

Afghanistan: An Unwinnable War To Meet Colonial Geostrategic Ends

by Ramtanu Maitra

A spectacular assault by Taliban suicide bombers on the main prison in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar on the night of June 20, led to the escape of at least 1,250 prisoners and laid bare once again the West's failed Afghan mission. Of these prisoners, 350 have been officially identified as Taliban fighters. There is little doubt whom the other escapees will fight for in the coming days.

This brazen assault, coupled with the deteriorating security situation across the border in Pakistan, has made evident that the entire region, which also includes the Central Asian countries and Iran, is in danger of falling into real chaos. The biggest threat such chaos poses now is to Pakistan's sovereignty.

Break-Up of Pakistan on the Agenda?

Pakistan is caught in a vise. Only nominally governed from Islamabad, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are slipping fast into the hands of secessionist forces. These militant groups have organized under a new banner, Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), otherwise known as the Pakistani Taliban. The situation has deteriorated so much, that at Pakistan's National Assembly, speaking on a point of order on June 23, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazlur (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman said that it was only a matter of months until the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) was "no longer part of the country." He also criticized the government, saying it would further aggravate the situation through the use of force, as demanded by the foreign troops inside Afghanistan.

The break-up of Pakistan's westernmost wing is evidently backed by the colonial forces, and their adjuncts; it would establish an unstable state that would depend wholly on Western powers for its survival. That would cut off both India and China, in particular, from land access to the Central Asian oil and gas fields, as well as from Iran. Over a period of time, it would also endanger Russia's southern flank.

The Kandahar jailbreak was followed by a tactical move by the Taliban fighters, who converged in the Arghandab River valley, south of Kandahar. There they were poised to assault that city, which is the birthplace of the Taliban, and is infested with Taliban supporters. NATO retaliated quickly, and one air strike followed another. While it is arguable how many of the militants were actually killed, the large contin-

gent of the Taliban melted away into the fruit orchards of the Arghandab valley, sure to challenge the occupying forces another day, perhaps in another place.

Meanwhile, in the Khyber Agency (district), Afghan militants have begun to hurt the foreign troops who bring in supplies through the Khyber Pass, disrupting supply lines that bring in about 70% of foreign troops' food, armaments, and other supplies, including the oil tankers. The Taliban has issued a warning to Pakistani private transporters not to transport gasoline from the Karachi port to Afghanistan.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Washington's blue-eyed *mujahid* during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, now a sworn enemy of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the foreign occupying forces, in a statement provided to Pajhwok Afghan News, said that Pakistan played a key role in the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, by providing logistical support to the foreign troops and their main supply lines. He urged the Pakistani Taliban to fight the Americans in Pakistan, by attacking their military convoys and equipment that is being supplied through Pakistan to kill Afghan children.

What the Prison Break Implies

The Kandahar jailbreak epitomized the growing strength of the Taliban, the way the Tet offensive by the Viet Cong in 1968 taunted Robert "bodycount" McNamara and Co. and made clear that the invaders were not "winning" the war ... and never would. Within a week of the attack on the prison, things got rougher. U.S. and NATO troops have conducted wide-ranging air strikes, killing Afghans who happen to be all "Taliban." Such killings have once again brought many Afghans out on the streets, protesting the killing of innocent civilians.

At the same time, reports of deaths of occupying troops have multiplied. In the month of May, more U.S. troops died in Afghanistan than in Iraq. Counting the British, Canadians, and others, the numbers are growing rapidly.

On June 23, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Schloesser told reporters during a teleconference from Afghanistan: "We've had about a 40% increase in 'kinetic events': We define those as the number of enemy attacks that we've had on our coalition and our Afghan partners." That means that attacks by Taliban militants on Afghanistan's border with Pakistan were up in the first five months of 2008 by 40%—not an insignificant

number. “This number was not unexpected,” he continued, adding that the frequency of attacks has increased each year since 2002. “The enemies are aggressively burning schools, killing teachers and students,” said Schloesser.

There are also reports from Afghan intelligence agencies that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are planning a spectacular attack on Kabul. That could come soon, since the militants have moved as close as 12 miles from Kabul, and are reportedly sending recruits from the United States and Britain into the city to collect information needed to kidnap Westerners, and prepare for spectacular suicide attacks. “Spectacular/High Profile attack in Kabul” is expected in the upcoming months, and “female suicide members present in Kabul ... U.S./British citizens,” one recent security report states.

Business as Usual

But these developments have not sunk in, inside the corridors of power in Washington. As one analyst pointed out, at their June meeting in Europe, President Bush and other coalition leaders pledged another \$20-plus billion in aid to Kabul—if Karzai’s regime becomes much less corrupt—while Australian Defense Minister Joel Fitzgibbon called for an additional 10,000 NATO troops for Afghanistan, and said that the war against the Taliban and its allies, including al-Qaeda, would take another ten years.

While it is for certain that Fitzgibbon did not have a clue about the subject about which he was so confident, the statement indicates a “Vietnam War” mentality. If the Karzai government does not remain as corrupt, if the Taliban insurgents do not come across the border from Pakistan, if the amount of funding is just right, if some more troops could be brought in ... the war could be won! Well, the Bush Administration does not have to worry too long that these “ifs” will never materialize. The Administration will be history in a few months, leaving behind the bloody baggage for the next incumbent in the White House.

