

Afghanistan: A Forgotten Cold War Tragedy

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Abstract

This article argues that there is no alternative to a peace process and some elements of the same, like the six plus two and regional initiatives, are already there. The lack of progress cannot be attributed to the Taliban alone. The security, economic and political interests of some of the regional powers are in conflict over the future of Afghanistan. Some of them have a vested interest in keeping Afghanistan unstable and in conditions of war. Others have found an easy scapegoat in the Taliban because of their hostile international image. Afghanistan's northern neighbours are shifting world attention from their own domestic failures to the Taliban by attributing to them qualities of threat that they do not possess. Washington and Moscow have transformed themselves from deadly rivals to co-operative partners in Afghanistan. Both of them, for different reasons, want to see the end of the Taliban regime and have worked together through the UN to isolate Afghanistan and impose sanctions. The recent move by the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo against the Taliban alone is not only unjust and unfair but also a recipe for prolonging the conflict. This may raise the expectations of the northern warlords and prevent them from seeking a negotiated solution.

I

Introduction

Twenty years ago, Afghanistan attracted world attention after the Soviet forces intervened there on Christmas eve in 1979, apparently to save a "revolution" that had provoked a mass resistance. The Soviet forces killed the incumbent president, installed a puppet regime, and went on to bring the turmoil under control by using brutal tactics indiscriminately against the civilian population.¹ They were optimistic in their mission—to finish the job in months. It took them ten years, tens of billions of dollars, over thirteen thousand deaths and the agony of defeat to finally realise the futility of intervention and withdraw in the spring of 1989.² Perhaps, the Afghans on their own might have failed to extract that price and military retreat from the former Soviet Union. Pakistan, the western nations at large, and the United States in particular, played a central role in crippling the Soviet war machine in Afghanistan.³ The alliance network and military confrontation were shaped essentially by the Western strategy of containing and countering Soviet expansionism.

The Western alliance viewed Afghanistan not only as a victim of Soviet aggression but also as a dangerous military threat to the security of the Gulf region. There were other reasons for the United States to put together an international coalition of forces to defeat the Soviet aims. The paranoia that gripped its Gulf allies after the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, and the question of American credibility in facing the Soviet threat were two main considerations in shaping a collective response to the Afghan war. Soon, Afghanistan became a battleground for the contest of superpowers, one engaged directly to establish its firm control, the other indirectly by supplying huge amounts of weapons and money to the Afghan resistance, popularly known as the Mujahideen or holy warriors. For the west, heroism of the

Afghan resistance was compelling. It confronted the forces of a superpower that had no inhibitions in the use of any means to suppress the rebellion. And it was effective in terms of denying the Soviet forces an easy victory, eventually raising the costs of Soviet occupation to an unacceptable level, forcing Moscow to vacate its aggression.⁴

Parallel to the military success of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan were other developments by the end of the 1980s that began to transform regional and international politics of the cold war era. Understanding between the two superpowers on disengaging from the regional conflicts was the first sign of great changes in the offing. Rivalry between the two began to give way to reconciliation, and later, to a partnership for peace. The Americans left the Afghan agenda unfinished after achieving a strategic victory in Moscow's retreat. The fundamental issues of peace and political settlement were ignored in the euphoria over the demise of communism, while the Afghans have continued to suffer the consequences. Allies like the Afghan resistance and Pakistan, which had played the role of a frontline state against the former Soviet Union, lost relevance to the US global strategy.⁵

As the clouds of the cold war lifted with the fall of communism, the United States decided to disengage itself from Afghanistan altogether. Perceptions of Mujahideen groups changed from allies against a common foe to potential adversaries as some vocal elements in the west began to discover a new enemy in the emergence of Islamic movements.⁶ The transformation of world power relations further relegated the war in Afghanistan to the periphery of global problems.

The failure of the Afghans to negotiate peace on their own or even implement accords that they signed with the help of friendly countries strengthened the cynicism that they lacked personal qualities to rise above petty feuds and political tradition to share power with others. But this may not be the only reason why the Afghan conflict has lasted 20 years and may continue to evade a permanent solution for years to come. A complex mix of internal confrontations in Afghanistan and rivalry among its neighbours has kept the war going.⁷ Expectation of strategic gains among the regional countries has blurred their vision about the tragedy of Afghanistan and its unfortunate people. Both the institutions of the Afghan state and society have been destroyed under the pressure of war.⁸ This factor has prevented internal reconciliation more than any other has.

