

CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND SECURITY STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Endgame

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The Executive Director, presented this paper at a roundtable organized by Department of War Studies,
Kings' College, London.

Let me begin with former British foreign secretary David Milliband's thoughts on Afghanistan's endgame, articulated through a very well-written article in mid January.

“Afghanistan's battles are not just between the Afghan and foreign forces and the Taliban insurgency, but between (and within) Afghanistan's often warring tribes. They know western patience is wearing thin; NATO has been there longer than the Russians. And also that while parts of the Afghan National Army are being trained well, it is a basically Tajik force seen as the enemy by many Pashtuns.”(David Milliband article in British papers, including Telegraph: Jan 16, 2011).

David Kilcullen, the Australian counter-insurgency expert, who also served the US army and the state department in many capacities, also makes a compelling case in his book “The Accidental Guerrilla.” (his experience on Afghanistan deals with the period between 2006-2008)

“Despite its importance as a terrorist safe haven, Pakistan is a problem. Not the problem. ... we see local (Afghan) guerrilla cells cooperating with mobile insurgent columns that draw supplies and recruits from Pakistan, but can operate for extended periods deep inside Afghanistan, drawing on local support. Thus fixing Pakistan would help but not solve the Afghan problem. The key to the Afghan insurgency lies in Afghanistan, not Pakistan.”

All this means that the need for a twin track political strategy is more urgent than ever. State or international security forces will not stabilize the country; only a peace deal can do that.

Track one is an internal political settlement. It needs to be far more up front in its recognition of what the end game (for the US and its allies) will be: a decentralized series of political settlements in the villages and valleys of Afghanistan, with national and international forces limited to preventing the overthrow of government in Kabul and al Qaeda taking root.

But this track will never get going unless track two — the track of regional political engagement — has real legs, Milliband emphasized. This needs to be a series of agreements which recognize the divergent interests of the different neighboring countries, from Pakistan to Iran. At the moment, it is a free for all, with a number of states backing all sides.

The key is, and always has been, a political settlement which can make withdrawal possible on terms that protect regional and global interests. Every one of the regional powers, Pakistan especially, would gain from an Afghanistan no longer exporting drugs, extremism and refugees. But none of these countries will gain anything if they hold out for Afghanistan to be their client state.

This underscores the non-linear nature of the Afghan problem, with an extended crisis in Pakistan itself in the form of frequent suicide bombings(one such attack in Mardan, some 40 kilometers north of Peshawar left 32 soldiers killed this morning Feb 10.

It is a situation in which, on the one hand multiple, conflicting state interests are at play i.e.

Its India versus Pakistan,

It's the US establishment – Pentagon – Intelligence that considers the Pakistani establishment as big road-block for its involvement with Pakistani and Afghan Taliban

It's a non-Pashtoon Afghan establishment skeptical of the Pakistani establishment,

It's the United States breathing down the neck of Iran, through Jundullah, It's the special 3,000 strong force – revealed in Obama's Wars by Bob Woodward, that is operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan for dubious missions (*Ref: Raymond Davis and other people like him.*)

It's the Russian apprehensions vis-à-vis an ever expanding American role in the region/

It's also the Russian discomfort with the smuggling of drugs out of Helmand (32,000 foreign troops) , Kandahar, Uruzgan and Ningarhar via Tajikistan / Uzbekistan.

On the other hand – Al- Qaeda / Local Taliban / Pakistani Taliban: All supported also by religio-political parties, organized crime, drugs cartels, transporters, smugglers: for them Afghanistan represents a relatively smoother playing field.

Does this complex inter-play permit a regional approach for a peaceful conflict-resolution in Afghanistan? And will the United States give way to such an approach?

If we look at the present US approach, the answer to these questions is no. And this emphatic NO is based on interviews with key and influential Afghan leaders who are part of the current Afghan government.

While Milliband and Kilcullen propose a regional approach, a combination of a) settlement of Afghanistan's internal problems and b) a trust-based understanding between its neighbours as facilitators, the Americans think differently. Gen. Petraeus believes right now, as also enunciated by vice president Joe Biden during his Jan 13th visit to Pakistan, that while he applies ever more pressure on what they call insurgents, he considers Pakistan as the key to his problems in Afghanistan. The US establishment naively makes out Pakistan as the major stumbling bloc but is it really so if we look at what people like Peter Tomson, David Milliband and David Kilcullen have been suggesting?

One pre-requisite for addressing apprehensions of Pakistan will be to engage it in a constructive way, with an assurance that it's not being encircled by the trio of Afghanistan/America and India. While India is legitimately cross with Pakistan for its role in Eastern Punjab and Kashmir, it has to acknowledge that Pakistan has paid a very heavy price for its adventurist policies as far as using non-state actors as foreign policy tools is concerned. The trans-border dynamics, currently at play in Afghanistan and Pakistan – al-Qaeda versus America and NATO, US versus Iran, US versus China and Iran – has not only brought death and destruction to also Pakistan but also confronted it with an ongoing security crisis, that is economically debilitating and socially nerve-wrecking.

In brief, Pakistan needs empathy rather than intimidation if the US and allies want to benefit from its 2560 km geographical proximity to Afghanistan. That will be probably step number one of the regional approach that David Milliband is suggesting. Step two would be to take Iran on board and minimize the American threat that is haunting and shaping its foreign policy. Thirdly, all the intelligence agencies, particularly the Pakistani ISI and its Indian and Afghan counterparts shall have to come clean on their activities in the region. Without halting the conflicting activities of these intelligence agencies, and without an end to the American intelligence operations in the region, the success of any regional approach will remain elusive.