

AFGHANISTAN AND THE AMERICAN STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

SANJEEV BHADAURIA

The US policy has always exhibited a deep sense of insecurity and quest for materialistic gains along with its self-acquired role of acting as a universal policeman — the need for which is sometimes real but most of the time imaginary, bordering on paranoia. Moreover, the American engine has always needed an extraneous threat to set it in motion. Earlier, it was the Communist threat. Now it is the threat posed by the ‘ungoverned states’. The sources of concern today are the states with large tracts of ungoverned territories like Afghanistan which offer ample opportunities to further its interests under the garb of international obligations. The situation in Afghanistan offers fertile ground for the US and the September 11, 2001, incident provided it with the reason to decipher its ambition. However, Afghanistan has gone from being one of Washington’s greatest foreign policy triumphs to one of its most profound failures. During the Cold War, the US support to the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance resulted in a debacle for Moscow, humiliating the vaunted Red Army and discrediting the Soviets throughout the Muslim world. After the Soviets withdrew, however, Afghanistan has proved to be a disaster for US policy, especially in its second endeavour after September 11, 2001.

The geo-political dynamics of this country with a strategic location has

* Dr. Sanjeev Bhadauria, is Associate Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Allahabad Central University, Allahabad.

American interest in Afghanistan post-Soviet invasion in 1979 was guided initially by a purely short-term, tactical and emotive agenda to seek 'historical revenge' for Vietnam.

led the policy-makers in Washington to show ample interest and be involved in its affairs, like in the Cold War period. The American interest in Afghanistan post-Soviet invasion in 1979 was guided initially by a purely short-term, tactical and emotive agenda to seek 'historical revenge' for Vietnam. However, once the Soviets withdrew, their interest in Central Asia suddenly revived and peaked due to the quest for the estimated 70 billion tons of oil reserves of Central Asia. The American geo-political drive also appears to be

motivated by the containment/engagement of China, Iran and extracting Central Asian oil and gas for the world market, in addition to putting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) right there at the doorstep of Russia. With the 9/11 attack, it realised to its chagrin and shock that the rabidly fundamentalist Al-Qaeda and Taliban, its own creation, had struck it with a vicious force that shook it beyond the realm of imagination.

Afghanistan can be characterised geographically as a mountainous desert interspersed with isolated fertile valleys, river basins and oases. It extends eastward from the Iranian plateau and incorporates the foothills of the Himalayan ranges, which rise to a height of 7,470 metres in the finger of land that divides Tajikistan from Pakistan and touches on western China. To the north of this range, known as the Hindu Kush, begin the plains that cross the Afghan frontier at the Amu Darya river and stretch for thousands of miles across Central Asia and the Russian steppes to the Arctic. To the south of the Hindu Kush is a bleak and windswept desert that passes through Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. More importantly, Afghanistan has an important geo-strategic location, connecting the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

Afghanistan provides a land bridge to Central Asia's vast oil and natural gas deposits. It is completely landlocked and only 30,000 sq km out of 6,47,500 sq km is irrigated land; 31.75 per cent people are literate and unemployment ranges from 40-60 per cent. It stands at 174th rank in the terms of the Human Resource Development Index in the world.

In recent estimates by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 52 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), amounting to \$2.7 billion annually, is generated by the drug trade. Some 3.3 million Afghans are involved in producing opium (90 per cent of world cultivation). It has a broad gauge railway network of only 24.6 km and a road network of 21,000 km most of which has been reconstructed recently. Out of 45 airports, only 10 have paved runways. It is clearly one of the more underdeveloped countries and the only positive indicator is the growing telephone network which stood at 15,000 fixed line telephones in 2001, and has now grown to 4.5 million, including the cellular network due to the reconstruction effort.

