

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://blogs.rediff.com/mkbhadrakumar/2015/02/23/us-resets-the-afghan-chessboard/>

US resets the Afghan chessboard

By M K Bhadrakumar

February 23, 2015

Two things to emerge out of the visit in the weekend to Kabul by the newly appointed US Defence Secretary Ashley Carter are: first, the strong indication that the US military presence in Afghanistan will be, after all, open-ended; and, second, that the Afghan peace process involving the reconciliation with the Taliban is, finally, taking off. No doubt, the two templates are inter-related but all the same each is a stand-alone development, too.

The establishment of the American military bases in Afghanistan costing hundreds of millions of dollars in construction and renovation work undertaken in the past couple of years and the tenacity with which Washington pushed the US-Afghan security pact that literally provides for diplomatic immunity to the bases and its personnel all along had signaled the Pentagon's long-term planning to keep a military presence in the region for years to come. Only, expediency demanded that the US drawdown was instead thrust into the limelight.

But now that the Afghan transition has led to the formation of an out-and-out pro-American leadership in Kabul, there is no need to keep up the presence anymore. Besides, Washington estimates that the regional acceptance of long-term US military presence in the region is at a higher threshold today — primarily because Pakistan, which is the key player among the neighboring countries, is willing to learn to live with the American military presence next-door, given the vastly improved climate of its equations with the new leadership in Kabul and its own

new approach to take American help and crack down on the terrorist groups threatening its national security from the tribal areas and from Afghan sanctuaries.

Clearly, the bottom line is that the US-Pakistan relationship has significantly improved and the two countries are able to harmonize their core interests — from the US perspective, kickstarting a peace process involving the Taliban that would lead to a durable settlement, and from the Pakistani perspective, accommodating the Taliban in the power structure in Kabul politically and also rolling back India's influence.

Equally, China, which is cooperating and contributing to the US strategy for the stabilization of Afghanistan — see my blog [*US-China partnership in Afghanistan*](#) — also has a more responsive partner in the new Afghan president Ashraf Ghani who is a well-known figure in Beijing as a former World Bank official. Indeed, China and the US are actively fostering Afghan-Pakistan amity and that in turn has vastly improved the regional security scenario.

A Xinhua commentary in the weekend noted that “Afghanistan has also for the first time realized Pakistan's role and President Ashraf Ghani on Friday hailed Pakistan's move to cooperate in the reconciliation process amid reports that the Taliban have indicated a willingness to begin peace talks.”

In sum, the US military presence in Afghanistan gains regional acceptance as a necessary underpinning in the emergent politico-military scenario, even as the reconciliation of the Taliban has commenced. Conceivably, the specter of the Islamic State threat that has been projected with exaggerated importance lately in the western media would also help to propagate the need of prolonged US military presence in Afghanistan — both in the American domestic opinion as well as regionally.

Iran, Russia and India are the three regional countries that do not figure in the first circle of states wielding influence in Afghanistan, but at any rate, it is in their self-interests too that the US military presence in Afghanistan (and the overall western commitment to Afghan reconstruction) does not abruptly by end-2016 when the security situation remains precarious.

Of course, the interests of Iran, Russia and India in Afghanistan converge on the key issue of countering and defeating the terrorist groups in the region. But each would have its self-interests, too. Of late, Iran has noticeably toned down its opposition to the US military presence in Afghanistan and instead takes to the broad principled position that the Afghans should handle their problems themselves. The point is, when it comes to fighting terrorist and extremist groups, Tehran and Washington have shown a new willingness to cooperate and if the nuclear issue gets resolved, this nascent trend can be expected to strengthen dramatically. Meanwhile, Iran is also “rebuilding” its equations with Kabul, as necessitated by the transition to the Ghani presidency, and is aspiring to play a role in the negotiation of any Afghan settlement.

Russia, on the other hand, finds itself between the rock and a hard place in Afghanistan. Its influence over the new set-up headed by Ghani is marginal and its capacity to play any sort of role in the peace talks is virtually nil. The US has effectively ensured that Russia is kept out in the cold. Washington forged a working relationship with China directly, which would cater to

Beijing's priorities of regional security and stability and, partly at least aims at precluding the need for Beijing to form any joint platform with Moscow.

Moscow has a vested interest in the continued American military presence in Afghanistan insofar as it impacts the security of the Central Asian region. At least, this is the stated position articulated by the Russian leadership from time to time. But then, there are undercurrents. The point is, long-term Russian interests are also involved here, given the chill in Russian-American relations and Moscow's perennial worry regarding the American intentions in the regions surrounding Russia. The fact that Washington continues to rebuff Moscow's projection of the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a provider of security, even in a limited way related to curbing drug trafficking, can only reinforce the Russian suspicions that geopolitics form the bedrock of the US agenda in Afghanistan.

Conceivably, Moscow would coordinate on this front with China and Iran, two regional states which also would have a degree of unease about any hidden American regional agenda behind consolidating its long term military presence in Afghanistan.

