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Seven Years of War on Terror – Has Afghanistan Improved?

Seven years after terrorists struck at the symbols of American might – the World Trade Centre and Pentagon – and the war against terrorism began, Afghanistan remains in the grip of ever mounting violence. Afghanistan is also in the clutches of leading members of the anti-terror coalition in the form of a 20 member Policy Advisory Group (PAG) comprising nine Afghan ministers/advisors with about an equal number of foreign diplomats and internationals (US, NATO and ISAF officials). With the PAG in leading role, the Karzai government remains hamstrung as far as vital security, financial and foreign affairs are concerned.

The intensified military campaign from across the border into Pakistani territories explains how the American forces want to counter those threats.

The Kabul-based US Political counselor leads the international coalition in the PAG, assisted by Political Adviser to CIMISAF/NATO. In addition, several leading diplomats discuss security situation assessment, auxiliary police initiative, update on joint security plan Kabul, ministerial visits abroad, updates on situation in Kandahar and Helmand, and sharing updated strategic communication messages. The composition of the PAG makes it quite evident that the war against terrorism has turned Afghanistan into a hotbed of competing interests; while the Western allies act in unison to pursue their objectives here, countries like Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan watch in awe as to what this extended western engagement means for them in the long run.

With the violence, that took some 3,800 lives including some 200 foreign troops in the first eight months of 2008, and has steadily been surging by the year, the US plans to induct more troops for combat operations. "We envisage a 122,000-strong structure, with a total of 134,000 personnel, the extra 12,000 allowing to keep a lot of people in school and training," Major General Robert Cone, in charge of helping to train the Afghan army, said recently in Brussels.

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Currently, close to 71,000 foreign troops drawn from 40 countries, including 34,000 from the U.S, are based in Afghanistan to quell the Taliban insurgency, backed up by 60,000 strong Afghan National Army with 8,000 under training, and some 76,000 national police, both inadequately trained though. Of the 34,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, 19,000 operate

under U.S. Central Command, and the rest placed under the NATO-led international force.

NATO and Afghan officials say violence overall in eastern Afghanistan has been up by 20% to 30% in the first eight months of the year compared with last year and rose about 50 percent in some areas, if compared with 2007. In addition to the combat brigade of about 3,500 to 4,000 troops, U.S. officials also plan to withdraw about 2,000 non-combat support personnel from Iraq and transfer about 1,300 Marines from Iraq's Anbar province to western Afghanistan.

It certainly doesn't augur well, neither for Afghanistan nor for Pakistan because more troops would attract more adverse reaction by locals and militants alike, and that would mean more military engagement in the troubled zones, particularly the border regions. A reinforced US contingent means greater latitude to operate and manhunt for militants wherever suspicion arises. This brings with it the danger of exposing the civilian population to an army that has largely moved with immunity inside Afghanistan, and of late in Pakistani border areas. The physical raid in Angoor Adda on September 3 and at least four missile strikes within the first week of this month, provide ample evidence of what a spike in US army numbers could mean for the region.

A Washington Post report (August 28, 2008) also highlights the implications of an operation that is guided and governed by a two-page "diplomatic note," giving thereby U.S. forces virtual carte blanche to conduct operations as they see fit.

The note delves into arcane issues such as customs duties and driver's licenses. It devotes only a few sentences to "the conduct of ongoing military operations," giving U.S. troops "a status equivalent" to diplomatic immunity and exempting them from any Afghan "disciplinary authority" or legal jurisdiction.

"Although President Bush pledged in a 2005 declaration signed with Afghan President Hamid Karzai to "develop appropriate arrangements and agreements" formally spelling out the terms of the U.S. troop presence and other bilateral ties, no such agreements were drawn up." Yet a recent U.S.-led air strike in Herat late August that killed up to 90 civilians -- most of them children - President Karzai has publicly called for a review of all foreign forces in Afghanistan and a formal "status of forces agreement,"

along the lines of an accord being negotiated between the United States and Iraq.

The prospect of codifying the ad hoc rules under which U.S. forces have operated in Afghanistan since late 2001 sends shudders through the Bush administration, which has struggled to finalize its agreement with Baghdad. "It's never been done because the issues have been too big to surmount," said one U.S. official who was not authorized to discuss the subject on the record. "The most diplomatic way of saying it is that there are just a lot of moving parts," the official told the Washington Post.

Although most civilian war deaths in Afghanistan are caused by Taliban forces, those resulting from the highly visible airstrikes are a particular cause of public outrage that neither Karzai nor the administration can afford to ignore.

"The disparate command structures have frustrated every government involved in the effort, but according to Afghan officials, they have also allowed diffused responsibility for civilian casualties, such as those of last week in the western part of the country. U.S. forces operate up to 90 percent of all strike aircraft in the country, and it is rarely clear whether an individual strike has been conducted as part of a NATO or U.S. operation."

The U.N. mandate for NATO serves as a de facto status-of-forces agreement. The protection and authority it gives, however, do not apply to the separate U.S. force, which is covered under the diplomatic note exchanged between the United States and a non-elected, interim Afghan government in the months after the Sept. 11, 2001. Similar legal immunity is included in U.S. status-of-forces agreements with more than 80 countries. But it has become the biggest roadblock to the conclusion of an accord with Baghdad, and U.S. officials say Karzai has taken his cues from the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Civilian casualties, long a recurring problem in Afghanistan, tripled last year as thinly spread U.S. and NATO forces grew more dependent on air power against a resurgent Taliban. Although the number of civilian deaths attributed to international forces during combat on the ground has remained relatively static at fewer than 100 each year, casualties due to airstrikes have reached more than 200 through the first eight months of this year, compared with 321 in 2007 and 116 in 2006.

In the last week of August alone, coalition troops killed more than 220 suspected Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan yet not without collateral damage; several operations by foreign and Afghan forces against the

militants have also resulted in over 500 civilian deaths, including 96 casualties in an air raid by the U.S.-led coalition in western Herat late August. The wave of protests over such deaths in Herat and in Helmand province compelled President Hamid Karzai to order a review of foreign troops' conduct in Afghanistan. The civilian toll also prompted Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, to warn NATO-led coalition forces, including Britain, that rules of engagement need to be revised or the coalition risks losing the war.

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"The struggle in Afghanistan is quintessentially at a point where popular support is crucial," Alston said. "My view is that it is being significantly undermined by the strong perception among the Afghan public that the allied forces are killing significant numbers of civilians with no accountability at all, even if that perception is exaggerated."

NATO's military command needed to alter its approach if it was to win popular support and triumph, said Alston who also accused officials of blocking his attempts to discover details of the rules of engagement under which NATO troops were fighting.

Continued turmoil in Afghanistan spells trouble for Pakistan as well; most US military and intelligence makes no secret of the fact the roots of violence in Afghanistan lie in FATA. The intensified military campaign from across the border into Pakistani territories explains how the American forces want to counter those threats.