The new US security presence in the region is providing additional impetus toward a redefinition by those regional powers of their strategic interests *vis-à-vis* each other and the United States. But, some important constant issues that emerge which are worth taking note of are: **firstly**, that Afghanistan has a strategic location at the "fault line", of four civilisations¹ — Islamic, Russian Orthodox, Chinese and Hindu — which has arguably been a significant factor for the region's instability; **secondly**, Afghanistan has ethnic linkages and geo-political 'susceptibility' with neighbouring countries — Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran — that continue to haunt the country despite the American military presence and that, in turn, will probably prolong the United States' presence;² and **lastly**, the existence of terrorist groups in Pakistan, many of them backed by elements of the country's military and fundamentalist Islamic groups which remain as the forces of instability in both Pakistan and Afghanistan — even in the face of Pakistan's apparent crackdown.³

Afghanistan is a pivot for relations among regional actors, principally Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan. Central Asia's huge oil and gas deposits continue to provide incentives to the regional actors,

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of the World Order* (India: Viking Penguin Books, 1996).

2. A Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

3. *Ibid.*

including Russia, that strive for their say in the region's geo-politics. This remains an impediment in the region's political development vis-à-vis the US military presence. Afghanistan's internal political fragility and external vulnerability continues due to the country's fragmented social structure and rule of warlords, and their linkage to regional actors.

US STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

An analysis of Washington's policy towards the pre-9/11 Afghanistan shows that the United States was ready to accept the fundamentalist regime of the Taliban to further its geo-political ambition (oil and natural resources as probable incentives) in the region. The geo-strategic argument was that since the Taliban was pro-Pakistani, and, at the same time, anti-Russian and anti-Iranian, the United States ought to accept it. As per this argument, it was not an American affair to ascertain how the Taliban treats its own people, or to cater to "a stable Afghanistan with an aesthetically challenged government than a convulsed Afghanistan that offers a playground for Iranian and Russian devilmets."⁴ Nevertheless, the US hoped that after long years of turmoil, the Taliban would unite the country. A Sunni-dominated government in Kabul would serve as a bulwark against the influence of Iran in the region.⁵ There were also reports that the US was using Pakistani guerrilla groups such as *Jundullah* to launch attacks on military and civilian bases in Iran.⁶

The containment of Iran had become an American strategy in the region, especially, after the Tehran government declared its readiness to extend port facilities to the newly independent Central Asian Republics and because of its regional ambitions. American interests in Afghanistan also increased when it became clear that the Rabbani government in Kabul had been drawn closer to Tehran, after the killing of Iran-backed Shia leader Abdul Ali Mazari by the Taliban in early 1995. What was more alarming

4. A Garfinkle, "Afghanistanding", *Orbis*, vol.43, no.3,1999, p.415.

5. J.F. Burns and Levine, "For Afghans, Taliban's Rise to Power was Deliverance from Tyranny", *International Herald Tribune*, January 2, 1997.

6. Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

for the Americans and the Pakistani intelligence agencies was the Iranian diplomatic success in bringing together the erstwhile enemies of the Afghan War, Rabbani and Hekmatyar, in an agreement in June 1996.⁷ So, the Americans were, and remain, most concerned over the possibility of Iranian interference in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, being a transport-junction and land-approach between the landlocked countries of Central Asia and the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, will remain strategically important⁸. Therefore, the competition over control of trade and pipeline routes from Central

Asia to the Arabian Sea (Indian Ocean) transformed relations between Iran and Pakistan, and Tehran's initiative in this respect was openly supported by Russia and India. The Taliban's ability to provide security for trade, and the projected pipelines was considered strategically advantageous to both Islamabad and Washington. Significantly, around this time, in the spring of 1996, a partnership between the American company UNOCAL and the Saudi Company DELTA had concluded plans for multi-million-dollar (\$2 billion) oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to Pakistani Baluchistan via Herat and Kandahar.⁹ Pakistan, with the American backing (as an American company was involved), and Saudi Arabia considered the deal very lucrative since it was not just the trade route, but potential oil and gas pipelines that were at stake. It was visualised that the Taliban's most important function was to provide "security for roads, and potentially, oil and gas pipelines that would link the states of Central Asia to the international market through Pakistan rather than through Iran."¹⁰

The US was appealing the Taliban at a time when the fundamentalist militia was training the Kashmiri, Uzbek, Tajik and Uighur radicals; thus, spurring the growth of destabilising fundamentalist movements.

