

Washington's War & Diplomacy in Afghanistan

Chintamani Mahapatra*

The defence diplomacy of the United States in the midst of the current war against terror in Afghanistan is designed towards ending the US military operations without ceding total authority to the Taliban. The US-led international coalition of forces, that include NATO forces, have failed to crush the Taliban. On the other hand, Taliban have been unable to force the external forces to quit Afghanistan. The US does not want to quit without the assurance that no second 9/11 takes place. Simultaneously, the cost of war is increasingly becoming prohibitive especially when the country is in the midst of a hard recession. Washington's war and diplomacy in Afghanistan is currently at a crossroads. This article examines and analyses US defence diplomacy in the region to resolve the Afghan tangle.

Some believe that when war ends, diplomacy begins. But in reality diplomacy is a constant before, during and after wars. When diplomacy fails, war becomes an option at times. Defence diplomacy, among other things, aims at preventing war. But diplomacy continues in various forms in the midst of war, as was evidenced during both World War I and World War II and many other wars as well. Significantly, diplomacy is the vital instrument that enables the warring parties to negotiate and settle for peace. The effectiveness of diplomacy and direction of negotiations very much depends on who is winning and who is losing on the battlefield.

The defence diplomacy of the United States in the midst of the current war against terror in Afghanistan aims at ending US military operations without ceding total authority to the Taliban. The US-led international coalition of forces, have failed to crush the Taliban while the Taliban on the other hand, have been unable to force them to quit Afghanistan. The US does not want to quit without

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The United States has been the key player in Afghanistan since the Soviet military intervention in December 1979. In the three decades of its involvement in the

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country, the US has been the sponsor of a proxy war to being a bystander in a political transition to becoming the foremost actor in combating terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan. In the first role, the United States was instrumental in training, equipping and funding Afghan mujahedin insurgency against the occupying Soviet military troops. In the second role, the US completely withdrew from post-Soviet Afghanistan, a time that was marked by a deadly civil war among warlords and then the rise to preeminent position of the Taliban. The US was a silent witness to the violent armed conflict conducted by the Taliban with the active support of Pakistan. While condemning the social practices of the Taliban government and incessant violation of human rights in Afghanistan, Washington appeared to be satisfied with political stability in that country; and at one time seemed

ready to do business with the Taliban. With the backing of the Clinton administration American energy giant Unocal attempted to build a gas pipeline through Afghan territory. In the last phase the US turned against the Taliban government in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

Cold War Diplomacy

US defence diplomacy in the wake of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in late 1970s was aimed towards raising the cost of Soviet adventurism. The humiliating defeat of US strategic goals in Indochina, the victory of anti-American Islamic forces in Iran and the successful Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, among other events, contributed to rapid decline of US influence in the Asia Pacific, the Middle East and Latin America. The Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia, Cuban involvement in Angola, and the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan were clear evidence of the expanding Soviet power and influence in the world.

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influence in the event of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. It wanted to make Afghanistan Soviet Union's Vietnam by training and equipping Islamic groups, called Mujahedins, to launch deadly attacks on godless Soviet communists. Its defence diplomacy relied on neighbouring Pakistan as a frontline ally in the fight against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. So over powering was the desire to dislodge the Soviets from land-locked Afghanistan and so great the strategic requirement of Pakistani help in this effort that the US played a dicey diplomatic game in co-opting Pakistan by overlooking the Islamisation process under General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime and turning a blind eye to that country's clandestine efforts to acquire nuclear weapon capability.

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The contradiction in US defence diplomacy was evident when it encouraged Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to fight a war against Iranian Islamists and simultaneously assist Pakistani and Afghan Islamists in their battle against the Soviet incursion into an Islamic country. In the short term the policy served the US purpose. But in hindsight the policy empowered the Islamic fanatics in South and Southwest Asia and subsequently turned them against the United States. The US political leaders now openly acknowledge the misguided defence diplomacy of 1980s. The US was not only in some way accountable for the emergence of a nuclear weapon capable Pakistan but also for the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington could have played a constructive role in preventing both.

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Critics who partly blame the US policies of the 1980s and 1990s for the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States are partially correct in their assessments. The US support to Osama bin Laden during the 1980s, their arming of Afghan warlords, growth of Islamic fundamentalist forces in the region and the US hands-off policy in the aftermath of the Soviet troops withdrawal from Afghanistan and the weakening of the US leverages over Pakistan after it acquired the nuclear weapon capability had unforeseen and unexpected consequences. The US slogan to protect Islam from godless communism did not sell well in this part of the world and the US policy towards the Middle East in general and Israel instead provided fodder to champions of jihad in the post-Cold War era.