II

The Russian Game Plan

In recent years, Russia has increased its military support to the Northern Front forces pitted against the Taliban regime.⁹ Moscow is concerned about Islamic revivalism in Central Asian states, which it thinks is being promoted by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The resurgence of Islam is troubling for the Russians. They are apprehensive about its effects on political stability, which may undermine their ability to maintain a political and military presence in Central Asia. But the link between the Taliban and the Islamic movements in Central Asia is questionable. All these movements have indigenous roots. Russia and the ruling elites in Central Asia exaggerate the transnational links among the Islamic movements to divert attention from their own political failures.

The head of Russian Security Council, Sergie Ivanov, threatened in April 2000 to launch missile and air strikes against Afghanistan after accusing the Taliban government of assisting the Chechen resistance. The indictment did not end there; Moscow further accused the Taliban of giving sanctuary to Islamists from some of the Central Asian states and allowing them to train for guerrilla warfare.¹⁰ The Taliban has responded by increasing their military presence along the border with Uzbekistan threatening retaliation if it allowed its territory to be used by the Russian warplane.¹¹ The Taliban have repeatedly accused Tajikistan of allowing Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Masud to maintain bases on its territory from where he stages incursions.¹² The problem with Russia and its Central Asian allies is that they are not looking at the roots of popular discontent in territories under their control or carefully assessing the behaviour of the ruling elites. They are quick to shift the blame more to external factors

than to do some soul searching; they justify their own interference in Afghanistan which they openly do by extending support to the Northern Front, while accusing the Taliban of providing sanctuaries to Islamic militants.

Even on the face of it, the connection between resistance in Chechnya against the Russian invasion and the Taliban regime looks very superficial. How many Chechen freedom fighters can really succeed in crossing all the land barriers from Afghanistan through Central Asia and carry all the weapons with them to attack the Russians? There is no evidence that Afghanistan or any other country fuelled the Chechen uprising. It was President Vladimir Putin's political game to appear tough in establishing militant nationalist credentials and the old obsession of the Russian elites to reclaim imperial holdings in the Caucasus that led to the war. The Russian atrocities against the civilian population in Chechnya, wilful destruction of villages, towns and all means of sustaining life are well documented and have been widely reported throughout the world. The world at large, including the Islamic countries, watched the cruel drama of the Russian war machine on the sidelines. Chechnya is back under the Russian control, picking pieces of rubble to rebuild a shattered life. One wonders what would have been the Western response if the Russians had done this to any of the European breakaway republics. The geopolitical limitations have once again demonstrated the vulnerability of the Central Asia and the Caucasus to the Russian imperial rule. The Russian presence is too strong and the Western powers have no interest in challenging Moscow in such a remote part of the world. Russia is encouraged by the apathy of the world community towards the Chechens. The Western intellectual and policy thrust against the Islamic resistance in different parts of the world has benefited Russia in promoting itself as a stabilising factor in the region.

Russia is planning a much bigger strategic game in and around Central Asia, including Afghanistan. There is considerable evidence of unrest in Uzbekistan and the civil war in Tajikistan is not over yet. The regimes in these two countries are confronting serious problems of social instability, and in some areas internal security, which have domestic roots. The emerging chaos in the region cannot be addressed by intimidating Afghanistan or shifting the blame away from the ruling class. There are four sets of factors that are fanning discontent in Central Asia. First, the regimes are autocratic, and they do not tolerate any opposition. They have premised their policy on the classical authoritarian logic that stability must come first before a culture of political pluralism develops. It makes sense that modernisation and institution-building precede full democratisation. But political tolerance is part of that process even in the initial stages. Second, anti-Islamic policies in some of the countries and repression of Islamic parties is too obvious, which is generating conflict. Third, corruption, violence and mis-governance are rampant in certain parts of Central Asia. These are crucial issues, which all developing societies are facing and Central Asia is not alone in failing to tackle them. But if these problems persist, they might force the populations to explore other alternatives and de-legitimise political authority. Finally, there is a backlash against the Russified elites in the making. The post-Soviet transformation must have gone beyond the political rhetoric of nationalism and imbibed true values of indigenous culture and rediscovered historical continuities that were interrupted by the Russian rule.

It is generally felt that modernisation in Central Asia must succeed and the elites there rebuild their societies as progressive and forward looking nations and accept the principles of diversity, pluralism, and accommodation with all the national groups including the Islamic parties. Only Russia and its imperial game will benefit if Central Asian states remain fragmented and chaotic. It is not in the interest of their own political stability to allow themselves to be used by the Russians against Afghanistan. The trouble is that the leaders of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have failed to come out of the Russian strategic shadow, which may not allow them to develop their nationhood. Lacking an independent position, they have denied themselves an opportunity to help resolve the Afghan conflict. Rather, they have gradually got sucked into the conflict by extending material support and sanctuaries to the Northern Front, which comprises of mainly the Tajik and Uzbek minority elements from

Afghanistan. They have genuine fears about Islamic militancy on their soils and transnational Islamic networks operating out of Afghanistan. But these apprehensions could best be addressed by institutionalising dialogue and building trust with the Taliban.

