

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

AFGHANISTAN: EMERGING SCENARIOS

14 JANUARY 2011

SEMINAR REPORT

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a seminar on "Afghanistan: Emerging Scenarios" to commemorate its Raising Day, on 14 January, 2011. Three CLAWS publications were released on the occasion:

- "Future Wars: Changing Nature of Conflict" – Editors – Brig Gurmeet Kanwal and Mr Samarjit Ghosh.
- "Afghanistan: A Role for India" – Editors – Lt Gen RK Sawhney, Brig Arun Sahgal and Brig Gurmeet Kanwal.
- The CLAWS Journal Winter 2010.

The above were released by Gen VP Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), former COAS, Gen Shankar Roychowdhury, PVSM (Retd), former COAS and Lt Gen Philip Campose, DG PP, Army HQ, respectively.

The seminar was chaired by Gen VP Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd). The key speakers were Amb Kanwal Sibal, former Foreign Secretary, Lt Gen RK Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), former DGMI, and Dr Mohan Guruswamy, Chairman and Founder, Centre for Policy Alternatives. The seminar was attended by officers of the armed forces, both serving and retired; members of the strategic community, as also members of the foreign diplomatic corps. The seminar was also broadcast on a live video feed to a group of officers at Headquarters Eastern Command, Kolkata.

Welcome Remarks: Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd), Director, CLAWS

The seminar was organised with to discuss and debate the emerging challenges in Afghanistan. The most recent discussions in the international community have taken place at the NATO Lisbon conference in November 2010, when 2014 was flagged as a provisional deadline for transition. This is being touted as the exit strategy for the

United States, even though the definition of what such a strategy would construe differs from person to person. In any event, this exit strategy is not taking shape. While Gen David Petraeus is of the view that the surge is working and more troops need to be involved in it, Defence Secretary Robert Gates has stated that 10,000 personnel should be exiting every year. Further, Vice President Joe Biden has signalled that he would prefer 30,000 troops to withdraw, and has stressed that the true problem lies in Pakistan, and not Afghanistan. It is generally assumed that the view of Defence Secretary Gates will prevail.

The challenges in Afghanistan are complex, and the issues which need to be flagged range from Pakistan's role, 'Plan B' as envisioned by Amb Robert Blackwill, Turkey's emerging role and rising Chinese interest in Afghanistan. China has begun to position itself more firmly in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), so as to ensure that should Pakistan eventually fail as a state, it would be in a position to prevent India from being able to exert its influence towards the North.

Chairperson's Remarks: Gen VP Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), former COAS

India's stakes in Afghanistan are well known. The two countries have had historical, cultural links, and India has had a good association with all the major tribes. Strategically, India's relations with Afghanistan are very important today. Keeping in mind the 1999 hijacking which terminated at Kandahar, any instability in Afghanistan affects both Pakistan and India. It is this repercussive effect which leads Pakistan to continue to use terrorism as a coercive tactic, both in Afghanistan and in India. For India, stability in Afghanistan would involve expanding its relations with Iran, Central Asia, and China.

During the 2010 London conference, the strategy voiced was in favour of Pakistan reverting to its earlier position on Afghanistan. In fact, President Barack Obama had stated that success in Afghanistan was inextricably linked to its relations with Pakistan. India wasn't invited to the recent Lisbon conference and there isn't usually much recognition of the important work that it has been doing in Afghanistan.

While a withdrawal is being debated, newspapers recently reported that about 1400 additional US troops had been sent to Afghanistan. Taking this development into consideration, the situation being increasingly complex today – the recent parliamentary elections saw 5.7 million votes cast. Yet, a quarter of them were invalidated; 24 candidates were declared winners officially, but each of them was disqualified by the election commission; the representation of different tribes in the security forces and the civil services is also an issue of concern. The police and the army have been increasing in numbers, yet reports reveal that almost 86 per cent of them are illiterate, and the attrition rate is between 24-30 per cent. The drug problem continues to be endemic, as does corruption. It seems it would be very difficult for any American strategy to work in this climate.

Chinese interests in Afghanistan have gone up in the previous year, coinciding with the first US announcement of withdrawal. Their involvement will bear watching.

