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Af-Pak

A Strategic Opportunity for South Asia?



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AF-PAK

A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR SOUTH ASIA?

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INTRODUCTION

“This is certainly decision-time in Afghanistan and for Afghanistan. A number of critical decisions will be made over the next weeks. Together, they will determine the prospects for success in ending a conflict that has become more intense over the last months.”

- UN envoy for Afghanistan, Kai Eide,
briefing the Security Council
(29 September 2009)

Obama inherited a war. He has described it as ‘one of necessity’.¹ He allowed the troop ‘surge’ under General Petraeus, a carry over of the Bush years, to go through, even as his administration carried out a review of the situation in its initial months.² In March, in a white paper,³ he outlined his Af-Pak strategy, to be spearheaded by Richard Holbrooke on the political side and Petraeus on the military. He is currently in the midst of fulfilling his campaign promise of taking the Taliban-al Qaeda problem to its logical conclusion.⁴

¹ “Afghan mission is ‘war of necessity’, says Obama.” IBN Live
<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/afghan-mission-is-war-of-necessity-says-obama/99426-2.html>

² “McCain and Obama on Afghanistan.” Time.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1823945,00.html>

³ “White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan.”
www.whitehouse.gov/assets/.../Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf. Also see,
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>

⁴ Indicating American determination, Obama has said: ‘We will target al Qaeda wherever they take root; we will not yield in our pursuit; and we are

The present juncture of contemplation of the strategy has been brought about by the commanding general in Afghanistan, McChrystal, who has reported realistically on the situation in Afghanistan back to the Pentagon.⁵ The 66 page report,⁶ under consideration of the White House, has led Obama to review the Af-Pak strategy.⁷ The run-off elections of 7 November 2009 have given Obama the time to think through the McChrystal proposals, as also ensure that the regime that is installed in Kabul after the elections will be a ‘credible partner’ with the capacity to deliver the international role expected of it.⁸ The resulting strategy would help protect the achievements from their US\$80 billion expenditure better. This would also be ballast as the Democrats contemplate Congressional elections next year and Obama faces prospects of the next election later in his presidency.

developing the capacity and the cooperation to deny a safe haven to any who threaten America and its allies.’ This counters the perspective that the US is looking for a face saving exit.

⁵ “Is It Amateur Hour in the White House?”
Newsweek. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/215991>

⁶ Bob Woodward. “McChrystal: More Forces or ‘Mission Failure’.” Washington Post. 21 September 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/20/AR2009092002920.html> for a pdf copy of the unclassified report.

⁷ “Obama seeks advice on Afghanistan.” BBC.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8295272.stm>. Also see,

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Readout-from-the-Pres-Secretary-on-the-Presidents-National-Security-Meeting-on-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan

⁸ “Obama’s chief of staff links troop surge to ‘credible Afghan partner.’” Guardian. 18 October 2009

The McChrystal reports states, "Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) -- while Afghan security capacity matures -- risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible." Implicit in this statement is the likely pattern of operations with the 40,000 troops reportedly requested for stabilizing the military situation in favour of the USFOR-A (US Forces Afghanistan) and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in the first year and thereafter, rolling back the insurgency. This implies a likely spike in the levels of violence in Afghanistan, where this strategy will unfold. It will also entail Pakistan doing 'more' in terms of rolling back the Pakistani Taliban, Afghan Taliban leadership and al Qaeda on its side of the Af-Pak region.

The paper analyzes the situation and the likely manner in which it is set to unfold. The paper first takes a look at the dangers of a military pursuit of the Pakistani Taliban, leadership of the Afghan Taliban and the al Qaeda, to the stability of Pakistan. Thereafter, it surveys American options and recommends a political approach which goes beyond merely opening up to the 'moderate' Taliban. It then dwells on India's options and concludes in favour of a proactive Indian involvement.

