

A Silk Route to Peace

Written by Kirthi Jayakumar

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KIRTHI JAYAKUMAR, JUL 26 2011

Afghanistan has been the cynosure of all eyes with the 9/11 World Trade Centre bombing, and the catena of retaliatory events that had followed suit soon after.[1] Ten years hence, it is still a puzzling conundrum, as the United States has agreed to withdraw its troops in a phased manner. The present American polity has understood where its mistakes originally were, and has decided to alter its lopsided policy perception involving the deployment of military prowess to certain pressure points in the world. With an apparent intention to alter and rebalance American foreign policy, Barack Obama has decided to take stock of the erstwhile problems that Afghanistan and Iraq threw up, and has decided that the challenges of the 21st Century are far more eminent in the case of Asia itself. The burgeoning economic power and political stature that China has gained over the years and the idea of expanding the UN Security Council- a movement that the BRICS[2] have siphoned enough energy into, to give momentum- are both very realistic concerns for the United States.

The United States of America has spent ten years, plenty of dollars and even more in the form of human effort and lives, in the war in Afghanistan, and pulling out will not be an easy task. A riveted nail is as deep as it has been driven, and plenty of effort is necessary to bring it out. The United States has indeed announced a significant drawdown of troops from Afghanistan and effectively reversing the surge that began 18 months ago. At the time when Barack Obama entered office, there were as many as two hundred thousand odd troops engaged in some form of combat or the other, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The promise suggests that the number will be halved in the next year, deploying the number that remains in operations that will be strictly non-combat oriented. One wonders if the drawdown needs to be expedient, or slowed down, but the move itself is in agreement with the core values of international law, that allow no room for the intervention of one state into the affairs of another.

Afghanistan is the quintessential war-ravaged state, parts of which remain in shambles while other parts have made tangible progress. The state is ridden with warlords aplenty, while several portions remain under Taliban control. This is likely to remain the trajectory for the state itself, even if one were to take stock two years from now. It is not possible to dismantle the Taliban, for there are plenty of entities that will reassemble its various components – including a terrorist faction, a part-nationalist movement and a part drug and crime cartel. Having had a significant role in Afghanistan's political and military history, the Taliban remains a very deeply rooted part of the Afghani social and political life. Consequently, they cannot be ignored. The Taliban would have to be won over with military and dialogue-based policies. This would require a comprehensive set of policies deploying not just negotiations and reconciliatory talks, but also the creation of a political framework that will engage the Taliban in a positive role that is most conducive to Afghanistan's progress. Integrating the Taliban into the Afghan Government's military will also prove to be useful for Afghanistan's future interests. The Taliban will have to be integrated in mainstream governance in some form or the other, not merely because of their integral role in shaping the Afghani polity, but also because they constitute a rather important segment of Afghani society. This is not a possibility that hinges solely upon the removal of the American troops, but a move that pivots largely around regional cooperation. The fears that the negative fallout of the troop withdrawal may result in a repetition of the post-Soviet withdrawal symptoms are hardly unfounded. While it is necessary to concentrate on the Afghani polity while and after withdrawing troops, it is also important to involve the six states that share its boundaries in different directions, to focus on the region and keep it afloat in a rehabilitative measure. With Security Council resolutions 1988,[3] and 1989, [4] a sanctions' blacklist for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda have been split, in a bid to win the Taliban over towards reconciliation.

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At this juncture, it is necessary to understand the consequences of the American war in Afghanistan. Not only has the war itself involved a massive expenditure of time, effort and money, what with ten years' worth and several thousands of soldiers being deployed, it has also been a rather catalytic factor in pushing many of the militant populace into the neighbouring states, causing the drifting of insurgent ideology, and the forging of military alliances unfavourable to the cause of international politics. Pakistan, for one, has faced this consequence, with plenty of radical Islamists, in whose view the Taliban are their natural allies and the United States and the West their natural enemies. A case in point being the arrest of a brigadier general for his ties to the extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, subsequently buttressed by the storming of the naval base in Karachi and the torturing and killing of a Pakistani Journalist who had chronicled the nitty-gritties of the insurgent infiltration into the Pakistani military. Needless to point out, although one would be remiss to overlook it, the very fact that Osama Bin Laden sat comfortably in a massive house, smack in the centre of an army cantonment, would have been extremely difficult if there were no hands to help from within the Pakistani Military itself.

The Afghani polity itself is weak, having frugal capacity to tackle the burden of rehabilitating the fragile country. Instead of allowing Afghanistan to remain at the mercy of an insurgent Taliban that relies on violence as a policy, it would bode well for those geographically contiguous states to align themselves in a manner that would allow Afghanistan to bloom, by encouraging the integration of the Taliban into mainstream governance in the state.

Another State, whose active involvement in this regard is equally important, is India, whose eye is on the unfolding scheme of political developments in Afghanistan. A greater part of India's concerns emanate from the fact that Afghanistan is a country whose fate is closely entwined with the question of Indian security, a rather important factor that drove India to spend sums that range up and above a whopping \$1.3 billion on a whole range of infrastructure and other projects aimed at improving the lot of the common man in Afghanistan.[5] India's concerns must not just remain couched in the monetary effort it has invested, and possibly will invest, in all probability, but must find more active assertion in the form of involvement in rehabilitating the region, and in the form of working towards nipping antagonistic insurgency in the bud. India has been at the receiving end of terror between 1996 and 2008, a time when the Taliban headed Afghanistan, and Pakistan deemed Afghanistan as its proverbial fifth province. But, instead of being decidedly parochial in accepting the existence of the good Taliban theory, India must understand and accept that the Taliban are an integral wing of the Afghani polity. It is not a weed to be trampled upon, but rather a shoot from the stem that has to be nurtured and taught to grow in the right direction. Nevertheless, India is not that antagonistic towards the Afghan peace talks, so long as there is a promise that its interests are protected.

President Hamid Karzai threw light on an encouraging trend in Afghanistan, evincing a burgeoning development in the form of peace talks with the Taliban, but it will evidently take more than just talks to get things in action. The burden is heavier than it looks, but will need plenty of shoulders to help bear it. While it is indeed true that other states also share a border with Afghanistan, there hasn't been so pivotal a role for any other than Pakistan, considering the very nature of events that has transpired thus far. These peace talks can yield positive results, considering that there has been plenty of groundwork, and that there is some hint of regional support.

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[1] After the September 11 terrorist attacks on America, "It's time for war, Bush and Blair tell Taliban – We're ready to go in – PM|Planes shot at over Kabul" (October 7, 2001)
< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/07/politics.september11> >

[2] An international political organization of leading emerging market countries comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, named BRICS with each letter representing each one its members.

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[3] S/RES/1988(2011), June 17, 2011

[4] S/RES/1989(2011), June 17, 2011

[5] "Indian PM Leaves for Afghan Visit" (May, 12, 2011)

<<http://tribune.com.pk/story/167124/indian-pm-leaves-for-afghanistan-visit/>>

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