

## DEBATE

### AFGHANISTAN : POST-US 'DRAW-DOWN' AND INDIA

President Barack Obama's planned "draw-down" of about a third of the 100,000 US forces in Afghanistan by 2012 seems to be underway. The first 10,000 troops were to return home by end-2011, he had announced, but had left the details to his commanders. A spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan confirmed that about 650 troops who had completed their regular deployment in Afghanistan left in July 2011, as originally scheduled, and would not be replaced, heralding the process. Afghan national security forces are to take over security responsibility from them in seven areas of the country this year, "taking the lead in securing the entire country by the end of 2014".

The Indian Representative stated at the UN Security Council on 29 June 2011 that "The security of Afghanistan and what happens there impacts us, as a country in the region, as a close neighbour and a civilizational partner whose ties with the Afghan people stretch into antiquity." Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, during his interaction with newspaper editors in New Delhi on the same day was specifically asked for his views on the American "pullout" from Afghanistan and its effect on the region. The Prime Minister stated, "It does hurt us. It could hurt us. No one knows what is going to happen in Afghanistan." On the question of "good and bad Taliban", he recalled what he had said in the Afghan Parliament, that while the reconciliation should be Afghan-led, one "cannot carry the good-bad Taliban distinction" much too far, reluctantly accepting the development but expressing his discomfort.

Meanwhile, the Taliban have been more assertive than ever. They have attacked American facilities with impunity, including an attack on the US Embassy compound in Kabul. The reconciliation process has failed to entice the Taliban or dent their activities. The assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani has dealt a severe blow to the process.

The leaders of the non-Pashtun ethnic groups are showing signs of impatience, worried about their future. Most of them are once again convinced that given the Taliban's rigid and inflexible worldview, their return to power in whatever form will endanger the security of other communities. There are also some moves to resurrect the old Northern Alliance to counter the Taliban.

Afghanistan will need continued international support, especially during the post-draw-down phase. However, the nature of international engagement

after 2014 remains unclear. There is no regional consensus on how to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan. Except for India, none of the others in the region has committed resources towards Afghan reconstruction efforts.

The two-day visit of President Hamid Karzai to India on 4–5 October 2011 resulted in the conclusion of an Agreement on Strategic Partnership between India and Afghanistan.

Some of the questions that emerge and need to be answered are: What will be the shape of Afghan politics after the draw-down? What will be the nature of the international engagement thereafter? In what form will the US maintain its strategic presence in Afghanistan and support the process of stabilization? What will be the regional reaction to the Indian pledge to stay engaged in Afghanistan? What are the other possible options for India in the changing circumstances?

The *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* invited three specialists to debate the issue, analysing the emerging scenario and India's actions so far and discuss India's options to safeguard its interests.

**Satish Chandra**, Former Deputy National Security Advisor, Former High Commissioner to Pakistan and currently Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, is of the opinion that:

**Pursue an Activist Policy, Reaching out to All Players**

US withdrawal is not something India should be overly concerned about. Indeed, it may work to India's advantage. In this context India needs to consider that it is the US presence in Afghanistan that has allowed Pakistan to milk it for billions of dollars of military and economic assistance, to India's disadvantage, without doing anything to reduce Pakistan's export of terrorism to India. Withdrawal from Afghanistan will free the US of such Pakistani blackmail and deprive the Pakistani military and economy of a major source of sustenance. ...

... An activist and constructive approach by India will help enhance its role and secure its interests in Afghanistan and is certainly better than the reactive manner in which it tends to conduct its foreign policy.

**Arvind Gupta** and **Ashok K. Behuria**, the Lal Bahadur Shastri Chair in Strategic and Defence Studies and Research Fellow respectively at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, are of the view that:

**Limited Options for India amidst Growing Uncertainty**

India's choices are limited. India should refrain from getting bogged down in Afghanistan but should pursue quiet diplomacy involving all sections

of the people. Building on the good work it has done during the last few years in Afghanistan, India should leverage its soft power in building capacities in Afghanistan. One important element of Indian policies should be to establish and maintain contacts with the youth of Afghanistan and facilitate their coming to India for education and skill building. For the moment, India should watch the situation and await opportunities where it can be more useful.

**Vidya Shankar Aiyar**, Senior journalist and Strategic Analyst, maintains that:

**The Hype about India's Strategic Role**

Indian policy so far has been on a safe track of winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan, while seeking to remain engaged in strategic terms in any dialogue of interested parties on its future. However, there is precious little that is in India's control strategically. Nor should it seek to change that position in any hurry, if at all. There is no reason for India to feel either disappointed or elated at the prospect of a US drawdown. There are several reasons for remaining concerned, though not obsessed, with Afghanistan.

To enrich the debate, a transcript of the Third RK Mishra Memorial Lecture by **H.E. Mr. Hamid Karzai**, President of Afghanistan, delivered in New Delhi on 5 October 2011, under the auspices of the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, is also being carried wherein he stated that:

**Afghanistan will Benefit from the Strength of India**

India fortunately has the strength to help us. This is for Afghanistan to use the possibilities that India has and offers to make our life better, to educate our children, to train our police, to train our army, to train our physicians, to train our lab technicians. The strategic partnership that we have is to support Afghanistan develop. I am sure this partnership will benefit us.

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## ***Pursue an Activist Policy, Reaching out to All Players***

Satish Chandra\*

The US intent to draw down its forces from Afghanistan beginning July 2011 has been articulated on several occasions since President Barack Obama's address at West Point on 1 December 2009. In this address he had justified the 30,000 US troop surge in Afghanistan, scheduled for the first half of 2010, on the grounds that it would allow the US to "begin the transfer" of its forces "out of Afghanistan in July of 2011". He also dwelt upon the importance of capacity building in Afghanistan in order to enable a "responsible transition of US forces" out of the country.

Both these ideas were endorsed at the London Conference on Afghanistan, held on 28 January 2010, which in addition called for Afghan-led efforts for peace, reconciliation, and reintegration. In pursuance of this, efforts have been underway, from time to time, to engage the Taliban.

In an annual review of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan the White House made known on 16 December 2010 that while the US troop reductions would commence in July 2011 and transition to an Afghan security lead would start during the year, a broad Afghan and international consensus had been arrived at the recent NATO summit at Lisbon, "agreeing on a path to complete transition by the end of 2014." The review frankly admitted that though the momentum of the Taliban in Afghanistan had been "arrested" in much of the country and even "reversed" in some areas, these gains were "fragile" and "reversible".

In the context of the foregoing, it is no surprise that President Obama in his 22 June 2011 speech asserted that beginning July the USA would withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of the year; by the summer of 2012 a total of 33,000 troops would be withdrawn; and by 2014 (note not "end 2014" as had been asserted earlier) the "process of transition will be complete". He also acknowledged that peace could only come through a "political settlement" and that the US would "join initiatives that reconcile the Afghan people, including the Taliban".

Quite clearly, the US and its NATO allies plan to cut and run and have no stomach for retaining a heavy military footprint in Afghanistan. This approach

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has been dictated by several factors, such as the political imperative of the 2012 Presidential elections, which demands the pull back of the bulk of the US forces abroad, and the recognition that a prolonged stay in Afghanistan will be too costly, both in military and economic terms, which the US can ill afford at a time when it is grappling with a grave economic crisis and many other pressing regional and international issues. As cited by *Stratfor* (22 June 2011), supplying one gallon of petrol in Afghanistan costs the US \$400 and the annual cost of sustaining one US soldier in that country amounts to as much as \$1 million. Most important of all, there is clear realization in the USA that it cannot decisively defeat the Taliban over the next year or two despite the military surge which in June 2011 had brought its troop levels to 100,000 and those of the Afghan National Army and of the International Security Assistance Force to 170,000 and 47,000 respectively.

It is no wonder, therefore, that in its report of 23 March 2011 titled “Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace”, an international task force, set up by the Century Foundation under the leadership of Ambassadors Lakhdar Brahim and Thomas Pickering, readily acknowledged that “Neither side can expect to vanquish the other militarily in the foreseeable future” and that there is a “sense of stalemate” in Afghanistan.

Indeed, the prevailing situation on the ground appears to be far worse. The Hamid Karzai government has not been able to strike roots, is corrupt and unpopular, and Taliban forces, though unable to hold the ground, can strike at will almost anywhere. According to the International Crisis Group’s report of 27 June 2011 titled “The Insurgency in Afghanistan’s Heartland”, not only is fundamentalism rising in Afghanistan but the insurgency has expanded far beyond its traditional stronghold in the south-east to several provinces in the vicinity of Kabul. Violent insurgent activity has risen sharply in these provinces and the Taliban have shadow governors in thirty-five of the sixty-two districts in seven provinces around Kabul. The report also argues that while on the one hand the Karzai government is unlikely to “be able to contain the threat and stabilize the country” by 2014, on the other hand it is likely that the Taliban “will push forcefully to gain more ground before the military drawdown” is completed. Through 2011 to date, inclusive of the terrorist attack on the NATO headquarters and the US Embassy on 13 September, there have been as many as six such attacks on the capital, testifying to the precarious security situation in Afghanistan.

In view of the foregoing, it is difficult to go along with those who argue that the USA’s strategic interests in the region, including the desire to ensure that Pakistani nuclear weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists, and the

need to prevent al Qaeda's resurgence, will ensure that it would continue to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 albeit at a lower level. Reports persist, however, that under the guise of a strategic partnership agreement, the US is trying to play for long-term military bases in Afghanistan. Such moves are non-starters for, as pointed out by Jonathan Steele in an article of 20 June in *The Guardian* (20 June 2011), captioned "The Taliban's Wish List", the "main motivation" of the Taliban, with whom the US is committed to promote reconciliation in Afghanistan, is to "end foreign occupation" of the country. Clearly, the *sine qua non* for bringing the Taliban on board for reconciliation is an end to the US military presence in Afghanistan.

