

PERCEPTIONS JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

December 2000-February 2001 Volume V - Number 4
Perceptions (a publication of the Foreign Ministry of Turkey)

GEOPOLITICS OF AN AFGHAN SETTLEMENT

by
PETER TOMSEN

Peter Tomsen, former American Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance, is at present Ambassador in Residence, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The road to an Afghan political settlement must proceed through two challenging rings: an inner ring of conflict among Afghans, plus an outer ring of nations manoeuvring for influence against each other inside Afghanistan. The two rings overlap. External powers use Afghan factions as surrogates to serve their own competing objectives in the region. This essay will concentrate on the outer ring, examining the geopolitical incentives and disincentives motivating outside powers to promote - or to prevent - an Afghan political settlement.

PAKISTAN BUILDING 'ISLAMIC STRATEGIC DEPTH'

Since the 12 October 1999 military coup in Pakistan, Islamabad's interference in Afghanistan in pursuit of 'Strategic Islamic Depth' against India has increased, not decreased. The powerful Pakistani military Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) supports a "joint venture"¹ of radical Afghan, Pakistani, Arab and other foreign Muslim extremists inside Afghanistan. The ISI co-ordinated Islamist joint venture today includes: the Taliban; Osama bin Ladin, his well-equipped 'Arab Brigade' of several thousand Arab militants from the Gulf, the Middle East and North Africa; Pakistani religious parties, notably the rabidly anti-West Jamiati-ul Ulema-ul Islami (JUI); the JUI's paramilitary arm, Harakat-ul-Mujaheddin (HUM); the hundreds of JUI-run madrassas (religious schools) supported financially in Pakistan by funds from the Persian Gulf; Afghan Muslim fanatics supported by Pakistan during the Soviet War; plus Muslim militants representing an array of radical Islamist groups from Central Asia and the Middle East to the Philippines and China's Xinjiang province in Asia.

In recent months, Pakistani Chief Executive, Pervez Musharraf, and his military regime have compensated for the Taliban's waning popularity inside Afghanistan by committing increasing Pakistani military manpower and resources to suppress the anti-Taliban Afghan resistance, led by Ahmad Shah Masood in northern Afghanistan. Jane's Defence Weekly cited Western military sources as estimating that combined Pakistani army regular troops, Pakistani religious students, bin Laden's Arab Brigade, and the medley of other foreign radicals in the ISI-directed joint venture comprised over thirty per cent of the 20,000-man force that overran opposition commander Masood's northern base at Taloqan in September.² Russia's Security Council Secretary offered a more inflated figure in charging that "30,000 foreign mercenaries" from "Arab nations, as well as Pakistani military men wearing Pakistani uniforms without concealment, and people from Chechnya" participated in the fighting.³ Jane's Defence Weekly reported further: "Pakistani military involvement appears to have gone beyond logistical support and the presence of military advisors to include the covert deployment of special forces."⁴ It quoted a Western military analyst as reporting the involvement of hundreds of Pakistani Punjabi-speaking infantry regulars displaying "extraordinary collective skills" during the attack.⁵ The assault on Taloqan was supported by Pakistani military-directed warplanes employing parachute dropped cluster bombs against Masood's forces.

AFGHAN SETTLEMENT LINKED TO KASHMIR INSURGENCY

The fighting in Afghanistan and the Kashmir insurgency are today interconnected, undercutting prospects for a peaceful resolution of either conflict. The ISI co-ordinated joint venture's control of areas in fragmented, chaotic Afghanistan is indispensable to sustaining the Kashmir uprising. Inside Pakistan, the JUI and a disparate collection of other Pakistani jihadi religious parties scour the populous Punjab and elsewhere in Pakistan to recruit fighters for Kashmir as well as for Afghanistan, first cycling them through the joint venture training camps inside Afghanistan. After training, they join extremist Arab, Afghan and other foreign Muslim radicals for the 120-mile trip via road and mountain paths through north-west Pakistan to Kashmir. The Pakistani jihadi parties closely track the actions and words of Musharraf for any sign of 'betrayal' on either Kashmir or Afghanistan. Closure of the joint venture training camps in Afghanistan would stir opposition to Musharraf within the ISI and among younger radical elements in the Pakistani military, as well as from the vocal jihadi parties in Pakistan.

