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America's AfPak Strategy: From Bush to Obama

From Failure to Resolution?

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Rudyard Kipling's 19th century 'great game' played by British India and Imperial Russia to gain access to India and the warm waters of the Arabian Sea continues. There are many new players and few new issues. Not forgotten is that Great Britain has been one of the big players at and for the Hindukush in the early days of colonialism. It is therefore not a surprise that the Government in London on 28 January 2010 will host an international Afghanistan conference. This confirms convincingly the continued British interest in this strategic area of geo-politics.

US Involvement in the Area

As far as the United States is concerned, there was little involvement in the area during the 19th century. Participation by proxy followed in the 20th century. This indirect US presence took the form of CIA links with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and covert arms supply for Afghan mujaheddin to "give Russia its Vietnam" as stated by Zbigniev Brezinski, from 1977 to 1981 National Security Advisor in the Carter Administration. Following the events of 11 September 2001, the United States became the lead actor in shaping international policies for Afghanistan during the 21 st century.

Circles of Conflict

In 2010 the deepening crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan play out over a wide geographical area. There is an outer circle of conflict in which a US-led NATO faces resistance to their Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) policy from Russia and China who are key members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO is a regional alliance to which most central Asian countries belong with India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia being associate members.

The 1999 NATO doctrine and subsequent disclosures that energy security is a main element of NATO policy have intensified confrontation with Russia and China. The two countries strongly reject western encirclement and interference in what they consider their sphere of traditional influence.

There is also an inner circle of conflict with Afghanistan and Pakistan as the centre. It is here where ethnic divisions in Afghanistan and the historic controversy between Afghanistan and Pakistan over 'Pashtunistan' determine local and cross-border politics. The 1893 treaty between British India and Imperial Russia has left its legacy in the form of an artificial border dividing the Pashtu-speaking community. Any US administration dealing with this

inner circle of conflict has to have detailed knowledge of this ethnic landscape.

Understanding of the Local Situation

Other local and regional circumstances need to be taken into account. Among these is the mistrust of local leaders in the central authority in Kabul, Peshawar and Islamabad. Pakistani authorities in Islamabad have not forgotten that at the time of independence in 1947 , the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) wanted to opt for India rather than for Pakistan!

Religious divisions between Sunni and Shia have traditionally been more pronounced in Afghanistan. The Shias of the Hazara area in central Afghanistan, in Helmand Province and other parts of south-western Afghanistan are inherently in conflict with the Sunni majority in Kabul. Since Iran has expanded its involvement in the AfPak area, Sunni-Shia confrontations are on the increase in Pakistan.

Feudalism, poverty and corruption* all have been an inherent part of life in the AfPak area. They are three elements which have considerable influence on today's crises in the two countries.

The UN identifies Afghanistan as one of the poorest countries in the world with an average life expectancy of only 42 years, an adult literacy rate of around 28% and a mortality rate of children under five of 297/1000. The picture in the tribal belt of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan is not any different.

India has never fully accepted that three of its western provinces (Sind, Baluchistan and NWFP) and parts of the Punjab were taken away in 1947 to form today's Pakistan. This explains to some extent the interest India has shown since then in maintaining a strong political foothold in Afghanistan.

China and Russia do not influence developments in the AfPak area from the outer circle only but are very much also overt and covert players within the inner circle as well.

To add further to the complexity of the AfPak crisis is the bazaar mentality of central Asian states. For monetary and other reasons the governments of these states have entered into bargaining relationships with Russia and the United States und thus have become unpredictable and unreliable players in the region. The recent negotiations by Kyrgystan over the Manas air base serve as a perfect example. Russia and the US tried to outbid each-other and in the end the US made the better rental offer.

The muslim world in the area, the Middle East and elsewhere is opposed to US expansion plans. The majority of people living in the central asian region are of muslim faith. This constitutes a major factor any US administration has to keep in mind. US President Obama may have done so when he directed his conciliatory speech in Cairo in June 2009 directed towards muslims. Afghans and Pakistanis alike will have taken note of his emphasis on the rights for religious freedom and economic development and most of all Obama's view that no system of government should be imposed by one country upon others.