While the drawdown of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan is now underway accompanied by efforts at dialoguing with the Taliban, the outcome is uncertain. There are many imponderables. Would the Taliban, for instance, be prepared to accept a power sharing arrangement with President Karzai under the Afghan Constitution and to cut its links with al Qaeda?; and if they do so, how long would the power sharing arrangement last? Would they not find it more to their advantage to wait it out, as time appears to be on their side since the US and its allies have virtually thrown in the towel? Would significant or marginal elements of the Taliban agree to reconciliation with the existing dispensation? In the event of a rapprochement, however short-lived, between the Karzai government and the bulk of the Taliban, would the Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, etc., who make up nearly 60 per cent of the population, acquiesce in it and allow the exercise of power to fall squarely into Pashtun hands? While there are no clear-cut answers to these questions, the fact is that the Karzai government is weak, corrupt and unpopular and is unlikely to be able to successfully resist the Taliban without foreign support. Thus, the dice are loaded in favour of the Taliban and it is probable that within a couple of years they will either be in power or, at the very least, will be exercising considerable influence in the prevailing dispensation in Kabul. However, a Taliban takeover is unlikely to be smooth and, indeed, may not necessarily happen in a united Afghanistan, as they will not only have to contend with Karzai but also with the non-Pashtun forces, for whom Pashtun domination would be hard to stomach. In these circumstances, US withdrawal will most likely see much bloodshed and civil war conditions cannot be ruled out. In fact, Afghanistan could even break up, with the south and east under the Taliban and the rest under the former members of the Northern Alliance. Should this happen, break-up of Pakistan comes within the realm of possibility, as the Pathans in Pakistan, who have always regarded themselves as Afghans, may feel impelled to join the Pashtun-dominated southern and eastern Afghanistan in a greater Pashtunistan.

Clearly, while many scenarios are possible in Afghanistan following US withdrawal, it is probable that there would be much uncertainty, bloodshed and civil war. In these circumstances external forces are bound to intervene on behalf of their proxies, with unforeseeable consequences. A Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan will have to face opposition not only from sizeable elements within the country like the non-Pashtuns, but also external powers like Russia, Iran and the Central Asian Republics. The Taliban would, of course, be supported by Pakistan. China will most likely play a much more activist role than in the past and may opportunistically seek to use the Taliban to establish its hegemony in Afghanistan. Chinese dominance of Afghanistan will place at its disposal the vast mineral resources of that country, bring it to the gates of West Asia, and immeasurably advance its ambitions of becoming a superpower.

#### **Implications for India**

Many have expressed grave apprehensions about the implications for India arising from US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the resulting increased influence of the Taliban there. They have argued that this would give a fillip to the forces of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism and make Afghanistan a Pakistani pocket borough; that this would result in increased terrorist attacks on India, exacerbation of the communal divide, and diminution of India's influence in Afghanistan; and that instability will increase in the event of a civil-warlike situation there, and a replay of the great game will ensue, with China as a major player, which would have adverse consequences for the entire region.

While there is some weight in these apprehensions, one may venture to suggest that they are somewhat exaggerated. The export of terrorism to India is, for instance, more or less exclusively Pakistan-inspired and the Afghan role therein is negligible. Pakistan has used terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy against India since 1947; and this will continue in the foreseeable future, whether or not Pakistan exercises influence in Afghanistan, though of course having a pliant regime there will give it increased resources to feed its terror machine. Exacerbation of the communal divide in India is again something that Pakistan has attempted for long with not much success, and the Taliban factor counts for little. The disease of communalism in India depends much more on internal factors than on external forces. As long as the Muslim community in India is mainstreamed and is happy and content, there is little to fear on this account from the pernicious influence of external forces.

The relevance of Indian influence in Afghanistan, leaving aside age-old cultural and people-to-people linkages, arises from the fact that Afghanistan

is a gateway to Central Asia and can be used as a pressure point against Pakistan. So, any diminution of Indian influence in Afghanistan would undoubtedly be detrimental to India's national interests. Such diminution is on the cards in the event of a Taliban takeover, at least in the short term.

Over the medium and long term this may not hold true, as any regime in Kabul – even a Taliban one – is bound to be influenced more by national considerations than by blind allegiance to Pakistan. Forces of geopolitics will inevitably influence any regime in Kabul to consider favourably a friendly relationship with India. This is all the more so as Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have been strained for much of their history. Afghanistan has always had grave reservations about the Durand Line, whereby much of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) were incorporated into British India though they had been a part of Afghanistan and were occupied by Pashtuns. Feelings in Afghanistan ran so high on this issue that in 1948 it voted against Pakistan's admission to the UN. In 1993 it appealed for renegotiation of the Durand Line in line with its provisions calling for review after a hundred years. Pakistan rejected this call, as indicated in Farzana Shaikh's book, *Making Sense of Pakistan*. Farzana Shaikh further points out, quoting from Ahmed Rashid's book *Taliban*, that the Taliban regime, which had been built up by Pakistan in the 1990s inter alia in the hope that it would recognize the Durand Line, refused to do so and did not give up Afghanistan's claims to a part of the NWFP. (Shaikh, Farzana. 2009. *Making Sense of Pakistan*, C Hurst)

In these circumstances, apprehensions about a Taliban regime in Kabul being a pliant instrument of Pakistan may turn out to be unfounded, as geopolitics and the Durand Line issue will inevitably create tensions between the two. India can also count on Pakistani insensitivity to act as an irritant, which will over time sour the relationship. In this context, one needs to keep in mind Anatol Lieven's assertion, in his book *Pakistan a Hard Country* (2011), which is based on the memoirs of Mullah Zaeef, former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, that "the Taliban leadership never fully trusted Pakistani governments and the Pakistani military, and since 2001 there has been in some Taliban circles active hatred of the Pakistani military because of the way in which they sided with the US after 9/11."

Instability anywhere is generally unwelcome. Instability in Afghanistan therefore may have some adverse consequences for India. However, the spill-over effect would not be considerable and certainly would be much more in Pakistan. Indeed, to the extent Afghanistan keeps Pakistan occupied on its western front and off balance, this would be to India's benefit. On the

downside, it will afford China an opportunity to fish in troubled waters; and if it does so skilfully, it could end up exercising a preponderant influence in Afghanistan. But going by historical experience, Afghanistan has never taken kindly to external dominance and has invariably exacted a stiff price from all those who have sought to subjugate it. Afghanistan is no Tibet or Xinjiang, where China has dealt in a ham-handed way; a similar approach in Afghanistan will prove costly to China and severely dent its image.

Finally, US withdrawal is not something India should be overly concerned about. Indeed, it may work to India's advantage. In this context India needs to consider that it is the US presence in Afghanistan that has allowed Pakistan to milk it for billions of dollars of military and economic assistance, to India's disadvantage, without doing anything to reduce Pakistan's export of terrorism to India. Withdrawal from Afghanistan will free the US of such Pakistani blackmail and deprive the Pakistani military and economy of a major source of sustenance. To the extent that Pakistan's capabilities for nurturing its military machine, which has been exclusively developed for use against India, are adversely affected, it would naturally be of benefit to India.

### **India's Options**

India's influence on the international community in regard to Afghanistan over the last couple of decades has been marginal, and only a fraction of that of Pakistan. For instance, scant regard was paid to the Indian view that the Taliban should not be included in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. India was also not consulted by the US in crafting its AfPak policy. Pakistan was a major player in this exercise. It has also exercised considerable influence in international fora in the evolution of policies pertaining to Afghanistan. To some extent this is natural, due to Pakistan's geographic contiguity to Afghanistan, which India enjoys only theoretically but not in practical terms. This is also a result of the fact that while India has followed a proactive bilateral diplomacy vis-à-vis the government of Afghanistan, it has not been so active in reaching out to all shades of opinion in that country and keeping in close touch with all the key external players. The perception that India has become a US camp follower following the India-US nuclear deal, and its votes against Iran at the IAEA, has also not helped.

Some have advocated that India should consider defending its interests in Afghanistan with boots on the ground. This would be a grave mistake. India's interests in that country are not so great as to warrant such an exercise the success of which is, in any case, highly uncertain, given: (a) India's lack of a real geographic contiguity with Afghanistan; (b) the opposition that this would

invite from Pakistan and perhaps China; and (c) the fact that the force levels India would be able to project would be limited on account of the internal security demands on its forces, the Sino-Pak threat, etc. India also needs to bear in mind that foreign intervention in Afghanistan has historically met with a rather unfortunate end.

India's options in Afghanistan are clearly limited; and India needs to recognize that it has been a marginal player there. This is not to say that India should do nothing. While carefully watching the emerging developments over the next couple of years, it should:

- a) Strengthen President Karzai's hand to the extent possible, with financial and technical support, as in the past. India should also not fight shy of helping beef up the Afghan security forces through supply of equipment and training on Indian soil. India's economic cooperation programmes have been an unadulterated success story and have won it enormous goodwill. This will stand India in good stead over the long term irrespective of the dispensation in power. As a result of its efforts India is the most popular country in Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister's visit to Afghanistan May 2011 went a long way in furthering Indo-Afghan ties. The joint declaration issued during the visit significantly upgrades the relationship. It inter alia agreed to the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the two countries, which also envisaged cooperation in security, law enforcement and justice; signalled the enhancement in Indian economic assistance by \$500 million, taking the total assistance to \$2 billion; and emphasized "the fundamental and lasting importance of the Treaty of Friendship between the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan of 04 January 1950." This treaty, signed between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Afghan Ambassador in New Delhi, committed the two countries to "everlasting peace and friendship" and envisaged their mutual appointment of Consul Generals, Consuls, Vice Consuls and Consular Agents. Reiteration of this treaty places the growing India-Afghanistan linkages on a sound historical perspective which will enjoy relevance for all time to come.

