

Afghan Karzai Looks To Iran as U.S. Sun Sets

by Ramtanu Maitra

As the United States brought in its third aircraft carrier, the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, joining the *USS Constellation* and the *USS Harry S Truman*, raising the number of American forces in the Persian Gulf region to close to 100,000 for its planned invasion of Iraq, the ground situation in Afghanistan—the last war—began getting hopeless for the Americans. At the same time, the administration of President Hami Karzai in Kabul, realizing the negative impact in the future of the dwindling U.S. role in Afghanistan, is now seeking friends elsewhere for its own survival.

The security situation in Afghanistan is getting worse for the U.S. troops. It is just over a year since the United States and its allies, under the pretext of launching a war against terrorism, had teamed up with the Tajik-Uzbek-dominated and Russia- and India-controlled Northern Alliance to drive the orthodox Islamic Taliban militia from power in Afghanistan. The objective of the mission, as Washington was telling the world while trying to garner support from other nations, was not only to launch a frontal attack against the terrorists worldwide, but also to drive down the terrorist outfit al-Qaeda, and hang Osama bin Laden and the Taliban supremo, Mullah Mohammad Omar. At the end of a 14-month-long “successful” campaign, the scorecards do not tally in favor of those objectives.

Failed Missions

What nobody denies is that al-Qaeda is very much there in Afghanistan, and has built up cells elsewhere; Mullah Omar is very much alive, and according to a recent news report by veteran Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, more and more Taliban are volunteering to join the anti-United States resistance movement building up in Pushtun-populated areas in war-ravaged Afghanistan. Taliban sources said their supreme leader Omar, on the run after the ouster of his government by the U.S. military in December 2001, told his die-hard supporters to organize resistance cells to attack American and other foreign troops in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar reportedly asked his followers not to harm Afghans fighting for the government or the warlords, because they may have been forced to do so, Yusufzai reports.

Another promise of the Bush Administration to the world was to eradicate Afghanistan’s poppy cultivation, which exploded during the Taliban regime. This was yet another false promise. According to the UN Drug Control and Crime Pre-

vention Directorate’s report obtained by Interfax on Feb. 2, revenues from the illegal turnover of opium in Afghanistan were over \$1.2 billion in 2002. Compared with 1994-2000, this figure grew tenfold, and is equivalent to \$6,500 per family a year. It should be noted that the average salary of an Afghan today is about \$2 per day. Afghan poppy is no longer an issue in Washington, apparently, since the Taliban are not controlling Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, no one in Washington has mentioned either Osama’s or Omar’s names in months, especially the mercurial Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who last year was commenting to the press daily about how the United States was closing in on all the terrorists in Afghanistan. But denial does not eliminate problems. In January, the top Taliban leaders—which also include Mullah Abdul Razzaq and Mullah Biradar—issued a statement, saying: “We all want to expel foreign forces, especially non-Muslim, from our homeland. Our resistance would continue until we achieve our objective.”

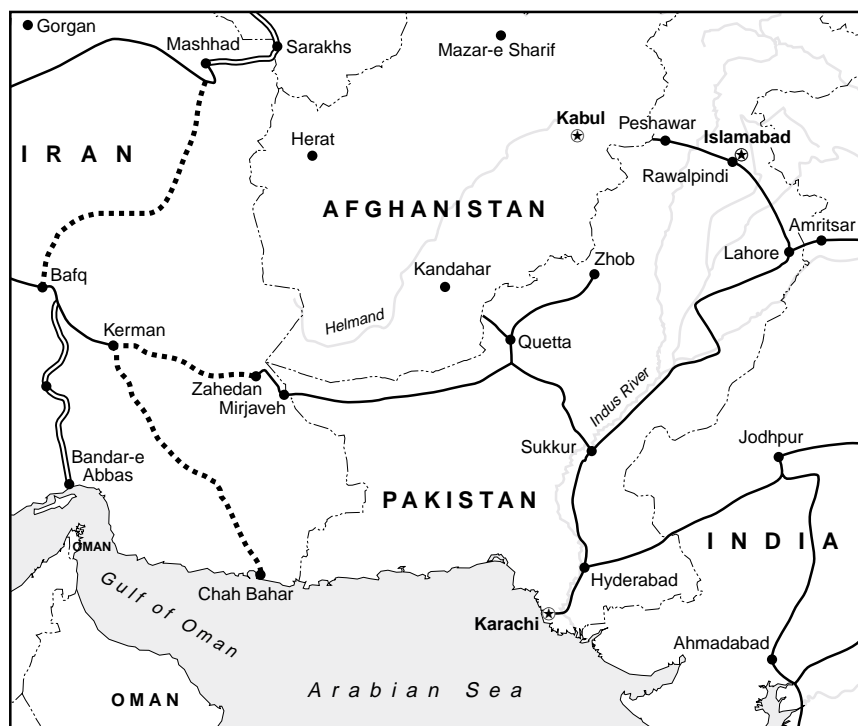
The Taliban declaration came in the wake of growing attacks on U.S. and Afghan government targets. On Jan. 31, reports filtered out of the remote Nimruz province bordering Iran and Pakistan, that a landmine explosion had killed five Afghan soldiers, including their commander. A day earlier, at least 18 people were killed when a passenger bus was blown up by a remote-controlled bomb blast near Kandahar. The United Nations said on Feb. 1, that it was concerned about lack of security in Afghanistan after a series of armed attacks on aid workers, and that those operating in the area were the intended target of the attack. To add insult to injury, Washington’s “old friend” and beneficiary of many weapons and bags of cash, the Afghan Hezb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has joined the Taliban cause. Hekmatyar was put on the U.S. most wanted list in January.

