

New Phase Beginning In Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

On July 14, the first batch of NATO forces arrived in Afghanistan's capital Kabul, to lay the groundwork for the Western military alliance to take over of command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on Aug. 11. Billed as the launch pad for NATO's most radical transformation ever, the deployment has received support of Russia. But China and India, two other major powers in the region, have remained quiet. The decision to deploy NATO in Afghanistan stemmed from the fact that the United States, whose troops had invaded and defeated the ruling Taliban regime in the Winter of 2001, is unwilling to deploy more troops where the situation has gotten worse over the last 14 months or so. Presently, some 11,000 American troops operate within the country.

First NATO Deployment in Asia?

The International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), which consists of about 5,000 troops based in Kabul, is a pittance compared to what is needed to provide security in the war-devastated and opium-infested Afghanistan. Over the last 12 months, there had been a number of discussions to expand the ISAF to five other cities, and to establish a "flying brigade" to provide rapid deployment capability. But like so many other proposals on Afghanistan, that died quickly. Currently, the ISAF is under German-Dutch command. Earlier, there were expectations that Germany would be sending many more troops to assist the ISAF, but the killing of four German peacekeepers and wounding seven others seriously, when a suicide bomber in a taxi collided with their bus in June, has made Berlin change its plans.

In addition, NATO will be supported by some 4,000 inadequately trained Afghan national army personnel. The current target of 9,000 Afghan troops for the Summer of 2004 is not only painfully inadequate, but even this pitiful number may not be attained. Moreover, the nature of this Afghan national army remains dubious. Under stress and strain of daily warfare, it is likely that many of these Afghan army members would switch sides and help their fellow Afghans against the foreign troops.

What, then, is this new NATO phase all about? In essence, it is a plan for the American troops to withdraw over a period of time, without leaving the country unattended, as it was in the aftermath of the Soviet Army withdrawal in 1989. While it is no easy task to get approval of the NATO and non-NATO members to bring the Atlantic Alliance into Afghanistan, the

more difficult task is to figure out how NATO can accomplish, and at what cost over what period of time, something that can be agreed upon by all as the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Through the media, Washington has expressed its immense optimism about the alliance's ability to bolster global security, given NATO's willingness to operate beyond Europe. The United States is pushing NATO to become a mobile force, and would like to see that agility in play in Afghanistan. To begin with, NATO had been falling all over the United States to help out in the Washington-declared war on terrorism. NATO offered to assist the United States when it launched attacks on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in October 2001, but the Pentagon asked only for help from individual members, fearing it would have to wage war by committee as it did in Kosovo in 1999.

It also seems that Russia is extraordinarily keen in seeing NATO deployed in Afghanistan. In June, when where the NATO foreign ministers met in Madrid for two days, Secretary General Lord George Robertson welcomed the Russian offer—which could include intelligence and logistical support, but not Russian troops on the ground—saying it was a sign of how far NATO-Russia relations had developed.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov, who was present at the Madrid meeting, said the continuing threat from Afghanistan should not be underestimated. "The situation continues to cause us serious concern. . . . The issue of Afghanistan should not drift into the background. We must not forget that there are still serious threats from Afghanistan," he told reporters. Ivanov also referred to the fact that 11,000 Russian troops guard the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of the NATO deployment, the issue of finance is sure to be brought up. At this point, there is no indication whatsoever that the international community is ready to allocate much more than the \$5.2 billion already pledged. Meanwhile, Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently asked for an additional \$15 billion in aid. He has not gotten much positive response.

The day that NATO officials landed in Kabul, Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah issued a statement warning the United States that its credibility around the world would be at stake, unless it does more to help his country rebuild and strengthen the central government. Possibly, the Afghan Foreign Minister has taken note of the burgeoning American budget deficits and growing U.S. expenses in Iraq.

In June, the pundits of the New York Council on Foreign Relations had issued a task force report, "Afghanistan: Are We Losing the Peace?" The report, which is rife with "what should be done," cited problems that exist in Afghanistan at every level. It even went to a great length to suggest such impossible tasks as U.S. involvement to demobilize, demilitarize, and reintegrate the regional militias with the Kabul government.

The CFR task force, of course, had little to do with realities. The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated

beyond the point at which one could talk about demilitarization. For months, the Taliban militia has been hiding in the areas of Pakistan borders Afghanistan. It has formed alliances with many other anti-American and anti-West forces, including Hizb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. These anti-Kabul forces have gained ground over the months, and are under the protection of some Pakistani Army personnel and Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In the past month alone, the Taliban militia and other rebels have launched scores of rockets at U.S. Army bases and exploded bombs in many Afghan cities. They have ambushed American and Afghan national army personnel, and burnt down newly built schools. During the last week of June, anti-Kabul rebels temporarily seized government offices in a remote part of Zabul province. On June 30, a Taliban fighter in Kadahar planted an anti-personnel mine in a mosque run by a Kabul-backed cleric. The blast that killed 17 worshippers. The next day an anti-Taliban Mullah was shot in the head and killed.

Pakistan vs. Afghanistan

Reports coming in from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas suggest the Taliban are recruiting new members at a much faster rate than Washington claims. Most of their recruits are coming from Afghan refugee camps in Chaman, Quetta, Peshawar, and Karachi in Pakistan. The anti-American campaign preached by the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani mullahs are bringing these young ones to the Taliban camp in droves.

Meanwhile, the other part of the Washington plan, which is to keep Kabul and Islamabad friends to each other, lies in ruins. For days in early July, Pakistani and Afghan troops exchanged fire across the disputed Durand Line that separates the countries. Along the Pakistan side of the border, the area is controlled by Pashtun tribal groups, who are close to the Taliban and are virulently anti-West.

President Karzai's men claim that Pakistan has captured some territory in the bordering Kunar and Nangarhar provinces in Afghanistan. Islamabad denies it, but to no avail. Anti-Pakistan demonstrations in Kabul are becoming daily features. In Kandahar, President Karzai's brother Ali Ahmed Karzai led a major demonstration against Pakistan in early July. The dispute between two of America's allies and linchpins of Washington's war against terrorism, indicates that things have gone out of Washington's control.

What is becoming increasingly evident, is that in Afghanistan, the peace has been lost. In the remaining months of Summer, it will witness increased violence. Two years' massive opium harvests will provide the contestants with enough cash to buy weapons and ammunitions. The Taliban have begun to believe that they can regain Kabul. Their mortal enemies, the Northern Alliance, are hell-bent on preventing the Taliban coming back to power. It is difficult to see, in this context, what NATO can achieve.