- b) Develop and deepen contacts with all sections in Afghanistan, including elements of the Northern Alliance, many of whom feel neglected. India's standing among the Pushtuns also could be better: Pakistan has been plugging the line, with some success, that India is anti-Pushtun. India should rectify this and reach out to influential Pushtun elements.

- c) Intensify coordination with the regional players like Russia and Iran on Afghanistan, which has diminished over the years. They, too, are uneasy over a Taliban dispensation in Kabul.
- d) Develop contacts with the Taliban. Once in power, Afghanistan's national interests will inevitably, over time, lead them to view India more favourably, unless India treats them as untouchables. In this context it may be recalled that India had, under the Rajiv Gandhi government, sought to establish contacts even with the Peshawar Seven, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

In these circumstances, the following assertion by India's Prime Minister in his address to the Joint Session of the Afghan Parliament on 13 May 2011, reconciling India to the process of reconciliation, was sagacious. In one stroke, while pleasing Karzai, it signalled that India did not regard the Taliban as untouchables:

Afghanistan has embarked upon a process of national reconciliation. We wish you well in this enterprise. It is up to you, as the people's representatives, to make decisions about your country's future without outside interference or coercion. This is your sovereign right. India will respect the choices you make and the decisions you take.

- e) Pursue a much more activist diplomacy in demolishing the myth being created by Pakistan that India is using its presence in Afghanistan to promote terror in Pakistan or that India is undermining Pakistan through collusion with Afghanistan. The fact is that India has had a history of close relations with Afghanistan; that both have had quarrels with Pakistan, but these have been pursued separately and not collusively.
- f) Explore and support the idea of a neutral Afghanistan, as has been mooted very persuasively by some, like Ambassador Gharekhan (*The Hindu*, 27 July 2011). This would, inter alia, entail guarantees by the international community of Afghanistan's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity as well as guarantees of non-interference in its internal affairs by any foreign country. India had in the 1980s constantly been impressing upon the international community the need for non-interference and non-intervention in Afghanistan. Hence, supporting such an approach would be in keeping with India's traditional thinking on the matter. In purely practical terms, however, it would be prudent to recognize that the proposed policy, while perhaps offering the best solution and a way out of the strife that is likely to engulf Afghanistan

once again in the next couple of years, will not find too many takers. To start with, Afghanistan itself may be reluctant to turn itself into a neutral state. Even if it does, would the international community, in particular the great powers and Afghanistan's neighbours, be ready to commit themselves to a self-denying ordinance requiring them not to interfere in Afghanistan? Above all, would the international community be prepared, and be actually able to sanction, any country that interferes in Afghanistan? It may be recalled that the 1988 Geneva Accords, on the basis of which the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, inter alia contained guarantees that Pakistan would not interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan; yet it flagrantly and with impunity did so.

Notwithstanding these problems, for want of a better solution, there is advantage in India taking a proactive stance on pushing for the ideas mooted by Ambassador Gharekhan, particularly if these can be embellished further with an appropriate mechanism to lend teeth to the guarantees for non-interference in Afghanistan. An activist and constructive approach by India will help enhance its role and secure its interests in Afghanistan and is certainly better than the reactive manner in which it tends to conduct its foreign policy.

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## ***Limited Options for India amidst Growing Uncertainty***

Arvind Gupta and Ashok K Behuria\*

Burhanuddin Rabbani's assassination by a Taliban suicide emissary on 20 September 2011 has cast its shadow on the reconciliation process that was supposed to facilitate withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. The manner in which Rabbani was tricked into a dialogue with the Taliban and killed suggests that there are enough loose cannons within the group to spoil the process. The official version in Kabul, for quite some time, has been that the top Taliban leadership is amenable to reconciliation. If this be true, this incident clearly shows that either there are irreconcilable divisions within the Taliban ranks, or there is an extraneous force (read Pakistan's ISI), who would not like the process, as it is being conducted now, to succeed. The US has of late been more vocal about the devious role being played by Pakistan security agencies. The intercepts of communication between the six suicide attackers who targeted the US embassy with rocket guns from a close distance reportedly confirmed their links to their masters in Pakistan. However, Pakistan continues to be in denial mode.

The gulf between the conditions set by the government and the demands placed by the Taliban appear mutually exclusive and difficult to bridge. The inter-ethnic faultlines have started reappearing in the political domain. According to reports from Afghanistan, most of the non-Pashtun leaders and warlords are girding themselves for an impending civil war, which could be much worse than the one in the 1990s. By all accounts, the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), trained to assume charge, post-withdrawal, is too ill equipped and ill prepared to stop the Taliban. Many of its cadres, it is believed, may actually melt into Taliban ranks once the international forces withdraw. American efforts to secure the Karzai government's nod for long-term lean and efficient military presence (read military base) after the withdrawal have not yet been successful. Most informed observers are of the view that Afghanistan may be in for another prolonged period of instability and uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, this essay raises a few questions and attempts to answer them. The questions are: Will the US withdraw from Afghanistan?

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Will the reconciliation process succeed? How are the non-Pashtun ethnic groups looking at the process? What will be the shape of Afghanistan post-US withdrawal? Who will succeed Karzai? Will the Taliban this time be different? What will be the role of Pakistan in the transition process? How will US-Pak relations evolve in future? How is India perceived in Afghanistan? What are the options for India?

### ***Will the US Withdraw?***

Since 2001, the international community has spent huge amounts of resources to rebuild and reconstruct Afghanistan and ensure peace and stability there. The US alone has spent more than \$443 billion (Belasco, Congressional Research Service, 29 March 2011) (out of a total of over \$500 billion) and taken about 1650 casualties (out of a total of about 2750). But the situation in Afghanistan is far from normal. Despite the troops surge since Obama's West Point speech of December 2009, the dramatic killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, and increasing drone attacks (208 out of 270 since 2008), the US has not managed to reverse the Taliban tide. On the contrary, the international efforts are marked by a sense of fatigue and domestic resistance to long-term troop commitment.

### ***Decision to Withdraw Irreversible***

The US is reeling under serious economic depression, with high unemployment rate and sovereign debts touching \$14.3 trillion. The PEW Research Centre opinion poll in July suggested that for the first time the majority of the US (56 per cent) favoured the idea of removing US troops as soon as possible. (PewResearchCenter Publications, 21 June 2011) Increasingly, Americans and people in the West are putting pressure on their governments to roll back their efforts. Some countries have already recalled their troops and the draw-down of US troops has already begun.

Interestingly, an American analyst forcefully argued in a recent article in *Foreign Policy* that the US had accomplished its mission in Afghanistan and the legal basis to wage a "war on terror" based on a Congressional resolution in 2001 was over. Hence, "now is the time" for President Obama "to declare victory in the war against al Qaeda and return to Congress for a new resolution dealing with the new threats of the coming decade, in a world where trillion-dollar wars are an unaffordable luxury". (Ackerman, *Foreign Policy*, 7 September 2011)

Various analysts have suggested, however, that the US decision to pull out all troops by 2014 is not an “absolute timeline”. NATO has said, in addition, that the final decision will be taken after reviewing the situation closer to the date of withdrawal. However, if Obama’s new plan for economic growth and deficit reduction – titled as “Living Within Our Means and Investing in the Future” – is any indicator, the US is cutting down on its international commitments to save “more than \$1 trillion in savings over the next 10 years from our drawdowns in Afghanistan and Iraq”. The nature and form of any future US engagement in Afghanistan is likely to depend on the situation as it evolves in that country after US withdrawal. Objective conditions at home may prompt the US to strike a “status of force agreement” with Kabul, modelled after Iraq, which will provide it with the legitimate excuse to maintain its forces in fortified bases inside Afghanistan. But this may not be easy if the Taliban were to be reconciled for stabilizing Afghanistan.

#### ***Will the Reconciliation Process Succeed?***

The process of reconciliation in Afghanistan is now in its sixth year. President Hamid Karzai had started it in May 2005 under the name *Programme Tahkim Sulh* (PTS) or National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission. However, the PTS had more or less failed to invite the Taliban into negotiations. Therefore, in the June 2010 peace jirga in Kabul, Karzai proposed a High Peace Council to engage the Taliban. The council was established with seventy members, with Burhanuddin Rabbani as its head. The process signalled a shift in the US approach, which was persuaded to believe that without Taliban participation it was difficult to pull off a political solution in Afghanistan. The Karzai government is also in touch with the Gulbuddin Hikmatyar faction; some of its members have been accommodated in the country’s power structure.

There are even indications that the redlines imposed by the US – that the Taliban must accept democratic and plural values of the Afghan constitution – may have already been crossed by the Karzai administration in its bid to co-opt the Taliban. There could thus be a symbolic Islamization of the constitution to ensure continued Taliban participation in the reconciliation process. The US and its allies are also probably willing now to concede symbolic ground to the Taliban in order to enable the process of reconciliation. There is an underlying hope that this would lead to improvement in the security situation and facilitate US withdrawal.

However, Rabbani’s assassination has come as a dampener in these talks.

Days before his killing, Rabbani had indicated that the peace process with the Taliban was not going anywhere. He had famously announced that the Taliban “are a disaster for the Muslims”. Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, despite his leading role in the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, was allegedly unacceptable to the Pashtun-majority Taliban.

### ***How are the Non-Pashtun Ethnic Groups Looking at the Process?***

The reconciliation process being attempted by Karzai is primarily focused on the Taliban, who are overwhelmingly Pashtun. There is a view amongst the Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks that the Karzai government has armed some of the notorious Pashtun warlords in the guise of creating a strong Pashtun constituency against the Taliban. The removal of Amrullah Saleh, a Tajik, on account of rocket attacks on the peace jirga in June 2011, is interpreted as a well-staged drama to dislodge an officer who had performed well as an efficient and effective chief of intelligence, merely because he is a Tajik, to appease the Taliban and Pakistan. Tajik anger at Rabbani’s assassination was quite visible during his funeral. The Hazaras and Uzbeks are also concerned about their future, especially when they find the US and the Karzai administration seeking to resurrect a *de facto* Taliban rule through negotiations. The Hazaras are also worried about dwindling Iranian support for them, on which they had banked in the past.

