

# New U.S. Bases in Afghanistan: What Do They Portend?

by Ramtanu Maitra

The United States is beefing up its military presence in Afghanistan, and reports from the Indian media indicate that the United States has decided to set up nine new bases, scattered throughout the country. The locations are: single bases in Helmand, Herat, Nimrouz, Balkh, and Mazar-e-Sharif; and two bases each in Jalalabad/Khost and Paktika. According to observers, these will be set up within the context of the U.S. Global Military Plan (GMP), to be small, but flexible bases to which supplies can easily be ferried, and which can also be used as a springboard, if necessary.

Reports have made it clear that the decision to set up new American military bases was taken during U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Kabul in December 2004. Subsequently, Afghan Pres. Hamid Karzai accepted the Pentagon diktat. Perhaps, he did not put up much of a resistance; U.S. Intelligence is of the view that President Karzai will not be able to hold on to his throne beyond June, unless the U.S. Army trains a large number of Afghan national Army personnel and protects Kabul. Even today, the inner core of President Karzai's security is run by the U.S. State Department, using people provided by private U.S. contractors.

On Feb. 23, according to the official Bakhter News Agency, 196 U.S. military instructors arrived in Kabul, scheduled to stay until the end of 2006. Gen. H. Head, commander of the U.S. Phoenix Joint Working Force, said that the objective of the team is to expedite the educational and training programs of Afghan army personnel. The plan to protect President Karzai, and the new-found "democracy" in Afghanistan, seems to lie in the U.S. creation of 70,000 well-trained Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel by the end of 2006. As of now, the 20,000-strong ANA personnel help out the 17,000-plus U.S. troops and some 5,000-plus NATO troops that are presently based in Afghanistan.

In addition, in a move to bring in a large number of militia-men to ANA quickly, President Karzai on Feb. 28 appointed Gen. Abdur Rashid Dostum, a regional Uzbek-Afghan warlord of disrepute, as his personal military chief of staff. The list of what is wrong with General Dostum is too long to lay out here, but he is important to President Karzai and the Pentagon. General Dostum has under him at least 30,000 militia members of his Jumbush-e-milli. In other words, a quick change of uniform for Dostum's militia would increase the number of ANA by 30,000, at a minimal cost. There is also

no question that Dostum's men do not need military training; what they need is some understanding, and respect, for law and order.

The other important factor in play with this Karzai-Dostum union is the Pentagon-Karzai plan to counter the other major north Afghan ethnic grouping—the Tajik-Afghans. Since the Presidential election took place in Afghanistan last October, and throughout the winter, Washington has conveyed repeatedly that the poison fangs of al-Qaeda have been uprooted and that the Taliban is split. There was also reliable news suggesting that a section of Taliban leaders had accepted the leadership of two fellow Pushtuns, President Karzai, and the U.S. Ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and were making their way into the Kabul government.

With al-Qaeda de-fanged and the Taliban split, one would come to believe that the Afghan situation is well under control. Is it so? If it is, then Kabul and Washington must explain how it is that a bomb went off in the southern city of Kandahar, killing five people on March 17, the very day that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice landed in Kabul on her first visit to Afghanistan. Also needing explanation is why President Karzai has pushed back the dates for Afghanistan's historical parliamentary elections, originally planned for 2004, first to May 2005, and now to September 2005.

## Opium . . . and More Opium

What is definitely not under control, and surely is the source of many threats to the region, is the burgeoning opium production. Opium production grew at a much faster rate during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan than the rate at which the enemies of Washington, and Karzai, weakened during the same period. In 2003, U.S.-occupied Afghanistan produced 4,200 tons of opium, and in 2004, the still U.S.-occupied, and semi-democratic Afghanistan, produced a record 4,950 tons, breaking the all-time high of 4,600 tons produced by the Taliban in the year 2000. Although this problem is known to the world, the Pentagon refuses to deal with it. It is not the military's job to eradicate poppy fields, says the Pentagon. Why? Because it would antagonize the warlords who remain the mainstays of the Pentagon in Afghanistan, say observers.

When all is said and done, one cannot but wonder about the purpose of the new military bases. If al-Qaeda is only a shadow of the past, if the Taliban leaders are queuing up to

FIGURE 1

## New U.S. Bases Planned in Afghanistan



join the Kabul government, and if the U.S. military is not interested in tackling the opium explosion, why does the United States need these bases? It seems a perfectly logical question to ask.

A ray of light was shed on that question during the recent trip to Afghanistan by five U.S. Senators, led by John McCain (R-Ariz.). On Feb. 22, McCain, accompanied by Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), Susan Collins (R-Maine), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.), held talks with President Karzai. After the talks, McCain, the number-two Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he was committed to a “strategic partnership that we believe must endure for many, many years.” He told reporters in Kabul that America’s strategic partnership with Afghanistan should include “permanent bases” for U.S. forces.

A spokesman for the Afghan President, however, told news reporters that establishing permanent U.S. bases would require approval from the yet-to-be created Afghan parliament. Later, perhaps realizing that the image that Washington would like to project of Afghanistan is that of a sovereign nation, McCain’s office softened his comments with a statement of clarification: “The United States will need to remain in Afghanistan to help the country rid itself of the last vestiges of Taliban and al-Qaeda.” His office also indicated that what the Senator meant was a long-term commitment of the United States, but not “permanent” bases. Was the “permanent bases” comment simply a slip of the tongue?