Russia and some of the Central Asian states argue that a stable and unified Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban movement would threaten the stability of adjacent regions by fanning similar Islamic movements and training militants. But this is public diplomacy, the operational strategy is different. The real motive of the Russians is to keep Afghanistan on the boil, so that Central Asian states remain dependent on their gas and oil pipelines for exporting energy to Europe. A peaceful Afghanistan would attract tremendous interest in building alternative pipelines for new markets that would break the Russian monopoly. Moscow would like to see that Northern Front regains some ground against the onslaught of the Taliban movement and redraw the battle lines around the Hindukush mountains. That would separate the non-Pashtun north from the rest of Afghanistan. It was a part of long term Russian strategy in the area to invest heavily in the development of Northern Afghanistan and integrate the Uzbek and Tajik regions to the security arrangements of neighbouring Central Asian states.

During the past 10 years, it has kept pouring massive amounts of weapons and money in support of Uzbek and Tajik warlords. But these warlords under the political and military leadership of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masud have failed miserably to roll back the Taliban victories. When the Afghan civil war is entering a decisive phase, Russia has decided to openly throw its weight behind Ahmad Shah Masud who has bases in Tajikistan and gets extensive assistance from Russian and other sources. The short-term objective is to release the Taliban pressure against Masud's militia and eventually push the Taliban out of the Tajik and Uzbek areas. But even if it appears to be unrealistic, Russia may succeed in preventing Central Asian states from using alternative transit and pipeline routes through Afghanistan and Pakistan, which can be the shortest to the Arabian Sea.

It is also possible that Russia may increase its military assistance to the Northern Front in the wake of a second wave of sanctions that the Security Council of the United Nations imposed against the Taliban in December 2000. The United Nations Security Council pushed by Russia and United States has imposed new tougher sanctions against the Taliban regime and tightened the previous ones. If the Taliban fails to deliver on the demands set in the Resolutions 1267—surrender of Osama bin Laden, closing of suspected terrorist camps, withdrawing support from international terrorism—their offices abroad will be closed, accounts frozen and the senior Taliban leaders forbidden from travel abroad. The Taliban will receive no arms supplies from any member of the UN, while their opponents have no such restrictions on the supply of foreign arms.¹³ This is likely to encourage the anti-Taliban Northern Front. While the sanctions have hardly succeeded as an instrument of foreign policy anywhere, in the case of Afghanistan, they may increase the misery of the common people and prolong the conflict. There is a broader coalition of regional countries that includes India and Iran that were willing to assist the Northern Front.

The Western powers have discovered air force and long range conventional missiles, which are quite precise and accurate in hitting the targets, as the most effective and least expensive means of punishing their designated enemies. The modern satellite imagery and easy identification and monitoring of moving and static targets have increasingly shaped the contours of a new war that is free of the political and economic costs of landing troops. The continuing American and British air and missile strikes against Iraq and American cruise missile attack against suspected hideouts of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1998 have set a dangerous precedent. More of the same cannot be ruled out to hit bin Laden or other targets in Afghanistan. Russia is also willing to launch its own strikes from across the Tajikistan border to dislodge the Taliban from strategically important points for the Northern Front.

There are troubling questions; has Russia not learnt its lessons in this country? Will destabilising and fragmenting Afghanistan really help the Central Asian states? What will be the repercussion for the Central Asian states if they allow their territory and facilities to be used by Russia against Afghanistan? It will be a short-sighted approach to national security problems to invite the Russians who have too much blood of the Afghans and Central Asians on their hands to unleash a new wave of barbarism. It will create an Islamic backlash and breed extremism.

It is in the interest of Central Asian elites not to involve themselves in the Russian imperial game. They have to address the internal questions of Islam, national identity and state-building prudently on the basis of accommodative politics, consensus and tolerance. They can find true sources of strength and stability in revitalising the cultural and civilisational riches of their own societies and by seeking legitimacy through popular support. They need to show better understanding of the complex Afghan problem and pursue a policy of dialogue among the Afghan groups to resolve the tricky question of political power and restructuring of the multi-ethnic Afghan state. The Russian game plan is too dangerous. It will only destabilise the entire region and the Central Asian states may not escape its consequences.

