

Is Washington Handing Afghan Policy to London and Riyadh?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Feb. 4—The Jan. 28-29 conference on Afghanistan policy, organized by, and held in London, attended by leaders and ministers of 60 nations, was a watershed. Until now, Afghan policy was in the hands of Washington and Brussels (NATO). But, what transpired during the conference makes it evident that the much-ballyhooed Af-Pak policy of the Obama Administration is now being transferred to Britain and Saudi Arabia. And from the reactions that followed, it is also evident that the United States, having accepted the fact that it is unable to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” the Taliban in Afghanistan, is ready to toe the British-Saudi line: to bring back the Wahhabi-indoctrinated Taliban, identified, inexplicably, as the “good” Taliban, to “share” power in Kabul with the elected government of President Hamid Karzai.

In addition, some European powers exhibited enthusiasm at the idea of a “national unity government,” which would bring the “good” Taliban officials in from the cold. NATO was even willing to back such efforts, putting together \$500 million in bribes to bring Taliban or rural tribal forces over to the government side. It has also been reported that Saudi Arabia is putting in \$150 million in aid to Afghanistan.

It is unlikely though that the stated objectives could be attained without accepting the entire Taliban militia as the legitimate rulers in Kabul. Washington should find that hard to swallow. Nonetheless, Washington’s quiet acceptance of the Wahhabi-indoctrinated Taliban to be put in charge of Afghanistan is a contradiction



The Obama Administration, having failed to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” the Taliban in Afghanistan, is ready to toe the British-Saudi line, and bring in the “good” Taliban, to “share” power in Kabul. Shown: Taliban fighters: Good? Or Bad?

that could have a far-reaching impact in the region. To begin with, Wahhabis, who have been set loose by Saudi Arabia throughout Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, are committed to ushering in an Islamic Caliphate, and to destroy all Islamic sovereign nation-states in the process. Wherever the jihadis—who have been identified as extremists and terrorists, and have been banned in a number of countries—are asserting themselves, they are battling the governments to usher in the Caliphate.

The endorsement of the Wahhabis—who are funded directly and indirectly by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, among others—as legitimate rulers of Kabul, poses the

question as to whether these terrorist groups, many of whom were bred and nurtured in London, could any longer be identified as “extremists” or “terrorists.” The London Conference, in essence, provides a boost to the Wahhabi campaign, and its objective of setting up the Caliphate, as a valid political movement, however brutal and bloody it might be. Moreover, there was no discussion in that conference to bring the majority Pushtun Afghans in to share power with other major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Since the vast majority of Pushtuns do not accept Wahhabism, setting up a national government comprised of Pushtuns and other ethnic groups was not of interest to either Saudi Arabia or Britain.

The Drug Issue and the ‘Good’ Taliban

What was also not discussed in London, as pointed out by the RIA Novosti political commentator Andrei Fedyashin, was how to curb opium production in Afghanistan. He wrote: “The United States and Britain do not like to discuss heroin at international conferences, and they do not like it when Russia tries to convince them to launch major anti-drug projects in Afghanistan and adjacent regions. Russia is pursuing this mostly because the Afghan connection has become a strategic threat to Russia, as the Central Asian countries’ borders with Afghanistan are completely unprotected.”

In defining the “good” Taliban, neither Britain nor Saudi Arabia, nor anyone in Brussels, ever brought up the drug question. Can a Taliban be “good,” while he is involved in opium and heroin production and trafficking? To London and Riyadh, the answer is, yes, and there are reasons why they say so. Fedyashin noted that, since 2006, in the area that was Britain’s sector of responsibility, southwestern Helmand province, opium production has skyrocketed.

Data presented by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime shows that the opium poppy fields were larger in 2009 than in 2006, when U.K. troops were deployed into Helmand. Although the country’s opium poppy areas decreased by 22%, the production of raw opium fell by only 10%, if not less. British experts have established that Afghan farmers have learned to produce more opium juice per poppy than a year ago: 56 kilograms of opium per hectare (2.47 acres), and 15% more.

There is no question that the opium/heroin provides enough money to the opium warlords to allow them to

introduce modern technology and increase output. Fedyashin says the Taliban leadership and field commanders are like Siamese twins, and that the opium business is following in the footsteps of Colombia’s drug cartels. Initially, the Colombian guerrillas protected the traffickers and dealers, but then, they started to protect their factories, and eventually, gained control of the drug business. The same has happened in Afghanistan. According to British sources, the overwhelming majority of captured Taliban admit that they receive the bulk of their funds for food, fuel, and weapons, from the drug business. The price of raw opium has fallen to \$48 per kilo, as the supply has dramatically increased, as proof of the failure of U.S. and British anti-drug policies.

Karzai Goes to Riyadh

In the communiqué that followed the London conference, the endorsement of the Taliban was included in the following form: “Conference Participants welcomed the Government of Afghanistan’s commitment to reinvigorate Afghan-led reintegration efforts by developing and implementing an effective, inclusive, transparent and sustainable national Peace and Reintegration Program; plans to convene a Grand Peace Jirga before the Kabul Conference; and the international community’s commitment to establish a Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund to finance the Afghan-led Peace and Reintegration Program.” However, the discussions that preceded made it amply clear that the Wahhabi-indoctrinated and U.K./Saudi-backed Taliban will be perfectly acceptable to the U.S. and NATO, as long the Taliban separates itself from the dreaded al-Qaeda.