7. P. Stobdan, "War in Afghanistan", in *Asian Strategic Review* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 1996-97), p.257.

8. Barnett R. Rubin, *Still Ours to Lose: Afghanistan on the Brink* (Council on Foreign Relations, September 21, 2006).

9. Barnett R. Rubin, "Women and Pipelines: Afghanistan's Proxy Wars", *International Affairs*, vol.73, no.2, 1997, p.288.

10. Barnett R. Rubin, *U S Policy in Afghanistan* (Muslim Politics Report), no. 11, 1997, p. 6.

It may be noted that the US was appeasing the Taliban at a time when the fundamentalist militia was training the Kashmiri, Uzbek, Tajik and Uighur radicals; thus, spurring the growth of destabilising fundamentalist movements throughout the region. But the hand-in-glove relationship could not last long as the real colours of the Taliban came out soon. After the bombing of the American Embassies in Dar-e-Salaam in Tanzania and Nairobi in Kenya in 1998 by Al Qaeda and lastly the 9/11 attack in 2001, however, Washington had to review its Afghanistan policy, while continuing its regional drive on a broad strategic set-up.

Presently, the situation inside Afghanistan appears far from being rosy due to the current strategy being followed by the United States and its NATO partners which does not inspire confidence that Afghanistan will soon do better. President Hamid Karzai would require more help from the international community to have a decent chance of avoiding future instability in his country and gradually improving the lives of the Afghans. Apart from this, Pakistan (a functional anarchy) is in the grip of one of its worst political crises in recent years.

With this background, the key components of the American perspective may be analysed as under.

THE LIGHT FOOTPRINT APPROACH

Lakhdar Brahimi, the first post-9/11 UN Special Representative for Afghanistan and the main architect of the Bonn Conference, is the man behind the “light footprint” policy. Bob Woodward reports in *Bush at War* that when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts discussed the US options in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “the general rule was to study what the Soviets had done and do the opposite”. As the Soviets had committed a large number of troops, it was decided to avoid doing that and instead rely on a small number of Special Forces, aerial bombardments and the anti-Taliban Afghan militias.¹¹

Thus, the initial “light footprint” policy was as much owing to this fear

11. Lafraie Najibullah, *Resurgence of the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan: How and why?* (Dunedin: Department of Politics, University of Otago, New Zealand).

of repeating the Soviet mistakes as to the subsequent need of personnel and equipment for the war in Iraq. Although the number of American and Allied forces gradually increased from a few hundred in late 2001 to a few thousand in 2002, to about 10,000 in 2003 and to over 20,000 in October 2004 to 85,795 as of February 2010, it was never felt sufficient to root out the remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. There is little doubt that the lack of dependable security forces around the country has given rise to “war lordism” and problems of law and order that have contributed to the resurgence of the Taliban. The treatment of the captured Taliban by the Northern Alliance, especially by Gen Dostum’s forces, added another incentive for many people to join the Taliban. Taliban Prisoners of War (POWs) were treated very inhumanely¹², and it is alleged that thousands of them died while being transported in overcrowded containers from Kunduz to Dostum’s headquarters in Sheberghan. The low-ranking Taliban, who did not attract much attention, failed to find meaningful jobs or means of livelihood either in Afghanistan or in the refugee camps. Thus, when the Taliban leadership reorganised itself and started recruitment, they found a fertile ground among the former members of the movement.

The trigger happy International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the American troops, while carrying out aerial bombardments, have ended up killing hundreds of civilians¹³, thus, alienating themselves from the local populace. Lack of understanding of the local culture and sensibilities, coupled with human rights abuse and torture of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay fuelled sympathy for the rising Taliban.¹⁴ Further, the external forces and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are operating without consulting or respecting the sentiments of the Kabul government.

