BACK WITH A VENGEANCE: PROXY WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan's four-year civil war, which has claimed over 100,000 lives and destroyed the capital Kabul, and the country's infrastructure, is expected to escalate in the spring as the Afghan warlords prepare fresh offensives. For the first time since 1992, when Kabul fell to the Mujahedin, regional countries are pumping unprecedented amounts of arms and ammunition to their various proxies, undermining United Nations attempts to broker a peace settlement. Iran, Russia, India, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and the Arab Gulf states are now actively fueling the war in an attempt to win future influence in the region.

After Kabul fell to the Mujahedin in April, 1992, Afghanistan's neighbours by land and sea let the Afghan warlords fight out their power struggles on their own. The United States and Russia also cut off the vast supplies of arms that sustained the Afghan Mujahedin's war against the pro-Soviet Kabul regime between 1980 and 1992. But four years later, neighbouring powers are back with a vengeance. According to Western diplomats, the Afghan conflict has become internationalised as never before and the stakes have been raised with Iran and Russia's involvement.

Outside powers are intervening because the conflict is at a crucial stage and the battle now raging for control of Kabul could influence future political events and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. The Tajik-dominated Kabul regime of President Ibrahim Haidari has been besieged since October 1995 by the Panjshiri-led Taliban movement, which has captured northern and western Afghanistan. The movement is loosely allied to the Uzbek warlord, General Rashid Dostum, in the north, and another Pakistan-armed alliance based around the eastern city of Jalalabad.

ACCUSED OF INTERFERENCE

Iran, Russia, India and some of the Central Asian republics are supporting Haidari because they fear the Islamic extremism of the Taliban movement and its covert attempts to spread fundamentalism to neighbouring countries. Russia, which faces a continuing civil war in neighbouring Tajikistan, believes it must contain both the Taliban's domination of Afghanistan and the spread of fundamentalism to Central Asia.

Iran infiltrates the Taliban because they are violently anti-Shia and Tehran has never tolerated Persian domination of western Afghanistan, which it considers its strategic backyard. The Taliban's capture of Herat and Persian-speaking western Afghanistan last September altered the strategic balance in the region, giving the Taliban outright control of the west for the first time. This, the Iranian leadership believes, could enable Haidari and Russia to back Haidari largely in an attempt to undermine its ally, Pakistan.

Meanwhile Pakistan and some Arab Gulf states are backing the Taliban. Since 1991, Pakistan has always backed the Taliban because of its own large Pashtun population. That is why, between 1980 and 1992, Pakistan tended to underplay the role of the Afghan ethnic minorities, such as the Tajiks, and sent smaller quantities of US-supplied military aid to them than to the Pashtuns. The major consequence of this policy was continuing mistrust between Pakistan and non-Pashtun minorities in Afghanistan. After 1992, Pakistan backed the national Pashtun leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, but his defeat at the hands of the Taliban last year forced Islamabad to take the movement seriously. Because of its backing of the Taliban, Islamabad's relations with Iran, Russia and the Kabul regime are at a low ebb with Kabul accusing Pakistan of outright interference in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is supporting General Dostum and standing up to Russian anger in the process. It is keen to block the General's attempts to set up a secular buffer zone in the north to prevent fundamentalist Pashtuns penetrating into Uzbekistan. The Arab states are being encouraged to pitch in because Iran, their long-time foe, is on the other side.

The lack of a regional consensus regarding a solution to the conflict, and the refusal of the warlords to agree on a power-sharing arrangement, helped detail two UN peace initiatives last year. And the escalation of outside arms supplies to Afghan proxies is now almost certain to thwart the latest UN initiative, launched in early January by the UN Special Representative and Tajikistan diplomat, Mahmoud Meradi.

THE RUSSIANS ARE BACK

Western and Asian diplomats and intelligence officials concede that, ten Russian and some thirty Indian technicians are upgrading the...
facilities at Bagram airport sixty miles north of Kabul, where Manad is based. Four Russian Il-76 transport planes arrive every day from Turkmenistan, Russia and Ukraine with Russian arms, ammunition, fuel and local Afghan currency, printed in Moscow, for the beleaguered Taliban regime.

The Russians have built a new bridge over the Amu Darya river in Tajikistan, where they have also been training their Afghan allies. But the new bridge has not been completed, and it is not clear when it will be ready for use.

US satellite pictures show that the Russians are also building an airport in Afghanistan, and it is likely that the new Russian federation is preparing for a military operation in the region. The US has previously accused Russia of sending military equipment to the Taliban, and it is possible that the new Russian federation is planning to send additional military equipment to the Taliban.

However, faced with an economic and financial crisis, Pakistan’s aid has been limited. Instead, Islamabad and the Taliban have encouraged Arab states to help, using the argument that the Arab states’ main enemy, Iran, is backing the Taliban. Envoys from Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have visited Kabul in the past few months and provided funds for the Taliban.

In the Gulf state of Sharjah, private Russian airlines companies have set up offices. They are flying arms, bought with cash supplied by all the Afghan warlords, from Russia and Turkey to Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad. Described as a cash and carry operation by diplomats, these Russian companies are prepared to work for all sides. A Russian transport plane carrying arms and fuel a million rounds of ammunition to the Taliban regime was forced down by the Taliban last August. The seven-man crew was still being held prisoner by the Taliban in Kandahar.

All sides are gearing up for heavy fighting in the spring once the winter snows begin to melt. Manad is training and rearming a new force of several thousand young Tajik recruits and is planning to launch a counter offensive to break the siege of Kabul by pushing the Taliban back south. He already has an estimated force of 25,000 armed and highly trained professional soldiers under his command around Kabul. In nur, the Taliban are planning a fresh offensive to capture Kabul, which they have been bombarding with rockets since last October. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the process.