INDIAN INTRANSIGENCE HARDENS AFGHAN-KASHMIRI LINK

India's tough approach in Kashmir reinforces the Afghanistan-Kashmir connection. All significant Indian political parties resist any meaningful compromise on Kashmir. New Delhi's concerns about encouraging anti-Indian separatist movements stretching in an arc of disgruntled ethnic groups from Mizos and Nagas in the east to Sikhs and Muslim Kashmiris in the north-west and north, work against Indian flexibility for a negotiated solution in Kashmir. The Hindu-centred conservative ruling Bhartiya Janata Party leaders evoke the symbols and tenets of Hinduism accompanied by a not so thinly veiled historic antipathy against Muslims. Much of the Indian political establishment considers Kashmir a Muslim as well as Pakistani challenge to Hindu India, a challenge that has been effectively rebuffed by Indian military successes in two and a half wars since partition in 1947. India enjoys a four-to-one conventional military edge and is virtually certain to retain possession over the two-thirds of Kashmir on its side of the International Line of Control dividing Kashmir. As the bull's eye for Pakistani pressure on India, Kashmir is also the potential fuse of a powder keg that could explode into mankind's first nuclear weapons exchange.

India's alienation of Kashmir's majority Muslim population has made New Delhi's rejection of Pakistan's attempts to force Indian compromise all the stronger. Its current vulnerability in Kashmir is grounded in deep popular discontent with Indian rule among Kashmir's Muslim inhabitants. New Delhi's brutal, military response to the insurgency resembles in many ways Russia's indiscriminate crackdown in Chechnya. Indian Kashmir is today de facto militarily occupied by a 400,000-man Indian military and paramilitary force against the wishes of the bulk of its inhabitants.

Today, New Delhi may also see advantage in sustaining the inter-connected Kashmir and Afghan conflicts. This strategy isolates Pakistan internationally by cementing anti-terrorist co-operation between India and major world powers, which wish to counter the Pakistan-supported Taliban and international joint venture of Muslim radicals based in Afghanistan. Active Indian collaboration with the West, Russia and other governments against international Islamist militancy thus serves New Delhi's broader goal of weakening and isolating Pakistan in the Subcontinent.

Prospects are, therefore, dim that, short of another Indo-Pakistani war, the two largest South Asian nations will end their bloody stalemate in Kashmir for the foreseeable future. The intractability of the Kashmir stand off merely puts more weight behind the deadlocked status quo in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the civilian populations in Afghanistan and Kashmir remain linked in their misery. In both areas, savage, inconclusive fighting still produces thousands of civilian deaths annually, continuing deterioration of agricultural and transportation infrastructure, and worsening poverty.

PASHTUNISTAN: YET ANOTHER OBSTACLE

Like the Afghanistan-Kashmir linkage, the Pashtunistan controversy constitutes another major obstacle to resolving the Afghan war. Rarely mentioned by Pakistan, it is an important factor in Islamabad's strategic calculations.

The Pashtunistan controversy has historic roots. On 13 June 1947, worried about Britain's rush to terminate control of its Indian empire, Afghanistan sent a diplomatic note to the British Indian Government asserting that the overwhelmingly Pashtun inhabitants of the region between the Russo-British agreed 1893 Durand line and the Indus River were Afghans and must decide themselves whether to join Afghanistan, Pakistan or India, or to become independent.⁷ The Afghan regime in Kabul was rebuffed by the British and later the Pakistanis.⁸ Afghanistan persisted in keeping the Pashtunistan issue alive following Pakistan's independence. On 30 September 1947, Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations and initially withheld diplomatic recognition of Pakistan.

Throughout the post-Independence period, Afghan-Pakistani friction over the Pashtunistan issue precipitated occasional war rhetoric, troop movements along their boundary, long periods of closed border crossing points, and severing of trade relations. Strategically, Afghanistan colluded with India to pressure Pakistan through most of Pakistan's post-independence existence.

Pakistan's support for radical Muslim domination of Afghanistan has in part been based on keeping the Pashtunistan issue suppressed. Afghan Pashtun tribal leaders still cite Pashtunistan as an unresolved problem. Small Pashtun parties on the Pakistan side of the border, such as the Pashtun National People's Party, call for the creation of a Pashtun homeland. In contrast, radical Muslim Afghans like Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Taliban mullahs de-emphasise state borders in favour of uniting

with the Muslim umma (community of believers) wherever it may be - Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, the Middle East or Central Asia.

The Taliban Pashtun mullahs also see common cause with Pakistan's military leadership in assisting them to withstand opposition to Taliban rule from Afghan Pashtun tribal leaders. During the three hundred years of their rule in Afghanistan before 1978, the more moderate Pashtun tribal aristocracy successfully kept Muslim extremists like the Taliban from exploiting religion to gain influence and power.