Tough Challenges for the US

Under the best of circumstances, the US and its allies face tough challenges in implementing their AfPak plans. The problem is that there are no 'best' circumstances. First of all there is a complete lack of trust among the majority of people living in the AfPak

region and the US-led NATO and the governments involved. Covert cooperation has become overt confrontation. Not forgotten in the area is that the US cooperated with Osama bin Laden and recruited, armed and indoctrinated anti-Russian militias. Mujahedeen friends of yesterday are mujahedeen foes of to-day. In a June 2009 interview with the German weekly 'Der Spiegel', former President Pervez Musharraf concluded: " Americans are hated in Pakistan to-day. The US left us with 30.000 mujahedeen they brought and trained!"

As in Iraq, the US lack of non-military preparedness and training to understand and handle the complexity of local situations explains much of the failure of intervention. Deeply engrained in the US psyche is the perception that the US is called upon to display, at all times, global leadership in all fields, by all means. Despite a new rhetoric by the current US administration, the impression remains that the Obama administration has not shed this perception. Elements of a US bi-partisan 'PNAC' mentality (the neo-liberal 'Project for a New American Century' of the 1990s) remain visible and augur not well for developments in the AfPak region.

Complications of a different kind facing the US and its allies in the AfPak region are the hilly terrain – excellent for guerillas, tough for a modern army -, the complicated supply lines involving long distances and, as mentioned, unreliable central Asian partners.

The Bush Administration in the AfPak region – a story of failure

Following the 11 September 2001 attack on the twin towers in New York, US covert counter-insurgency involvement became overt counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. US military assistance for Pakistan was intensified. The Bush Administration's objectives were threefold: defeat of Al-Qaida, destruction of the Taliban support base and blind determination to bring democracy to Afghanistan and the wider muslim world. Beyond these general aspirations, the US Government, during the presidency of George W. Bush, never had an Afghanistan or a Pakistan strategy let alone an AfPak strategy.

As in the case of Iraq, there was, however, much tactical experimentation involving troop deployments, the mixing of military operations and humanitarian assistance and soliciting support of local groups. During these years more and more time and money was invested for the security of the troops themselves. The distrust and hate of the foreign presence, especially of the US military, has been on the increase. Information leaked about the cruel treatment of Afghan prisoners held at the US airbase at Bagram, the US equivalent in Afghanistan of Guantanamo, became fuel in the fight against US troops. The recent terror attack within an American CIA outpost in Khost near the Afghan-Pakistani border by a member of the Afghan military killing seven American intelligence operatives and a Canadian reporter is evidence of the depth of hatred that has accumulated in the country against the foreign invaders.

What should not have come as a surprise to Washington was the ease with which Pashtu-speaking insurgents would move back and forth between Afghan and Pakistani border areas. For them it was home-territory on either side. The US response was to carry out covert special forces operations and mount unmanned drone deployment in Pakistan's tribal belt. This has raised the stakes and complexity of the crisis. The Pakistani political establishment reluctantly condoned these US incursions. The reward was US financial assistance and military hardware, both needed to strengthen the military as well as the Government of Pakistan against wide-spread opposition to President Asif Ali Zadari and the

Cabinet of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani. This US approach has been the pattern of US-Pakistani cooperation for decades. Different this time is only the magnitude of the US contributions.

The mood of the people in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has become increasingly hostile as the number of local victims grows. Manifestations of the anger of the population are the well planned attacks upon NATO supply centers in the Peshawar area and military convoys en route from Pakistan to Afghanistan. To make matters even more complex, Pakistan's inter-services intelligence, the ISI, continues to play a clever double game by cooperating with both the US authorities as well as local groups in northern Pakistan and across the border in Afghanistan.