Hazara and Tajik warlords are strengthening their defences against possible Taliban assault in future. Realignment of forces among these minorities is likely to resurrect the former Northern Alliance in some other form, widening the Pashtun–non-Pashtun divide in Afghanistan. The Taliban have not done anything so far to assure the non-Pashtuns about their safety. Some observers have noted with concern the composition of the High Peace Council with overwhelming Pashtun representation in it. (Grossman, *USIP Peace Brief*, January 2011) The non-Pashtuns have already started looking for possible support or help from external agencies.

### ***If the Taliban Comes to Power, will it be a New Avatar?***

The Taliban are more confident than ever of imposing their writ on Afghanistan once the Americans leave. As the latest rule book (*Layaha* in Pashto) issued in May 2011 (Clark 2010) suggests, they are assuming the role of *de facto* rulers of Afghanistan and are taking measures to bring moderation to the “mujahideen” and thus make themselves more acceptable to the people of

Afghanistan. Observers in Afghanistan believe that the new generation of Wahabized youth is in the process of replacing the older-generation traditionalist and Deobandi Taliban; and they are working with al Qaeda: some call them Qaliban. This new crop of Taliban may be media friendly, open to the idea of girl education and even display an accommodative posture vis-à-vis other ethnic groups; but their worldview remains essentially conservative. It is unlikely that they would ever accept the existing Afghan statecraft which emphasizes democracy and liberalism. If the Karzai government tweaks the constitution to co-opt them, they are certain to wreck the system from within and re-induct a conservative regime in Afghanistan. They have become so powerful that even Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban, needs their approval in negotiating any issues.

#### ***What could be Pakistan's Role in Future?***

The arrest of Mullah Baradar of the Taliban in early 2010 by Pakistani authorities, just when he was reportedly talking with the Karzai administration, demonstrated the Pakistani resolve not to allow the Taliban to open an independent line of communication with the government in Kabul. Pakistan remains committed to its stated position of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan and hopes that it can realize its goal if the Taliban assumes power in Kabul.

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is largely determined by the military leadership, which is unable to comprehend the political fallout of the recapture of Kabul by the Taliban with its help. The Pakistan military has put all its eggs in the Taliban basket. In the Urdu media in Pakistan, which reflects the mindset of the military establishment, some of the following views have been expressed: the reconciliation efforts are a "sheer wastage of time" (*Jang*, 29 January 2010); any effort by the US "to impose India on the Afghans would be construed as the beginning of a new imperial period" (*Jang*, 14 January 2010); a "block comprising Pakistan, China, Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan" and "forging a defence and strategic partnership can achieve two goals – the end of the US status as the sole superpower and countering the US strategy of projecting India as a regional policeman" (*Ausaf*, 18 January 2010).

Counter to this trend are several liberal elements in Pakistan, and especially commentators in the English-language media, that in the past the Taliban have displayed their autonomy and embarrassed Pakistan on several occasions. The recently released report on Afghanistan (Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, 2011) by the Jinnah Institute, Islamabad, for example, does

mention India as a strategic competitor for Pakistan but recommends sparingly that Pakistan and India should stop working against each other's interests in Afghanistan.

***What will be the Post-US Withdrawal Scenario?***

The internal security situation in Afghanistan meanwhile is getting worse. The Taliban have targeted people close to Karzai in the recent past. His half-brother Ahmad Wali, governor of Kandahar, was killed in July 2011; and the mayor of Kandahar was gunned down a few days later. The Taliban are thus planning to weaken Karzai's hold during the process of transition of security to Afghan forces. By targeting the US embassy and assassinating Rabbani, they have made their intentions clear. They want to dictate the course of political transition during the process of withdrawal. As the latest *Layaha* (Clark, 2010) issued by the Taliban suggests, they are even hoping to attract the Afghan security forces into their ranks, with a rather liberal and accommodative policy towards the security forces seeking to surrender and join them.

***Possibility of Civil War***

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs) in a recent report on Afghanistan has urged the international community to "take decisive action to avert a scenario similar to that in Somalia" (Cytha D Mass and Thomas Ruttig 2011). 'Is Afghanistan on the brink of a Civil War?', (SWP Comments 21). Many analysts in Afghanistan and the region hold that the ANSF is too poorly led, paid and trained and equipped to ensure security in the country.

The Taliban hope that the Pashtun component of the security forces may defect to their ranks once the foreign forces leave. There is about 20 per cent desertion rate in the Afghan National Army (ANA); in case the Taliban stage a successful comeback, many of the deserters may join the Taliban ranks. There is also a view that the Pashtun strongmen, empowered by the Karzai government in different areas during the last few years, may as well switch to the Taliban side once the foreign troops leave. In this scenario, the local strongmen in the areas dominated by minority ethnic groups, which had experienced the wrath of the Taliban not too long ago, have started looking away from Kabul and focused on arming themselves.

*Who after Karzai?*

This prevailing atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty has been worsened by the government's incapacity to deliver essential services to the people. Allegations of rampant and widespread corruption and mal-governance, combined with Karzai's blatantly rigged re-election, have seriously affected the legitimacy and acceptability of his administration (Kenneth Katzman, *CRS*, 22 August 2011). What will happen to Karzai in case of any reconciliation with the Taliban remains unknown. The constitution bars more than two presidential terms for any Afghan citizen. Thus, after Karzai demits office in 2013 there may be a succession war among different factions, which could destabilize the process of democratic consolidation in Afghanistan.

**Different Scenarios**

Various scenarios ensue, based on the following drivers: the attitude of the Taliban, the role of the US and its allies, the role of Pakistan, and the approach of the regional actors.

1. *Throwback to the Past*

The Taliban remain inflexible. Even if they join the reconciliation process, they do not leave their conservative moorings. They do not like to share power with Karzai and they work towards turning Afghanistan into an Islamic Emirate, inviting international sanctions and economic hardship. Their rigid Islamist view sparks ethnic unrest in the country, which gradually snowballs into internal civil war. Pakistan helps the Taliban to expand their area of influence and use its territory for training jihad elements. Afghanistan becomes a magnet for radical Islamists of all varieties. And Afghanistan becomes a pariah state.

2. *Conventional Islamic Republic*

The Taliban share power with the Karzai government and facilitate withdrawal of the international security forces. In a graduated manner, they bring about changes in the Afghan constitution and incorporate Islamic precepts into it. They displace secular elements and strike a bargain with all ethnic communities. While they maintain their hard-line rhetoric and justify jihad practised by radical groups like al Qaeda, they do not allow them to operate out of Afghan soil. They establish good relations with all neighbouring states and open up to the West. They embark on the path of

reconstruction by inviting foreign capital and creating a condition for economic development. The regional countries engage the Taliban and help the process of change. The US maintains a tactical presence in Afghanistan and together with its allies takes forward the process of rebuilding that country. Pakistan maintains its influence over the government but does not repeat the mistakes of the past – of turning Afghanistan into a training ground for jihad groups. Afghanistan becomes another Islamic republic: emphasizing a home-grown variety of Islam, willing to engage the world.

### 3. *Democratic and Plural*

The Taliban demonstrate prudence: they work with the international community, take the democratic process forward and accommodate diverse ethnic and sectarian interests. Pakistan learns its lessons from the past and works in Afghanistan with India and other regional countries. The US and its allies remain steadfast in their commitment to provide the necessary resources to help the process of Afghan reconstruction. Afghanistan stays engaged with its neighbours including India. The regional countries develop Afghanistan as a regional economic hub and as a transit country between Central and Southern Asia. Afghanistan emerges as a stable, democratic and prosperous country at peace with itself and the world.

History and political trends indicate that the first scenario, “Throwback to the Past”, as the most probable in the existing circumstances.

### **What will be the Role of the Regional Players?**

Countries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan – Iran, China and Russia – are not eager to evolve a regional consensus on that country. Iran has been pushing for US withdrawal, tying up with the Taliban and distancing itself from the Hazara Shias because of their softness towards the US. Iran is allegedly funding different Taliban groups and supporting Pashtun Shias in Herat to raise a common front against the US. Iran has often floated the idea of a regional solution to the Afghan problem. It has discussed the issue with Russia, Pakistan, Turkey, China and some Central Asian states, but not with India. These talks have not generated any regional initiative to deal with the Afghanistan problem.

Taking advantage of the presence of the international security forces,

China has promoted its economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan, hoping to moderate the Taliban on its restive Xinjiang province through the intervention of Pakistan, in case the Taliban return to power in Kabul. Russia has expressed its desire to get involved in the reconstruction process with American money. Turkey has of late limited its interest in Afghanistan to facilitating political dialogue. The Saudis have influence on some groups in Afghanistan but do not intend to play a prominent role in either the process of reconciliation or democratization. None of the regional countries except India seems to have any long-term vision or commitment to help the process of reconstruction, which will require a huge amount of resources.

### **India's Options in Afghanistan**

#### *How is India Perceived in Afghanistan?*

In December 2010, the Pakistani daily *Dawn* carried a story on how Indians are perceived in Afghanistan: its author, Farman Nawaz, wrote that during his visits to Afghanistan, Afghan friends would

advise Pakistani traders not to disclose their identity as they move around in Afghanistan. In fact, it is considered safer for them to disguise themselves and, if approached, to identify themselves as Indians, as there is a perception ... in Afghanistan [that] Indians are more respected than Pakistanis. (Farman Nawaz, *Dawn*, 13 December 2010)

India is the only country in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood that has come out with an open offer of aid and assistance to develop that country's capacities. India's quick-impact programmes (six to twelve months) in many Pashtun-dominated Afghan provinces have been received well by the local populace. The local Pashto and Farsi media also acknowledge India's constructive engagement in their country and often compare and contrast it with the Pakistani interventions. Some commentators argue that Afghanistan has become a battleground for competing interests of India and Pakistan. However,

the approaches and objectives of these two countries are different. India wants a secure and developed Afghanistan that does not pose any threat to Indian security, but in contrast Pakistan wants a poor and insecure Afghanistan in order to secure itself. (Nazrullah Qudrat; Sayyed Ikramuddin Tahiri )

Non-Pashtun minorities and progressive Pashtuns view India as a reliable

and well-meaning partner of their country.