Pakistan's concerns about the Pashtunistan issue therefore contribute to Islamabad's resistance to a broad-based Afghan settlement process as well as Pakistani favouritism for the Afghan radical Muslim factions. An inter-ethnic political consensus among Afghan groups would inevitably sideline the Taliban in favour of traditional tribal and clan leaders. Pakistani strategists and the joint venture have so far effectively blocked emergence of a religiously moderate Pashtun tribal alternative to the Pashtun Muslim radicals through weapons transfers, financial means and assassinations, such as the 1999 assassination of prominent Popalzai tribal leader, Abdul Ahad Karzai, in Quetta.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

In his memoirs, former US Secretary of State George Shultz wrote about an exchange between then President Reagan and Pakistani military dictator Zia ul-Haq during the lead-up to the 1988 Geneva Accords that led to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan:

"Several hours later, President Zia, the truly authoritative figure in Pakistan, called President Reagan. I heard the President ask Zia how he would handle the fact that they would be violating their agreement. Zia replied that they would just lie about it. 'We've been denying our activities there for eight years.' Then, the president recounted, Zia told him that, 'Muslims have the right to lie in a good cause'."

Zia's policy of denial continued into the post-Soviet period, when Pakistan replaced the Soviet Union as the major outside power attempting to establish its hegemony inside Afghanistan.

Since the Soviet withdrawal, two Pakistani Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Pakistani ambassadors abroad have portrayed Islamabad's Afghan policy as opposed to a military solution and supportive of a broad-based Afghan political settlement process. Senior military as well as civilian Pakistani officials and diplomats regularly join counterparts at international forums in describing a military solution as impossible to achieve in Afghanistan.

ISI actions on the ground, ultimately directed by Islamabad's military leaders, belie these high level, official assertions of Pakistani policy. As they resigned in disgust, the previous UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and his predecessor, Norbet Holl, lashed out at Pakistan's blatant pursuit of a military solution in Afghanistan.¹¹ The massive Pakistani involvement in the fall 2000 Taliban military offensive has only reinforced the conclusion that Islamabad cynically continues its futile quest for a military solution in direct contradiction to Pakistan's official positions and rhetoric.

IRAN: FACILITATOR OR OBSTACLE TO AN AFGHAN SETTLEMENT?

Tehran appears to have much to gain from a broad-based political settlement in Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan would offset mounting instability to Iran's west in the Middle East. Tehran's continued testy relations with Iraq, which hosts the Iranian dissident Mujahidin-e Khalq, and friction with neighbours in the Gulf and the Caucasus, constitute further incentives for Iran to strive for stability along its eastern Afghan flank.

Iran shares a cultural, linguistic affinity with northern Afghanistan's non-Pashtun elements, which suffer the most under Taliban rule. Tehran resents the atrocities regularly visited upon the Shiah Hazara minority by Sunni fanatics among the Taliban, Pakistani and Arab forces in Afghanistan. It fears the Taliban-style of radical Sunni extremism moving north into the new Central Asian republics, which could, in turn, produce more barriers to Iranian influence in the Caspian basin. An inter-ethnic Afghan regime chosen by consensus would inevitably be more moderate, less susceptible to Pakistani and Saudi control, and more accepting of Afghanistan's Shiah minority than the Taliban.

A legitimately chosen, broad-based Afghan regime would also be more receptive to international co-

operation on narcotics smuggling, a major headache for Tehran along the Iranian-Afghan border. Iran recently revealed that 740 drug dealers and 174 Iranian police officers were killed in narcotics-related battles during 1999.¹²

Over the past two decades, Iran and Pakistan have competed for influence in Afghanistan, supporting opposing factions. Tehran's principal goal in Afghanistan has been to resist the ascendancy of a radical Sunni regime in Kabul, supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. While Soviet-supported Afghan communist regimes were in Kabul, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia ensured that the Iran-backed Shiah Mujahidin received minimal representation in Mujahidin institutions. This exacerbated already strained Afghan Shiah-Sunni tensions as well as Iranian-Pakistani mistrust.

Tehran still perceives Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban, supported by Saudi Arabia, as a co-ordinated attempt to isolate Iran. Riyadh's extensive contributions of weaponry and cash, through ISI and Saudi-based Muslim aid institutions, to Afghan Sunni and Arab extremists fighting in Afghanistan continue. There is a possibility that the slow Saudi-Iranian rapprochement underway since the 1998 Tehran-hosted OIC Islamic summit will eventually lower Saudi-Iranian tensions and ameliorate their competition in Afghanistan. For the foreseeable future, however, it is likely that Riyadh and Islamabad will continue to resist any expansion of Iranian influence in Afghanistan.

During the four years the fractious Sunni-dominated Mujahidin regime occupied Kabul before the Taliban seized the capital in 1996, Iran, through delivery of weapons and logistical support to mostly Shiah groups, manoeuvred to establish two corridors of influence inside Afghanistan: one from the Iranian border through the central Shiah Hazarajat