

# NATO Faces Existential Crisis in Afghanistan, as Taliban Escalates

by Ramtanu Maitra

The harbinger of all bad news, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, arrived unannounced in Kabul from the Sultanate of Oman on March 20, ostensibly “to assure” Afghan President Hamid Karzai that the Bush Administration will leave no stone unturned in the April 2-4 NATO summit at Bucharest, to get more NATO troops into Afghanistan before the expected Taliban Spring offensive begins. Following his meeting with Karzai, Cheney told reporters: “The United States and the other members of the coalition need to have a sufficient force here to be able to ensure security.”

In fact, Cheney’s trip promised anything but security, since he was following the British imperial script to create a zone of permanent instability in the region.

Cheney was midway through his ten-day trip to the Middle East, when he landed in Kabul. He began his trip on March 16, a few days after Adm. William J. Fallon resigned as chief of CENTCOM. He favored diplomacy over war against Iran, and it was widely acknowledged that the admiral resigned when he became aware that Cheney would be visiting the Middle East, particularly Oman and Saudi Arabia, in order to prepare the region for a U.S.-led bombing campaign of Iran, although a senior aide denied that Cheney’s sojourn was intended to set the stage for military action against Iran.

## Iran, Afghanistan, or Pakistan?

The media does not report how Cheney’s visceral anti-Iran campaign went down with President Karzai. What is widely known, is that the combination of the imminent Taliban offensive, Washington’s inability to stretch its troops on the ground in any significant way, and the unwillingness of NATO, led by the European nations, to put more boots on the ground, worries Kabul no end. The Taliban insurgency was its deadliest last year, with the killing of more than 8,000 people, according to UN figures. Most of the dead were rebels, but 1,500 civilians also lost their lives, the UN says. Additionally, the year 2007 was highlighted by the use of suicide bombers against NATO troop contingents based in Afghanistan. In 2007 alone, there were 185 suicide-bomb attacks in Afghanistan, whereas before 2005, there were none. In 2008, already as many as 58 suicide-bomb attacks have been recorded in Afghanistan.

Failure to counter the expected Taliban offensive will not

only give the Islamic militants a huge morale boost, but, as *EIR* has reported, it’s likely to kill and bury NATO in the rocky, dusty plains of Afghanistan. At the same time, it would not bode well for the government that Karzai built. Karzai has said that Afghan security forces, being built with international assistance, wouldn’t be able to stand on their feet for some time, which means a likely victory for those who have been identified as enemies by Kabul.

“Someday Afghanistan will be fully in charge of the security of this country, defending the borders,” the U.S.-backed Afghan President said on March 20. “But that is not going to be anytime soon.”

## NATO’s Inadequate Role

NATO took charge of Afghanistan’s military security in 2006, when the alliance formally assumed responsibility for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in that country. Since then, NATO members have repeatedly quarreled over the size of the troop contingents each should provide, where they should serve, and under what conditions. ISAF currently has over 43,000 personnel, from 40 nations, including all 26 NATO countries. The U.S. contingent—which includes 17,000 service members assigned to ISAF and 12,000 personnel under a separate command dedicated to special counterterrorist missions and training the Afghan Army—is the largest. Britain, Italy, Canada, and the Netherlands have also made significant troop contributions, but the realities on the ground indicate that the Afghan situation has reached a point that it demands a much larger number of troops. One British commander says that a foreign force of 200,000 could keep the Islamic militants at bay for good.

But the fact is, that most of the 26 NATO countries represented in Afghanistan would like to send troops purely for civilian operations. This policy is understandable because of domestic objections over life-threatening military operations in Afghanistan.

In a Feb. 10 speech at the 44th annual Munich Security Conference, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates urged that “The alliance must put aside any theology that attempts clearly to divide civilian and military operations.” He warned of the potentially disastrous consequences of such an approach, saying: “Some allies ought not to have the luxury of opting only for stability and civilian operations, thus forcing

other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying.”

Kabul is following this quibbling among NATO member nations, and for good reason, is becoming increasingly uneasy about the future. There are indications that Karzai has opened back-channel negotiations with Taliban leaders, who have been politely identified as “moderates.” But, it is also clear that these “moderate” Taliban will not help Kabul unless and until NATO, and other foreign troops, stop killing Afghans. If the Afghan President goes ahead with this line of negotiations, and succeeds, both the United States and the NATO troops will have a very difficult time in achieving whatever they sought to achieve, when they launched their war on terror by invading Afghanistan.