If we add to this the weaknesses of Karzai viz, his own personality, factionalism within the government, questionable appointments, questionable legitimacy, rampant corruption, slow progress in reconstruction and human development, slow progress in creating an army and police force,

12. D.Rohde, and D.E. Sanger, “How a ‘Good War’ in Afghanistan Went Bad”, *The New York Times*, August 12, 2007.

13. Najibullah, n.11.

14. Ibid.

“Surge and bribe” is a short-sighted approach intent on repeating the very mistakes of American policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past three decades.

narcotic drugs problem and negative impacts of the free market economic policy, an unacceptable situation has been created in Afghanistan¹⁵. The policy of the American troops to negotiate with the local warlords while keeping the Kabul government in the dark has boosted the growth of “war-lordism” once again and has also undermined the authority of the Karzai government¹⁶. The situation has improved somewhat in the urban areas, but most rural parts of the country, where the majority of Afghans live, remains beyond Mr. Karzai’s control.

THE SURGE AND NEGOTIATE POLICY

The “surge first, then negotiate” plan of Barrack Obama¹⁷ is to build up security in Afghan cities with new US troop arrivals before initiating talks with the Taliban. For the talks to be successful, the US intends to squeeze the Taliban first, including by taking another page from its Iraq experiment and setting up lightly trained local militias in every provincial district. The crux of the policy is to bring down violence by cutting deals to keep the Taliban intact as a fighting force, with active ties with the Pakistani military. The move ignores the danger that such militias could terrorise local populations. If a resurgent Taliban is now on the offensive, it is primarily because of two reasons: the sustenance the Taliban still draws from Pakistan; and a growing Pashtun backlash against foreign intervention. A US surge will not intimidate local Taliban commanders and tribal chieftains to negotiate peace deals, especially when some countries with forces in Afghanistan are exhibiting war fatigue and a desire to pull out troops. Indeed, it is naive to expect an Iraq-style surge-and-bribe experiment to work in Afghanistan, whose mountainous terrain, myriad tribes, patterns of shifting tribal and ethnic loyalties, special status as the global hub of the poppy trade and a history of internecine civil conflict set it apart from any other Muslim country.

15. T.H. Johnson, “On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 5(2), 2007).

16. Najibullah, n. 11.

17. Brahma Chellaney, *The Times of India*, January 2, 2009.

In such a land, with a long tradition of humbling foreign armies, pay-offs won't buy peace. Yet, the US champions a 21st century version of a divide-and-conquer imperial strategy. If there is any certainty, it is that the US plan will help the already-entrenched Taliban sharpen its claws. However, to help justify "surge and bribe"¹⁸, a distinction is being drawn between Al Qaeda and the Taliban to portray the former as evil and the latter as a different force with whom a compromise ought to be pursued. The blunt fact is that Al Qaeda and the Pakistani military-reared organisations like the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and Jaish-e-Muhammad now constitute a difficult-to-separate mix of *jihad*-spouting soulmates, with safe havens in Pakistan. A deal with any one such group will only strengthen the global *jihad* syndicate, plus the Pakistani military.

"Surge and bribe" is a short-sighted approach intent on repeating the very mistakes of American policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past three decades that have come to haunt US security and that of the rest of the free world. If America is to reclaim the global fight against terror, it will need to face up to the lessons from its past policies that gave rise to Frankensteins like Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar and to "the state within the Pakistani state", the directorate of the Inter-Services Intelligence, made powerful in the 1980s as a conduit of covert US aid for the anti-Soviet Afghan guerrillas.