It recommends reaching out to the Taliban, including the hardcore Taliban, to forestall the destabilization of Pakistan due to the expansion of a counter offensive against Pakistan's military into Pakistan's heartland by the Pakistani Taliban. The paper recommends a politically predominant strategy for the international community to prevent such a risk from materializing. For India to favour a strategy which takes Pakistani interests into account, Pakistan will have to reciprocate in a similar manner by ending proxy war and preserving Indian interests

in Afghanistan. This can be achieved through a dialogue between the two states, one that is delinked from the presently 'paused' composite dialogue. The argument here challenges mainstream strategic thinking that privileges the military option. It hopes to widen the debate on approaches available to the international community and makes constructive suggestions on India's options. An innovative Indo-Pak approach to Af-Pak could help unlock the current impasse, since as the McChrystal report states, the face-off between the two states 'is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani counter measures in Afghanistan and India.'⁹

I THE PAKISTAN SCENE

After having swept away the Pakistani Taliban encroachment from within the vicinity of Islamabad,¹⁰ Pakistan is presently attempting to roll up the Pakistani Taliban-al Qaeda combine in South Waziristan. With the Tehrik e Taliban chief, Baitullah Mehsud killed in a drone attack,¹¹ the leadership disarray within the Pakistani Taliban is being exploited in this offensive. Two divisions of Pakistan Army, along with an armoured brigade, face an estimated 10,000 hardcore Taliban militants plus 6,000 battle-hardened Uzbeks and al-Qaeda's Arab

⁹ Stanley McChrystal. "Initial United States Forces (Afghanistan) Assessment." pp.2-11. http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf

¹⁰ The Pakistani Taliban had come to within 100 km of Islamabad on their takeover of the neighbouring districts of Swat after the peace deal of April 2009. See Harinder Singh. "Tackling or Trailing the Taliban: An Assessment." IDSA Strategic Comments. July 2009. <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/HarinderSingh200709.htm>

¹¹ "Taliban confirm commander's death." BBC. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8220762.stm

fighters.¹² Pakistan is under pressure to ‘do more’ and has been responsive to the extent it has been suitably incentivized. The Kerry-Lugar bill, promising US\$1.5 billion for non-military aid to Pakistan over the next five years has been signed by Obama.¹³

Pakistan can be expected to be proactive and on the offensive only so far as this does not open up an internal cleavage along ethnic lines. This threat has consistently brought down the vigour in its response. It does not want a civil war on its hands nor a divide in the Army along ethnic lines. There is also the Islamist angle and anti-Americanism that has kept its enthusiasm under check. Additionally, there is a pre-existing affinity between the Army-ISI combine and the Taliban. The Army would like to preserve as much leverage in Afghanistan through the Taliban in a post-US intervention scenario as it can. Therefore, Pakistan will be a reluctant participant in the forthcoming phase of further military action against the Taliban.¹⁴ As with the post-9/11 moment, in which Musharraf was made to make a turn around in abandoning the Taliban,¹⁵ Kiyani and Zardari, in that order, would require to take a decision. The present operations in Waziristan have a limited purpose of militarily reasserting the writ of the state.

Earlier, with the support of the Pakistani society largely behind them, the Army was able to undertake the Swat operation and

the nation could absorb the three million temporarily internally displaced people resulting from the operation.¹⁶ However, the question is whether the anti-Americanism in Pakistani society will permit greater freedom of military action to the duo. Secondly, with greater pressure being mounted by the Army against it, the Pakistani Taliban, which has a considerable Punjabi component, could step up its reaction elsewhere in Punjab. Pakistan would not like to see the instability spreading, particularly to its multiethnic economic hub, Karachi. Therefore, the answer is likely to be that Pakistan would be a reluctant participant and may cite reasons of internal stability for its recalcitrance.¹⁷ The risk is in Americans stepping in by expanding the footprint of their military action. Presently, its role is confined to using technology and stand off weapons in Pakistan with the tacit acknowledgment of the Army. However, an enlarged footprint could see a more rigorous counter and public relations backlash. Besides considerations of sovereignty,¹⁸ the brunt of the reaction would be felt by the people in Taliban’s terrorism, ultimately forcing the showdown the state has been attempting to avoid. Therefore, there are limits to which Pakistan can be pushed and there are limits of Pakistani action against the reactionary forces within its polity. These have proven far stronger than the Pakistani state can cope with. Therefore, the gun that the Pakistanis usually hold to their own heads while negotiating with their western interlocutors, should be given some credence. Strategic prudence demands that

¹² “People continue to flee as Pak jets pound Waziristan.” *The Hindu*. 14 October 2009.

¹³ Nirupama Subramaniam. “Hue and cry in Pakistan over Kerry-Lugar conditions.” *The Hindu*. 8 October 2009.

