

NATO in Afghanistan: New Bottle, Rancid Wine

by Ramtanu Maitra

In the presence of Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Aug. 11, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Gen. James L. Jones raised the organization's green flag in Kabul to formalize NATO's first-ever operation outside European soil. The alliance will now be in charge of the 4,600-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) "indefinitely" after taking over from Germany and the Netherlands, which have been in joint command of the operation since February.

The very same day NATO took charge of maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan, a geopolitical analysis group, Stratfor, reported the Taliban wresting control of most of the southeastern Zabul province. Two days later, on Aug. 13, violence erupted throughout the country. According to available reports, during a span of 24 hours, 61 were killed and dozens wounded in a series of violent incidents across Afghanistan. The most significant of these incidents were an all-out war between government troops and rebels in Uruzgan, a south-central province, which took at least 25 lives; and a bus bomb which killed 15 in Helmand province in the south. In fact, besides Zabul, both Helmand and Uruzgan, along with the southern and southeastern provinces of Kandahar, Paktika, Kunar, Paktia, and Nangarhar, are shifting into the hands of anti-Kabul, anti-U.S., and anti-NATO rebels. Most of these rebels are Pushtuns and likely followers of the Taliban, and even al-Qaeda. The control of the U.S.-backed regime of President Karzai does not extend beyond the capital city of Kabul, and it is likely that the situation will only get worse before the Summer is over, NATO or no NATO.

What To Expect

The arrival of the NATO command was preceded by a steady deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan. ISAF was involved mainly in maintaining law and order in Kabul. Despite repeated requests by President Karzai, and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which lack protection for their work, the small contingent of the ISAF did not deploy its troops to any of the provincial towns. On the other hand, the 11,000-odd strong United States troops were involved in hunting down al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants.

In recent weeks, the U.S. troops were more involved in trying to figure out whom to fight—America's Pakistani ally or its Taliban enemy; or is it true that both of them were working together against the United States and President Karzai? It is evident that the U.S. troops, despite confident

utterances to the media, have not figured out this mystery yet. On Aug. 12, they came under attack from Pakistani troops along the Pakistan border of eastern Afghanistan. The retaliatory military action saw two Pakistani soldiers dead, and an angry Islamabad protesting U.S. killing of Pakistani soldiers.

One may ask at this point: If the United States after its 18-months stay in Afghanistan, and working hand-in-glove with Pakistan, could not figure out who is the enemy, what chance has NATO under the circumstances? In fact, NATO has very little to offer to help the Afghan situation. But neither the Germans and Dutch, nor the earlier Turks, were willing to carry around their necks the albatross, otherwise known as maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan. When four German troops in the ISAF got killed last Spring, Berlin decided to pipe down from its earlier announcement, when they offered to enhance German troop strength in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, NATO may eventually help the United States get out of Afghanistan. Never meaning to be there for long, America for all practical purposes had used Afghanistan as the launching pad for troop mobilization in an area where two of the three “evil” nations of President Bush’s “axis” are located. While one cannot pin down what exactly was on the agenda of the policymakers in Washington when they launched the Afghanistan invasion in October 2001, subsequent moves of Washington give a glimpse.

Game of Deception

Time magazine of Aug. 11 reported that last Fall, as the United States began planning the invasion of Iraq, Washington shifted many of its highly classified special-forces units and officers who had been hunting Osama bin Laden for almost a year in Afghanistan, moving them to Iraq where they performed covert operations before the war began. By December most of the 800 special forces personnel who had been chasing al-Qaeda for a year were brought back home, given a few weeks’ rest, and then shipped out to Iraq. Along with the special operations personnel, high-tech equipment and Arabic speakers left Afghanistan for Iraq. And while they were replaced by fresh troops, many of the new units comprise reservists who, rather than specializing in countering Islamic threats, were trained for operations in Russian- and Spanish-speaking countries.

The weakening of American determination to take on the Taliban, and to cut the Pakistan/Taliban/al-Qaeda umbilical cord, has not gone unnoticed. Karzai, who is quietly getting closer to both India and Iran, has virtually declared war against Pakistan. The much-disputed Durand Line, drawn by the British Raj in the late 19th Century, has become again the subject of Afghan-Pakistani contention. Unfortunately for Washington, it is right in the middle of it. Two of its virtual client states are ready to spill blood over their common border. But the sole superpower seems most unwilling to get involved.

The inability of Washington, Kabul, and Islamabad to

agree on how to bring stability has been exploited by the anti-Kabul, anti-U.S. Taliban and the Pushtun majority. The Pushtuns, who were kept out of all powerful positions in the Karzai government, were suspects in the eyes of U.S. analysts. Now, the Pushtuns are up in arms to settle their score against the minority ethnic communities who control Kabul. The scene was exactly the same just before the Taliban came to power in 1997, and for that matter, throughout most of Afghanistan’s history. So, the members of the Bush Administration, who believe they are imbued with superior republican ideals, have not taught these tribal bigots much.

American efforts to bring Afghanistan back into normalcy are now a thing of the past. Following the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the United States had a six-month window, during which reconstruction should have taken off in full earnest. Instead, Washington chose to expend energy to “set up puppets” and hunt down al-Qaeda. It never occurred to the policymakers that the first thing that the United States should have done was to earn the trust of the majority of Afghans—and not simply of Tajiks or Uzbeks or Pushtuns.

That window closed quickly when the Americans on the ground began to deal with the opium warlords to get bin Laden. The warlords got stronger, and as a corollary, Kabul got weaker, and the Afghans saw what the U.S. policy was all about. Now, the window has closed. No reconstruction can be done. The Afghans will sabotage all reconstruction efforts, trying to drive the Americans and their puppets, out.

Did Washington learn from any of these experiences? It does not seem so. Washington is now proclaiming from the rooftops of Baghdad who is a good Iraqi and who is not, and making new enemies every day. In Afghanistan, the United States was keen to keep Pushtuns out because in its view, Pushtuns were the Taliban. The already-divided Afghanistan was further divided. This inane approach led to all the problems with the Afghans and Pakistan.

Why NATO?

For the record, it should be noted that NATO had lent its support to the invasion of Afghanistan at the very outset. Secretary General Lord George Robertson had said that NATO members had “expressed full support for the actions of the United States and the United Kingdom.” The primary reason that NATO was called in to carry out the thankless task in Afghanistan now, is as a step in the direction to get over the bitter geopolitical differences that the Iraq war created between the U.S. and European pillars of NATO. By being an eager helper in Afghanistan, NATO may live, no matter what happens to Afghanistan. On Nov. 22, 2002, NATO leaders launched a radical overhaul of the Western alliance at a summit in Prague. Admitting seven new members from the former communist bloc, they created a rapid-reaction force to fight anywhere in the world. The 19 NATO leaders also agreed to set up a 20,000-man strike force to be used “whenever needed.” The force was first suggested by Washington.