III The Ethnic Dimension

The war in Afghanistan has revived and strengthened old ethnic identities and has created new ones. Since the defeat of the Mujahideen factions by the Taliban and routing of the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a new political polarisation has emerged that has ethnic overtones. Fragmentation of Afghanistan along ethnic and regional lines had started much earlier with the Soviet policy of strengthening the northern minorities. The Taliban are largely Pashtuns and the ethnic minorities have formed a loose alliance that has some leaders from the old Mujahideen factions. However, the Taliban claims that they are an Islamic movement and their objective is to re-establish peace and stability by demilitarising and reunifying the country. Ironically their rivals from the Northern Front make the same claim that they are fighting to end the war, restore peace and establish a stable government that will be acceptable to all the Afghans. Neither side in the civil war seems willing to seriously engage the other in negotiations to end the war.

There are many questions about the rise of the Taliban movement.¹⁴ In our view the rise and success of this movement might be explained with reference to the exhaustion of the Afghan society. Battered for 18 years, the local populations had no vigour to resist any new force or defend the discredited Mujahideen groups. More than that, the Taliban rode on the tide of widespread frustration with the Mujahideen commanders who kept fighting among themselves, turned out to be not less corrupt than any former authority in the country and failed miserably in restoring law and order. The Taliban movement was a response to the anarchy, corruption and warlordism in the country.

Although the name Taliban suggests that all of them are students of religious educational institutions, this is not the case. The composition of the Taliban movement represents a wide and complex mix. It has war veterans who fought under the command of various Mujahideen parties, former members of the army and the young peasants who want to join fighting for even a meagre salary. The most critical aspect of the Taliban movement is that it is overwhelmingly Pashtun in character and its creed is rooted in the conservative, textual interpretation of Islam. Reunifying the Pashtuns under one movement after almost decades is a remarkable achievement, which all Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand line support for nationalist reasons. What made this unity possible was a general resentment that the Pashtuns who had dominated the Afghan state for centuries, had lost to the northern minorities.

The Taliban wants to continue the war to its logical conclusion, that is to bring the remaining

10% of the territory under their control by defeating their ethnic and political rivals in the north. After evicting the Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara warlords from most of their strongholds, the Taliban commanders appear to be more confident than ever before of extending their power beyond the present battle lines. Their aim is to bottle up the forces of Ahmad Shah Masud in the Panjshir valley and cut him off from the supply lines of Tajikistan. If they hold on to the town of Sher Khan Bandar that they recently captured and other points along the border, the balance of forces in the area will decisively shift in favour of the Taliban.

The central goal of the Taliban movement is to establish total, complete and effective territorial control over the country. The Taliban believes that peace and order will remain illusive until all armed groups resisting them surrender and accept their political authority. They are not averse to negotiating with the representatives of ethnic and political groups but would like to do so on their own terms. They want the opposition leaders to give up fighting, sever ties with their foreign supporters and accept representation in the Taliban government either on a regional basis or according to the strength of each party. Their solution for ending war is typical of the attitude of any party in the conflict that appears to be winning. But those fighting against the Taliban rule in the country and their foreign sponsors refuse to acknowledge that the Taliban are anywhere close to complete victory. And they are no less determined to reverse the military gains of the Taliban than the latter to destroy the opposition.

The political and military leaders of the Northern Alliance even after suffering defeat in a series of battles have not given up hope of rolling back the Taliban from Kabul or taking back the territories they have lost in the north during the past four years. They view the Taliban movement and its military successes as an expression of Pashtun dominance. Despite frequent infighting, rivalries and serious personality clashes, the non-Pashtun groups seem willing to close their ranks and put up a common resistance against the onslaught of the Taliban. In this struggle, the leaders of the Northern Alliance have been able, for ethnic and strategic reasons, to secure political and military assistance from a wide array of foreign sources. The ethnic dimension of the civil war is more dangerous than the political and ideological elements that shaped its course earlier because it may suck in more players from Central Asia. This is already taking place, which explains the anxiety and eagerness of the Taliban to quicken the pace of their military campaign against Masud.

Like the Taliban, the leaders of the ethnic minorities are not opposed to the idea of a broad-based, representative government but would like to define these terms according to their own interests. It is tragic that none of the Afghan groups accepts the basic norms of power-sharing, compromise and reconciliation on the basis of give and take to end the tragic war. Burhanuddin Rabbani as a president, and Masud as a defence minister when in power behaved no differently from what the Taliban does. They refused to accept their rivals in the government, which was formed according to an agreement among all of them. For years, they did not allow the prime minister designate to enter Kabul and continued to hold on to power even after the expiry of their tenure. Their persistent refusal to honour accords brokered by friendly countries was an open invitation to war. Where others failed to dislodge the Masud-Rabbani combine from Kabul, the Taliban succeeded. But then the dynamics of the war changed from political to ethnic and religious with greater mix of external powers getting involved to promote their strategic interests.