Amb Kanwal Sibal, former Foreign Secretary

Despite the enormous amount of brainstorming that takes place in various institutions in and around the world on Afghanistan, and the policy documents originating from the various governments involved in the country, the way forward isn't always clear. This may have something to do with the relative lack of optimism about success in the region. The endgame scenario is something that everyone agrees on: Afghanistan should be stable, peaceful, democratic – to the extent possible, not be a hub of international terrorism, not be under the control of radical extremist forces like the Taliban, should become a connectivity hub between Central and South Asia, and remain free from the political influences of any other country.

The US is the most deeply involved in Afghanistan, bearing the greatest military and economic burden, NATO/ISAF involvement notwithstanding. Most of the strategy revolves around what the US will or will not do – other countries involved can have some influence, but not beyond a point. This isn't necessarily a positive thing because US strategy in Afghanistan is linked to domestic politics in the US. And at times, President Obama has to manoeuvre US strategy to avoid the country being bogged down in Afghanistan. Thus, there is pressure to show 'success' for internal

political purposes and resultantly, notwithstanding the ground situation, political choices may be made which may not be for the best.

The US has not shown consistency in Afghanistan. After the initial intervention, President George Bush got involved with the Iraq operations, and reluctantly turned back to Afghanistan only once the operations in the former had started winding down, and the Afghanistan situation was proving too volatile to ignore. Currently, there is pressure on President Obama to reduce the level of American engagement in Afghanistan. Thus there is a disconnect between what other actors want the US to do, and what the US itself can or cannot do. Any exit strategy cannot be possible in a vacuum. It has to be linked to the on-ground situation, which is not presently fit for any reasonable withdrawal. The basic requirement for any withdrawal is that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should be sufficient, in terms of numbers, quality, combat readiness, training and motivation, to take on the necessary responsibility to allow US troops to withdraw.

The situation in the south has not improved. Stated strategies to stabilise Kandahar have not proved to be successful. On the contrary, the Taliban insurgency is said to have reached the north. Incidents on ground have increased, instead of decreasing. President Obama has to resolve the dilemma of withdrawing at least a token number of troops, even if it is only 10,000. But can he do it in the face of the deteriorating situation? It doesn't help that the US' allies have even less of a stomach to continue. NATO members have resolved to withdraw in 2014, not realising (or not caring) that announcing such dates merely gives the Taliban and Pakistan an incentive to wait them out. It doesn't make negotiation very attractive either.

Reintegration and reconciliation: Reintegration looks like a very attractive proposition on paper - for misled mercenaries, who do not espouse the radical sentiments of the Taliban, to be brought into the mainstream and demobilised. However, any success in this regard would primarily depend on the Afghanistan government's achievements on the ground, in the spheres of livelihood, employment and development. Reintegration would not have much success with a dysfunctional government.

Reconciliation does not hold as much prospect as reintegration. For one, any such reconciliation with radical forces would prove, in the long term if not the short, to be inimical to India's interest. Second, expecting their consent on issues such as abiding by the constitution, exhibiting tenets of secular behaviour, so on and so forth, is a non-starter at best. President Hamid Karzai is undertaking such ventures solely to secure his own political position, in an attempt to strengthen his political base, such that he doesn't suffer Najibullah's fate. He doesn't appear to understand that in any such reconciliation process he would be the first casualty.

With regard to Pakistan, the US has not been able to evolve a coherent strategy to deal with it. It maintains that the key problem remains in Pakistan, not Afghanistan, yet doesn't do much beyond stating the fact. This statement is not enough, especially if the US continues to supply Pakistan with arms and money, without any checks. There doesn't appear any sign that this policy would change, especially in light of the fact that the US is always afraid that the government of Pakistan may collapse and are in fear of the repercussions of such a collapse on the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. They're aware that most of the leaders of the Taliban and the Al Qaeda are residing in the borderlands of Pakistan, yet do not show much interest in tackling them. Pakistan, on the other hand, is very interested in playing the role of an intermediary in any dialogue between President Karzai and the Taliban leadership, to ensure that their interests are taken care of. To an extent, such a stance may be understood, taking into consideration the permeable Durand line, the chances of Pashtuns from both sides coming together on the Pashtunistan issue – which is why they want a government favourable to Pakistan in Afghanistan. This is also why they've ratcheted up the threat of allegedly evil intentions that India has in Afghanistan, albeit with no evidence to support its conjecture.