Not everyone in Europe opposes Karzai’s approach. Many NATO allies think U.S. policy remains over-reliant on the use of force. Some NATO allies, including Germany, Italy, and France, argue that stabilizing Afghanistan requires a comprehensive economic, political, and military strategy.

Cheney perhaps sought to assuage Karzai by telling him that at the Bucharest summit, NATO will try to work out a deal with Moscow, whereby Russia will allow its land and airspace to supply its security forces in Afghanistan. Western diplomats have denied any trade-off with Moscow to keep Ukraine and Georgia out of NATO. “I hope that Afghanistan might be an area where NATO and Russia can make strides to cooperate more closely together,” NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told a security conference in Brussels recently.

## **An Angry Karzai**

In Kabul, however, worries about more military action in its vicinity create more concerns than in the distant, and mostly-disconnected, Washington. Moreover, President Karzai is not in a very friendly mood these days, since Washington tried to force him to go against Iran for alleged subversive activities within Afghanistan. He refused to do that, and, instead, claimed Iran as one of Afghanistan’s best friends. When London and Washington tried behind his back to appoint Lord Paddy Ashdown, former leader of the British Liberal Party, as the UN Special Envoy to coordinate various Afghan operations, Karzai said a firm “No.” He even went public, indicating Ashdown’s “viceregal” activities, virtually ignoring the head of state, when he was the “High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina,” from 2002 to 2006, as unacceptable.

Subsequently, when he found out that two British MI6 agents, under the cover of a senior EU official and a top UN official, were laying down a plan to fund, train, and arm about 2,000 “West-friendly” Taliban, in the opium-infested province of Helmand in southern Afghanistan, without Kabul’s knowledge, he threw them out within 48 hours. Since the British are among the very few gung-ho troops in Afghanistan trying to keep the NATO flag flying, the incident created bad

blood between London and NATO on the one hand, and between London and the Afghan President on the other.

But, Karzai realizes that as long as the U.S. troops and NATO remain in Afghanistan, it ensures his personal safety, and buys him time to bring under his wing many Afghans who do not want to keep on fighting with no end in sight. But, that would mean making a deal with his Afghan opponents. One of the likely first items on such a negotiating agenda would be his opponents’ demand for withdrawal of all foreign troops. It’s unclear how Karzai can balance these two objectives.

In addition, Karzai is fully aware that more unrest is coming, as a result of the developments along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, particularly in Pakistan’s tribal areas, where thousands of militants, many of whom are committed to fight the foreign troops in Afghanistan, are ready and waiting for the weather to improve before launching a new offensive.

## **Pakistani Complications**

Kabul knows that full-fledged war in these tribal areas may begin soon. Hundreds of U.S. private warriors have assembled along the Afghan borders and will go in, some time or the other. Routinely, U.S. drones are attacking the militants sheltered in these tribal areas, and Pakistani paramilitary troops have blocked off entry of these militants into Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province and Northern Areas. In other words, both sides are preparing for a long, hot Summer.

On Feb. 19, Pakistan’s general elections led to the formation of new National Assembly and return of a democratic form of government, ending the military rule of more than eight years under President Pervez Musharraf. Unfortunately, as Pakistan’s former foreign secretary, Tanvir Ahmed Khan, pointed out recently in a national daily, “the international support for Pakistan’s democracy project has been overshadowed by the expedient needs of the United States and the NATO countries embroiled in the Afghan war.” He said that the need of the hour is to provide the coalition partners, who took control of the government, and “that have somewhat differing perspectives on the war on terror, a collective but sovereign choice to reconcile them into a coherent national policy backed by the people and the armed forces.” But, it is the exigency of the ground conflict situation in Afghanistan that dominates Washington’s and Brussels’ policy-making for the region.

That fact became evident in the informal NATO Defense Ministers meeting in Vilnius on Feb. 7-8. Throughout the deliberations, it was evident that the governments representing the NATO member-nations disagree sharply over strategy in Afghanistan. The growing instability and violence in neighboring Pakistan have further endangered NATO troops. However, the urgency of the NATO-member governments to shore up NATO’s commitment, was evident throughout. Ironically, this was happening at a time when the Kabul government is losing support among Afghan citizens frustrated by decades of war and poverty.