In recent months, most of the external actors with some interest in the outcome of the Afghan conflict seem to be speaking the same language of peace-broad-based, representative government, which has become a trite and stale phrase. The question how that government is to be created and what will be the share of different regions or minorities is the most troubling in the prevailing conditions. The Taliban and the Northern Alliance are poles apart on the issues of representation, structure of government and character of the state.

It is unfortunate that neither of the warring parties in Afghanistan nor their foreign supporters have shown sensitivity to the plight of the people of this country who have suffered the most in destruction of life and property. There is hardly any Afghan family that has escaped physical dislocation or loss of a son, father or husband with so much emotional and economic stress on the women. The warlords do not care about this.

Contrary to the claims of the combatants, the civil war may not reunite the country but move it farther away from this goal. Despite victories of the Taliban in the several battlefields, the endgame in the civil war may not be determined by the strength of the fighting men alone. There are vexing political issues about the future of the country that may also affect the relations among the neighbouring states that need to be addressed with no less vigour than the use of arms.

What the Taliban does not seem to realise is that restructuring of the Afghan state can be made possible through co-operation of other Afghan groups whatever their shades of opinion or ethnic background. No group can alone reunify the country or undertake reconstruction of economic infrastructure that lay in ruins. The lofty goal of territorial unity should not be predicated with military victory as it may prove to be transitory. War itself is a cause of territorial fragmentation and it may produce more if not ended. Some form of fragmentation also exists even in areas that the Taliban has captured. They have neither established an effective control nor any strong presence in all areas. The Taliban has a system of alliance with the local influentials, which they operate more through intimidation than common interest. Their basic weakness lies in the absence of formal structure of the state and institutions of government. Threat of reprisals against uprising or periodic forays into areas where the Taliban see some sign of resistance to their rule do not substitute for institutional presence of the government.

IV The Search for Peace

There can be many ways to end the conflict in Afghanistan and there is no dearth of peace-doctors from the UN, Organisation of Islam Conference (OIC) and the six-plus-two countries, that are neighbouring states, Russia and the United States. What they need is political will and some degree of realism to end the war. The solution to the Afghan conflict will emerge as a result of a process, which may involve many steps, calibrated and measured by progress. A verifiable cease-fire, an arms embargo against all the warring groups to be monitored by the UN and an ending of sanctions against the Taliban government may be the starting points. Humanitarian assistance to all Afghans, rehabilitation of refugees and revival of economic infrastructure should not wait for a final political settlement, which will most likely evolve in a gradual fashion than to be structured in one go.

During the past few years, three different but parallel peace tracks have been identified. These are: initiative of the six-plus-two countries, OIC and the UN sponsored talks, between the Taliban and the Northern Front, and the proposal by Zahir Shah, the former king of Afghanistan to convene a *Loya Jirga* (grand assembly of Afghan elders) to end the war. The problem is that there is hardly any movement on any of the tracks so far. Once there is some progress, all three tracks may converge on the single point of ending the conflict and creating a broad-based government.

After much hesitation and too much delay the six-plus-two group, which includes six states bordering Afghanistan and two great powers met in Tashkent in July 2000 and laid down certain fundamental principles according to which political settlement of the Afghan war can be achieved. These principles, such as territorial integrity, unity, sovereignty and independence of Afghanistan are a repetition of UN resolutions and declarations issued by other international gatherings. Also, the call for cessation of hostilities, arms embargo against all Afghan parties sound familiar.¹⁵ Interestingly, all the countries that signed the Tashkent Declaration were accused of fanning the Afghan conflict by

giving military assistance to the Afghan belligerents. Some of them have even offered their own territory to some groups to stage attacks against their adversaries inside Afghanistan. For almost a year now, there has been no follow-up meeting of the six-plus-two group to promote the idea of establishing a broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.

The question is how these lofty goals can be achieved? The central element to the conflict, the Taliban were not invited because none of the countries in the group except Pakistan has extended recognition to them. The declaration is partly an indictment of the Taliban regime and partly a charter of demands. The main thrust is on restructuring political power by marginalising the Taliban. The group may focus more on dialogue among the Afghan groups and reconciliation than on demonising one and patronising the other.