The primary lesson is to keep the focus on long-term interests and not be carried away by political expediency. Yet again, Washington was itching to give primacy to near-term considerations. Even if "in the best-case scenario", the Obama Administration managed to bring down violence in Afghanistan by cutting deals that would keep the Taliban intact as a fighting force, with active ties to the Pakistani military, such a tactical gain would exact serious costs on regional and international security¹⁹. In seeking such short-term success, the Obama team is falling prey to a long-standing US policy weakness: the pursuit of narrow objectives without much regard for the security of friends.²⁰

18. Ibid.

19. www.crisisgroups.org

20. Chellaney, n. 17.

The US should realise that military campaigns such as the one in Afghanistan are far easier to launch than to bring to a decent conclusion; that American pride and credibility may be destined to leave America entangled in Afghan troubles for many years to come.

THE SURGE, NEGOTIATE AND RUN POLICY

The emphasis in the communiqué of the London Conference on speedy action on Afghanisation in all areas, most notably security, reintegration, and development, is an unmistakable indicator that the US and its NATO allies wish to cut and run from Afghanistan and no longer have the inclination for retaining a heavy footprint in the country. In this context, it is relevant to recall that President Obama, in his address at West Point on December 1, 2009, had justified the 30,000 US troop surge in Afghanistan scheduled for the first half of 2010 on the grounds that it would allow the US to begin the transfer of forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011. The speech was at once the declaration of a “surge” and the announcement of an exit strategy.²¹

Similarly, in the same speech, the President dwelt upon the importance of capacity building in the country so that there can be “a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan”.²² The US desire to disengage in Afghanistan from 2011, or thereabouts, is dictated partly by the recognition that a prolonged stay will be too costly in both military and economic terms, and partly by the fact that it cannot afford the luxury of such distractions at a time when it is still grappling with a grave economic crisis and many other more critical regional and international issues.

All that can be expected of the US and the international community is that, until their pull -out in 2011-12, they will do their best to upgrade the all round capacities of the Afghan government in order to help it secure the best possible power sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Reintegration, or the incorporation of elements of the Taliban into the Afghan government, explains itself by the imperative of the US and NATO wishing to leave Afghanistan.

21. Fouad Ajami, “Afghanistan and the Decline of American Power”, *The Wall Street Journal*, WSJ.com, April 8, 2010.

22. www.rediff.com, *Communiqué, London Conference on Afghanistan: Implications for India*, February 08, 2010.

Indeed, President Obama, in his West Point speech, quite openly stated that the US will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens. Similarly, in an interview to Reuters on February 3, Gen David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, went much further in suggesting that though it was too soon to hope for reconciliation with the likes of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, negotiations with senior Taliban leaders could not be ruled out.²³ Clearly, therefore, the arguments against differentiating between the good and the bad Taliban have been brushed aside. The Afghan government has already been in dialogue with the Taliban with a view to persuading some of them to cross over to it and cut their ties with Al Qaeda, etc.

The best case scenario is that substantial elements of the Taliban break away and opt to join Karzai, in which case his government will have a reasonable chance of prevailing.

Though the exit of the US and its NATO allies from Afghanistan in the 2011-12 time-frame appears to be distant, coupled with efforts at accommodating the Taliban, the outcome is still somewhat uncertain as there are many imponderables. For instance, it is not clear whether the Taliban will be ready to accept a power sharing arrangement with President Hamid Karzai under the Afghan Constitution and to cut its links with Al Qaeda. Despite Obama's announcement of a July 2011 date to begin withdrawing US forces, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stressed that such a transition would be "conditions-based" in each province, and only when Afghan forces are capable. "There is no doubt the going will be tough, no one should expect instant results," he said. "But it will not be a run for the exit."²⁴

Assuming that the US and its allies have virtually decided to withdraw, they may wait it out in the belief that time is on their side. Another possibility is that the Taliban may agree to an accommodation with the

23. Ibid.

24. Jill Dougherty and Elise Labott, "NATO to Send More Troops to Afghanistan", CNN.com, December 4, 2009.

government, and once within the system, engineer a take-over. The best case scenario is that substantial elements of the Taliban break away and opt to join Karzai, in which case his government will have a reasonable chance of prevailing.

The US dilemma in Afghanistan is that the war is unpopular domestically and analysts believe that the Americans will cut a deal and run — they will cut a deal with the Taliban and withdraw prematurely, before the Afghan Army is ready. If they do, it will be a disaster for the war ravaged country and perhaps for the region as well.