India did have good relations with the Northern Alliance in the 1990s; but ever since it started working with the Karzai government, India has not nurtured its contacts with the old and emerging leaders of the Northern Alliance. Many young Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara leaders allege that India has not shown any interest in the emerging leadership of various minority ethnic groups and is focusing too much on the regime in Kabul.

#### *India's Approach So Far*

Officially, India's Ministry of External Affairs has maintained that India "neither sees Afghanistan as a battleground for competing national interests nor assistance to Afghan reconstruction and development as a zero sum game". Further:

The bottomline for India's involvement remains the fact that India considers extremist ideologies to be very dangerous and a national security threat. To that extent, India wants to utilize its development programme in Afghanistan to help Afghanistan stabilize and emerge as an economic hub linking South and Central Asia through a network of trade and transit linkages that would benefit the people of the entire region. (Ministry of External Affairs, India)

#### *India's Options*

The situation in Afghanistan remains fluid and unstable: it is unlikely that the US and the international actors can leave behind a stable and secure political arrangement there. Instability in Afghanistan is likely to worsen in the future.

Likely, this will be accompanied by instability in Pakistan. Despite the current impasse and the consequent impasse between the US and Pakistan militaries over the activities of the Haqqani group, the US cannot afford to alienate Pakistan beyond a point: it needs Pakistan until the withdrawal from Afghanistan is complete. Pakistan's internal political, economic and security situation is also worsening, with that country getting sucked into the vortex of instability in Afghanistan. This may prove Pakistan's undoing. If the security situation in Afghanistan worsens further and the Taliban are not tamed, the US even may hasten its withdrawal to before 2014. In which case, a political and security vacuum may emerge in Afghanistan much sooner than generally expected.

For India, the scenario is highly unstable. It would need a friendly and stable Afghanistan so that the terrorist groups operating in that region do not turn against it. An India-friendly Afghanistan would also deny Pakistan the “strategic depth”, i.e. control over Afghanistan. India also will depend upon Afghanistan for the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) gas pipeline.

Currently, India has focused on building links with all sections of the Afghan society and providing generous economic and technical assistance to the Afghans. It has stood behind the Karzai government. It has refrained from exercising political influence in Afghanistan, though many Afghans would think that India should play a more active role in this aspect. Against this backdrop of growing uncertainty in the Af-Pak region, the following questions arise:

- *Can India and the US work closely in Afghanistan?* India needs to be wary. US policies are in flux and the US is on the back foot. It is working to secure its own national interest and is not, at the moment, concerned about the Afghans or regional security. Therefore, India should be wary of any US proposals at burden sharing and refrain from taking any security duties in Afghanistan.
- *How should India react to the idea of US bases in Afghanistan?* This is an issue between two sovereign countries. Permanent US bases in Afghanistan will alienate some of the regional countries. India will need to assess what purpose these bases will serve: will they provide security to the Afghan government or will they only serve US geo-political interests in the region? India should seek a briefing from the US on this important matter.
- *Should India continue to extend assistance to Afghanistan?* India has earned the goodwill of the Afghans through its assistance programmes. However, the worsening security situation in Afghanistan would put constraints on Indian programmes there. India should take into account the security situation before taking long-term commitments in Afghanistan. However, India should continue to provide assistance to the people of Afghanistan through education, capacity-building, skill development and other programmes. The Afghans visit India in large numbers for medical treatment. The visa regime should be liberalized to facilitate people-to-people contacts. India should continue with its assistance programmes which help the Afghan people, particularly the youth.
- *How should India react to any possible rise of a non-Pashtun alliance?*

India should remain in touch with all sections of the Afghan political structure, including components of the former Northern Alliance. It may not, however, be possible to resurrect the Northern Alliance of the mid-1990s. Civil war in Afghanistan is not in India's interest. India must remain in touch with the Pashtun tribes, watch the situation and identify opportunities in order to promote genuine national reconciliation in Afghanistan. India has a role but this cannot be overstated.

- *Should India work for a regional solution for Afghanistan?* For the moment, regional countries are watching the developing situation without committing themselves to any particular course of action. No regional initiative appears to be in the offing. However, opportunities might arise in future. India should remain in touch with the countries of the region to assess whether an opportunity for a regional solution would arise.
- *Should India compete with Pakistan in Afghanistan?* Competing with Pakistan in Afghanistan would polarize the country and lead to further uncertainty. India's approach ought to be people-centric. Long-term relationship with Afghanistan built during the last few years will pay dividends in the long run. Let Pakistan follow its own policies and bear the consequences.
- *Should India talk to the Taliban?* India should remain in touch with the Pashtuns but talking to the hardcore Taliban does not seem to be a good idea as they have repeatedly targeted Indian facilities. They have an Islamic agenda which will not suit India. Nor are the Taliban interested in genuine reconciliation.

To sum up, India's choices are limited. India should refrain from getting bogged down in Afghanistan but should pursue quiet diplomacy involving all sections of the people. Building on the good work it has done during the last few years in Afghanistan, India should leverage its soft power in building capacities in Afghanistan. One important element of Indian policies should be to establish and maintain contacts with the youth of Afghanistan and facilitate their coming to India for education and skill building. For the moment, India should watch the situation and await opportunities where it can be more useful.

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## ***The Hype about India's Strategic Role***

Vidya Shankar Aiyar\*

Afghanistan will remain important to India, though not necessarily “vital” to Indian interests, whether or not there is a US drawdown. It is necessary for India to recognize and project as much and not overplay the importance of Afghanistan in various official pronouncements and strategic discussions. Indian policy so far has been on a safe track of winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan, while seeking to remain engaged in strategic terms in any dialogue of interested parties on its future. However, there is precious little that is in India's control strategically. Nor should it seek to change that position in any hurry, if at all. There is no reason for India to feel either disappointed or elated at the prospect of a US drawdown. There are several reasons for remaining concerned, though not obsessed, with Afghanistan.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*: the more things change, the more they remain the same. Events of the recent past (May–October 2011) have been dramatic, to say the least, for Afghanistan. From the killing of Osama bin Laden to the killing of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the world seemed to have been turned upside down for Afghanistan, and yet, their impact has hardly manifested itself in any meaningful fashion. It remains the same intractable land and country that it always was, with hearty Pashtuns dominating its spirit. Ten years have passed since the US adventure, for that is what it was, an adventure post the events of 11 September 2001. There is now an apparent looming deadline the US has been careful to call, a “drawdown”, rather than its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan.

For the foreseeable future, the best result that India can realistically hope to achieve is to keep its relations with Afghanistan on a good and even keel, without expecting any dramatic rise or fall in its quality. Seen in this timeframe, there is never going to be a future in India's relations with Afghanistan where Pakistan becomes irrelevant or begins to play second fiddle to an India-Afghan duet. Future of India and Afghanistan rests in the recognition of this reality, within which there is ample scope for a strong bond between the two countries. This picture holds, irrespective of the role of the US.

There are several points in support of this argument.

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**Anatomy of Drawdown**

The principal point to remember is that the US drawdown is not happening for any “strategic” reason relevant to the unfolding situation in Afghanistan. It is happening purely because domestic US compulsions make it necessary. Its timetable too is dictated primarily with the US Presidential election calendar in view. Let us be clear, the US is not reducing its presence in Afghanistan because the Afghan National Army (ANA) has grown to be a strong, self-reliant and effective force, which should have been the natural reason for a reduction of foreign troops and forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, the goals set within Afghanistan post the US decision to withdraw are primarily to enable this transition. The ANA is being brought up to speed precisely with this aim. It still remains to be seen if this plan will succeed. Much also depends on whether the Afghan police forces will come up to speed as well. However, the US cannot realistically be expected to indefinitely stay on in Afghanistan, and so needs a point of departure. That point is being defined by domestic concerns in the US, rather than the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

After all, the spate of attacks in the recent past on American troops, embassy and the assassination of Rabbani hardly give one any measure of confidence, irrespective of Mike Mullen’s reassuring words to the US Senate Armed Services Committee. He said,

... these incidents are designed to reap a maximum strategic and psychological effect with minimal input. And make no mistake, combating an insurgency is about combating perceptions. We must not attribute more weight to these attacks than they deserve. They are serious and significant, but they do not represent a sea change in the odds of military success.

The cup, at any rate, is both half full and half empty. One may see in those recent attacks evidence of the Taliban’s determination to wrest control. Or one may see these attacks as the exception, as Mike Mullen did. Those exceptions, though, come at a steep price of keeping the peace, at about \$2 billion a week. This is clearly not an indefinitely sustainable proposition. As US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta reminded in his testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, “... the department has to implement \$450 billion in savings over the next ten years as a result of the debt ceiling agreement [in Congress].” Having made his primary concern clear, he too had to conclude that the cup is half full. Commenting on the recent attacks he said,

Overall, we judge this change in tactics to be a result in a shift in momentum in our favor, and a sign of weakness of the insurgency. While overall violence in Afghanistan is trending down, and down substantially in areas where we concentrated the surge, we must be more effective in stopping these attacks and limiting the ability of insurgents to create perceptions of decreasing security. ... but the bottom line is that we can't let these sporadic attacks deter us from the progress that we've made.

And what is that progress? "... we've established conditions that are putting Afghans on the path to assume lead responsibility for security nationwide by the end of 2014." Notice the present continuous tense. That "path" is long and hard.