¹⁴ Harinder Singh. “The Pakistani Taliban: An existential or a passing threat?” *IDSAs Strategic Comments*. September 2009. <http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/HarinderSingh230909.htm>

¹⁵ “US threatened Pak bombing after 9/11.” *IBN Live*. <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/be-prepared-to-be-bombed-us-told-pak-after-911/22158-2.html>

¹⁶ “UN agencies concerned over ‘massive displacement’ in Pakistan.” *UN News Center*. 8 May 2009.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30743&Cr=pakistan&Cr1>

¹⁷ For a perspective on the threat and Pakistan’s ability to cope, see “Q&A: Militancy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *BBC*.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8104063.stm

¹⁸ “Pak military up in arms over US aid riders.” *TOI*. 8 October 2009.

Pakistani concerns be taken on board. No state should be compelled to commit suicide.

Consider the consequences of a 'military first' strategy. It is being dubbed as a 'Pakistan first' strategy in the US, indicating that the US will push Pakistan even as it contributes its technology and firepower.¹⁹ Pakistan, which is critical to the outcome of operations in Afghanistan, is to whittle the Afghan Taliban. In reaction, its ally, the Pakistani Taliban is likely to take the fight into the Indus plain and Karachi. Pakistan, the best-positioned state to tackle terrorism, could be destabilized, with an obvious impact on the conflict outcome. A situation of civil war would have massive human security consequences. The Algerian civil war of the early nineties and the multiple insurgencies in Iraq are the closest parallels. The dimensions of what will happen in Pakistan are greater because of the demographic factor and larger area of spread. The safety of nuclear weapons is another issue that has been bothering analysts over the past year.²⁰

It is in this context that Pakistan is advocating reaching out to the Afghan Taliban. It has indicated that the Mullah Omar faction, called the Quetta Shura, can be brought to the table.²¹ It prefers that the faction be accommodated in the Kabul power arrangement, with the current power equations being duly modified. This would require the western powers to exit. The security arrangements would be taken over by the UN under a peacekeeping mission. The Taliban for its part would be required to provide an assurance that it would not

revert to religious extremism or harbour international terrorists such as the al Qaeda. The idea will not gain traction lest the gains of the Bonn process²² and those regarding funding made at Paris, London and Tokyo, be compromised. The return of the Taliban could lead to another blood bath with those siding with the West, particularly the northern ethnic minorities, being targeted. These problems exist, but can be addressed as part of the negotiations. The initiative to reach out to the core Taliban is a more immediate concern. The deal could be worked out over a period of time as had been the case with other conflicts through the Paris peace talks, Geneva Accords and Oslo process.

II US APPROACHES

This is particularly important for America to consider. It already has a sense of the issue and this has caused it to modify its strategy, diluting its purely military angle. There is now a political component to the strategy that includes a political approach to the Taliban, possibly Saudi-mediated.²³ Talks have been reported with the 'moderate' or 'good' Taliban.²⁴ The aim however, is counterinsurgency-oriented, in that, it seeks to create a divide within the Taliban which would enable a whittling of its power. This has not met with any success since the Taliban, aware of its ascendancy at the moment, has not cracked. The leadership of the Mullah Omar, Hekmatyar and Haqqani factions,

¹⁹ "Obama admin considering 'Pakistan First' approach." Indian Express. 7 October 2009.

²⁰ Ali Ahmed. "Pakistan's Nuclear Assets, India's Concerns." IPCS CBRN Brief. 11 February 2009.

²¹ Ambassador Mehsud presented an outline of a proposal at the USI Seminar on 'Peace and Stability in Afghanistan: The Way Ahead', 06-07 October 2009, New Delhi.

²² "Bonn Agreement (Afghanistan)." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonn_Agreement_\(Afghanistan\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonn_Agreement_(Afghanistan))

²³ "Source: Saudi hosts Afghan peace talks with Taliban reps." CNN. 5 October 2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/10/05/afghan.saudi.talks/index.html>.

²⁴ "US open to Afghan Taliban talks." Al Jazeera. 8 March 2009. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2009/03/20093885411963197.html>

hiding in Pakistan, is also out of direct reach of the US. The possibility of a western exit, discernible by the exhaustion of the Europeans and the latest opinion poll in the US with 58 per cent respondents against continuing intervention,²⁵ has possibly, in the short term, increased Taliban's resolve. Other than the neo-cons, even congressional support, particularly of democrats, for the war is denuding. This is being played down in the US to prevent the Taliban 'waiting out' the US-NATO deployed in Afghanistan. Defence Secretary Gates has indicated that the US is prepared for the long haul.