Diplomacy & the War on Terror

The US and the world received a strong psychological jolt when a handful of civilians executed a thoroughly planned terrorist attack on the US. The new Bush administration was thrown off balance for quite some time before it could respond to the attacks. While the punishing military strike against Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda operatives in that country was widely expected, the Bush administration's military offensive was accompanied by sophisticated defence diplomacy.

The sophistication of the diplomacy was palpable when the US made Pakistan a partner in the war against the Taliban that were the creation of Pakistan. When the Taliban regime did not concede to the US demand to deliver Osama bin Laden, the severing of ties between the Taliban and their Pakistani mentors was in the nature of a diplomatic coup. Common sense logic would suggest that the Bush White House would bomb the al Qaeda holdouts in Afghanistan and would even punish the Pakistan and the Taliban Governments for being responsible for the terror attacks on the US. But

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a declared war against a nuclear weapon capable Pakistan and the resilient Taliban forces was not considered the best of available options. Instead the US strategy aimed at making the creature (the Taliban government in Kabul) and the creator (the Pakistani establishment) each other's enemies.

It was not easy for the Bush Administration to persuade the Musharraf regime in Islamabad to team up with the US to overthrow the Taliban regime and simultaneously launch a military offensive against the al Qaeda and their supporters. A carrot and stick approach was employed to rope in Pakistan and make it the frontline ally against jihadi forces. As Musharraf had to contend with threats from the Taliban and local Islamic extremists to stay away from the US, billions of dollars of assistance dangled by Washington was not adequate to buy his support in the proposed global war against Islamic terrorists. One statement from Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee did the magic and prompted Musharraf to join the United States in military operations in Afghanistan.

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Second Time Frontline Ally

Convincing Musharraf was a diplomatic victory for the Bush administration. It was another Republican administration headed by President Ronald Reagan that had first turned Pakistan into a frontline ally in the war against Soviet communist incursions into Afghanistan. The first alliance in the 1980s had considerably augmented Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan, but the second alliance ended Pakistan’s so-called “strategic depth” in that country and weakened the tenacity and morale of some anti-Indian jihadi groups who were consistently receiving moral, political, financial and even military assistance from the Pakistan establishment.

The common people in India failed to understand the logic of Washington’s defence diplomacy. They expected the Bush administration to punish Pakistan which was responsible for putting in place the Taliban regime in Kabul, which in turn had provided the safe havens to al Qaeda, which in turn had planned the 9/11 terrorist attack from inside the caves of Afghanistan. Indian people were also disappointed when the Bush White House turned a deaf ear to India’s offer of unconditional support in the war against terror. However, Washington was well aware that without India’s cooperation the military operations in Afghanistan were unsustainable. Pakistan could not be expected to cooperate along the Afghan border, if the status quo on the Line of Control along the Indo-Pakistan border was not guaranteed. The terrorist attack on the Jammu and Kashmir legislature building, the Indian Parliament and elsewhere were the last ditch efforts by the jihadi forces to stoke Indo-Pakistani tensions and prevent Pakistan from aligning with the US.

The Bush Administration drew a quick lesson from these incidents - that an Indo-Pakistan détente was necessary to execute the Afghan war strategy. Thus, the US diplomacy in South Asia during eight years of the Bush administration was to contain home grown anti-India jihadis of Pakistan by pressurising the Musharraf regime and to restrain India from muscularly responding to Pakistan-inspired terrorist activities in India. While India was offered a robust “strategic partnership”, Pakistan

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was made a major non-NATO ally and given huge amount of military and economic assistance. The success of the Bush Administration's defence diplomacy in South Asia is testified by the absence of "zero-sum" perception of US engagement in the region by New Delhi and Islamabad.

"Af-Pak" Strategy or Struggle?