ROLE OF REGIONAL POWERS

We all are aware of the role of the regional actors in Afghanistan and the resulting ‘muddle’ since the Soviet invasion, the consequent civil war, the Bonn Agreement, ‘the Afghanistan Compact’ and the recently concluded London Conference. Regional actors generally assess that the United States is the only outside actor in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, other states seek to pursue their own objectives in Afghanistan.

These strategic and geo-political ambitions of the United States have led to considerable resentment among the countries surrounding the region. Russian, Chinese, and Iranian unhappiness is particularly visible in this context. In order to keep the Americans away from their “dirty games” in the region²⁵, these countries will continue to support the ethnic and tribal groups through whom they hope to promote their own geo-strategic interests. For instance, China will continue to be perturbed by the expanding US presence on its southwestern frontiers and support the anti-US forces; the Russians, by the Tajiks and Uzbeks; and the Iranians, by their Shia minority ethnic group in the northwestern part of the country, because these countries perceive that through its military presence in the region, the United States is unduly interfering in their “sphere of influence.”

In this sense, the overarching American geo-political objective in the region may be kept off balance by the regional powers, and that will continue

25. Rubin, n. 8.

to keep Afghanistan fragile and fragmented. In the process, America might get bogged down militarily in this landlocked country that has a long history of fighting against foreigners. Despite some high-handedness on terrorism and religious extremism, the regional actors complain that the US was not responding fully to the terrorist threat because it was not affecting the US interests directly. Leaders of Afghanistan's neighbours have pointed fingers at the US for its "selective approach" and "double standards."²⁶ They view that while the enduring American military presence in Afghanistan and the region is not going to eliminate the spectre of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, the menace has provided a good pretext to the US for entrenching itself in the region.

US ANTI-INSURGENCY POLICY

The United States does not still have an anti-insurgency policy in place primarily because like any other traditional state army, it was meant to win wars and not to fight insurgency, in the first place. But then, a pertinent question arises, that perhaps in its exuberance to react instantly, was the US notion of dealing with the insurgency flawed?

Let us examine the implications of an insurgency operation where the US Army is involved. In order to undertake the challenge, the old Cold War mindset deserves a relook. There seems to be a view that a relentless attack against Islamic insurgents, wherever they surface, should be waged. The view is as seemingly logical as the Cold War belief in a worldwide Communist conspiracy for global domination — and just as wrong. So, the larger lesson is to retain the clarity of a "local" versus "global" perspective and to selectively apply the lessons of previous successful campaigns in similar asymmetric conflicts.

Here, it would be interesting to analyse the politics of asymmetric conflicts and to figure out on the basis of the pre-theoretical perspective of Andrew Mack as to *Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars?*²⁷

26. www.cfr.org (Council on Foreign Relations- Washington).

27. Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict", in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Power, Strategy and Security* (New Delhi: Asian Books, p.126).

The road ahead is going to be tough for the NATO forces, even with the big increase which President Obama has announced and which is still not fully implemented.

The key facets of his thesis are:

- The conventional wisdom that military superiority prevails has been destroyed in this war as the constraints on mobilisation are political, not material. In none of the conflicts noted was more than a fraction of the total potential military resources of the external power, in fact, mobilised.
- The theatre of war extends beyond to encompass the polity and social institutions of the external power — full mobilisation is not possible as it also increases domestic costs.
- Direct costs become of strategic importance when translated into indirect costs — psychological and political — as the aim of the insurgents is not the destruction of the military capability of their opponents as an end in itself.
- Dissent permitted in 'open societies' is an obstacle. The totalitarian societies are not troubled by the domestic constraints which the US faced on Vietnam.
- The progressively greater human, economic and political costs give rise to "war weariness". The last years of the Vietnam conflict were marked by troop mutinies, widespread drug addiction, high levels of desertion, and even the murders of over-zealous officers' intent on sending their men on dangerous patrols.