Russia is guarded about entering Afghanistan aggressively, worried, on the one hand, about its past experiences, yet also concerned about radical spillover into Central Asia. They do not want to hinder operations in Afghanistan as they can see that the situation is improving, though their main concern is the drug issue – with good reason, as about 30,000 people die in Russia every year due to drug addiction, from drugs originating from Afghanistan.

Iran continues to play a double game, concerned about constant American presence in the neighbourhood, while also keeping channels open with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban, including through monetary support.

Turkey is also beginning to play an active role, in line with its ambitions as a regional power. Saudi Arabia has distanced itself from the reconciliation process for the most part, despite its previous involvement and recent overtures by the Afghanistan government. China's policies in Afghanistan are very problematic for India. A troublesome development in this regard is Pakistan and China's recent position on POK, which reads that China is positioning itself in the region, in case Pakistan needs to move westwards. China is doing so, in order to maintain enough control to prevent India from regaining its influence in POK.

'Plan B', as envisioned by Amb Blackwill, would imply that the situation would continue to fester, with indefinite instability. In pure *realpolitik* terms, if Pakistan does get bogged down in southern Afghanistan, with the constant fear of the Pashtuns destabilising Pakistan, they will have less scope to create mischief on their eastern borders. However, while there may be short-term gains in this regard, it wouldn't be helpful in the long term. It would imply that the US would continue in a half-cocked situation, Iran would continue with its disruptive political games, Afghanistan would have no scope for development, and no agreements would hold water. As a responsible regional power, such a scenario would not be in India's interests.

India should continue with its present policy of economic and development aid, despite the physical danger to its institutions and personnel. It needs to bear in mind that the general public view of India in Afghanistan is very positive, even in the Pashtun areas, and it should resist the temptation of getting involved on the ground militarily. It can and should offer more training in this regard, if the Americans and Afghans are open to it. The recent support from the US, in terms of India's developmental work, is heartening, but India would do well to keep in touch with Iran and Russia, and hedge a strategy for the worst-case scenario.

Lt Gen RK Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), former DGMI

The present situation in Afghanistan does not look very promising, but the full blame of the situation cannot be laid on President Karzai. The US must take its fair share for tardy progress, the worsening of the situation between 2002-08, the lack of proper plans or policies to achieve the requisite goals of raising the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Most of the serious work in this regard began only since 2008. Till then \$50 billion had already been spent and since then, the Obama administration has requisitioned \$20 billion more. Adjusting for inflation, this amount is double that which was spent on post-war Germany, and four times that which was spent on post-war Japan.

Any assessment in Afghanistan should have certain yardsticks. For instance, are the US and its allies assisting in creating a sustainable national government? Are they establishing systems to ensure that a certain level of democracy pervades the system? Are they taking the necessary steps to ensure that an effective ANSF will be able to take charge when the time for transition comes? A military assessment is far more difficult – counterinsurgency operations cannot show results like conventional wars. Perceptions change gradually and expecting dramatic results is unrealistic. Gen Petraeus and those of his ilk believe that though counterinsurgency is more favourable to success, there cannot be any question of reconciliation unless the Taliban are beaten down to it. Until then, the focus should be on reintegrating those who want to change positions willingly.

Contrary to newspaper reports, things on ground are looking quite optimistic. The US forces, in conjunction with the ANA, are getting results which they weren't earlier. Very gradually, the writ of the government is coming in effect in southern Afghanistan – in Kandahar, Helmand to name two important districts. If Gen Petraeus is allowed to stay, and given more troops instead of facing an abrupt withdrawal, they may get results even in spite of Pakistan.

The US political establishment, led by Vice President Biden, is skeptical. They feel that the counterinsurgency strategy won't succeed, and therefore, are reluctant to push further in this regard. But it bears keeping in mind that these are not the US

forces of the Vietnam era. It is a pure volunteer force, and on ground, they're confident – given time and resources, they are capable of getting results. While the civilian political establishment is disenchanted with the 9-year timeline, Indian experience attests to the fact that the results the US forces have achieved in 9 years are remarkable.