It was surely not a mistake. On March 16, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that no decision had been reached on whether to seek permanent bases on Afghan soil. “But clearly we’ve developed good

relationships and good partnerships in this part of the world, not only in Afghanistan,” he said, also mentioning the existing U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

### Permanent or Long-Term?

But these accounts merely amount to word play. The reports from media in the Indian subcontinent clearly point out that the intent of the United States to set up new military bases, is not simply to bring Afghanistan under control, but to use as a major hub for controlling activities in the vast Eurasian region. In fact, one can argue that the landing of American troops in Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001 was conscious policy to set up forward bases on the crossroads of three major areas: the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. It is important for Washington to set up these bases not only because of the area’s energy bounty, but also because it is the meeting point of three growing powers—China, India, and Russia.

One may also argue that the base set up at Manas outside Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, is part of a military pattern. Central Asian reports indicate that close to 3,000 American troops are based there. It embodies a major commitment to maintain not just air operations over Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, but also a robust military presence in the region well after the war.

In Uzbekistan, prior to putting the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, the United States paid the Uzbek Government handsomely for permission to set up an air base in Qarshi Hanabad. There are about 1,500 U.S. soldiers in Qarshi Hanabad, and agreements have been made for the use of Tajik and Kazakh airfields for military operations. Even the neutral Turkmenistan has granted permission for military overflights. Ostensibly, the leaders of these Central Asian nations are providing military facilities to the United States to help them eradicate the Islamic and other sort of terrorists that threaten their nations. These developments, particularly setting up bases in Manas and Qarshi Hanabad, are not an attempt by the United States to search for an exit strategy for Afghanistan, but quite the opposite: to establish a military presence.

In December 2004, U.S. Army spokesman Major Mark McCann said that the United States was building four military bases in Afghanistan, which will be used only by the Afghan National Army. “We are building a base in Herat,” he said. “It is true,” and he added that Herat is one of four bases being built. The others are in the southern province of Kandahar, the southeast city of Gardez in Paktia province, and Mazar-i-Sharif, the northern city controlling the main route to central Afghanistan. The United States already has three operational bases inside Afghanistan; the main logistical center for the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan is the Bagram Air Field north of Kabul—known by U.S. military forces as “BAF.”

Other key U.S.-run logistical centers in Afghanistan include Kandahar Air Field, or “KAF,” in southern Afghanistan, and the Shindand Air Field in the western province of Herat. Shindand is located about 100 kilometers from the

border with Iran, which makes it controversial. Moreover, according to the U.S.-based think-tank, Global Security, Shindand is the largest air base in Afghanistan.

## **Encircling Iran**

According to Paul Beaver, an independent defense analyst based in London, the proximity of Shindand to Iran could give Tehran cause for concern. Beaver points out that with American ships in the Gulf and Shindand sitting next to Iran, Tehran has a reason to claim that Washington is in the process of encircling Iran. However, the United States has played down the potential of Shindand, saying that it will not remain with the United States for long, but would be handed over to the ANA.

But Tehran has a reason to worry beyond Shindand. In Pakistan, the Pervez Musharraf government has allowed the commercial airport at Jacobabad, about 300 miles north of Karachi and 300 miles southeast of Kandahar, to be one of three Pakistani bases used by U.S. and allied forces to support their campaign in Afghanistan. The other bases are at Dalbandin and Pasni. Under the terms of an agreement with Pakistan, the Allied forces can use these bases for search and rescue missions, but they are not permitted to use them to stage attacks on Taliban targets. Both the Jacobabad and Pasni bases have been sealed off, and Pakistani security forces have set up a 5-kilometer cordon around them.

By March 2004, there were reports of increased U.S. operations in Pakistan. Two air bases—Dalbandin and Shahbaz—were the focus of extensive movements to provide logistical support for Special Forces and intelligence operations. Shahbaz Air Base near Jacobabad appeared to be the key to the U.S. Spring offensive. At Jacobabad, C-17 transports were reportedly involved in daily deliveries of supplies. A report in the Pakistani *Daily Times*, March 10, 2004, claimed that the airbase was under U.S. control, with an inner ring of facilities that were off-limits to Pakistan's military.

There is no question that prior to an U.S. invasion—unilateral or with the support of U.S. allies—a lot of diplomatic water will flow through the Persian Gulf. Only time will tell how long it will take either to resolve conflicts or to come to a determination that the disputes cannot be resolved. But, there is no doubt that the war option is on the table, and plans are afoot to go ahead in case. . . .

The intent to prepare for war was announced publicly by none other than Vice President Dick Cheney, just hours before being sworn in for a second term. In an interview on the MSNBC program "Imus in the Morning," Cheney publicly raised the possibility that Israel "might well decide to act first" to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Commenting on the Vice President's remarks, former National Security Council chief Zbigniew Brzezinski said on PBS, "the Vice President today in a kind of a strange parallel statement to this declaration of freedom hinted that the Israelis may do it, and, in fact, used language which sounds like a justification or even an encouragement for the Israelis to do it."