Almost all the countries in the group lack the credibility of honest brokers for peace. All of them have a vested interest either in keeping the Afghan situation boiling or seeking a political solution that would strengthen its strategic interests. There is a conflict of interest on transmission routes of energy resources from Turkmenistan and other Central Asian states to South and East Asia. Iran wants the pipelines to travel through its territory, while Pakistan believes it offers the shortest and most economical routes.¹⁶ Pakistan is apprehensive that Iran and Russia have common interest in preventing the proposed pipeline passing through Afghanistan. A UNOCOL project of linking Daulatabad gas fields of Turkmenistan with Pakistan and India has been scuttled because of conditions of war.¹⁷ The American interest in Afghanistan in recent years has centred on expulsion of Osama bin Laden who is wanted for the terrorist attacks on American embassies in East African countries and on controlling the flow of drugs and suspected terrorists from Afghanistan. For these two problems which figure prominently in American agenda, Washington blames the Taliban. The Central Asian states, Russia and Iran for their own independent reasons want to see the end of Taliban rule.¹⁸ Pakistan stays as the main supporter of the Taliban and it is not willing to allow the other parties to impose any other government by military means. While all of them talk about the need of forming a broad-based, representative government in Afghanistan in public, they continue to interfere in the Afghan conflict through economic and military assistance to the warring parties. Unless there is some consensus among the regional countries, the conflict in Afghanistan may continue. Better understanding between Iran and Pakistan may hold the key to the resolution of the conflict. Iran and Pakistan have started an independent process of consultation and dialogue since the fall of 1999 and they have made some progress but they have to go a long way in finding a meeting point. There is clash of interest between Iran's desire to create a Persian-speaking corridor from Herat on its borders through northern Afghanistan to Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan and Pakistan's geopolitical imperatives. The Afghan peace process may remain shackled in the conflict of interests between the two most powerful neighbours of Afghanistan.

The representatives of the UN and OIC have been working towards getting the Taliban and the Northern Front to a negotiating table. It took more than a year and lot of efforts behind the scene by the OIC contact group and the UN representatives to persuade the two sides to talk peace. The second round of indirect talks between the Taliban and the Northern Front that took place in May 2000 in Jeddah has made little progress towards ending the war.¹⁹ Their hostility runs so deep and mutual rejection is so strong that they refused to sit around one table and negotiate a political settlement of the war that has destroyed their country. An understanding on the release of prisoners, sparing the civilian population of military operations and restraining escalation of conflict is a welcome step, if it gets implemented, but not sufficient to create conditions for peace.

This was not for the first time that the Afghan warring factions agreed to address these issues. They have given similar understandings and have even signed more comprehensive political settlements on different occasions, but every time they went back on their pledges.²⁰ I do not wish to sound cynical, but the record of failures in the Afghan peace ventures is not very encouraging.

Nonetheless, it is important to engage the Taliban and Northern Front in a sustained and constructive dialogue towards a comprehensive political settlement.

As we are familiar with many similar instances of conflict resolution, the peace initiatives have to reflect ground realities in order to be fully respected. In the Afghan case, the Taliban, Northern Front and external interference are three important elements that form the ground reality, which has grown too complex to lend itself to any easy solution. The complexity lies essentially in two parallel sets of confrontations: one between the Afghans, and the other among the neighbouring countries. At stake are economic opportunity and the larger, but ambiguous security and foreign policy interests for the neighbours and political power for the Afghans.

The problem is that the rival Afghan groups have linkages with the rival neighbouring states. They seek military equipment, political support and foreign connections to resolve the conflict on their own terms. Even after 20 years of continuous war, which has left the country in ruins,²¹ the Afghan factions have not given up hope of total victory against each other. The Taliban movement that controls almost 90% of the territory and has somewhat effective administration primarily in the realm of law and order seems encouraged by its track record of military victories. Its strategy is to reunify the country by defeating the remaining forces of Northern Front that are holed up in the northern corner of the country. Its rivals are equally determined to regain the areas that they have lost to the Taliban. They are encouraged by the fact that the international community does not recognise the Taliban. The image of harsh Islamic rule invokes sympathy for them and a strong group of adjacent states, notably Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia are pouring in massive amounts of military equipment to help them resist the Taliban rule.

After 20 years of fighting the Afghan armed groups and their foreign backers must have realised that war offers no solution. The years of conflict have already raised strong political and psychological barriers in the way of peaceful settlement. There is so much evidence from history, if Afghanistan's own experience is not sufficient, which suggests that military means to settle civil strife are by themselves a cause of war. Afghanistan is the only country in the post-cold war era where no concerted, sustained and effective attempts have been made towards conflict resolution. It is tragic that a country, which indirectly contributed to the resolution of regional conflicts in the wake of the fall of communism, has itself escaped the attention of world community. Many of the attempts that were half-hearted to begin with were abandoned by the special envoys of the Secretary General of the UN on the ground that the Afghan factions showed no flexibility and the neighbouring states did not stop their interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. These are precisely the issues that any approach towards conflict resolution has to adopt. The twin problem of internal confrontation and external interference would require a peace process that draws in both the warring Afghan factions and external powers that are extending military and political support to them. Such a peace process has yet to take shape.

