
Afghanistan

The Northern Alliance: With Whom Do They Stand?

by Ramtanu Maitra

As U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told U.S. ally Pakistan that bombs will continue to fall on Afghanistan through the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (Nov. 17-Dec. 17), many in the region have begun to frown. Their worry relates to the efficacy of the Northern Alliance, the non-Pushtun opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan, in whose support these bombs are being dropped. So far in five weeks of bombing, the Northern Alliance has not been able to take advantage of the carpetbombing cover to make any headway.

The capture of the capital, Kabul, by the Taliban on Sept. 26, 1996, quickly realigned political forces within Afghanistan and the region. The non-Pushtun forces allied again, as they had in forming the Northern Alliance in 1992. The Northern Alliance was composed of the ousted ethnic-Tajik President, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the late Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, and their Jamiat-e-Islami forces, along with Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum and the ethnic-Uzbek Jumbish-e-Milli Party. A smaller group, represented by Hezbe Wahadat, a Shia Muslim faction, also operates on behalf of the Northern Alliance in Herat province.

The Northern Alliance is headed nominally by Rabbani, who held power with de facto Defense Minister Ahmed Shah Massoud—but Massoud was assassinated, allegedly by al-Qaeda operatives, in Afghanistan on Sept. 9, two days before the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Massoud, a favorite of Iran, Russia, India, Tajikistan, France, and Britain, was a renowned commander who fought valiantly against the invading Soviet troops in the 1980s.

Since Massoud's death, the leadership has been passed on to Gen. Mohammad Fahim, a deputy to Massoud, but not a natural successor. Within the Northern Alliance, three others vie for the top post. They are: Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum of Jumbish-e-Milli, Gen. Ismail Khan of Herat, and Rasool Sayyaf, a Pushtun. It is evident that General Fahim does not control the three. The situation remains practically unresolvable, since Dostum is backed by Turkey and Uzbekistan, while Ismail Khan's godfathers direct his moves from Tehran. As long as Massoud was alive, the differences were mostly kept under control, but not so now.

In any case, Pakistan has made it a point never to allow the Northern Alliance to become a coherent military force, and Pakistan has succeeded.

A Changed Geometry

In 1995-96, when the Taliban began to emerge as a power, with the help of Pakistan's military and intelligence support, and Saudi and U.S. money, Washington threw its support quietly behind the orthodox Islamic group. Washington's rationale, which turned out to be the fruit of deception, was that the Taliban, despite their "backwardness," would allow pipelines carrying oil and gas from Turkmenistan to go through Afghanistan. This would benefit not only U.S. oil companies, but also consumers worldwide. Washington also "assumed" that the Taliban would eradicate opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, in part based on what the Taliban were then saying. We now know that none of that happened.

On the other hand, the Northern Alliance became a natural repository of arms and political support from India, Russia, and Iran. Russia wanted the Northern Alliance to keep Central Asia, Chechnya, and Azerbaijan free of the Taliban; India wanted the Northern Alliance to undermine Pakistani-U.S. influence over Afghanistan; and Iran strongly opposed the rise of an orthodox Sunni Muslim sect taking power next door with the help of Iran's sworn enemies—the United States and Saudi Arabia. Such was the geopolitical equation that lasted for five years—till Sept. 11, when things changed rapidly.

Now that Washington is bent on destroying the Taliban for harboring its number-one enemy, Osama bin Laden, the U.S. is also backing the Northern Alliance, and thus currying favor with Russia. Such a move has developed a new geometry, and a new round of deceptions are being put in place. The new geometry poses a serious threat to Pakistan, which will do almost anything to prevent the setting up of an anti-Pakistan, pro-India, pro-Russia power on its borders. As a result, despite what Washington and the U.S. media claim, Pakistanis are pouring into Afghanistan to fight the Northern Alliance and prop up the Taliban. Many of these Pakistanis, though widely portrayed as "tribesmen," are military regulars.

It is evident that the Northern Alliance, without an undisputed leader and with a record of being an "also-ran" for the last five years, is finding it difficult to break through the 12,000-troop screen thrown up by the Pakistanis, Arabs, and Afghans between the Northern Alliance positions and Kabul. Reports indicate that the United States is ready to land 2,000 troops, now based in Tajikistan, on the front lines, once the Northern Alliance clears up some part of northern Afghanistan for an operational base. In order for this to happen, the Northern Alliance must capture Mazar-e-Sharif, a strategically located town in northern Afghanistan.

It is likely that the intense spell of U.S. bombing will achieve this small goal. But how this will gel the Northern Alliance into a cogent fighting force, is anybody's guess. The Indian Defense Minister, George Fernandes, making caustic remarks about the U.S. bombing prior to Secretary Rumsfeld's arrival in India, said it is indeed a very costly way to melt the mountain snows of Afghanistan. Washington prays that Fernandes is simply being facetious.