

Progress Seen Toward a Regional Solution for Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

July 30—With the fresh eruption of violence in southern Afghanistan, it is evident that the much-touted U.S.-Taliban secret talks are going nowhere. Reports indicate that International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) have handed over seven areas of Afghanistan to the control of local authorities, and the plan has failed. What worries Washington is that the violence, which has escalated to record levels, may put a damper on President Obama's plan to withdraw 33,000 troops, to facilitate his 2012 re-election and to cut down on war expenditures.

The assassination of President Karzai's half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, arguably the most powerful person in southern Afghanistan, in early July, and within the following two weeks, assassinations of two other powerful Afghan individuals, has set the clock back in southern Afghanistan. Wali Karzai was gunned down in his home in Kandahar by a close associate on July 12. Five days later, Karzai's inner circle suffered another hit, when gunmen killed Jan Mohammad Khan, an advisor to the President on tribal issues and a former governor of Uruzgan province, also in southern Afghanistan. Then, on July 27, Mayor Ghulam Haider Hamidi, the third powerbroker from southern Afghanistan, was killed by a suicide bomber. The Taliban have claimed responsibility for all three attacks.

While it is dawning on the British-Saudi-influenced dealmakers in Washington that the situation in southern Afghanistan is worsening, at the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's June 23 testimony at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings, and her proposals during her subsequent visit to India, among other nations, provided hope that, instead, the conditions on the ground are improving for a regional solution to the Afghan conflict.

Clinton and the Regional Solution

In her prepared testimony to the Committee, Secretary Clinton stated that the "Core Group, of Afghani-

stan, Pakistan, and the United States, has met twice and will convene again next week. At the same time, we are engaging the region around a common vision of an independent, stable Afghanistan and a region free of al-Qaeda. And this effort is paying off. India, Russia, and even Iran are now on board."

In response to questions from Committee members, Clinton was forthright about the importance of bringing Iran to the table, discussing the approach to put an end to the Afghan conflict, and this did not go unnoticed.

In a July 27 op-ed in a leading Indian news daily, *The Hindu*, India's former Ambassador to the United Nations, Chinmoy Gharekhan, said, "in a welcome development, the U.S. has now embraced the idea of seeking a regional solution to Afghanistan. In her significant testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 23, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was asked by the influential Senator, Richard Lugar, whether the nearly 200-year-old precedent of the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15 could offer a model for Afghanistan today. Ms Clinton's response was positive. She said: '[The] Congress of Vienna is an interesting historical example because there was a pact among regional powers that in effect left the Benelux countries as a free zone, so to speak. . . . Afghanistan is a part of a much larger diplomatic pattern and set of relationships, comparable to the Congress of Vienna.'

"She went on: 'This [Afghanistan] is a regional problem that is going to have that kind of a rather broad diplomatic solution. Certainly, if we could get to that point with the regional powers in South Asia, that would be a very worthy outcome.' She added Iran to the names suggested by Senator Lugar—India, Russia, Saudi Arabia. In her words: 'You cannot ignore Iran. Iran is a big player in the region and has a long border with Afghanistan and Pakistan.' She concluded: 'The only way we are going to get a political solution is through this



On July 23, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a Senate hearing that Iran should be included in any regional talks concerning the resolution of the Afghan conflict. This followed her trip to Asia, where she discussed Afghanistan, among other things, with regional leaders, including Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (shown here on July 19).

Press Information Bureau of India

kind of diplomatic outreach and that is what we are engaged in.’”

Gharekhan also said that during her recent visit to Delhi, Secretary Clinton “seems to have proposed a quadripartite dialogue among the U.S., India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.” Given Pakistan’s allergy to India having anything to do with Afghanistan, this idea will not go far. It would be more practical and productive to initiate a trilateral dialogue among the U.S., India, and Afghanistan, specifically on Afghanistan, Gharekhan suggested.

Fresh Thinking in New Delhi?

The fact that such an article appeared in a leading Indian newspaper is significant. It is a foregone conclusion that no workable solution for Afghanistan can be reached without the active participation of five major countries in the region: Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, and India. Gharekhan’s evaluation of Clinton’s statement as “a welcome development” suggests that some forces have emerged within India in favor of such a regional solution. This is surely a development that has taken place recently.

When this writer visited India in May, his discus-

sions with senior Indian analysts gave him the impression that New Delhi was not considering this as a likely option. The general impression the writer had from those discussions is that, while some in India were “hoping” that the United States will stay in Afghanistan for a few more years—more than what Washington is ready to agree to now—others were of the view that the Taliban, with Pakistan’s tacit assistance, will take control of Afghanistan, and the United States will accede to that.

These views were perhaps based on a reading that Washington is unwilling to make efforts in improving conditions and equations among the regional big powers, and in absence of such efforts, any cooperation among these powers for a solution of the Afghan conflict will be difficult to come by. The most frequently cited difficulty, the analysts in India pointed out, is that India, China, and Pakistan cannot sit together at the same table, to come to a mutually agreed upon conclusion to the Afghan issue. There were also concerns in India that exclusion of Iran would further jeopardize the talks from taking a concrete shape and form.

In addition to Clinton’s June 23 statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee calling for

Iran's inclusion in these talks, a number of subtle shifts have occurred in the region during this short period. These developments include openings for wider China-India relations, and efforts to ease tensions between India and Pakistan.