When Barrack Obama succeeded George Bush as the American president, it was clear that he would focus more intensely on Afghanistan than his predecessor. Obama fulfilled his campaign promises rather quickly by ending US military operations in Iraq and intensifying the war efforts in Afghanistan. He considered Iraq war as unnecessary and the Afghan war as an imperative. While on the

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battlefield of Afghanistan he deployed thousands of more troops, he expanded the war to include a part of Pakistani territory as well. He devised an "Af-Pak strategy" for military as well as diplomatic purposes. In terms of military efforts, Obama ordered an unprecedented number of drone attacks on terrorist hideouts on the Pakistani side of the Afghan-Pakistan border. Pakistani rulers publicly registered protests against violation of their sovereignty, but privately allowed the US military do so. The private support of Pakistan was bought by increasing the amount of military and economic assistance. The current rulers of Pakistan are aware of the importance of economic assistance in view of economic recession, a devastating flood and rising foreign debt. The Pakistani military, ever obsessed with India, is easily pacified with US military supplies.

However, the defence diplomacy under the Obama Administration received rude shock when it was discovered that elements of the Pakistani military and the intelligence services were continuing their assistance to Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. In other words, part of the American money flowing into Pakistan was channelled to support the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan. There was suspicion earlier, but this fact was confirmed in recently. Consequently, the trust deficit between the US and Pakistan has is being augmented by the day. The rise of the Pakistani Taliban, the growing number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan and the structural weaknesses of the civilian leadership in Pakistan have added to the problems faced by the Washington in sustaining the American longest war in history.

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in the US policymaking circles. The current recession that has hit the US economy hard and the cost escalation of war efforts in Afghanistan have contributed to the fast erosion of popular support to Obama's Afghan war. Questions are raised about Afghanistan turning into Obama's "Vietnam".

Significantly, while escalating military strikes in Afghanistan and expanding the war efforts to Pakistani territories, Obama's Af-Pak strategy narrowed down the war objectives by excluding ambitious national reconstruction programmes. While approving the "surge" in US boots on the ground, Obama spoke of drawing down the force level by July 2011. While authorising increased drone attacks, the Obama administration sent feelers to the Taliban to negotiate a power sharing arrangements in Kabul. It has also been strategised that the Afghan military will take over the entire responsibility and foreign forces will cease their military operations by 2014.

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Past is Prologue

There is little doubt that the Obama administration has launched a diplomatic offensive to extricate the US from the perceived Afghan quagmire. The question is no longer whether the US would leave Afghanistan, but when it is likely to do so. But the most important question is how to resolve the Afghan question. Who will be the main actors in the end-game? Is it going to be a solution forced on to Afghan groups? Is it going to be an amicable solution involving all ethnic factions in that country? Is it going to be a democratic arrangement with proportional representation? Is it going to be a power sharing arrangement involving powerful warlords and ethnic groups alone?

Assuming that a democratic power sharing understanding is arrived at, the next big question will be the garnering of resources to sustain the new government, the economy and the new Afghan military that will entrusted with the gigantic responsibility of maintaining order in the country.

However, no such agreement is possible without the cooperation of external actors. The US national interest would be to ensure a government in the country would be in a position to prevent 9/11 type incidents. The regional countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia and a few Central Asian republics have their own stakes in a stable Afghanistan. Can the US defence diplomacy succeed in arriving at an understanding where the interests of these regional actors are protected? So far, the US has given excessive importance to Pakistan only to have the late realisation that Pakistan is an integral part of the problem and cannot provide a satisfactory

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along with the US insistence to exclude the Haqqani group from negotiations are all indications that hard bargaining is already underway. While there is war weariness in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the American and European publics seem increasingly fed-up with the costly Afghan War, the regional actors, including India, are showing signs of uneasiness about the possible outcome. A hurried American and NATO withdrawal could prove disastrous. So will be an undemocratic transition in Afghanistan.

There are more questions than answers to the Afghan problem. The US defence diplomacy is still facing more challenges than opportunities. The endgame has started but the outcome is anybody's guess. However, Afghanistan's recent history seems to be prologue to its near term future.

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solution to it and that Islamabad should not be allowed to prevent or include regional countries, such as India to be part of a regional effort to promote peace in Afghanistan. Until now, the US has focused more on Iran's nuclear programmes and less on bringing Iran on board to resolve the Afghan issue. The recent Iranian step to block the steady supply of energy to Afghanistan is testimony to Iran's relevance in the end-game. The Indian and Russian involvement in Afghan affairs is crucial in order to prevent Pakistan from turning Afghanistan yet again into its "strategic asset" that spelled danger for the world only recently. The defence diplomacy of the US needs to consider these factors more seriously than it has done so far.

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