In fact, things are not under U.S. control in any part of Afghanistan. Even Kabul, the capital, where the U.S. and its allied forces’ presence is most felt, is getting difficult. Repeated power failures and food shortages sparked student protests at Kabul University the week of Jan. 27. Police opened fire on a crowd after about 1,000 students took to the streets. At least two students were killed, several others wounded. Outside of Kabul, sporadic fighting continues in the South, near the Pakistani border.

All signals indicate that the United States neither has the means nor the spine at this point to launch the much-touted Marshall Plan to reconstruct Afghanistan. In fact, more than the al-Qaeda or the Taliban, the United States is on the run in Afghanistan. If Washington launches a full-fledged war against Baghdad, the U.S. troops and the allied forces in Afghanistan will have to spend the rest of their stay in bunkers. It is likely that al-Qaeda and the Taliban will then roam the streets and the so-called Afghan campaign of the United States will come to a formal end.

It is evident from the brisk diplomatic movements in the region, that those who till now depended heavily on the United

FIGURE 1

Expansion of Iran's Railroad Connections, East and West

While reconstruction by U.S. forces in Afghanistan is stalled, the Presidents of Iran and Afghanistan have agreed to develop road/rail trade corridors from the Iranian port of Chah Bahar—which is being built up for the purpose—up through Afghanistan, and into the Central Asian Republics to the north.

States for their physical survival are looking out to court new friends. A case in point is the American handmaiden and former official of Unocal oil company, Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Karzai, a Pushtun, had endorsed wholeheartedly the Bush Administration's policy toward Afghanistan, and got hold of power. After an attempt on his own life, and the killings of a Vice President and a tourism minister last year, Karzai asked the United States for a team of American soldiers to protect him. He now lives in Kabul surrounded by U.S. special operations commandos. And yet, even Karzai is now actively seeking cooperation from Iran.

Reportedly, the Afghan President, in a telephone conversation on Feb. 2 with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, had discussed expansion of mutual cooperation. The Iranian President underlined Iran's all-out support for the Afghan interim government. He expressed Iran's satisfaction with the removal of obstacles to the reconstruction of Afghanistan and restoration of stability in that country. The Afghan President, for his part, highlighted the existing amicable relations between Tehran and Kabul, and described as positive the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the reconstruction process in his country.

The reason President Karzai is anxiously seeking support

from President Khatami is not difficult to assess. At the same time that United States is weakening rapidly in Afghanistan, Iran, along with India, has become most active in the region, trying to hook up Afghanistan by road to both Iran and Central Asia. When the Iranian President was in India as that country's chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations on Jan. 26, India and Iran announced the building up of the Iranian port of Chahbahar and connection of the port through railroads and highways to the existing Garland Road in Afghanistan, for sending goods through Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Afghanistan Brought Into 'New Silk Road'

Labeling it a "New Silk Road," Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, who visited Kyrgyzstan on Feb. 2-3 after a short stay in Tajikistan, said that India is going to construct 200 kilometers of this new road that would usher in an entirely new era of trade relations and people-to-people contact between India and Central Asia. "This new Silk Route of prosperity is India's wish for its relations with Central Asia," Sinha said, recalling how the historical Silk Road had provided the meeting

point for China and India to carry out a high volume of trade. It is also interesting to note the growing military relations between the Central Asian nations and India. Sinha's meetings with Tajikistan Defense Minister Khairulloev and Kyrgyzstan Defense Minister Egen Topoev were of a sensitive nature and should be viewed against the backdrop of India's increasing military presence in the Central Asian region, particularly since Sept. 11, well-placed sources in India said.

Since the India-Iran memorandum was signed on Jan. 25, things have begun to move on a fast clip. On the night of Feb. 1, Iranian Trade Minister Mohammad Shariatmadari, Afghan Trade Minister Mostafa Kazemi, and Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Digvijay Singh signed two memoranda on cooperation in trade, economy, and transportation. The documents provide for an increase in the level of trilateral cooperation in economic and transportation areas, and also in the development of a joint trade policy and mutual investments. The Iranian government promised to grant significant reductions in transportation charges for the goods delivered from the seaport of Chahbahar to Afghanistan, and to reduce the tariffs on the use of containers and other transport assets of this port.