A Boost in China-India Relations

To begin with, China-India relations—which often get boxed in, over disputes regarding border demarcations, stymying attempts at further cooperation between these two large and increasingly powerful countries—may have turned the corner for the better.

Recently, the Indian media reported that Beijing is ready to support India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Born in 2001, the SCO consists of Russia, China, and four Central Asian "stan" countries (excluding Afghanistan and Turkmenistan). India, Pakistan, and Iran are among those with observer status. These nations virtually ring Afghanistan, which shares ethnic linkages with most of them.

During the last annual summit of the SCO in June 2011 at Astana, Kazakstan, India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna praised the SCO for its "constructive and forward-looking role in contributing towards peace in Afghanistan." Krishna also pointed out that, by becoming a part of the SCO, Afghanistan could act as the geostrategic bridge between Central and South Asia as well as a trade and transit hub, *The Hindu* reported.

At the summit, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said: "Russia is calling for more intensive and deeper cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan. . . . Eventually, the process of political stabilization in Afghanistan depends on this, and the security of our states to a great degree depends on the situation in this country."

In addition to India's growing relationship with the SCO, two other noticeable events occurred during this short period, which could improve bilateral relations between India and China, and between India and Pakistan.

The first involves whether China would finance development of the Gwadar Port on the Baluchistan coast of Pakistan, just a stone's throw from the Strait of Hormuz, a prospect which set off alarm bells in New Delhi, as well as in some other countries. India's concern was that Pakistan's decision to allow China to bring oil and gas through the Gwadar Port to western

China, would influence China to remain neutral in any future anti-India activities by Pakistan along its borders, and in various diplomatic forums.

However, New Delhi may have to reassess things, given what Peter Lee of *Asia Times*, in a May 28 article, called China's dropping of "the Gwadar hot potato." The reference was to Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani's visit to Beijing this past May. One of the items on Gilani's agenda was to secure more financing for the port. Although Beijing made no such commitment, Pakistani Defense Minister Ahmed Mukhtar, who accompanied Gilani to Beijing, said, in a statement, "The Chinese government has acceded to Pakistan's request to take over operations at Gwadar port as soon as the terms of agreement with the Singapore Port Authority (SPA) expire," Associated Press of Pakistan reported. It is likely that Mukhtar made the statement to showcase the solidarity of Sino-Pakistan relations, or perhaps simply to irritate India.

Nonetheless, Beijing did not like Mukhtar's statement. Lee wrote that "China promptly issued a denial—about building the naval base, at least—that made the whole episode look like another spasm of incompetence by [Pakistani] President Asif Ali Zardari's administration."

The Chinese decision to drop the financing of the port, under the circumstances that prevail in Pakistan, has forced New Delhi to realize that China is not interested in undermining India strategically; that its decision was based on commercial considerations, i.e., that the present circumstances in Pakistan are not favorable for such a commercial venture.

The second potentially useful development is the just-concluded visit by the newly appointed Pakistani Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, to New Delhi. While one visit by a Pakistani official cannot in itself overcome the six-decade-old enmities, including three wars and a long list of onerous issues, New Delhi has responded positively, and the Indian External Affairs Minister, S.M. Krishna, told reporters that Indo-Pak relations will "certainly improve," after the visit of his Pakistani counterpart. "This was the roadmap that we had worked out, and I am very happy that she came to India, and that certainly will improve bilateral relations between our two countries," Krishna added.

Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan

To arrive at a regional solution to the ten-year old conflict in Afghanistan, would require strong leader-



China's role in developing Pakistan's Gwadar Port (shown here), just a stone's throw from the Strait of Hormuz, set off alarm bells in New Delhi. But China made it clear it is not interested in undermining India strategically.

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ship from four nations—the U.S., China, Russia, and India. While it is still not clear what kind of resolution of the Afghan conflict that China, India, or Russia would consider at this point, it is likely that there is a realization that U.S. efforts, apparently carried out through Germany and Qatar, have little chance to succeed.

What is known is that the Afghan situation is worrisome to Russia, China, and Iran. Moscow worries about its own “war on drugs,” and wants NATO out of its backyard; it does not want permanent U.S. military bases in Afghanistan. Beijing worries about the Taliban influencing the Uighurs in Xinjiang. It is also abundantly clear that Tehran will keep cultivating its privileged relationship with Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks in Afghanistan, and would not like to see a return of the Wahhabi-indoctrinated Taliban to Kabul.

In addition, the emergence of a trilateral give-and-take among Tehran, Kabul, and Islamabad has become noticeable. Reports indicate that close associates of Afghan President Karzai are saying that his inner circle is pushing the President to move closer to Iran, as the U.S. forces recede. Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, a

visiting research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore (NUS), pointed out, in an *Al Arabiya News* article of July 27, that visits between Iran and Afghanistan have increased in recent years, and politicians of both countries have participated in jointly organized forums. The Iranians feel that the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan has deprived Tehran of playing a larger role in a country with which it shares deep historical, cultural, civilizational, and economic ties. Tehran further fears that the prolonged U.S. stay in Afghanistan will permanently eliminate Iran’s influence there. Iran has maintained that outsiders are not capable of establishing security in Afghanistan, D’Souza noted.

At the same time, D’Souza said, Iran is making common cause with Pakistan on Afghanistan. Both countries suggest that the regional powers need to have a stake in the solution to the Afghan problem, and that a solution imposed by either international military efforts, or negotiations with the Taliban, would not produce enduring results. The Iran-Pakistan alliance has caused deep consternation in Saudi Arabia, D’Souza added.