

Afghan Crisis Coming: What Will U.S. Do?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Notwithstanding repeated Pentagon assertions, U.S. troops and the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) are all at sea in Afghanistan. If late reports are to be believed, Washington, facing a Taliban takeover in the South, is trying to turn the tide by concentrating on what it describes as “reconstruction of Afghanistan.” But as usual, stated American intent and actual actions differ,

Last year, the United States had spent most of its aid to Afghanistan in meeting the humanitarian needs in the country. This year, however, Washington has made it clear that it will spend most of its aid on building up the Afghan army. The Afghans are getting increasingly cynical, and point harshly to the many luxury cars in Kabul that ferry United Nations and aid officials to meetings, while East Kabul remains bombed out, exactly the way it was when the Americans and ISAF moved into Kabul in the Winter of 2001.

In the coming days, most things remain uncertain, but two things definitely will occur. First, is a massive opium harvest, which may be as high as 4,000 tons. The other is the Spring offensive by the Taliban and other Afghan forces who oppose the U.S.-imposed government in Kabul. The Spring offensive has already begun and regular coverage of the mainstream American media suggests that anxiety is rising in Washington.

In Kabul, interim President Hamid Karzai, surrounded by the U.S. State Department-lent bodyguards, is trying to juggle things as best he can. Since being named in June 2002 following a sham *loya jirga* (council of elders), President Karzai and his administration have been trying to extend his writ beyond Kabul. In many key provinces—such as Herat, in western Afghanistan, and Balkh in the north—the government’s power is eclipsed by the local militia leaders. In the south, where Pushtuns live, the Taliban are gaining in strength. Even those whom President Karzai had appointed as governors are now more eager to fight the Taliban alongside the Americans than to serve Karzai’s requirements.

President Karzai’s effort to frame a new Constitution is in progress and it remains a secret. The Constitution was scheduled to be made public in March, but the commission has not presented its version yet. Under the Bonn agreement of January 2002, the Constitution is to provide the framework

for new elections, currently scheduled for June 2004. The vote is designed to mark yet another watershed—the completion of Afghanistan’s political transition period.

Some point out rightly that the unveiling of a constitution at this juncture has no meaning at all. The country remains too divided; the elites, thrown out of the country over a 30-year-long civil war and foreign invasions, remain abroad, and remain virtual non-participants to any discussion on the Constitution; and the regional commanders who run their provinces have no intention to abide by it or President Karzai. As an American academic pointed out recently at a forum held at the Open Society Institute in New York, “Given that they [regional commanders] control courts and administration in the areas they command, they can intimidate people.”

Myth of Military Victory

The constitutional discussion is similar to the other two myths that the United States, with the help of the Kabul government, wants to perpetuate. The first is the myth of building an Afghan national army. Karzai, driven by his desire to shed his image as a foreign stooge, is trying desperately to put together a 70,000-strong Afghan army. Short of money, he has succeeded in recruiting and training about 2,000 so far. The warlords, whom President Karzai threatens to eliminate from time to time, have more than 700,000 militias with them. The other irony is that neither the Americans nor the ISAF trust the Afghans; they would like to expand the foreign troops’ presence.

The other myth is the military victory achieved by the United States. Following the American troops’ success in November 2001, when the Taliban-controlled regime in Kabul collapsed like the proverbial house of cards, Gen. Paul Mikolashek, commander of the U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan, described the offensive as a “textbook” operation. Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. Central Command, who is now confronted with the Jacobin chaos in Iraq, claimed the Afghan military operation as an “unqualified success,” adding in the Spring of 2002 that the security situation in the country was under control. Another claimant of unmitigated success was Gen. Frank “Buster” Hagenbeck, the operational commander. “I think we’ve taken out a large chunk of the al-Qaeda-Taliban hard-core, well-trained, experienced veterans. If you want to compare it to a U.S. military unit, I would

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describe it as . . . their majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels. We've isolated their command and control element, and their logistics structure, and we're going to go after that."

But from the outset, it was evident that the purpose of shouting out loud their limited success was to make people believe in the myth. Even then, it was widely known that a core group of 1-2,000 al-Qaeda fighters were roaming freely among the Pushtun mountain villages straddling the Pakistan-Afghan border, where residents share ethnic ties and sympathy with the Taliban and its Arab allies.

Since the start of 2003, the American press has been rife with news of growing strength of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. President Karzai's last visit, about nine months ago, to the Taliban bastion Kandahar, ended up in a near-assassination. Today, the situation is even more precarious. Kandahar Gov. Gul Agha Shirzai, an avowed enemy of the Taliban handpicked by President Karzai for the post, is now teetering under the pressure of the Taliban militia in the area. President Karzai has instructed provinces to send their customs revenue to Kabul, but most commanders in southern Afghanistan, like Gul Agha Shirzai, have not sent a single penny to Kabul for months. They claim to be using that money to build up their militia to fight the Taliban.

The crippled Karzai Presidency also faces, every day, the growing power of the warlords. From time to time, from his palace in Kabul, Karzai threatens to curb their growing power. The threat is literally laughed at by Afghans who know the ins and outs. They know too well that the warlords have been supported by the U.S. Army since it landed in October of 2001. These warlords, Washington claims, are important to nurture to fight al-Qaeda and Taliban. Zalmay Khalilzad, the special U.S. envoy (now trying to control the Kurds in northern Iraq), said on April 11 that the U.S. military has had to work with regional warlords "to solve practical problems." Once the central government and its institutions such as the Afghan national army are stronger, there will "be an adjustment to our approach," said Khalilzad.

The fallacy in the statement is not difficult to apprehend. If the warlords, who do not send in customs revenue, get stronger by the day, how ever could the central government control them? Moreover, the lack of customs revenue reduces Kabul's capability to recruit more troops, while the money that never reaches Kabul is used by the warlords to recruit more into their militia.

A New U.S. Tack

As an American strategic failure looms, some in Washington are of the view that it is urgent to emphasize less the military "successes," and instead promote "reconstruction efforts" as the new American initiative to stabilize Afghanistan. Initially opposed to the reconstruction, the Bush administration has found it "key" to Afghanistan's future. But spreading the "words" seems to be more important to Washington than actually to carry out the work that needs to be done. The U.S.

Embassy spokesman in Kabul told reporters "that opposition to nation-building is a figleaf that dropped a while ago. We're up to our ears in nation-building," he boasted.

What exactly is this nation-building effort? The most prominent project is the rebuilding of the Kandahar-Kabul-Herat roadway. So far, \$180 million has been collected to do the job. The United States would donate \$80 million, and Japan and Saudi Arabia \$50 million each. President Bush has announced that the construction would be completed by June 2004 before the national elections are held. However, on the ground, the story is different. The U.S. firm contracted to do the job says that the \$180 million collected so far is enough to build only a part of the roadway from Kabul to Kandahar. Afghans claim that the U.S. company is charging too much money and they themselves would like to do the job.

Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai does not believe that the United States is "up to its ears in nation-building." During his presentation of the annual budget in March, he pointed out that despite prompt commitments by the developed nations, Afghanistan received, in per-capita aid, even less than Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and other places that have been through war in recent years. Ghani also warned that if the international community cuts back on its commitments, "Afghanistan will become a narco-terrorist state that will be a constant problem to the world."

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