However, to incentivize the Taliban to come to the table, it is likely that there will be a spike in violence with the additional 40,000 troops demanded by McChrystal being used to gain a 'position of strength'. Just as the killing of Shamil Basayev helped end the Chechen insurgency and Prabhakaran's slaying broke the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), the decapitation of the Taliban leadership, reportedly hiding in Pakistan, to whittle the Taliban, may be resorted to. The strategy advocated by Biden is somewhat along these lines, with the suggestion being that the terrorists be taken out through technological means rather than troop-intensive counterinsurgency.²⁶ The US thinks that without taking the fight to the Taliban, its power would be undermined. Additionally, this would cause a demonstration effect elsewhere and Islamism may get a boost in claiming that it had laid low yet another superpower.

The credibility of NATO, in its first out of area operation, would also be at stake. Thus, the US, though cognisant of the

²⁵ Kristi Keck. "Reassessing Obama's War of Necessity." CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/09/16/afghanistan.obama/index.html>.

²⁶ "Obama Considers Strategy Shift in Afghan War." New York Times. 22 September 2009.

limitations of a military option in light of its Vietnam experience, would rely on it at least partially, to herd the Taliban to the table. This is likely to result in a catch-22 in which the Taliban will not negotiate till the exit strategy is on the table and the US will not put this on the table lest it lose face. The war is thus, set to increase before the situation stabilizes. While the US takes on the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan would be required to destroy their bases in the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). The problem is in the linkages between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. That latter comprise both disaffected Pukhtuns and Punjabis of a jihadi mindset. They would expand the war in case they are further constricted by military action. Therefore, the destabilization of the nuclear-armed state on India's borders is a strong possibility.

III AN APPROACH FOR INDIA

India is alive to this possibility.²⁷ Some in the strategic community in fact, would welcome the destabilization of Pakistan.²⁸ Their rationale is that the Pakistani state would only be paying a price for its own actions over the past three decades. It would increase the power asymmetry between a growing India and a failing Pakistan. It would not only ensure a decisive de-hyphenation of India from Pakistan, but also enable uncontested regional hegemony by India. Lastly, in its impact on India-China equations, it would leave China without a consequential partner in South Asia with which to balance India and will lock it into a South

²⁷ For an earlier, skeptical look at the possibility, see C Raja Mohan. 2004-05. "What If Pakistan Fails? India Isn't Worried...Yet." The Washington Quarterly. 28 (1), Winter: 117-128.

²⁸ This was suggested controversially by Colonel Ralph Peters in his article, "Blood Borders" in the Armed Forces Journal in June 2006. See Shahid Siddiqi. 2008. "Pakistan's Balkanization." Foreign Policy Journal. 12 December.

Asian box as a regional and not an Asian power.

The governmental line of reasoning is that a stable Pakistan is in India's interest.²⁹ However, India wishes to preserve its strategic interests even as the global community thinks through its options. India would primarily like to see Pakistan desist from using terror directed at Kashmir or the rest of India. The most horrific escalation of this was the Mumbai attacks resulting in a 'pause' in the composite dialogue between the two states.³⁰ India has therefore, been attempting to sensitize Pakistan to its concerns. This, it is attempting not only diplomatically and through the US, but also most likely, through intelligence action. Such action though does not have official acknowledgement, but its effect can be discerned from the vociferous manner in which Pakistan has been complaining of Indian interference in Baluchistan and expansive Indian presence and interests in Afghanistan.³¹ While the former found controversial mention in the Sharm El Sheikh joint statement,³² the latter has been directly targeted by terror action, such as the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and again in October 2009. The 'strategy of containment' of Pakistan on the one hand and withholding from talks till it appears responsive to India's concerns on the other, is, however, not an end in itself. It is a 'means' to an 'end', the end being the discontinuance of terror directed at India.

²⁹ "PM's statement in Lok Sabha on the debate on the PM's recent visits abroad on July 29, 2009 PMO." PMO.

<http://pmindia.nic.in/parl/pcontent.asp?id=43>

³⁰ Pia Malhotra and Aparajita Kashyap. "Resuming The Dialogue: India, Pakistan And The Composite Process." IPCS Issue Brief. August 2009.

