

Pakistan Plans To Bury NATO in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

On March 6, a day after a NATO air strike killed nine Afghan civilians in Kapisa Province, north of Kabul, and ten civilians died in an alleged clash between U.S. troops and Afghan insurgents, NATO and Afghan forces launched their largest combined offensive to date in a bid to stabilize the southern province of Helmand, where the resurgent Taliban have taken control of most of the territory. The International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) says the offensive—code-named Operation Achilles—will eventually involve 4,500 NATO-led troops and nearly 1,000 Afghan soldiers.

The NATO offensive in Helmand is a reaction to the “Spring offensive” of the Taliban that has already begun. There are indications that, in the coming days, the Afghan Taliban will be aided by Pakistani troops in their efforts to bring down the pro-West Karzai government in Kabul, and install a pro-Islamabad, and pro-Taliban, government there. This, ultimately, is Pakistan’s objective: to revive its role in Kabul. If the Taliban succeeds in establishing a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul, there is no doubt that NATO will be finally buried in Afghanistan.

The primary reason that NATO will fail is that, in reality, a *post-Taliban* situation has emerged in Afghanistan. This was correctly pointed out by a former CIA station chief in Pakistan in the 1980s, Milt Bearden, in a recent analysis. He said the five years of occupation have created more enemies within Afghanistan, and all these Afghans are not Taliban. In Afghanistan, the NATO- and U.S.-led forces face the Pushtuns, who can not be labeled as “Taliban”: Pushtuns whose homes were bombed and families killed. These Afghans are seeking revenge and they would go to any length, including sacrificing themselves, to achieve that end. Then there are other Afghan enemies who are controlled by the warlords and druglords.

Opium and the Military

Operation Achilles was launched in Helmand, where almost 50% of Afghanistan’s record opium crop was harvested while the province remained under official control of the U.S.- and NATO-led troops and the Karzai government, at a time when hundreds of Afghan students rallied in the eastern city of Jalalabad, demanding the withdrawal of foreign troops. The protesters shouted slogans against the “invading forces” and chanted “Death to Americans!”

There is little doubt that the occupying forces, and their

puppet government in Kabul, are under massive pressure not only from the Taliban and other Afghan insurgents, but also from the Afghan masses. In Helmand alone, 10,000 insurgents are reportedly waiting for the NATO troops to come out of their barracks, where they have remained ensconced for months in a sort of self-imposed siege. During this period, Helmand's control slipped into the hands of the Taliban.

To expect NATO to achieve any success in Helmand in the coming days is absurd. Despite what European and American propagandists claim, foreign troops in Afghanistan have virtually no support. "Incidents such as the killing of defenseless civilians are a great opportunity for the Taliban to claim they protect the people and that foreign troops and the government are killing them," analyst Wahid Mujda told Agence France Presse (AFP). This shift in feeling was starkly evident after the March 5 carnage in eastern Nangarhar province, when hundreds of demonstrators called for the death of President Hamid Karzai. On the other hand, since damage-control is the only mantra of NATO, adverse reports would be censored, even if NATO achieves none of its objectives in Helmand.

A Disillusioned NATO

To begin with, the mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Afghanistan is the plan of the United States and European Union to create a "new" NATO, whose objective is to push its perimeter beyond the European theater and take on new threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

NATO joined the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan, known as Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). OEF is a combat operation led by the United States against Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants, primarily in the eastern and southern parts of the country, along the Pakistan border. OEF is not a NATO operation, although many coalition partners are NATO members.

Afghanistan is NATO's first "out-of-area" mission beyond Europe. The ostensible purpose of the mission is the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. But beyond that, it is not difficult to see the broader plan. Afghanistan is not only situated in Asia, and not too far from the oil- and gas-rich Middle East; it is the virtual meeting point of three emerging powers—Russia, China, and India. The NATO gambit is to prevent these three powers from having complete access to Central Asian oil and gas reserves.

But NATO's mission in Afghanistan never really took off with enthusiasm. The mission statement laid out the essential tasks of stabilizing and rebuilding the country; training the army, police, and judiciary; supporting the government in counter-narcotics efforts; developing a market infrastructure; and suppressing the dreaded Taliban.

Although the NATO allies agreed on ISAF's mission in general, most of these nations met with domestic resistance. People of these NATO countries were unwilling to see their

FIGURE 1



soldiers lay down their lives to make the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan a success. As a result, bickering started from Day One. Some allies did not want their forces to engage in combat operations against the Taliban on behalf of the United States.

For instance, while Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition government has expressed a more decisive commitment to securing stability in Afghanistan than that of her predecessor, Germany now has 2,300 forces in ISAF trained for stability operations, but not for combat in the northern part of the country. None of the NATO allies of the United States wanted to engage directly in destruction of poppy fields to counter the drug trade, and as a result, their effort to support the weak Karzai government in training the police has proven to be an indifferent undertaking.

A recent Canadian Senate report said Ottawa should tell reluctant NATO allies that unless they send reinforcements to the Kandahar region, Canada would rethink its commitment to the mission. Too many NATO allies spend more time "saluting" than "marching," the report said.