Throughout this, General Dostum is sitting on the fence, having taken money and weapons in the past from Russia, Uzbekistan and even Iran. He is waiting to see which side emerges as the winner, and which country makes him the best offer.

**ENTER THE TALIBAN**

The growing influence of outside powers was triggered off by the emergence of the Taliban last year, which has added to the anarchic situation in Afghanistan and increased the dangers of a split in the entire region. The Taliban now control the whole of southern and western Afghanistan and are currently only 20 miles from Kabul.
The Taliban are led by Afghan students from madrassas (Islamic colleges) in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province under the tutelage of the Pakistani Islamic Party, the Jamaat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI). Led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the JUI is allied to the government of the Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto.

Some Taliban fought in the war against the Soviets, but the majority are too young to have taken part. In addition they have enlisted officers and professionals, such as tank drivers, mechanics and pilots from the former Afghan army who sought refuge in Pakistan after the collapse of the Afghan communist regime. These men have been hired back by high salaries paid by dollars by the Taliban. Pakistani students who have joined the Taliban belong to extremist splinter groups of the JUI and want to launch a similar movement in Pakistan to bring about an Islamic revolution.

The Taliban leadership is made up of mudalls drawn from village mosques in the south. They have little experience of the wider world and are influenced by a backward authoritarian and highly simplistic view of global Islam, harking back to the Middle Ages. They have been incapable of creating a viable controlled leadership and have no vision of a future peaceful Afghanistan. Nor do they have any idea of how to deal with complex issues such as power-sharing and maintaining relations with neighboring states. Moreover, their leadership council does not include any members from the clan and tribal hierarchy among the Pathans – which is seen as essential if a more moderate and viable political system is to emerge in Afghanistan.

At the same time the Taliban leadership is based on the Durran Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan, who are historically antagonistic to the Chitrali Pathans of eastern Afghanistan. The Durranis ruled Afghanistan until 1973, but before the arrival of the Taliban their political clout in the country had been reduced as the Chitrali Pathans received most of the US military aid in the 1980s. The Taliban’s unwillingness to forge alliances with other Afghan ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks, has been the biggest stumbling block to the UN peace process.

**A VIBRANT BLACK ECONOMY**

The Taliban first appeared in October 1994, when a convoy of Pakistani trucks trying to open a route from Quetta through Kandahar and Herat to the Central Asian Republics was hijacked by Afghan bandits. Several hundred Taliban arrived, faced the convoy, and, after four days of fighting, in which some fifty people were killed, captured Kandahar on 5 November 1994.

Promising a new era of peace and good government, the Taliban then marched south and captured the upland-grown provinces of Helmand and Lashkargah from where most of their leaders originate. The Taliban’s initial strategy of clearing the rival of numerous checkpoints set up by former Afghan commanders won them the unqualified support of Afghan and Pakistani traders and smugglers based in Quetta and Kandahar. They wanted to open up trade and smuggling routes to Central Asia.

These smugglers, who provided monetary support for the Taliban, have benefited hugely from the movement’s subsequent victories. Afghan smugglers can now carry large loads of consumer goods and foodstuffs from Quetta via Kandahar and Herat to Turkmenistan and onwards to Uzbekistan. They bring back cheap Russian tyres, air conditioners and raw cotton bound for Pakistan. Smugglers now also trade with eastern Iran, from where they return with fuel for the Taliban and their own war efforts.

Under the Taliban, smuggling has grown into a multimillion dollar business, creating a vibrant black economy in the entire region and depriving states like Pakistan of much needed customs revenue. Efforts by Islamabad to stop this trade across the hundreds of miles of porous border, hampered by a corrupt police force and insufficient border security, have proved fruitless. Moreover, the activity of these smugglers, which was once restricted to the Pakistani-Afghanistan border region, now covers thousands of miles into Iran and Central Asia.

The Pakistan army and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has no Afghan policy to date, seems initially not keen to back the Taliban. In the past, the ISI’s Afghan policy was conditioned with the help of Pakistan’s Jamat-e-Islami, the main rival of the JUI inside Pakistan, and the Afghan Hezb-i-Islami, led by the fundamentalist Pakistan Gulbuddin Hezb’s Hezb-i-Islami was the main protégé of the ISI from 1980 to 1992.

However, after 1992, with the stalemate in Afghanistan preventing Pakistan from opening new land routes to Central Asia and in the absence of a united Pakistan leadership, Islamabad’s Afghan policy badly needed a shot in the arm. Civilian agencies under the control of the Interior Minister, Naseerullah Babrak, initially a Pashtun, initially supported the Taliban. In a bid to keep the JUI’s influence in the Duttalo government also gave the JUI carte blanche to raise funds for the Taliban from Arab states. Pakistani political leaders in the ruling Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) saw the Talibans as a counterweight which could help the Afghan Pashtuns replace Kabul from the Tajiks and assert Pashtun dominance over Afghanistan.

**A NEW FRANKENSTEIN?**

In the spring of 1995 the Taliban launched an abortive bid to capture Herat and Kabul, but when they were pushed back by Masud’s forces, suffering heavy casualties. The deteriorating relations between Islamabad and the Kabul regime by the summer of 1995, and the burning of the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul on 6 September by a mob inspired by Ahmad Shah Masud, prompted the Pakistani government, the military and the ISI to step up and coordinate efforts to help the Taliban. Thus, in turn, led to a
The Taliban have taken control of large parts of the south and west of Afghanistan.