President Karzai, now caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place, has made an appeal for Saudi mediation to bring the Taliban back to power. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal made clear that he did not close the door on this, but stated that this request should be made by Afghanistan, officially, and that the Taliban should confirm its intention to attend negotiations by cutting ties with terrorists (read: al-Qaeda). “So long as the Taliban doesn’t stop providing shelter for terrorists and bin Laden and end their contacts with them, I don’t think the negotiations will be positive or even able to achieve anything,” the Saudi Foreign Minister said in London during the conference. “They must tell us that they gave this up, and prove it, of course,” he said, accord-



Since 2006, in southwestern Helmand province, Britain's sector of responsibility, opium production has skyrocketed. Shown: a Taliban militant (with AK-47 rifle) oversees the harvesting of opium poppies in Helmand province.

ing to the privately owned Saudi daily *Asharq al-Awsat*, adding that an official mediation request is needed.

To get the ball rolling, Karzai paid a visit to Saudi Arabia on Feb. 2, to seek King Abdullah's support in talks with the Taliban. Karzai's delegation included Foreign Minister Zalmay Rasoul and key religious leaders, who planned to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and then meet with the Saudi King. Karzai and Abdullah will discuss Afghanistan, the region, and possible "solutions for reconciliation," according to a statement from Karzai's office. Ahead of his trip, Karzai said he hoped that "King Abdullah will personally assume a prominent role in leading and supporting the peace process." In fact, one report shows that Karzai will be pleading with King Abdullah to help negotiate a ceasefire with the Taliban.

Washington's Reactions

On Jan. 29, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Philip Crowley said that the United States welcomed the participation of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) in the London conference, and their regional role in Afghanistan. On reconciliation efforts to include Taliban in the political process in Afghanistan, Crowley noted that Taliban is

"a mixed group of disparate elements. And we think that there can be an opportunity through a political process, one that is Afghan-led, to try to see who among these leaders are willing to make a fundamental change in their approach.... We think that as this moves forward, it should be based on the concepts that anyone who wants to reconcile and play a more constructive role in Afghanistan's future must accept the constitution, renounce violence, and publicly break with extremist groups such as al-Qaeda."

President Obama's year-long deliberations, on Af-Pak policy, resulted in a shift in his position from, "It is

not a war of choice, but a war of necessity" to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the current Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and Commander, U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), in an interview with the *Financial Times*, published on Jan. 24, said he acknowledged growing skepticism about the war. "As a soldier, my personal feeling is that there's been enough fighting," he said. "What I think we do is try to shape conditions which allow people to come to a truly equitable solution to how the Afghan people are governed."

When asked if he would be content to see Taliban leaders in a future government in Kabul, he told the *Financial Times*: "I think any Afghans can play a role if they focus on the future, and not the past." The *Financial Times*' analyst pointed out that McChrystal's remarks reveal the growing faith the U.S. military is placing in a power-sharing arrangement could end the war, a possibility floated in Islamabad earlier by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates.

On Jan. 22, Gates told AFP, while visiting Pakistan, that "the Taliban, we recognize, are part of the political fabric of Afghanistan at this point.... The question is whether they are prepared to play a legitimate role in the political fabric of Afghanistan going forward, mean-

ing participating in elections, meaning not assassinating local officials and killing families.”

Then, on Jan. 29, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ruled out talks with Taliban hardliners: “We’re not going to talk to the really bad guys, because the really bad guys are not ever going to renounce al-Qaeda and renounce violence and agree to re-enter society. . . . That is not going to happen with people like Mullah Omar and the like,” Clinton said in an interview with National Public Radio.

The Roadblocks

While U.S. acceptance of the “good” Taliban is now official, what the British and Saudis are aiming for will meet resistance. To begin with, the Taliban central leadership, which does not recognize the “good” and “bad” Taliban distinction, made clear on Jan. 27, that the mujahideen were not fighting for money or to grab power. Describing as baseless that most Taliban fighters were not ideologically committed, it claimed that nobody compelled the mujahideen to take up arms and fight the invaders. “Had the aim of the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate been obtainment of material goals, they would have accepted dominance of the invaders in the first place and would have supported them.” In other words, having caught the U.S. and NATO troops in a vise, the Taliban has no intention to make a deal.

The most active opposition to inserting the “good” Taliban into Kabul, however, will come from both India and Russia. On Feb. 1, Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, came for a two-day visit to New Delhi. The main objective of his sudden visit was to discuss with India’s newly appointed National Security Advisor (NSA), Shivshankar Menon, the shifting strategic situation in Afghanistan, in the wake of the Western proposal to establish power-sharing with the Taliban in that country. Neither India nor Russia are comfortable with accommodating the Taliban and have resented any contrived distinction between the “good” and “bad” Taliban.