In addition, the European NATO allies wanted to keep their names clean in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison-torture scandal and criticism of U.S. practices at Guantanamo. These allies, while endorsing the Bush Administration's policies in Afghanistan and elsewhere, insisted on close observation of international law in dealing with prisoners taken in Afghanistan.

NATO, which functions within Afghanistan as the ISAF, has proceeded in stages to stabilize the country. Its principal mechanism for rebuilding Afghanistan is the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). PRTs, composed of military and civilian officials, are charged with extending the reach of the Kabul government by improving governance and rebuilding the economy.

However, from time to time, complaints have been heard, loud and clear, that several NATO allies have not committed sufficient resources, in the form of cash or manpower, to make their PRTs effective. Most observers predict that ISAF's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan will require a few more years, if all goes the way they dream. But, the ongoing failure to achieve any significant success in Afghanistan has put a number of NATO allies in a state of despair. They blame Pakistan for making the situation "harder." On the other hand, Pakistan believes that if they can make the situation a yard harder, NATO allies will pack up and leave by the end of 2007.

Pakistan's Burial Plans

That seems to be what is in the minds of the Pakistani military, as described by a senior Pakistani journalist, Syed Saleem Shahzad. In his article in *Asia Times Online*, Saleem Shahzad claimed that the Pakistani establishment has made a deal with the Taliban through a leading Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, which will extend Islamabad's influence into southwestern Afghanistan, and significantly strengthen the resistance, in its push to capture Kabul this Summer.

He said the objective of the Pakistan military-backed Taliban will be to open up a corridor, which is already open for all practical purposes, "running from the Afghan provinces of Zabul, Uruzgan, Kandahar, and Helmand, across the border into Pakistan's Balochistan province." The key for the Taliban will be to capture Kandahar and lay siege to Kabul, from the southern Musayab Valley on the one side, to the Tagab Valley on the northern side. Last Spring, the Taliban made its presence known in a big way, and for a short while, took charge of the Tagab Valley, but did not succeed in bringing down the Karzai government, because it did not try to get control of the Musayab Valley. The Taliban leadership has now come to the conclusion that Pakistani military help is necessary to achieve these specific objectives.

Most observers point out that Washington is deeply concerned about these developments. U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney paid an unexpected visit to Pakistan in late February to meet with President Pervez Musharraf. The White House refused to say what message Cheney conveyed to the Pakistani leader, but it did not deny reports that it included a tough warning that U.S. aid to Pakistan could be in jeopardy. There are indications that Cheney also demanded from Musharraf a commitment to carry out a joint military operation within Pakistan's tribal agencies bordering Afghanistan. It is claimed that in the tribal agencies, thousands of al-Qaeda recruits have been trained, and they are now ready to disperse out of the area to wreak havoc among the Western forces based elsewhere.

Fear of losing out completely in Afghanistan has set in among the NATO leaders. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, in early February, stressed that Afghanistan needs a "global" and "civil" response rather than a "military" one. Taking a leaf out of the book of President Bush's standard

speeches on the war on terror, Scheffer said in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, days before a NATO summit in Seville: "We are in Afghanistan to fight the faceless threat that wants to destroy our society. . . . If we fail in Afghanistan, the country will collapse and become a state that will export terrorists to the West."

It is not clear whether the NATO Secretary-General was only being miserly with truth, or if he was trying to build up fears in order to get more troops and donations from NATO allies, when he said that Afghanistan would become a "state that will export terrorists to the West."

It is known to those who want to know, that not a single Afghan has been found anywhere fighting for al-Qaeda, or any other Islamic militant outfit, for the sake of giving the West a bloody nose. The fact remains that the Taliban is only concerned about Afghanistan, and not even about its immediate neighborhood. The Taliban are Afghans, and their sole concern is their version of peace and stability in Afghanistan. They did provide shelter to Osama bin Laden and his associates, but that "marriage" was brought about by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and not by the Taliban themselves.

On the other hand, if NATO fails in Afghanistan, as Scheffer fears it could, not many will be sorry in Pakistan, or elsewhere in the region. As a Pakistani political observer, Tanvir Ahmad Khan, pointed out recently in the Pakistani news daily *The Dawn*, "NATO, reinvented after the cold war . . . provided a security umbrella for a virtually historic push of Western influence beyond eastern and central Europe into some of the erstwhile Soviet states."

Having played a pivotal role in the Balkans, NATO's outreach is undergoing a near revolutionary revision, toward a global interventionist role. "What was a defensive alliance against a putative Soviet thrust into Western Europe is being defined as a shield for the worldwide dissemination of Western values," Khan said.

NATO is an amalgam of major powers with hardly any precedent in human history, and yet its future now depends on its success in Afghanistan, a war-ravaged far-off country of 22 million, largely displaced, people. "[Put] aside the clichés of freedom and liberty and you find a huge disparity between the money being spent on military operations and economic reconstruction," Khan added.

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