What has been the role of the United Nations in the AfPak crisis? There has been no debate in the UN Security Council and only limited UN humanitarian assistance and support for national reconstruction. The UN and its agencies have been active in looking after displaced people on both sides of the border. Both UN and NATO leadership, however, have praised the cooperation between the world body and the alliance. Kai Eide, the courageous UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan who will be leaving his post in March, told the UN Security Council in December 2009 that in his opinion war-torn Afghanistan was at the brink of becoming unmanageable. At the political level, the UN has played little more than a legitimizing role for the NATO presence in Afghanistan during the years of the Bush administration. This is not surprising since President Bush never had much time for multilateralism, neither in Iraq nor in Afghanistan.

Limited geo-strategic knowledge of the US administration resulted in severely underestimating the political weight of Russia and Afghanistan's neighbours such as China, central Asian countries and Iran. The Bush Administration simplistically thought that US military superiority was good enough to promote the cause in Afghanistan, to spread pluralism in the area and to marginalize Russia. In the absence of a strategy, the US had only limited policy objectives. The Bush Government sought to increase the size of the Afghan army and police and provide more training to both. This is not different from their approach in Iraq. Additionally, more intelligence analysts were brought into Afghanistan to help in hunting down al-Qaida and the Taliban.

During these years opium production in Afghanistan has reached new records. The UN Office for Drugs and Crime in Vienna estimated that in 2008 Afghan poppy fields yielded some 8000 tons of opium. US reaction ranged from a laissez-faire attitude to destruction of crops and laboratories. Little was done to promote crop substitution and nothing to reduce the consumption of Afghan opium abroad. The livelihoods of Afghan farmers and their traditions were ignored entirely.

The Obama Administration in the AfPak region – opportunities for resolution

It is too early to come to definite conclusions on the Afghanistan and Pakistan policies of the new US Administration. What can be said is that the bar of US ambitions has been lowered. In his June 2009 Cairo statement President Obama pointed out that 'no system of government can be imposed by any country on any other country'. Nothing was said anymore about bringing democracy, freedom and human rights to Afghanistan. The other declared objectives of the Obama Government, not dissimilar from those of the Bush Government, are to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida and the Taliban and to ensure that safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan of these groups are no longer threats to the

United States.

It is important to note that the rhetoric of the present US Government and the sensitivity of interaction with the region is much more positive and constructive compared to the language of previous US governments. There is talk of working with 'moderate' Taliban, whatever that means. The days with the motto 'we smoke'm out wherever they are' are gone. There is also Foreign Secretary Clinton's sobering observation: 'The people we fight today, we set up twenty years ago. Let us be careful – what we sow, we shall harvest!'

Noticeable is a tougher line the US is taking with the Karzai Government in Kabul. A key point of US criticism relates to corruption involving the Afghan Cabinet and the wider bureaucracy. Gone are the bi-weekly video conferences between the US and Afghan presidents which took place in the days of the Bush administration.

'We must listen to the Afghan voice', President Obama insists. There is no shortage of Afghan voices. An Afghan villager recently remarked: 'we want friends, not masters. Priorities must be Afghan priorities. Important to us right now are agriculture and education'. In a letter to President Obama an Afghan Taliban wrote: 'we want you to repudiate the war-mongering policies of the previous US Administration and put an end to the anti-human wars in Iraq (!) and Afghanistan.' There are as well Pakistani voices on the AfPak crisis. 'Please distinguish between

acts of terrorism, acts of crime and acts of local protest about decades of unfulfilled promises by the government for better water supply, health facilities and the settlement of land disputes' an angry Chitrali living in the vicinity of the Afghan border pointed out. One also hears Pakistani voices in government and the military demanding that the US should understand Pakistan's security interests and reverse its policy favouring India.