³¹ "India fuelling unrest by funding Taliban: Pak." Indian Express. 26 October 2009.

³² "Joint Statement Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh and the Prime Minister of Pakistan Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani." MEA. 16 July 2009. <http://meaindia.nic.in/>

Therefore, India needs to consider the extent to which it wishes to carry forward the strategy of containment.

India needs to appreciate the extent to which Pakistan can respond in its present circumstances.³³ Ajai Sahni characterizes Pakistani propensity to negotiate with a gun to its own head as a 'skillfully constructed nightmare fantasy.' While skepticism is understandable, a reality check is in order. While it is taking on the Pakistani Taliban and the al Qaeda, in particular the Uzbek forces in Waziristan, it may not be in a position to take on the Punjabi terror groups it has nurtured. The violence throughout October this year, as Pakistan launched its South Waziristan operation, only demonstrates the reach of the extremists.³⁴ These attacks culminated in the targeting of the General Headquarters itself. The message is implicit that the Pakistani Taliban has the capacity to expand the reach of terror into the hitherto stable Punjab. Pakistan would be wary of consolidation of extremists, both Pukhtun and Punjabi, by also taking on the anti-India jihadi terror groups. Therefore, India requires to decide how far compelling Pakistan will be in its interests.

Decidedly, a destabilized nuclear state on its borders with the potential to interfere in its internal affairs, particularly in majority-minority relations,³⁵ is not in India's national interest. Therefore, there is scope for India to consider the Pakistani position on negotiation with the Taliban. Quite

³³ In his "Encounters in a Nightmare". In Ira Pande (ed.) *The Great Divide: India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. p.157.

³⁴ So far 180 people have been killed in October alone according to "Fresh attacks rock north Pakistan." BBC. 23 October 2009. Along with the GHQ, attacks have targeted the Islamabad University and the Kamra air base.

³⁵ The inside-outside connection is usually lost sight of in strategic commentary. Here it is taken as relevant to the Indian consideration. This is particularly when rightwing forces take advantage of the strains.

obviously, India would require extracting from Pakistan the price of its cooperation. Such concession by India to Pakistan would require that Pakistan make a similar concession. At the very least, it would require giving up its use of terror as a strategic tool directed at India in Kashmir and elsewhere. At the same time Pakistan would require to guarantee good behaviour of the Taliban in Afghanistan in order that those who have associated with the West and India are not imposed upon by a returning Taliban. This would enable political space for the Taliban in Afghanistan and also facilitate Pakistani aims. Indian interests can be protected in the deal through India's soft power, based on its economic strength, extended to cover the reconstruction efforts there.³⁶ Thus Afghanistan instead of being treated as a space for strategic contestation should be seen as one of strategic opportunity. This would require wisdom and trust. The Indian Prime Minister's refrain is pertinent in this regard: 'Trust but verify'.³⁷ This is easier if each side has something to gain. India gets a guarantee against terror, underwritten by Pakistan, not only of terror perpetrated by Punjabi groups, but also the Taliban. Pakistan gets 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and some control over the Pukhtun approach to the Durand line. And while the Afghans get a respite from the insurgency and counterinsurgency, the US and NATO get a face saving exit. The guarantees Pakistan and Taliban are to provide have to be factored in, in a cast iron manner. This

³⁶ India has contributed US\$1.2 billion to Afghanistan's reconstruction. See Foreign Secretary's address, "Concluding address by Foreign Secretary at the International Seminar on Peace and Stability in Afghanistan: The way Ahead." MEA. 7 October 2009, <http://meaindia.nic.in/>

³⁷ In his address to the Lok Sabha on 29 July 2009, the PM said, 'Trust but verify is the only possible way of dealing with Pakistan.' <http://pmindia.nic.in/parl/pcontent.asp?id=43>

would require talking through the idea first between the states involved.