Their discussion also included an exchange of views on such problems as the fight against international terrorism, and illegal production and trafficking of drugs, originating principally in Afghanistan, on the watch of the U.S. and NATO troops. During the meeting, Patrushev brought up the issue of drug production in Afghanistan, and told his Indian counterpart that the Western countries also needed to address

this issue.

In fact, early last December, on the way back from Moscow, following Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s summit visit there, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao told newsmen: “Russia and India are on the same side, when it comes to recognizing the very serious dimensions of the clear and present danger that we face from terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. . . . Like India, Russia doesn’t see any validity, that you can distinguish between so-called ‘Good Taliban’ and ‘Bad Taliban.’ That distinction doesn’t exist.” India is extremely critical of any sort of deal or reconciliation with militants in Afghanistan, as proposed in U.S. President Obama’s new Af-Pak policy, she added.

No Takers in India and Russia, Only a Few in Pakistan

There are genuine reasons for both India and Russia to oppose the move to put the Taliban in power in Afghanistan. For instance, India wants a strategic presence there, since Afghanistan is situated between two of its most important allies. India needs to have a strong presence in Afghanistan in order to orchestrate policies that would facilitate regional continuity between Central Asian nations and Russia in the north, and Iran, Iraq, and Turkey in the south. Besides, India is one of the six largest contributors to the Afghan stabilization program, having invested at least \$1.2 billion for setting up schools, roads, and hospitals there. New Delhi also fears that Pakistan, hell-bent on keeping the Indians out of Afghanistan, will work out an arrangement with Kabul whereby both Pakistan and the Taliban—the two most prominent anti-India forces in the region—will undermine its strategic interests.

Russia has similar interests. The Central Asian nations and Iran are both of extreme importance to Russia. Moreover, Russia has been devastated by the Afghan opium and heroin during the last eight years of the U.S. and NATO occupation. In addition, the Saudis have, over the years, sent Islamic jihadis all over the Muslim-dominated areas inside Russia and Central Asia, to commit violence, with the ultimate objective of breaking these provinces away from Russia. This has been the conscious policy of Riyadh and London, which have provided the training and deployment of the insurgency in Chechnya, Dagestan, and South Ossetia within Russia, and in many Central Asian nations. The insurgents embrace Wahhabi ideology; it is therefore difficult for Russia to accept the Saudi-backed, Wahhabi-

indoctrinated Taliban, in a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul. Moscow is convinced that these Taliban, “good” or “bad,” will be under the Saudi thumb to promote Wahhabism, violence, and drug trafficking to weaken Russia, a prime objective of the flag-bearers of old British Colonial Office.

On Jan. 28, in an interview with *Spiegel* online, the newly appointed Russian Ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin, referring to the London Conference then in progress, stressed “the importance of economic and civil measures needed to stabilize Afghanistan. The course of action for battling drugs must also be set in London. We are prepared to take a cooperative approach with the West in order to prevent its defeat in Afghanistan. But we also assume that everything will make sense and that it will come at a price. We want to be informed of the objectives and tasks undertaken by the West in Afghanistan. And we want our interests to be regarded.”

Pakistan Played with Fire

Finally, opposition will also come from Pakistan. In the 1990s, Pakistan, in league with Britain and Saudi Arabia, and having sold to the Americans the mythical “strategic depth” concept against India, in order to maintain control over Afghanistan, helped the Taliban militarily to secure power in Kabul. Things have changed drastically since then. The Taliban, having their friends and associates with the Pakistani military and intelligence, want to share power in Islamabad as well. It is evident that Islamabad did not have a clue about what the Saudi-British nexus was after, and played with fire and got burnt.

It is perhaps for this reason that the Pakistani Army Chief, Gen. Ashraf Parvez Kayani, upon his recent return from NATO headquarters in Brussels, said his country has no interest in controlling Afghanistan. “We can’t wish for anything for Afghanistan that we don’t wish for ourselves,” Kayani was quoted by AFP as saying. Kayani said peace and stability in Afghanistan were crucial to Islamabad’s long-term interests.

But the real reason that Pakistan must oppose the Taliban takeover of Kabul is what was indicated by a senior Indian analyst, B. Raman, in his recent article, “Making a Virtue of Taliban,” which appeared on *outlookindia.com* on Jan. 29. He pointed out that, if the West is now prepared to make a deal with the Afghan Taliban as an organization, or at least with elements in it, which are prepared to make peace with the NATO

forces, how about its Wahhabized ideology? “Is it prepared to accept the ideology of the Taliban and face the prospect of its coming in the way of the post-9/11 goal of the modernization of Afghanistan? If the Taliban ideology is OK in Afghanistan if it gives up violence, how can one say that it will not be OK in Pakistan and the rest of the Islamic world?” Raman inquired.

If the West is prepared to legitimize the Taliban, or sections of it, in Afghanistan, how can it refuse to legitimize the Pakistani Taliban, and give it a role in the administration of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan? If it is prepared to legitimize its ideology and objectives in the FATA, how can it refuse to do so in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)? If it is prepared to legitimize the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban, which are essentially a Pashtun phenomenon, how can it refuse to legitimize the Punjabi Taliban, consisting of organizations such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), the Harkatul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM), the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ)?, Raman asked.



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