

Iraq a Lost Cause; Synarchists' New Hope Is Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

Now that the neo-cons of Washington, and the oil-hungry lobby around Vice President Dick Cheney, have become exasperated with Iraq, blaming the “despicable” Shi’as and Sunnis of Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere, their new great hope is Afghanistan. It is therefore necessary for the American people to get a good glimpse of this pipe dream, before they are taken for a yet another murderous ride.

The clarion call for creating this Afghanistan-based policy fantasy, was sounded in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on April 2, when the Democratic Party’s geopolitical guru, Richard Holbrooke, said: “The only viable choice is to stay, in order to deny most of the country to the enemy. That means an indefinite U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan. No U.S. official will say it publicly, but the conclusion is clear: We will be in Afghanistan for a very long time, much longer than we will remain in Iraq.” Holbrooke did not spell out why the United States needs to be in Afghanistan, beyond asserting that this “failed mini-state” has offered “sanctuary to our greatest enemies. . . .”

Containment of Russia

Now, Holbrooke is neither a neo-con, nor even a stray of the kind that Dick Cheney herds. He is one of those Washington-bred geopoliticians who has not accepted the end of the Cold War. He, along with some others in Washington, notably Zbigniew Brzezinski and Madeleine Albright, are wholly committed to contain Russia, to save the “free trade world.” It is elementary to all geopoliticians in Washington, that to wean the nations in Russia’s periphery from the “Russian bear hug,” it is important that NATO and American troops stay in Afghanistan, bankrolling an obliging, handpicked government in Kabul. But, in a larger sense, the policy reeks of the oil factor. These Democratic geopoliticians do not want to share the oil and gas from central Asia, and the area south of the Caspian Sea, with Russia.

But, Holbrooke is no policymaker. He is an opportunist who tends to bend with the wind. A perfect example that was exhibited when he said on CNN’s “Inside Politics” on May 2, 2003, following the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s bronze statue in Baghdad: “I think it’s very important for all Americans, whether they opposed the war or supported it, whether they are liberals or conservatives, Republicans, Democrat, or

independents, to be able to say with pride we won—to embrace the victory—even as we begin to discuss the very difficult decisions that lie ahead.” But, Holbrooke has changed his mind, and now he is quoted in the *Washington Post*, saying that “Iraq stumbles toward an increasingly bleak future.”

The Scorecard

However, reality is much more relevant than what Holbrooke thinks. The United States invaded Afghanistan to remove its “greatest enemies”—such as Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban, Afghan warlords, Afghan opium—to supposedly establish a functional democracy, replete with infrastructure. Washington has now been “in control” of Afghanistan for almost three years. About 17,900 U.S. troops are in Afghanistan, and the Bush-Cheney Administration has persuaded 9,000 NATO troops to help maintain order. Although three years is not long enough to achieve overall success, it is surely a long-enough period to develop a scorecard that one can look at, to see how the plan is going, and why Holbrooke wants the United States to stay there for a “long time,” which, sometimes to mortal beings, means forever.

Osama bin Laden is free, and is safe-housed with essentials, somewhere, and Washington does not seem to want to know where he is. Osama, the supreme demon, has since been replaced as the Washington neo-cons’ enemy image by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born Chechen who is supposedly Iraq’s most notorious insurgent, wreaking havoc on the neo-cons’ “neatly” designed plans in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda, though never adequately defined, is one of those organizations which changes its name by the hour but does not change its stripes. Pundits in Washington claim al-Qaeda is now weaker, but al-Zarqawi is mighty—whatever that distinction means. What is certain is that both al-Qaeda and Zarqawi want to kill the occupying Americans. Some others claim that al-Qaeda has shifted its base to Palestine, to engage the Israelis.

Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban supremo whose name in 2001 was uttered in Washington along with Osama bin Laden as the super demon, cannot be traced. The one-eyed Mullah Omar, however, is very much alive, and he gives telephone interviews to media from time to time. He is very much on the job, despite what Washington and the U.S. military claim. That he has not been put out of business, is evident from his recent accurate forecast of the resurgence of the Taliban militia in the Spring of 2006.

The clear picture of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan is no longer Mullah Omar’s monopoly. Taliban attacks are up; their tactics have become more aggressive and nihilistic. They have detonated at least 23 suicide bombs in the past six months, killing foreign and Afghan troops, a Canadian diplomat, local police, and in some cases, crowds of civilians, according to a recent article by Christian Parenti that appeared in the weekly, *The Nation*.

Kidnapping is on the rise. American contractors are being targeted. Some 200 schools have been burned or closed down. Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, senior American military officer on the scene, expects the violence to get worse over the Spring and Summer.

One of the war cries in the Winter of 2001, when U.S. Special Forces, showing admirable agility, invaded Afghanistan, was to eliminate the Taliban, the dark-age forces, once and for all. The Bush Administration then had told us that the objective, among others, was to search out and destroy the Taliban. As a result, the Taliban were dispersed, but thanks to the hospitality of one of Washington's best allies in the region, and the abundance of opium-generated money, the Taliban militia forces are strong again. Fresh recruits are thronging to the Taliban militia camps, according to Pakistani correspondents.

Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher, a virtual neophyte when it comes to the Afghan situation, nonetheless observed recently while visiting Afghanistan, that the violence in the country is likely to increase this year, as NATO-led foreign forces expand into new areas where Taliban insurgents are active. Obviously, Boucher was less than truthful, since in his next breath he said that NATO would spread its campaign in southern and eastern Afghanistan later this year. But, then, pray tell, why has violence there begun already?

The answer to that perhaps lies across the border in the ungoverned tribal areas of Pakistan. Pakistani correspondents, who have provided the most accurate picture of the security crisis in Afghanistan over the years, recently pointed out that Pakistan's military operations on the front line of the U.S.-led war on terror have led to a further "Talibanization" of the border tribal regions, that is now spreading to areas that have traditionally been under government control. In 2003, an 80,000-strong Pakistani force was deployed to flush out forces loyal to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

But three years after Pakistani soldiers first entered the tribal area of South Waziristan, many politicians from the tribal area, media commentators, and retired officers are united in their view that the operation has produced few positive results. Instead, there is a steadily encroaching Taliban-style influence. Shopkeepers have been told not to sell music or films, barbers are instructed not to shave beards, and women have been told not to go to the market. More than 100 pro-government elders and politicians have been killed in the past nine months.

The problem facing the Pakistan government is underlined by Sen. Mohammed Salah Qureshi, a cleric from South Waziristan. "The clerics here have thousands of followers and they are following jihad against the U.S. and the world,"



DoD/Spc. Gul A. Alisan

Is the pretext, after the Iraq debacle, of using Afghanistan as the base for a U.S. presence in central and southern Asia, going to bog the United States down in the same type of no-win permanent conflict that the Soviets found themselves in there, earlier? Here, U.S. soldiers in a valley near Orgun-e, Afghanistan.

he said. Negotiations with tribesmen over releasing foreign al-Qaeda fugitives have not borne much fruit, other than stoking anti-government and anti-U.S. sentiment, Pakistani news reports claim.

Despite Washington's "success" in holding a Presidential election, and the parliamentary elections, not to speak of a parrot-like chirping of how democratic values are being rooted in Afghanistan since the Taliban have been removed from Kabul, the warlords of Afghanistan remain as strong as ever. In fact, for better or for worse, the warlords were in decline during the Taliban's dark-age rule in the late 1990s. Veteran Pakistani correspondent Rahmullah Yusufzai pointed out in the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, on Feb. 23, 2005, that Afghanistan's warlords prospered when the Taliban lost power, and were rewarded with positions of authority in the interim government led by President Hamid Karzai. Most of the governors in Afghanistan's 34 provinces are former warlords. The number of others who have been appointed governors has definitely increased, but they too are largely dependent in their provinces on police and security chiefs who happen to be former commanders or warlords, according to Yusufzai.

Opium Production Again on Rise

The other bone of contention is Afghanistan's illicit opium crop, by far the largest in the world. Although the United States is not the main market of the Afghan opium, hashish, or heroin products, the Europeans have been buying up the illicit stuff by the truckload. The opium crop keeps the

warlords and Taliban militias active and strong.

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) review issued in December 2005, during the recent several years, opium poppy cultivation has spread to every corner of Afghanistan. The illegal opium trade accounts for a huge part of the Afghan economy, and has a negative impact far beyond its borders.

Reports indicate the opium crop is likely to increase sharply this year, since villagers are planting more opium poppies in defiance of the ban, according to the United Nations. Production is expected to increase over last year in 13 provinces, according to a UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report. Cultivation is likely to stay steady in 16 provinces, and only decrease in 3, the report noted, based on a December-January survey of 496 villages.

According to Parenti, the backdrop to this gathering crisis is Afghanistan's shattered economy. The country's 24 million people are still totally dependent on foreign aid, opium poppy cultivation, and remittances sent home by the 5 million Afghans abroad. Afghanistan ranks fifth from the bottom on the UN Development Program's Human Development Index. Only a few sub-Saharan states are more destitute.

Since late 2001, the international community has spent \$8 billion on emergency relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan, at least on paper. Even the World Bank, not particularly noted for its careful expenditure of public money, has accused the aid sector of "sky-high wastage." In addition, the Bush Administration, which once purportedly proposed to deliver a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan, is slashing funding for reconstruction, from a peak of \$1 billion in 2004, to \$615 million this year.

The impact of opium on Afghanistan's economy, governance, and society is profound. Cultivating opium poppy helps supplement subsistence-level incomes derived from other agriculture-based pursuits. To beat opium for good, however, Afghanistan needs to build an economy that provides an annual per capital income of some \$1,000, said former Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, as reported in *Bloomberg Markets* magazine. Although this is not a huge sum, it is five times the 2005 levels, and is an indicator of how much and how quickly Afghanistan's economy will have to grow, if the scourge of poppy production is to be eliminated.

One other indicator is that the average gross income per hectare from opium cultivation exceeded that of wheat, the main alternative crop, by as much as 27 times.

Finally, we take note of how democracy is doing in Afghanistan. Honestly, no one in Washington cares about democracy in Afghanistan. Such rhetoric is used merely to pull wool over Americans' eyes. Even Holbrooke never mentioned "democracy" in Afghanistan in his *Washington Post* op-ed. Of course, he does not want to sound stupid.

Now that you have the scorecard in front of you, how long do you think it will be, before the United States accomplishes what it went there for? Do I hear, never?