To this end, an India-Pakistan discussion, not linked to the composite dialogue, has been suggested here.³⁸ In this, the necessary 'give and take' and verifications would require to be worked out. This is only the first step. A parallel US-Pakistan dialogue, along with the other interested states, can be undertaken to evolve a strategy towards the Taliban, culminating in a replacement of ISAF with a UN mission, including contributions from members of the SAARC experienced in UN peacekeeping, Muslim states³⁹ elsewhere and other UN members.⁴⁰ The reconstruction efforts can be jointly undertaken by Pakistan and India, under the aegis of the SAARC, along with other states such as China. Pakistan will require to allow Afghanistan a route through its territory for access to India.⁴¹ This way the drugs problem could be ended with the Indian market becoming available for Afghan goods, thereby, ending the economic rationale for poppy cultivation. The US would have a receding and less visible military role, and would require underwriting its success through its political and economic contribution. Thus, it can be seen that several possibilities can open up, provided the first step is negotiated first. In principle, there is a need to accept that the Taliban can be engaged with. *That wider possibilities on*

³⁸ Prem Shankar Jha suggests a dialogue also between the armed forces indicating the ameliorative prospects of dialogue in "Double Deadlock". In Ira Pande (ed.) *The Great Divide: India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. p.115. 2009.

³⁹ Arif Rafiq. "A Muslim solution for Afghanistan." *Christian Science Monitor*. 6 October 2009.

⁴⁰ Firdaus Ahmed. "A Strategy for Af-Pak." *IPCS Article* 2828. 9 March 2009. http://www.ipcs.org/article_details.php?articleNo=2828

⁴¹ Ambassador R. Sikri's intervention at a USI International Seminar on 'Peace and Stability in Afghanistan: The Way Ahead' on 07 October 2009.

the India-Pakistan stand-off open up, is the best incentive for treating this juncture as a strategic opportunity.

IV RATIONALE

Arguing for this first step would require dealing with the critique that getting the core Taliban on board would amount to 'appeasement'. The question that needs to be answered is whether the Taliban will continue to be expansionist if it returns to power?⁴² Will this result in triumphalism and provide a boost to the waning tide of terror? Will terror find, yet another time, a safe haven in Afghanistan? If the answers to these are in the 'affirmative', then the hardcore Taliban would require to be eliminated; even if this takes time or carries the risk of Pakistan going under with a considerable human cost. Recourse to history is useful. Terrible aftermaths have surrounded revolutions – French, Russian, and Iranian.⁴³ The fear among neighbours and interested powers that revolutions are expansionist and therefore, require dissipation of their energy, have often led to bloody interventions. While Taliban is not in the same category, the fear is that they too are expansionist. Also, in history, is the manner in which the Vietnamese were projected as communists out for 'salami slicing' Southeast Asia. Likewise, the Taliban are seen as forerunners of an Islamist tide that could destabilize the Middle East, Pakistan and Central Asia.⁴⁴ Instability in energy and resource-rich lands would lead to disruption in the global economy and the way of life of the West in particular. This constitutes the vested interest or vital national interest of the West. This explains

⁴² "Taliban say they're no threat to other countries." TOI. 8 October 2009.

⁴³ Stephen Walt. 1996. *Revolution and War*. Cornell University Press.

⁴⁴ Ahmed Rashid. 2001. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.

their presence and resort to the military instrument. Is their projection of the threat correct?

Here the argument is that the image of the Taliban, particularly one received from the western media, is possibly self-serving and a trifle exaggerated. It does have a substantial element of truth, in that, Islamists and the Taliban are an extremist and reactionary force. This owes to their need to define themselves completely antithetically to their enemies, the hated, western 'other'. In case of an end to the war and the resulting absence of an 'enemy', the Taliban can redefine itself. The threat they pose to Islam elsewhere is also overdrawn. The interpretation of Islam of both Central and South Asia is not so weak as to succumb easily to the Taliban's version. The Muslim populations of Pakistan, India and Central Asia are not amenable to extremism, but instead are forward looking. Therefore, any threat of expansion or Talibanization is much less likely than is feared. In India, the origin and sustenance of both problems that are likely to be affected, that is, Kashmir and India's minority management, have a largely internal dimension. The threat of aggravation from outside is overdrawn, as is restricted at best to tactical issues such as training, logistics etc., as against any strategic linkage. The government has yet again launched an initiative to talk to the dissidents in Kashmir.⁴⁵

The major point is that defeating them would be inordinately costly. Among the problems faced by Obama and in the European capitals are scarce resources and inadequate time.⁴⁶ Since the outcome of conflict is always uncertain, there is no guarantee of a victory in such a conflict. The Iraq model can be taken as a counter argument, in that, the Iraqis were turned on

⁴⁵ "Hurriyat to talk to Centre after consultation with others." TOI" 7 October 2009.