Disillusioned by the half-hearted peace initiatives of the UN, some of the Afghans have started to give serious thought to seeking a political solution through an old institution, the *Loya Jirga*. The *Loya Jirga*, and the provincial councils of *sardars* (chiefs) were two traditional institutions that along with the religious establishments played an important role in confirming legitimacy on the Afghan kings, and approved constitutional and legal changes in the country. The institution of *Jirga* also functioned at local levels to adjudicate disputes between individuals and tribes. Looking at the evolution of the Afghan state, particularly its early phase and central system of governance, one can hardly miss the point that it rested on consent of the tribes and other socially influential groups.²² Zahir Shah, the former king of Afghanistan came out of his political hibernation in Rome and made an announcement on 26 September 1999 about convening an emergency *Loya Jirga* to ascertain the will of the Afghan people.²³ He left many questions unanswered about this old scheme that has been floated on and off during the past 20 years. Who will convene the *Jirga*? where will it be convened?, and who

will represent whom for what particular purpose? are some of the important questions that have to be addressed before one gives any serious attention to this proposal. The brief message of the King to the Muslim people of Afghanistan carefully skirted these vexing issues in proclaiming that "it is with God's help and our compatriots' efforts inside and outside the country, as well as the international community's assistance, that this plan will succeed."²⁴

During the past several months there has been no visible progress on this project, except the number of meetings among Afghan intellectuals, former members of the oligarchy and retired civil and military officers who live in exile. No one should doubt the sincerity of these Afghans about ending the war in their country and restoring peace. They represent moderate, modern and enlightened sections of the Afghan society and the old intellectual and political elite that emerged in the wake of modernisation. They have seen their country go through so many cycles of destructive conflict with so many internal and external players stoking it. Pushed out of the country and without any backing from the international community they found themselves helpless in shaping the course of events during the Soviet war. Mujahideen warriors fitted more in the western strategy of defeating the Soviet aggression. These elements are regrouping under the leadership of Zahir Shah.

The United States and some European countries are giving serious consideration to the Zahir Shah option, as the international community is frustrated with the warring factions. The US administration has extended support to the proposal for convening the *Loya Jirga*.²⁵ The American experts on Afghanistan and the diplomats with some experience of the Afghan problem have suggested that the American initiative should emphasise the role of the Afghans, and at the same time propose forceful UN action to stop outside interference.²⁶ The UN Secretary General has also given his blessings. Pakistan's position is that if *Loya Jirga* is acceptable to the Taliban and the Northern Front, it will support the initiative. It is too early to suggest when and where the *Jirga* will meet. At this stage, the representatives of the old Afghan monarch are active seeking support of the regional countries and major powers and also building contacts with Afghan groups inside the country. Some of the moderate Afghan parties in exile like the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan have started mobilising support for the *Jirga*.²⁷ This traditional institution served the purpose of confirming legitimacy on the new king or it was convened to approve new constitution or major policy shifts. It is a difficult task to revive this institution in the prevailing conditions of war and in the face of opposition both from the Taliban and the Northern Front. The idea is to create some role for the moderate factions that have been marginalised by the warring factions. Zahir Shah may serve an important political objective in garnering international support and reunifying various Afghan groups. As a neutral figure and symbol of national unity he may use his influence to convene the *Jirga* to establish an interim government and start a political process that may end the war. In trying this option one has to be realistic about the ground realities in Afghanistan and how the country and its power structure have changed.

V

Conclusion

As a victim of the cold war, Afghanistan begs a solution, a more humanitarian approach than a policy of rejectionism by the west or competitive interference by the neighbours. No other country has suffered such destruction, human dislocation, and the collapse of all governmental institutions than Afghanistan during the past two decades. An estimated one million Afghans have been killed and more are losing their lives every day in the ongoing strife. More than four million Afghans are still refugees in Iran and Pakistan awaiting an end to the war in their country and repatriation. There is no life support system left to attract the refugee population back to their villages and revival of agricultural activities is threatened by the presence of anti-personal mines in the fields.