It can be appreciated that the postulates propounded by Mack are valid and applicable in all prolonged asymmetric conflicts, including the ongoing one in Afghanistan. Mack concludes that a lesson for the governments (of the US and NATO countries, in this case) which have committed themselves for such conflicts is that they should realise that, over time, the costs of the conflict will inevitably generate widespread opposition at home. The causes of such dissent lie in the structure of the conflict itself – in the type of conflict being pursued and in the asymmetries which form its distinctive character. Henry Kissinger has correctly observed on the war in Vietnam, "We lost

sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerilla warfare that the guerilla wins if he does not lose and the conventional army loses if it does not win".²⁸

It seems that the lessons should once again be remembered by the US and NATO in their campaign in Afghanistan. The United States must remember that it intervened in Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban, not to rebuild the country or spread democracy, and has not adjusted its strategy since, says James Dobbins, a former US special envoy to Afghanistan and Director of the International Security and Defence Policy Centre at RAND Corporation.²⁹

Today, when the United States is being asked to increase its level of commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan as a means of stabilising the country, even as American troops battle the resurgent Islamic extremists who operate along the Afghan-Pakistan border, the key question is no longer whether to withdraw but rather when and how.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Clearly, the road ahead is going to be tough for the NATO forces, even with the big increase which President Obama has announced and which is still not fully implemented. NATO forces are pretty thinly stretched and when a very large surge goes into particular areas, as has recently happened, that means that there can be gaps elsewhere.

Hence, "Mission AFPAK" will need all the diplomatic, military and economic might of America and all the regional players to succeed. Whether America will follow the zero-sum game or Washington will rehyphenate the relationship in such a way that Pakistan gets a 'soft landing' and simultaneously engages New Delhi at a much higher level than before, befitting an emerging superpower, remains to be seen.

Some of the suggestions given by the Afghan Study Group operating under

28. Henry A. Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations", *Foreign Affairs*, XLVIII, January, 1996, p. 214.

29. Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, *Afghanistan Success Hinges on Karzai Reforms*, an interview with Stephen Biddle, Roger Hertog Senior Fellow for Defense Policy, CFR (NY : Council on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2010).

In a counter-insurgency “things get worse, inevitably, before they get better,” and there is concern about whether there will be enough time for current plans to succeed.

the aegis of the Centre for the Study of the Presidency³⁰ released in January 2008 outlined the critical issues to be addressed by the US and its NATO partners which were related to international coordination, security, governance and the rule of law, counter-narcotics, economic development and reconstruction, and Afghanistan and its neighbours. The 2008 London Conference also produced a document called “Afghanistan Compact.” The document postulated on every aspect of Afghanistan’s social and economic development. But, on the country’s security challenges, Pakistan was not even named in connection with the growing insurgency. Instead, the Compact called for “full respect of Afghanistan’s sovereignty, and strengthening dialogue and cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours.”

At the February 2010 London Conference, the international community pledged its long-term commitment to Afghanistan and support for the Government of Afghanistan and its security, development and governance. The participants agreed to support the phased growth and expansion of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police to levels of 171,600 and 134,000 respectively by October 2011. It was further agreed that the Afghan forces would progressively assume the leading role in all stages of operations. The Afghan government would host a conference in Kabul, later in the year, preceded by a grand peace *jirga* (gathering of elders). Presumably, this would be to facilitate the national peace and reintegration programme.³¹ But, how and when these recommendations would be implemented remains to be seen as their transformation into reality is questionable as it involves huge resources and efforts.

30. Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, *Cordesman : Despite Gains, Future in Iraq, Afghanistan Remains Uncertain*, an interview with Anthony H. Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, Centre for International and Strategic Studies, (NY : Council on Foreign Relations, January 14, 2008), p. 3.

31. www.cfr.org (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations).