⁴⁶ "Afghanistan 'under resourced' for years: US." TOI. 1 September 2009.

the al Qaeda in their midst through the 'awakening' campaign in the Sunni Triangle.⁴⁷ However, the dimension of the problem here is much bigger, in that, Pakistan is more than four times the size of Iraq in terms of both, size and population. With the 'home front' of the West weakening, in terms of the peoples' support for the war, their governments would be hard put to stay the course if the situation gets worse. Since the elimination of the Taliban and the remaining al Qaeda is not a possibility, military force could be applied for arriving at a 'position of strength' from which to negotiate. Will this happen? The Taliban has been resurgent over about four years now. It would require considerable degradation of its fighting capabilities for the West to gain an upper hand. This would require great exertion in military power in a time compressed dimension. The human costs ought to serve as a deterrent, particularly in light of the Pakistani state's incapability to handle the aftermath of the earthquake in POK in 2005 and the presently internally displaced people from Swat. These only provided an opportunity for the Islamists to gain ground and public sympathy, thereby, further tying the regime's hands in acting against them. Therefore, the outcome is once again open-ended and fraught with uncertainty. The campaign would be interrupted by cataclysmic events. An example is that while no one may miss or mourn Mullah Omar, the death of Osama bin Laden as a martyr could lead to an emotional upheaval with unpredictable consequences in the course of the war.

Finally, it bears mention that the seemingly far-fetched option of Indian military intervention, alongside the international community, has also been

⁴⁷ Aaron Glantz. "Petraeus' Testimony. FPIF. 8 April 2008. <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5136>

discussed by the strategic community.⁴⁸ This 'boots on ground' approach involves cases in which Pakistan does not commit itself or there are unforeseen events within Pakistan such as a rightwing coup. It can only grow stronger in case of more bomb attacks against Indian interests in Kabul such as the one on the embassy on 8 October 2009.⁴⁹ In such circumstances, commentary has it that the international community may rely on India. Interestingly, at the time of the writing of this paper, India and the US are participating in a joint military exercise in which their mechanized troops will undertake counterinsurgency operations in a semi-urban terrain.⁵⁰ This is perhaps with a view to send a signal to the Pakistani establishment that the international community has additional options, including the possible containment of Pakistan. This could bring forth greater commitment from Pakistan since it would not want its traditional foe to gain any leverage against it or get any closer to the US. However, in case the envisaged circumstances were to come about, then the possibility of India participating in anti-Taliban operations might become more real. Interoperability for this has been built up over the years of military engagement with the US.⁵¹ Since the capability exists, the decision to use it may well be a positive one. The consequences and implications would then undoubtedly be thought through, but the dangers will remain. The argument that not acting may bring about worse dangers would be used to convert sceptics. Time pressure may

⁴⁸ C Raja Mohan. "Debating India's stand on military aid to Afghanistan." Indian Express. 7 July 2009.

⁴⁹ "Kabul blast outside Indian Embassy." BBC. 8 October 2009.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8296137.stm

⁵⁰ "Indo-US military tango next week." TOI. 8 October 2009.

⁵¹ Firdaus Ahmed. "Military cooperation with the US: A mixed bag." India Together.

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/oct/fah-usind.htm>

undercut a wholesome debate. Therefore, it is best that this direction of strategic drift also be questioned in terms of its implications on internal politics, on civil-military relations, on militarization and, most importantly, if Indian military participation would help or heal.

V CONCLUSION

The moot question is ‘Can the Taliban be moderated by engagement?’ This is not infeasible. Even prior to their ostracism, they were attempting to gain international legitimacy. In control of two-thirds of Afghanistan, they had been canvassing for recognition and support. It is their religious extremism⁵² and association with Bin Laden - fallouts also of the lack of openings elsewhere - that deprived them of this. There is a degree of correspondence between them having been denied support and their extremism, as was demonstrated in their destruction of the Bamiyan statues. While this is indeed indicative of the type of regime they had and could be expected to revive, it bears recall that a decade has passed since. Their interest is self-preservation and a return to power. They would also like to see Afghanistan’s reconstruction. They will not be able to militarily go about this since the might of the international community is arrayed against them. Their power has been considerably degraded and would continue to wane as long as defiance continues. Their reliance on the Pakistani Taliban has brought about costs that their host society may be unwilling to bear. Their associates in the Pakistani establishment and ISI are also keen that the war end and the western military depart the region. This can only happen if the Taliban be prodded to act maturely and rationally. The Saudi regime could convince them to participate, particularly if it underwrites the resulting

⁵² See Ahmed Rashid. 2000. *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. London: IB Tauris. pp.82-95.

regime economically.⁵³ In return, the Taliban could sever ties with the al Qaeda that is anathema to the Saudis. Therefore, there are advantages for the Taliban to talk.