President Obama's rhetoric resonates these voices. His challenge is to translate his position into tangible action. It is by no means guaranteed that US operations in the AfPak region are not going to be Obamas archilles heel. The US/NATO search for an AfPak strategy is still on. This does not include the option of withdrawal from the AfPak region. Since the new administration has come into office three military strategy reviews in a row have been carried out by US National Security Advisor General Lute, by the US Joint Chief of Staff Admiral Mullen and by General Petraeus, the Chief of US Central Command. While US troop levels are to be increased by 30.000 soldiers so will US casualties increase. These stand at mid-January 2010 at close to 1000. Efforts are finally being made by US commanders in Afghanistan to want to minimize civilian casualties. 'Accidental killings of Afghans constitute one of our greatest strategic vulnerabilities' was stated last year by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates. He could have included northern Pakistan in this observation. The cross-border drone operations 'have created more enemies than eliminating them' is the view of a foreign military advisor to General Petraeus. Exact civilian victims of unmanned US drone attacks are not known but definitely on the increase in the tribal areas of northern Pakistan.

The two US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drained US military capacity to an all time low. The global economic and financial crisis has further disabled US freedom of action. Senior political figures in the US including President Obama have repeatedly made it known – without referring to the increasing US incapacity – that the US Government expects from Europe a significant increase in military and financial support for AfPak operations. These expectations constitute a major test of the durability of transatlantic relations since Europe

is likely to disappoint US expectations. European NATO allies are already under strong political pressure at home to reconsider their participation in the AfPak adventure.

Just prior to the Afghanistan conference, the German Minister of Defence, Theodor zu Guttenberg, pointed out that Germany will present at the conference a unilateral strategy for Afghanistan with " more support for national reconstruction and training". Foreign Minister Guido Westerwell even threatened to boycott the conference should the London meeting be limited to a debate about additional troop contributions. Earlier he had stated in the German Parliament that only when goals and strategy had been clearly defined could the issue of 'content' (in plain language the question of troop increases) for Afghanistan be considered. Interesting here is that he also referred in his statement to the sensitive issue of eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan. It would not come as a surprise if following the London meeting, it turned out that his pronouncements had been merely a clever political move of the German Government to prepare the German public for a forthcoming increase in the deployment of German troops for Afghanistan.

It is important to mention here that it remains to be seen whether President Obama can find individuals with genuine area-specific knowledge. His special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, has yet to show evidence that he falls into this category. A deputy national security advisor responsible for Afghanistan who recently was unaware of the much discussed Durand line (the contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan) named after Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary in British India in 1893, is not reassuring.

Two US Administrations: From entry to exit?

In comparing the Bush and Obama approaches in Afghanistan and Pakistan, one detects clear commonalities as well as significant differences. Both administrations believe that US leadership is a pre-condition to world peace, well-being and democracy. Any alternative to US leadership would spell international anarchy. Both administrations have experimented with troop levels, the balance of military and civilian operations and the extent of negotiations at regional and local levels. Lack of geo-strategic knowledge has been apparent in the two US administrations. President Obama and his team, however, see this shortcoming and are trying to do something about it. This involves the looming confrontation between NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the ethnic and religious divisions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the local cross-border sensitivities and of course, the special interests of Iran and India in Afghanistan. Lastly, there has been a belief in both US administrations that the surge mechanism, increasing US troop levels for a specific period of time, would result in a military solution. It appears that the Obama administration has started to question whether a primarily military intervention can solve the crisis in the AfPak region. Both governments have been aware of the potentially dangerous status of Pakistan as a nuclear power and engaged the Pakistani authorities in efforts to enhance the protection of nuclear facilities in the country.

At the rhetorical level are major differences in the approaches of the two administrations. Willingness of the Obama Government to listen, also to the protagonists, is a major difference to previous leadership in Washington. Dialogue and diplomacy are once again for the US acceptable tools in international relations. The current government is also more forceful in asking for political, financial and military burden sharing. President Obama is much more multilaterally-minded than his predecessor and would like to see a greater role for the United Nations and more focus on development in the AfPak region and elsewhere. The relationships between the United States and central Asian Governments such as

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have become more complicated over time. The present US government is aware of the delicate nature of these relationships. As Pakistan has become an integral part of the crisis, the US is now pursuing a clear AfPak approach taking also into account the need to protect Pakistan's nuclear installations.