From the Indian perspective, things do not look good at all — although it is better placed than Russia today. The continued US military presence in Afghanistan has been Delhi's demand all along — and there is no sophistry here. Delhi genuinely thinks that the US military presence is in the interests of regional security and stability and would even secretly hope that the American presence acts as a pressure point on Pakistan and deters the latter from sponsoring terrorist groups. So, India has no problem with any 'rethink' by President Barack Obama with regard to keeping American troops in the region beyond 2016.

Having said that, India has been reduced to a bystander. Kabul under Ghani's leadership is, understandably, responsive to the Pakistani sensitivities and no longer encourages a high-profile Indian presence in Afghanistan. There are reports that apart from rolling back mil-to-mil and security cooperation with India, Kabul recently shut down summarily half a dozen or so centres involved in cultural or educational activities related to cooperation with India, which were located in the border regions close to Pakistan's Baluchistan province.

The fact of the matter is that India's poor relations with Pakistan prevent it from playing any significant role in shaping the Afghan settlement that is looming large on the horizon. The US has been nudging Delhi to find a way out of this cul-de-sac by resuming dialogue with Pakistan, but only with limited success so far. Simply put, the right wing Hindu nationalists who mentor the present government in Delhi has its own entrenched mindset when it comes to the 'unfinished business of Partition' in 1947 that led to Pakistan's creation.

In the ultimate analysis, Washington also has its own interests to pursue, which is its priority, and that requires Pakistan's optimal cooperation. What Washington tries to do, therefore, is to keep Delhi in the loop and keep reassuring the Indian security establishment that what is going on today on the Afghan chessboard will turn out to be for the good of India's interests in the fulness of time. Washington's priorities will be three-fold: a) encourage Delhi to keep up its big donor profile in Afghan reconstruction since the resuscitation of the Afghan economy is a top priority; b) keep Delhi fastened to its side as a fellow-traveller in its Afghan odyssey,

notwithstanding the centrality of Pakistani role in it; and, c) hold India back at all costs from upsetting the US-Pakistani apple cart rolling in the Hindu Kush.

The point is, India failed to take advantage of the shift in Pakistan's approach to terrorism by its refusal to take note of the shift itself until it became all too late. Suffice it to say, the train has left the station and India has been left behind. Equally, India held on for too long to outdated notions regarding the Taliban and didn't see the writing on the wall that the Taliban's return to mainstream Afghan national life was gaining acceptability not only in the international community but also within Afghanistan itself, including among the erstwhile Northern Alliance groups that worked with India in the late 1990s.

Events are moving so fast and a comprehensive review of India's Afghan policies is urgently called for. The policy challenges are formidable — building bridges with the Taliban; eschewing zero sum mentality vis-a-vis Pakistan; redefining India's future role in Afghan reconstruction; harmonizing with China's 'Belt and Road' strategy; cultivating the new Afghan power structure; breaking out of the regional isolation and so on.

But the key to all this lies in constructively engaging with Pakistan. Of course, the advantage now lies with Islamabad, being the cynosure of all eyes in the Afghan endgame. (See my blog *Pakistan is the nurse, guide, guardian of Afghan peace.*) Delhi lost valuable time by not following up the initiative to invite the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend the inaugural of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in last May. Much water has flown under the bridge during these past 10-month period and Delhi can only hope to make the best out of a bad bargain. In the ultimate analysis, Delhi has no one to blame but itself for being so hopelessly out of the touch with the emergent realities and for misreading the tea leaves.

What Iran, Russia and India can do — and should do, even if belatedly — is to come together with Pakistan and China under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]. This would need a leap of faith on the part of all protagonists, especially India and Pakistan, but it is doable. The admission of Iran, India and Pakistan as full members of the SCO is a necessary step in this direction. The initiative lies with Russia, which is chairing the SCO summit in July in Ufa.

For the present, Obama has something to celebrate. His forthcoming move to reset the Afghan chessboard by consolidating a long-term US military presence, which can be expected during Ghani's visit to the Washington in March, signifies the culmination of the US's diplomatic success in piloting the transition in Kabul to a friendly regime that is heavily beholden to it and in mending fences with Pakistan — while also defining common ground for cooperation with China despite the backdrop of the US' pivot strategy in Asia.

But the sustainability of this idyllic state of affairs for US diplomacy remains in doubt, as it critically depends on a variety of factors — the quality of Pakistan's cooperation, the pitch of the US-China rivalry, the future trajectory of US-Russia relations, and, of course, Iran's own willingness to accept the US as a benign military presence in its Afghan backyard even after a nuclear deal is concluded. Above all, the known unknown is as regards the acceptability of long term western occupation of their country by the Afghans themselves. The Taliban are yet to

moderate their longstanding demand that the vacation of American military presence on Afghan soil is a non-negotiable prerequisite of any settlement.