Even assuming that the ANA and the police forces in Afghanistan do get trained to some measure, the problem of corruption, both in the administration and the police, will linger. This is a difficult factor to weigh. As such, "corruption", or the lack of good governance, will not figure in any strategic calculation on when to let the Afghans have complete control over themselves, though it holds the potential of undoing most of the good work done in the presence of the ISAF. As Mike Mullen warned,

If we continue to draw down forces apace while such public and systemic corruption is left unchecked, we will risk leaving behind a government in which we cannot reasonably expect Afghans to have faith. At best this would lead to continued localized conflicts as neighborhood strongmen angle for their cut, and the people for their survival; at worst it could lead to government collapse and civil war.

### **The Role of the US and Pakistan**

So, will the US really draw down by 2014? The answer to that is also not an absolute one. Much will depend on who wins the US presidential elections and what is the prevailing situation then, both in the US and Afghanistan. And it seems like an open race at the moment. The focus, though, remains acutely on the American economy, and hence, it is reasonable to expect some kind of drawdown, irrespective of who becomes the President. Still, there is much ground to cover from now to then. It is, therefore, only reasonable to also expect a review of any decision to draw down, closer to the date. In other words, India cannot afford to assume that US drawdown is inevitable. India will have to keep all possibilities in view, while deciding its course of action.

There are already calls within the US for continued presence. P.J. Crowley, the former US Assistant Secretary of State who quit his post over the White House's Afghanistan policy, has openly asked that "more time be put on the clock", so "the United States can increase the odds of military, political and strategic success." Even the 10,000 troops withdrawal by the end of 2011 and the 23,000 by the end of summer 2012 ordered by Obama is possible only if the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) develop into "capable, credible and legitimate" forces. While the target for numbers has already been achieved for 2011 at 305,600, the need is for quality development of the ANSF, and that is a work in progress and an area that directly interests India. The key problem in developing such quality remains the repeated interference from across the border with Pakistan. The clearest enunciation of what the US plans to do post 2014 has come from the press conference that Hillary Clinton had with President Karzai on 20 October in Kabul.

But I want to be clear: The United States is making an enduring commitment to the people of Afghanistan that will not end in 2014. We will not abandon Afghanistan. We continue to make progress toward a new Strategic Partnership Declaration that will provide a framework for long-term cooperation between the United States and Afghanistan. We hope that this agreement and the clarity it brings will bolster Afghan and regional confidence that this country will not again become a safe haven for terrorists or an area for competing regional interests.... The United States will do our part.

Much was made of a near break in ties between the US and Pakistan, post the attack on its mission in Kabul. The fires clearly seem to have been doused with Hillary Clinton's visit, even though it may not be business as usual between the two "allies". The US and Pakistan have no choice but to embrace one another in this imbroglio. A break is not something that either can afford at this point. The price will have to be paid, whether that comes in the form of more money from the US to Pakistan or giving Pakistan more access to control Afghanistan post the US drawdown, or winking at the Chinese help to Pakistan's nuclear programme or anything else. The possibilities are many. If the US did not go for the jugular with Pakistan post Abbotabad, there is little chance of it threatening Pakistan with bombing it back to the Stone Age over its role in Afghanistan. The nature of the compromise between the US and Pakistan matters to India though it has little control over it.

Will Pakistan play a constructive role in Afghanistan or remain part of the problem? It is evident on the face of facts that a return to the Taliban-ruled

days of Afghanistan is not possible. It will simply not be allowed by the US and NATO, even though they may be constrained by limited economic resources to ensure it. Sooner rather than later, Pakistan will have to play a constructive role in Afghanistan, and it has no choice in the matter. The arc of history must either bend towards a stable region or forever witness a region on the boil. The latter is not a situation that Pakistan can control either. The Pakistan Army may well be an interloper rather than an interlocutor, but the internal developments of Pakistan and ethnic ties across the border make it necessary for the state to exercise positive influence in Afghanistan over the long term. The old Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban was left to its own devices for Pakistan to do as it willed. That will not be the case anymore. The present discord between Pakistan and the US is engendered by the need to jockey for positions of influence towards the final outcome of the withdrawal of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Though Pakistan is accused of playing a large hand in the attacks on US troops and helping the Haqqani network operate in Afghanistan, its principal interest has been served by being the key interlocutor between the US and the Taliban on the Pakistan side.

Mike Mullen expressed the Afghanistan muddle rather well in his testimony when he said,

Our interests in the region, however, do not rest solely in the operational effectiveness of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. The United States, the countries in the region, and their neighbors all share interests in regional stability, nuclear surety, and increased prosperity. That stability is threatened by too many other factors for the United States to simply walk away once al-Qaeda is effectively crippled. We must and will remain steadfast partners with Afghanistan and, yes, work closely with Pakistan, as difficult or as uneven as that relationship might be.

Wise words. It remains to be seen how much of it will be heeded once the tumult of electoral politics in the US plays out.

### **India's Role**

India need not be perturbed, however, by these developments between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The end result of all their machinations cannot be inimical to India, as that would not be good for the region. Nor is it possible for Pakistan or the US to fritter away all the goodwill India has built up over the years with the people of Afghanistan. To all those in India who salivate at the thought of having Indian troops on the ground to deny Pakistan its "strategic depth", need to be reminded that troops may come and go in Afghanistan, but

the minds and hearts of the Afghan people are clearly with India. At the end of the day, those “boots on the ground” may not be Indian or even Pakistani or American for that matter, but they will certainly be Afghan ones, strongly backing India, not Pakistan. A policy for India to send troops to Afghanistan can never be made purely with the idea of denying Pakistan access. There must be an overwhelming reason for India to do so. Indian intervention, if any, will have to be positively oriented: not negatively conceived.

Indeed, not enough credit is given to Indian policymakers for the restrained way in which India has made inroads into Afghanistan. Knowing that India’s hand is very limited strategically in Afghanistan, but remaining concerned about the den of terrorism on its doorsteps, India has done well to seize the single most important opportunity it has: contributing to the development of Afghanistan. It is the kind of action that no one can reasonably object to. It is the one thing that will ensure that there will always be Indian presence to contend with in Afghanistan. No one can, after all, ask India to get out when it is merely building roads, schools, the parliament, etc. In its own modest way, India’s contribution is now around \$2 billion. This may be what the US spends in a week on Afghanistan, but each dollar that India spends is an investment in making that slender opportunity to be present in Afghanistan a strong one. In a situation where India is not allowed space to be a strategic player, this is vital oxygen.

Having said that, India also needs to be cautious in projecting its role in Afghanistan. The recently concluded Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) is a welcome development but could have been more conservative in this regard. The fact is, India uses this word “strategic” rather indiscriminately to describe relations with many different states, from the US to Indonesia, and now an offer to Bangladesh and, possibly, Iran, leaving one to wonder about the definition of “strategic” being used. However, India is also at pains to say that this is not a security treaty. The few words in the SPA which deal with the issue of security refer to the Afghan National Security Forces, deliberately not clarifying whether ramping up training is to happen with the Afghan National Army or with the Afghan National Police. “India agrees to assist, as mutually determined, in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan National Security Forces.” The choice of words is clearly deliberate. However, it is not fooling anyone, except Indians at home. While most media outlets went to town reporting Afghanistan’s first strategic partnership, the details of the “strategic” nature of its content flitted between India training the ANA to India training the ANP. The fact is, no troops are going to be in Afghanistan. Not yet, in any case.

While complaining about Pakistan's objections to Indian involvement in Afghanistan, India must not appear to lend credence to them. What is the need to announce an SPA and in the same breath clarify that it is not aimed at any State: a clear reference to Pakistan? The need has arisen simply due to the title of the Agreement and the few words on helping the ANSF. Clearly, India needs to find a better expression to help states that it has relations which feel special. India's agreements with any state, let alone Afghanistan, must surely stand on their own terms. Despite various commentaries of analysts, official Pakistan remains unperturbed with the SPA, a clear sign that there is nothing "strategic" about this Agreement. Yet, the Agreement can also be seen as laying the foundation for an institutional framework to have troops on the ground at some later stage, not being conceived of at present. To quote from the SPA, "The Sides agree to establish a Strategic Dialogue to provide a framework for cooperation in the area of national security." This involves only talking: not troops movement. In any case, depending on the situation that may warrant Indian troop presence in Afghanistan, it may not be preceded by any agreement or treaty. This miasma of doubt on India's intentions was completely unnecessary. While it may have been diplomatically a good way to label relations between Afghanistan and India, its potential to earn public relations brownie points in either country remains suspect. The timing of the SPA has also been entirely fortuitous, what with the perceived souring of relations between the US and Pakistan. Going big with Afghanistan's "first strategic partnership" was really not needed, especially when it is in a mood to sign many more strategic agreements with other states. It is clearly not a security agreement and should have unambiguously been titled so. Surely, India is not contemplating a future in Afghanistan without the involvement of Pakistan, is it? Is that even possible? Ties of blood exist on either side of the Durand Line that cannot be rewritten with an SPA. Then why pretend or masquerade as a security treaty or call it "strategic"? This has been a promiscuous trend in Indian drafting of agreements lately that is better avoided.

### **Strategic Depth or Strategic Confusion?**

Pakistan has been claiming that it does not subscribe to the idea of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. Its former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi publicly said so and more recently General Kayani has been reported to have said as much. India does not believe this assertion, but that is no reason for India to allow its entire policymaking to be dictated by it. Indeed, there is much to be gained if India takes Pakistan's assertions at face value and forces it to commit to that stand. The situation in the Af-Pak region is significantly

different from what it was ten years ago. Today, it is open knowledge that the US distrusts Pakistan and vice versa. The US is trying to get Pakistan to be more accountable and responsible, and hence the repeated references to “snakes in one’s backyard”. The problem with looking at Pakistan through the prism of “strategic depth” is that it obfuscates more than it clarifies. It assumes that Pakistan is a homogeneous entity. Present-day experience tells us that there are many Pakistans. It emboldens the negative elements within Pakistan and weakens the positive ones who do not believe in using terrorism as state policy or Afghanistan as a crutch in an eternal war of attrition with India. India must, therefore, seize the moment and discard the “strategic depth” perception and join the US in encouraging a responsible and accountable Pakistan, while doing its best to counter terrorism.