A new front has opened up in Yemen in the fight against terrorism. This has happened largely without publice knowledge until the arrest on 25 December 2009 of Abdulmutallah, the Nigerian banker's son who tried to blow up a US airliner over Detroit. The world is now being told that Yemen is becoming a dangerous AlQaeda haven and stronghold used for training of young muslims such as Abdulmuttalah. As Yemen is added by the US, and undoubtedly by NATO, to the number of hotspots around the inner AfPak circle, the complexity of overt and covert US military operations in the area has further increased.

President Obama knows that the political clock is ticking in Washington as well as in Brussels and in other European capitals. An indefinite presence of the US and their NATO allies and the ever increasing cost, military presence and number of casualties, both Afghan and foreign, is no longer acceptable to parliaments and certainly not the public in individual EU countries. An unnamed European diplomat was recently quoted in the media as saying: 'all we are talking about behind closed doors is the sooner we get out of Afghanistan, the better!' It is also safe to assume that those in the outer circle of the conflict, central Asian countries, China and Russia will intensify their resistance to western plans in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The provocative plans of NATO to expand its membership eastwards and to complete its encirclement of Russia and China will only create more conflicts in the area and further promote a dangerous arms race, including nuclear weaponry development.

Russia shares in the short term western concerns about Islamic fundamentalism, the Taliban and drugs and for this reason extends some support to NATO, e.g., it agrees to the transport of lethal and non-lethal materials through Russia via rail and air. This is not in contradiction to Russia's fundamental objections to the US/NATO presence in its backyard. NATO leadership should keep this in mind when complaining about Russia's half-hearted support to the NATO adventure.

The evolving self-confidence and assertiveness of China are bound to provide new challenges to the western alliance in Afghanistan. China's comportment at the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen, its challenge of US and EU Iran policies, the boldness of its civilian investment programmes in Afghanistan and, not to be forgetten, the recent decision to participate with its navy in patrolling the waters around Somalia are indicators of a much more direct and open Chinese interventionism in future global crises, including Afghanistan.

The Urgency for Change

The Obama Administration has had a good foreign policy start. Opportunities to go beyond intentions in solving global conflicts including those facing the AfPak area will not prevail for long. They must be grasped without delay. His statement on 1 December 2009 of a new US Afghanistan policy further clarifies these intentions and confirms previous policies such as the denial of safe havens for Al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents, halting the Taliban momentum, preventing the overthrow of the Afghan Government and the strengthening of the Afghan military and police forces. 30.000 more US troops and an additional 7.000 coalition troops are supposed to provide the surge mechanism. New is Obama's proposal to partner more with the Afghan military and civilian authorities not just at the central level in

Kabul but also at regional and especially local levels "to create conditions for the transfer of responsibilities to the Afghans" and to intensify US partnership with neighbouring Pakistan.

What is missing is a confirmation by the US Government that it understands the vital importance of getting all those in the outer and the inner circles of the conflict to come together to discuss alternatives to the failing military option and how national reconstruction can move forward in Afghanistan on the basis of successful confidence building measures.

The crisis in the AfPak region and beyond calls for an all embracing and comprehensive dialogue. The understanding by the United States and its western allies of the causes of Islamic fundamentalism in the AfPak area and elsewhere must be seen as a pre-requisite for progress.

** 'Corruption' is a term which unfortunately is used abroad in a simplistic and undifferentiated manner. It does not take into account the many forms so-called 'corruption' can take from simple favouratism based on local traditions to modern criminal acts of dishonesty. There is no single approach in dealing with Afghan behaviour that foreign politicians conveniently describe as 'corruption.'*

Hans Christof von Sponeck served as a UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq. He resigned in February 2000 in protest to UN Iraq Sanctions policy.

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