The prime worry in Afghanistan, as of now, is extremism of the kind which has been continuing for a long time, and these forces usually feed on political instability which, to a large extent, can be attributed to forces in Pakistan. The current insurgency in Afghanistan does not arise from a profound disaffection among large elements of the Afghan population with their government. This insurgency has been raised in Pakistan, mostly by individuals residing in Pakistan, a majority of whom are refugees from Afghanistan supported by others who are native Pakistanis. For the tens of millions of Pashtun tribesmen on both sides of the current border, the distinction between Afghan and Pakistani is, indeed, of little importance, as neither they, nor the Government of Afghanistan, for that matter, recognise the current border between the two countries as legitimate.

The United States remains bogged down in a growing insurgency in the country, and if the US missiles take more innocent lives, Washington's strategy could well backfire.

Richard Holbrooke's feedback and recommendations should help President Obama unfold his terms of engagement in the future. It is imperative that the US deals with Pakistan with an iron hand. The safe haven for the opposing forces inside its territory must be denied, if it has to achieve success in the strife-torn region but the indications are to the contrary. The Pakistani establishment had tried its level best to make America rethink and was finally successful in extracting aid without strings — a dangerous development which has the potential to destabilise the region.

Stephen Biddle says that the Allied Command is guardedly optimistic that they will eventually succeed. But he notes that in a counter-insurgency "things get worse, inevitably, before they get better," and there is concern about whether there will be enough time for current plans to succeed. He also said, on the eve of an international conference in London on Afghanistan, that success in Afghanistan will "require, among other things, a conscious decision by [President] Hamid Karzai

to . . . implement reforms. If we cannot persuade him to do that, we are not going to succeed."³²

We will find out pretty soon, certainly within the next year, whether the surge policy is making a difference. Time is running out in Afghanistan, not in terms of finishing the insurgency, but in halting the momentum it has had over the last year. The US and NATO forces have to gain the initiative over the next year. If they fail to gain the initiative in Afghanistan with this big influx of resources, then the pressure for a very different approach will become imminent.

CONCLUSION

Bringing about a normal situation in this war-ravaged country will depend on how the United States acts in the coming days. The present trend does not look conducive to permanent peace in the country. The American peace efforts so far appear fragile, and the country is passing through a thin edge of instability as it is still being haunted by so many divisive and centrifugal forces. Afghanistan remains critical to the future of its neighbours, as instability in this landlocked country has the potential to destabilise the whole region. A potent combination of drugs, weapons, and militants traverse Afghanistan and cross into its neighbours and beyond, and hence, the seeds of instability remain intact.³³ The Bonn process, reconstruction of the country and its national security are not intrinsic to the Afghan situation alone. It is, in fact, heavily loaded with regional geo-politics. As stated above, many believe that the geo-political factors such as Central Asia/Caspian energy resources; China's Xinjiang, Iran, etc are the reasons for the US interest in Afghanistan. And, if that is the case, and the United States remains bogged down in a growing insurgency in the country, and if the US missiles take more innocent lives, Washington's strategy could well backfire.³⁴

32. Afghanistan Study Group Report (Centre for the Study of the Presidency), Second Edition, release date January 30, 2008.

33. E. Sky, "Increasing ISAF's Impact on Stability in Afghanistan", *Defense & Security Analysis*, 23(1), 2007.

34. n. 32.

This is the centre of gravity of the problem and unless a suitable end game is played out, the desired end state where the regional aspirations are fulfilled satisfactorily, may remain elusive. And within this geo-political entanglement, the regional and non-regional actors, especially the US, have to play their part decisively, proactively and positively.

As we are seeing today in Iraq and Afghanistan, America has been unable to defeat insurgencies with the sheer power of the US military. Ultimately, it will be the local conditions, population, unique features and personalities of each nation that will determine the outcome of the insurgencies against the US-backed governments. The larger lesson is to retain the clarity of a "local" versus "global" perspective in dealing with the future insurgency challenge.

We must have optimism for Afghanistan: the Afghans want security and hope which they deserve after about 30 years of near-constant war, but realism says it will take time.