In the midst of such absurdities, which indicate how little the people in power understand the gravity of the situation, or want to make it worse, like those of the British colonial mindset do, Karzai—often referred to derisively as the Mayor of Kabul, because of his virtual non-existence as President—threatened Pakistan with some sort of invasion, if Islamabad

does not prevent incursion of militants inside Afghanistan. He made this warning a day after the jailbreak. Karzai has been reportedly informed by Afghan intelligence service personnel that the April 27 failed attempt on his life in Kabul was carried out with the help of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Pakistani Defense Minister Chaudhury Ahmad Mukhtar on June 26 rejected those allegations, telling AFP that “this is all baseless, this is not true. ISI is a professional organization which is not interfering in the affairs of any country.”

No matter what, any aggressive action against Pakistan by Kabul could draw Western powers into a full-fledged war in Asia, next door to Iran, which is now in the crosshairs of Western governments. Islamabad believes that Karzai issued this threat under pressure from Washington, London, and Brussels, while knowing full well that Afghan troops, without support of the occupying forces, would be no match for the Pakistani Army and, unlike the uncontested American incursions, any incursion by Afghan forces would be militarily contested by Pakistan.

On the other hand, it should be evident by now that the Afghan war cannot be “won” by the occupying powers. Notwithstanding this reality, more troops are being poured into Afghanistan to tame the insurgents. Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, desperate to be on the wrong side of this absurd war, has committed 1,000 more troops, to bring up the number of German soldiers in Afghanistan to 4,500. This was announced by Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung, and the decision was made despite the fact that the deployment remains a hot topic inside the country.

In addition, it has been reported that Moscow and Washington signed a deal in mid-June in Moscow, as part of the United States-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism (CTWG), over the supply of Russian weaponry to the Afghan Army in its fight against the Taliban. “An agreement in principle to provide Russian military matériel to the Afghanistan National Army,” was concluded during a two-day meeting of the CTWG, the communiqué said. “We in the past have already provided military equipment to Afghanistan and we feel there is now a demand by the Afghan population and the ability of Afghanistan to take its security in its own hands,” Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak told reporters.

Lost War, but Geostrategic Gains?

Meanwhile, reports from London indicate that Britain’s armed forces were stretched beyond their capabilities and could not continue fighting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on June 25. “We are not structured or resourced to do two of these things on this scale on an enduring basis, but we have been doing it on an enduring basis for years,” Chief of the British Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup said.

Debates have also ensued in Canada about the role of its troops in Afghanistan. The Canadian government has acknowledged that its troops can be used for protecting the

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Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, favored by Washington over the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline deal, which is scheduled to be signed in July. The Bush Administration has made clear that it does not support the IPI, because it would bring in revenue to one of the “axis of evil” nations, Iran, and the pipeline could be extended to China in the future.

The war in Afghanistan cannot be “won” for a number of reasons. According to NATO’s recently retired U.S. Commander Gen. Dan McNeill, “this is an under-resourced war and it needs more maneuver units, it needs more flying machines, it needs more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance apparatus.” McNeill pointed out that America’s counterinsurgency textbooks would recommend 400,000 soldiers to stabilize a country of Afghanistan’s size and terrain, as opposed to the 65,000 troops that have been deployed so far. Clearly impossible.

The war in Afghanistan cannot be “won” also because of the in-built contradictions that started this war. The war was launched in the Winter of 2001, not against the Afghans, or the Pakistanis, but ostensibly against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. But, the war was conducted, in reality, with the mindset of a colonial power. The objective of the war, as it stands now, is to have a geostrategic presence with the purpose of keeping Central Asia in permanent turmoil, and containing Iran, China, and Russia, even if that leads to the break-up of Pakistan, and thus the formation of unviable, hostile nations. From that standpoint, one may claim that the war in Afghanistan is heading towards “victory.”

Those who study history, and recall it for the sake of understanding current realities, know that this war in Afghanistan cannot be “won.” The United States, when it invaded Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, had two options. The first was what British Col. Frederick Roberts (later Lord Roberts, and the subject of Rudyard Kipling’s sarcasm as “Bobs Bahadur”) did on Sept. 1, 1880, when he was confronted with more than 2,000 Afghan insurgents under Ayub Khan in Kandahar. He slaughtered them all, bringing temporary peace in Afghanistan. In this context, McNeill’s remarks about the necessity of deploying 400,000 troops make sense.

The other option, as pointed out by another analyst, is on the model of a temporarily successful Western military operation in Afghanistan: Alexander the Great’s settlement of a significant number of Greek soldiers and civilians there, four centuries before Christ. But, this does not seem a viable option for the West either in the present context. Therefore, it is a certainty now that the West is following the path toward the humiliating defeat in Afghanistan suffered by Britain in 1842, and the Soviet Union between 1979 and 1989.

Finally, one must not forget Bobs Bahadur’s later musings, in a letter to a friend: “It may not be very flattering to our *amour propre* [self-esteem], but I feel sure I am right when I say that the less the Afghans see of us, the less they dislike of us....”