In case they are offered a return to a share of power and assistance with reconstruction, in return for their reconstructing their ideology, it would appear a fair bargain. The presence of other groups in the power sharing arrangement would further balance out the Taliban. The argument here is that when approached as equals and not as losers in the war, they may find this acceptable. To get them to accede to talks, as a first step, the exit of the western powers and their replacement by blue helmets over time could be promised to be taken up in the negotiations. The details of this changeover can be worked out, with a phased approach, beginning with relegation of the US to military bases initially and, thereafter, a winding down over a mutually acceptable period.

It needs be said that the al Qaeda problem is on the wane. After eight years of relentless military and intelligence operations, the al Qaeda has been considerably degraded.⁵⁴ It is not a force that can be completely eliminated since its ideology holds sway elsewhere, even if it is not militantly pursued. The wellsprings of support are also to be found in the angst against US policies in the Middle East. Therefore, it needs reconsideration if the UN mandate, permitting the US-led ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ can continue indefinitely.⁵⁵ The US cannot

⁵³ “Karzai Sought Saudi Help With Taliban.” *New York Times*. 30 September 2008.

⁵⁴ “Britain Lowers Al Qaeda Threat Levels.” *Reuters*. 20 July 2009.

⁵⁵ On 23 March 2009 the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) had its mandate renewed by UN Security Council resolution 1868. The annual resolution in March every year by the Security Council forms the mandate for the UN Mission in Afghanistan and defines the priorities of

have a blank cheque of indefinite presence.⁵⁶ That would be a return to a colonial era and permitting 'Infinite Justice', as Operation Enduring Freedom was originally called. Instead, there is a need to move to other ways to resolve the al Qaeda phenomenon. These essentially involve Obama and the US making good on his Cairo speech.⁵⁷ There is a need to marry the Holbrooke mission in Af-Pak to the Mitchell mission for the Middle East,⁵⁸ for results on this score. The bottomline is that by continuing military action, the US would overstay its welcome. Instead, a move towards a political approach would help it disengage militarily, thereby, depriving the nationalist energy from under-gridding the counter it has faced from the Taliban.

India requires asserting its growing power with a vision that accompanied its freedom struggle and also needs to privilege it economic over military power. Outsourcing security in the region to a superpower militates against its emerging power credentials and negates its anti-colonial heritage.⁵⁹ Instead, it needs to innovatively take a lead in engaging Pakistan in churning out a regional solution, under perhaps the rubric of the SAARC. Pakistan's idea of taming the Taliban's nationalist credentials can be a useful start point. Doing so would make for a 'win-win' situation for all. This way

the Taliban would be weaned away from its propensity to extremism and violence; Pakistan would feel more secure; and India would be less threatened by their combined action. It would enable Pakistan and India to exercise a joint initiative in which Pakistan has the political lead compensated by India's soft power.⁶⁰ It could herald a wider rapprochement. In such a positive and proactive turn, it would gain stature and come to be acknowledged not only as a regional power, that it already is, but an Asian power. Helping break the Af-Pak impasse through constructive contribution to a solution for the US-led international community can be India's moment of arrival.

the Mission. For the mandate, see <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1742>

⁵⁶ Jha, n.38, p. 112.

⁵⁷ For text see New York Times.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>

⁵⁸ Daniel Pipes blog. "George Mitchell's Return to Middle East Diplomacy."

<http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2009/01/george-mitchells-return-to-middle-east>

⁵⁹ Mainstream thinking exemplified by writings of analysts such as C. Raja Mohan is for a Washington-New Delhi meeting of minds on 'finding answers to deepening threats emanating from Pakistan ("The Great Nuke Game." In Ira Pande (ed.) *The Great Divide*. p.138).'

⁶⁰ China's expanding footprint in Afghan reconstruction bears mention here. See C. Raja Mohan. "The Great Game Folio: Plan B." *Indian Express*. 21 October 2009.