A people and a country that suffered so much to win the cold war for the west deserves better treatment than imposition of sanctions; punitive strikes against suspected terrorist targets and

international isolation. Such a policy may be counterproductive to the objective of restoring normalcy in Afghanistan and further delay the process of restructuring the Afghan state and society. What Afghanistan needs is a serious and concerted international effort through the UN to broker peace among the warring Afghan factions and help establish a broad-based Afghan government. The difficulties often cited by the UN representatives may be discouraging. I wonder if there is any other alternative to diplomacy to resolve the Afghan conflict. War will only torment the people and remove the country further away from the course of national reconciliation. We suggest that a special UN commission on Afghanistan comprising representatives of the major world powers and regional states be formed. This could be a starting point that could lead to the convening of an international assembly of the Afghans in order to set up an interim government, which should include all Afghan factions including the Taliban. After more than three years of persistent war, the Taliban must realise that international recognition, political legitimacy and reconciliation with other ethnic groups are perhaps more important than military victories. The important lesson of the Afghan war is that battle lines during the past 20 years, the contestants, and foreign supporters have kept shifting, and there is no reason why the present equation in the country will not change.

Iran and Pakistan have too much at stake in securing a workable political settlement and they have levers to influence the Taliban and their opposition. They may encounter many difficulties, but there is hardly any excuse for not trying everything to restore some sense of human dignity to Afghanistan.

The key to the resolution of the Afghan conflict lies with neighbouring states. The co-operative and honest efforts towards a peaceful solution would lead to ending the tragedy of Afghanistan; their rivalry and confrontation would cause more suffering to the hapless people of the country. It is necessary that the six-plus-two group along with the UN representative should meet more regularly and institutionalise the Afghan peace process. The important task before the group, the UN and OIC is how to get the Taliban and the Northern Front on a negotiating table and explore a political settlement, which is realistic, just and workable.

But the first condition for the success of the peace process is that external military support to both sides must end, which should be monitored by the UN observers, and the Afghan groups must give up their illusive quest for military victory. A one-sided and unequal arms embargo only against the Taliban offers no solution, rather it runs the risk of prolonging the agony of the Afghan people. Let us not forget that the war has produced no permanent winners, and there will be none in the future. The sooner it is realised the better for a nation that has been devastated by the cold war, internal power struggles and competing strategic interests of the regional powers.

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Notes

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3. See for instance, Marvin G Weinbaum, "War and Peace in Afghanistan: The Pakistani Role," *Middle East Journal*, Winter 1991, p 76.
4. Riaz M Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.
5. The United States imposed sanctions against Pakistan in the fall of 1990 under the Pressler Amendment.
6. Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1999, p 57.
7. Rahimullah Yusufzai, "When War is a Big Business," *The News*, 6 June 2000.
8. Barnett R Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Lahore, Vanguard, 1996, pp 63-68.
9. *Dawn* (Karachi), 18 May 2000. On 6 August 1995, a Russian cargo plane belonging to Tataristan was forced to land in Kandahar by the Taliban. The plane was carrying arms and ammunition for the opposition.
10. *Nation* (Islamabad), 10 April 2000.
11. *Dawn*, 6 June 2000.
12. *The News*, 5 May 2000.
13. *The News*, 21 December 2000.
14. See Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1999.
15. *Dawn*, 22 July 1999.
16. On the occasion of the ECO summit meeting in Tehran on 9-11 June, Iran claimed that it offers the safest route for pipelines. *The News*, 9 June 2000.
17. The UNOCOL is an American company which has strong interest in gas and oil in the region. It puts together a broad consortium of companies to make the project feasible. But after changes in American policy and American cruise missile attacks against the hideouts of Osama bin Laden in August 1998, the Company withdrew.
18. Ahmad Rashid, "Iran Anti-Taliban Alliance," *Nation*, 4 April 2000.
19. *Nation*, 12 May 2000.
20. It is primarily because of the failure of the Peshawar Accord that was signed in the last week of April 1992 to put in place a coalition government and Islamabad Declaration in March 1993 on division of power among different factions that the war intensified in the country.
21. On the effects of war on children in particular, see, Robin Wright, "Afghan Children Left to Their Own Devices," *Dawn*, 4 May 2000.

22. On the role of the *Jirga*, see, A Olesen, "Afghanistan: The Development of the Modern State" in K Ferdinand and M Mozaffari (eds), *Islam: State and Society*, London, Curzon, 1988, pp 155-169.
23. *Dawn*, 27 September 1999.
24. Zahir Shah 's message to the people of Afghanistan.
25. *Nation*, 24 May 2000.
26. See for instance, Peter Tomsen, "Flawed US Policy in Afghanistan," *The News*, 21 March 2000.
27. *Nation*, 7 May 2000.