What is being suggested is not very different from what is already being done in India’s relations with Pakistan. After all, dialogue with Pakistan is sought to be continued despite the knowledge that elements in Pakistan are actively engaged in using terrorism as state policy. The same yardstick needs to be applied vis-à-vis Afghanistan as well while dealing with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### **To Talk or Not to Talk?**

So, what happens to talking to the Taliban? And should India talk to the Taliban? So far the Indian government has been happy to say it will follow the lead of Hamid Karzai in the matter. Will Karzai remain in power past 2014? India is now talking to the Taliban, at least such former members who visit its mission in Kabul. There is also acceptance, no matter how reluctant, that there is no point in distinguishing between good and bad Taliban. Indian diplomacy is also engaging with a wider spectrum of opinion in Afghanistan, not wishing to put all its eggs in the Karzai basket. All these developments are welcome. It is also to India’s credit that it had no comments to make on Hamid Karzai’s recent interview to *GeoNews* of Pakistan suggesting that Afghanistan would back Pakistan in a war with India or the US. No one is taking what he said seriously as an indication of his loyalties to anyone: Pakistan, the US or India. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that there is no wishing away American presence or Pakistani involvement, and so, there remains no alternative to talking to the Taliban, even while fighting them at the same time.

India did not ask for the presence of US troops in Afghanistan. It should not be sad at the prospect of their withdrawal. There is a growing constituency

in Afghanistan that wants good relations with India. Pakistan ranks low in that regard. Nevertheless, India would do well to remember Mullen's urging at his testimony:

We should also help create *more* stakeholders in Pakistan's success by expanding the discussion and including the international community; isolating the people of Pakistan from the world right now would be counterproductive. In summary, success in Afghanistan and in the broader region will require substantial efforts outside the realm of security – they are now largely in the political domain.

Most importantly, Afghan voices need to be heard louder. For most of them, the link to 9/11 is remote. More than half of the population of Afghanistan is below the age of 15. It is this growing population and its expectations that will need to be managed in the days to come. And for this, India is well poised to play an inspirational role, by listening more and talking less. The second donor conference in Bonn in December 2011 will do well to give a strong push to good governance and doing its bit to reduce unemployment. It must also give Afghanistan the confidence that it can sustain the growing numbers of the ANSF. India must recognize its limited role and do its best to ensure that the future of Afghanistan post 2014 remains in Afghan hands.

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## ***Afghanistan will Benefit from the Strength of India***

Hamid Karzai\*

It is a very particular honour for me to have been considered to speak today before this distinguished audience and to be only the third speaker if I understood it correctly, at Observer Research Foundation's Lecture. Looking at the audience, indeed it is a very distinguished body of opinion makers.

Well, Mr. Rasgotra referred to Afghanistan and India as two countries or peoples linked to one another from the dawn of history of mankind. Indeed, it is a story of that nature and one that has captured the imagination of people around the world as well with many ups and downs and sufferings and tragedies and happy stories in between.

I am not going to go way back into the past today. I will begin from 1977–78 or more precisely 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the consequences that invasion brought not only to Afghanistan but to the wider region. A brief description of Afghanistan at that time will lead us to where we are today.

Afghanistan was a poor, mostly illiterate, Central–South Asian country with deeply believing Muslim people, with quite good minorities of Hindus and Sikhs and some Jews living in that country where the society was deeply believing in Islam, where the society at the same time was traditional and moderate, where the society lived as the tradition in that part of Afghanistan, and in parts of India is, in a panchayat type of system where there was an egalitarian culture where the Khans and the Lords and the Maliks were not much above the farmers and those that helped them or served them when they sat around the dinner table or dinner cloth as we call the *strahan*, I am sure you call the same in India, and other occasions, where education was on the rise, where the society was beginning to be more affluent and more educated, where a civil service was taking shape, where governance was taking the modern shape as we have now experienced in the past two or three centuries in the rest of the world. In this environment, the Soviet Union came to Afghanistan and with the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Afghan people

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rose and resisted that foreign occupation and to the imposition of communism as a way of life on the Afghan people. The reaction to that was the jihad of the Afghan people, the resistance of the Afghan people as the French called it at that time and, also equally, an imposition in the name of the jihad of the Afghan people by other foreign forces of religious radicalism on the Afghan people.

So, Afghanistan was confronted by two opposing political trends, one using communism as a tool, the other using and promoting religious radicalism as a tool. One using that tool to defeat the so-called non-communists and the other using the tool to defeat the so-called communists. In this tussle, Afghanistan suffered heavily. In this war, which was a war of liberation for the Afghan people, but a war of purposes other than that for countries in the region and the West and the Soviet Union.

We all know the story till 2001 and beyond. With the arrival of Taliban and with 11 September, the West woke up or, perhaps the right word would be, began to see their interests more present and imminently of danger to them in Afghanistan. They came to Afghanistan and, as we saw, the West led by the United States of America and NATO succeeded in removing the Taliban and Al Qaeda and their foreign backers within a month and a half. I was personally present there in Afghanistan at that time and a witness to what happened and that is of extreme importance to the audience today. The Taliban and the Al Qaeda and their foreign backers in Afghanistan were defeated not because only of the arrival of the NATO and American forces. They were defeated because of the deep desire of the Afghan people to free themselves, because of the deep desire of the Afghan people for liberation.

When the Taliban and Al Qaeda and their backers were removed from Afghanistan within a month and half, it was when there was no American forces on our soil. There were only perhaps 500 of them altogether and definitely not in the Southern parts of Afghanistan where the Al Qaeda and the Taliban had strong presence. It was the community that rose against them, that pushed them away and they left.

Subsequent to that, from 2001, Afghanistan began to re-emerge as a country for all Afghans, while before that whoever was the government claimed total ownership of Afghanistan. If it was the Communists they said all is ours, if it was the mujahideen parties who came they fought among themselves and brought ruin to themselves and to the country and the Taliban of course was totally exclusionists. The Afghanistan of today is the Afghanistan in which all Afghans find their place. It is a place for all Afghans. So, that is

the greatest achievement of the past decade of work.

In this decade, we began not only to make Afghanistan once again the home for all Afghans but also to bring back to Afghanistan the repair of the destruction of the two previous decades. Bring back a civil service, bring back an economic recovery, bring back the build up of the institutions, bring back democracy, bring a constitution and most important of all, the return of women to the Afghan polity and work place and education. I will come back to India in this connection later on, but before I go further I would like to once again make a note of thanks to the people of India for having participated in every aspect of this rebuilding of this country. In every aspect, from democracy, institution building, to education, to highways, to transmission lines for power generation, for electricity, to the thousands of scholarships to the very well spent, nearly 2 billion dollars of assistance in our country. So, thank you very much and I will return to the subject later on.

This is what we achieved. But this achievement of Afghanistan came in spite of all the obstacles and odds. The war machinery against Afghanistan, terrorism, extremism did not stop. Those who came from the rest of the world to help us, their financial contributions mattered greatly but also their presence in Afghanistan brought the unintended consequences of parallel structures, private security firms and all other activities that caused an impediment to the growth of the Afghan State. So, Afghanistan has grown to where it is today, where we have nearly 70,000 students in our universities, nearly 7.5 million children in our schools, and a massively free press where you can't imagine in India, because India is too focused on its own as far as the media is concerned. You don't look beyond India. When you look beyond India into the region, the Afghan Press is perhaps as vibrant, if not as entrenched in culture of media freedom as India is, but it is as vibrant and as abusive of the government as yours. This is a significant achievement and we will continue with it and I will come to the vision part of it later on.

In this whole exercise for the rebuilding of Afghanistan, as I referred to in my remarks earlier, India, as it was a contributor in the past, became even more of a significant contributor in the past 10 years. It never said no to any of Afghanistan's requests. It fulfilled. When I asked the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh for more scholarships, he said yes. When I asked the Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee before him for roads, he said yes. The two governments that I have seen since my Presidency in Afghanistan have given us all that we wanted.

Yesterday, we signed a strategic partnership agreement. It is nothing new

by the way. We have been engaged in strategic partnership cooperation for the last many years. When you gave us 2,000 scholarships, that is strategic. That is extremely strategic when you train our youth in your universities. When you built a brand new road from the South West of Afghanistan to the West of Afghanistan, the Zaranj-Delaram road, that brings a massive change to trade and transit and the livelihood of people, that is strategic. When you build the transmission lines from Northern Afghanistan to the capital of the country and beyond, that is strategic. When you build the Parliament of the country, that is strategic. When you give us 2.5 billion dollars, that is strategic. So, yesterday we put in words and signed the strategic cooperation that we have had and this will now encompass security, capacity building, economic activity further in the mineral capacity building and exploration in oil and gas and all other fields. So, taking this occasion, thank you very much India for what you have done for us and surely the Afghans will not only not forget this but will remain grateful forever for what India has done for us today and for this very important step that we took to formalise this relationship yesterday.

As I mentioned earlier, Afghanistan's rebuilding effort concentrated on all the aspects of our life. I mentioned briefly the obstacles that we faced. In order to give you a picture of these obstacles in a little more detail, and then to take a step further into the peace building efforts and to the transition, I would like to tell you that in the past 10 years as we were building schools, the terrorists were coming and burning our schools. As we were building the traditional society of Afghanistan bringing back life to the political culture of the country, the terrorists and those from outside were killing our leaders, national leaders to community leaders to local leaders. As we were building mosques and Islamic institutions, our Ulema were being killed and maimed and muted. As we were training teachers, our teachers were being killed and intimidated. As we were building health institutions, doctors were killed and clinics destroyed. Hundreds of community leaders have been killed. Thousands of police and soldiers have been killed. Thousands of our civilians have lost life to various forms of violence. Hundreds of schools were shut down or destroyed. The roads that we built were damaged again by violence and terrorism.

So, where Afghanistan stands today, a country where in 2001, in 2002 rather, where we had an income per capita of 150 dollars, today we stand at 600 dollars; where we had a GDP of 3 billion dollars, today we stand at perhaps close to 18 billion dollars, above 17 billion dollars; where we had a foreign reserve of a mere 180 to 200 million dollars, we stand nearly 6 billion dollars today; when we had no schools, in spite of the violence we have

thousands of schools; where we have no advancement in any other part of the country or areas of development, Afghanistan stands good and solid; where Afghanistan was totally taken by polio and malaria, and mother and child mortality, Afghanistan has done magnificently well, in that Afghanistan has received the appreciation of the United Nations in this fight against polio and the mother and child mortality rates which have come down considerably. But where Afghanistan has not succeeded is to bring security to its people. Where Afghanistan has not succeeded is bring peace to its people. Where the international community, NATO and the United States have failed in bringing peace and stability to the country.

What is the reason for that is the most important question for us all. Because it is not only Afghanistan that suffers. Afghanistan suffers a lot more, but so does India in the hands of terrorism, so does Pakistan in the hands of terrorism. Pakistan suffers more today than we do in Afghanistan. Much more. Just yesterday, 13 people were killed in Quetta in some form of sectarian killing. In the beginning, from 2002 to 2005–06, I was highly vocal in condemning violent activities as we felt was coming from across the border into Afghanistan. But when I saw that Pakistan too was beginning to suffer in a very serious way from extremism and radicalism and the consequences of that in terms of violence and the loss of life for the people of Pakistan, I began to change my attitude and my rhetoric. Since then, from 2005–06, ladies and gentlemen, no government in Afghanistan, since the creation of Pakistan 64 years ago, has engaged as extensively and with strong focus as I and my government have done, by launching a peace process with the Taliban and by engaging directly and very sincerely and very brotherly with our brothers in Pakistan. We have not unfortunately yet received the result that we wanted. What we wished has not yet been fulfilled.

In the peace process with the Taliban, a messenger who came in the name of peace killed Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani – a suicide bomber. He came to bring us a message of peace and he was killed. Professor Rabbani was killed by the same messenger of peace. Therefore, we have now decided to not talk to the Taliban because we don't know their address, we don't know where to find them. And when we find them, we will talk to them. Therefore, we have decided to talk to our brothers, our neighbours in Pakistan. In all sincerity, desirous of results, we will continue to work with our brothers in Pakistan. This relationship, as we began years ago, has unfortunately not given us the result that we want. So, the peace process as it stands today will be focused more towards in relations between countries rather than on us seeking a dialogue with an organisation or a body of

individuals that we cannot find.

In this quest of ours for security in Afghanistan, Afghanistan has not only engaged in the most brotherly terms, in the most friendly terms, the relations with our friends and brothers in Pakistan but also with Iran and also with our other neighbours, which we will continue to do. In the same exercise in bringing stability and strength to Afghanistan, as we signed an agreement with India for strategic partnership, Afghanistan is also in negotiations with the United States of America. Afghanistan has already signed one with NATO and Afghanistan is looking at an agreement with the European Union. So, Afghanistan can provide for itself the means of stability and the means of capacity building by arrangements with the international community in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan and beyond the neighbourhood of Afghanistan.

In this connection, the most important development that is of relevance not only to Afghanistan but the region is the transfer of authority from the international community to the Afghan forces, particularly from NATO to the Afghan forces. We began this transfer of authority last July, the first tranche of it in seven Afghan cities and provinces. The next tranche is to begin in the month of October and I will be announcing it soon after my return to Kabul which will continue to be implemented towards the third tranche and the final by 2014 which we were trying to cut short and make it take place by 2013. This means that by 2013 or maximum by 2014 Afghanistan will be entirely responsible for its own security. Afghanistan will be entirely responsible for the protection of its borders. Afghanistan will be entirely delivering services and all other governmental and state functions to its people. Afghanistan would be looking after its affairs in short entirely on its own, in cooperation and collaboration with countries like India, Europe, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Russia, China, of course all our other neighbours. This is a process that I hope India and all our other neighbours of ours will support and back as we move forward.

Transition and the implementation of transition of authority to Afghanistan will bring us rather in a dramatic way, head to head with what it is that we aspire for the region. Can Afghanistan, can India, can Pakistan, especially these three countries, and our other neighbours continue life as it is today? Can we feel threatened as we move to the future? Can we live in the same environment of insecurity and fear as we do today? I was earlier talking with His Excellency the Vice President Mr. Ansari and I told him can you tell me how many children in India, in Delhi, know about flares that are fired from helicopters and planes as they pass by. How many children in India or in the rest of the world would be playing the suicider game and the other person's

game who are trying to protect themselves. How many children in the world would be knowing the name of Chinooks and Black Hawk helicopters. The children of Afghanistan know, and in Pakistan too.

How many children in the world, do we have any child in the world that will play like we saw recently in a video in Pakistan where one child becomes a suicide bomber and the others are the victims and they play this game. This is a tragic scene, extremely abusive of humanity, extremely abusive of humanity where our four year old boys talk of suicide bombs. I have heard my own son many times, when I come home, he says, daddy, did you hear the suicide bomber. I tried to change the subject but he would not give up, he will keep asking. Is this the region that we want to live in? Definitely not. So, if we don't want to live in a region filled with violence, anger, aggression, what is it that we should do?

As I mentioned earlier, we have done our best, the best that is humanly possible with our neighbours and we will continue to do the best that is possible with our neighbours. But this region with this massive potential of growth and it is being seen as we see it in India fortunately, this massive growth that you have, as we see it in China, has a great story of success visible to the whole world, and yet at the same time this region has the most negative trends affecting us as well. On the one hand there is massive potential of progress and activity towards a better living and on the other hand there is so much violence, so much aggression, so much extremism coming to us. If this trend continues as it is, years from today not only we will be faced with increased threat and less development but we will have as we do have today water shortages, shortages of space and land, shortages of vegetation and forests, and all other difficulties that will confront us in a very daring and challenging manner. I don't think, ladies and gentlemen, that we can afford as human societies by the standards of the so-called sophisticated war seekers. I don't think we can afford to live as human societies in this environment of hatred and lack of trust.

For Afghanistan we have no option but to be the best of brothers and friends with our neighbours, to be a transit route, to be the hub of commercial activity for this region and to have freedom of movement. For this region there is no way that we cannot copy the European model of living side by side in peace and prosperity. Europeans have had bigger conflicts than we have had in the histories of our countries. My vision for this region is one in which there are no borders or lax borders. My vision for this region is where our youth's energy is released and spent for the wellbeing of the future generations. My vision for this region is of more prosperity and of peace. My vision for

this region is where the grand children will not be talking of suicide bombs, they will not know suicide bombs, and they will be talking of anything else. That vision will not come unless we all recognize that we need bold, visionary steps and leadership.

In the past 10 years I have been witness to efforts by India and Pakistan, one that began by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the other that began by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Mr Gilani. I appreciate both the efforts. As I talk to them Nawaz Sharif, Mr Vajpayee, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Mr Gilani, are as much desirous of peace as anyone of us in this room and beyond. I hope the polity as a whole can get together and go beyond the established tendencies, and Afghanistan will spare no stone unturned, Afghanistan will not fall short of any measure that brings that. So, Afghanistan's grapes can reach you not on a plane, on an IL-76 or something like but in a truck from Kabul to Delhi, as delicious and fresh as they are in Kabul or in Kandahar or in Jalalabad. So, we can have eventually the vision of Dr Manmohan Singh where we can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, dinner in Kabul and perhaps the next breakfast in Tehran. This is the vision that I have and this is surely the vision of the millions and millions of inhabitants that this region have. I will continue to work in tremendous and honesty with our brothers in Pakistan.

The signing of the strategic partnership yesterday with India I must emphasise and reemphasise is not directed against any country, is not directed against any other entity. This is for Afghanistan to benefit from the strength of India. India fortunately has the strength to help us. This is for Afghanistan to use the possibilities that India has and offers to make our life better, to educate our children, to train our police, to train our army, to train our physicians, to train our lab technicians. The strategic partnership that we have is to support Afghanistan develop. I am sure this partnership will benefit us. My plea today is that we grow beyond the environment of lack of trust, if not hatred.

For me, the vision for the future is what this region has. Ladies and gentlemen, if you look closer this region is in terms of its people more assembled, more united, more culturally together than any other region. Do you have in Russia, a great German poet? No. Do, we have in Italy, a great French poet? No. But we have in India, Bedil, a great Persian poet, but we have in Pakistan Iqbal a great Persian and Urdu poet. Do you have anywhere in the world where in a distance of thousands of kilometres someone like Tagore writing about the life of a merchant in the other country of that region? No. But Tagore has written *Kabuliwala*. Do you have in any other part of the

world a singer like Lata Mangeshkarji who would listen to Mehdi Hassan or Mehdi Hassan who would listen to Bhimsen Joshi, or Kushal Khan Khattak who would speak of the beauty of India. Our Ghalib would be read by all of us, from the shores of the Arabian sea to the other end of this continent. Ask any Afghan, they will tell you about Shah Rukh Khan, ask any Afghan they will talk about Shammi Kapoorji, the late Shammi Kapoor. Ask any Pakistani, they would love the Indian songs. Ask any Indian, they would love Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. This is the foundation that we have and this is the foundation upon which I hope with tremendous aspirations that we can build towards a future where we can be not only peaceful but very prosperous countries, prosperous people, where I can as a retired citizen of Afghanistan also be a retired citizen of South Asia. That is my dream and thank you very much.

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