The future scenario is not very clear, as evident from the outcome of the Lisbon conference. While NATO is clear about withdrawing from combat operations in 2014, the US has not given any such concrete guidelines. President Obama may well hedge on any firm policy, depending on the outcome of the 2012 elections. The situation in the Afghanistan government is as uncertain. President Karzai had hoped that his supporters would gain a 2/3 majority in the recent parliamentary elections, which would have allowed him to ratify reconciliation agreements, as also amend the constitution to give himself a third term in office. However, since he was only able to get 82 members, his endeavours in this regard did not work out.

India's role in Afghanistan remains constant, despite the influences of the US, NATO and Pakistan. Most of the elite in Afghanistan have been educated in India, at some point or the other, which cannot be stopped. India should continue giving them the support, the teachers and the possibilities for advancement. It should ensure that its presence remains in a pervasive, while not necessarily dominant manner. However, it should not be found wanting for contingency plans, which must also include possibilities from Central Asia.

Dr Mohan Guruswamy, Chairman and Founder, Centre for Policy Alternatives

Before one can judge the viability of strategies in Afghanistan, it is important to judge whether or not it is worthwhile to expend time, money and effort when they may simply be nations by accident, and not justifiable in their existence. If one notes the position of nations in Europe, nationalities conform to the state boundaries. It is not the case in India or the US, because unlike the European ones, these are citizen states and not nation-states. If one takes note of Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, ethnicities run rampant, regardless of the colonial borders and thus, are difficult to sustain.

Pakistan's economy is fast becoming unsustainable – its total budget is the size of India's defence budget, only 2 per cent of its population pays any income tax, and 18 per cent of its GDP is crime (opium) related. National intelligence estimates of the US states that if the Pakistani government is unable to hold on to power, a coalition of Pashtun tribes is likely to take control, maximising their stake at the expense of the Punjabis and other groups, summing up its position that Pakistan is a 'wild card'. India's estimation of Pakistan is considerably different. The Indian foreign office has stated that it is committed to the unity and integrity of Pakistan; something, ironically, which not many Pakistani are committed to.

In effect, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are countries which have been cobbled together as a result of various circumstances. While Pakistan did have the advantage of some systems of governance right from its foundation, Afghanistan didn't. Moreover, given the terrain in Afghanistan, it is not possible for the US to win a war, militarily or otherwise, in Afghanistan. It should cut its losses and opt out as early as possible. In terms of future scenarios, the plan envisioned by Amb Blackwill is most likely to come about and therefore, should be supported.

As far as India's role is concerned, Afghanistan is one of the few places in the regional periphery where Indians are liked. There is no need for the Indian government to constantly hanker for a place at the high table when it comes to Afghanistan – it will not be worthwhile. It should plan for a post-US withdrawal situation, and should maintain some influence with the Northern Alliance and others of its ilk.

Discussion

- Reconciliation and reintegration is very much in the air in Afghanistan. A serious dialogue process is underway between President Karzai, the Taliban and Pakistan, albeit outside Afghanistan – in the UAE, Turkey, the Maldives.
- The current strategy being practiced in Afghanistan is the Push, Pull, and Hammer strategy – Push the Taliban from the FATA/NWFP to Afghanistan, Pull those elements in who are willing to be integrated, Hammer those elements who've been pulled into Afghanistan, but continue to be recalcitrant.
- There is a working group in place in Afghanistan to look at a post-transition phase, either in 2011 or 2014, on how to create greater synergy with the remaining ISAF forces.
- Afghans believe that the ANA is coming of age and improving in operational capabilities. Post 2014, they should be able to undertake successful operations independently.
- While it may prove to be useful for India to have a dialogue with the Pakistan Army on Afghanistan, given that it hasn't been able to resolve long-standing bilateral issues, any success in this regard would probably be elusive.
- It would be disingenuous to state that the US, with almost 100,000 troops on the ground, is not looking for a conventional, military victory. However, it is true that the definition of any such victory has also changed. Unlike Germany or Japan, there is no room for territorial gain or total annihilation, respectively.
- There have been many plans for enlarging the training responsibilities for India, but they've always been scuttled at the last minute, either by Pakistan, or by the UN on Pakistan's behest. Pakistan would prefer that the Afghans were trained in Pakistan, which the Afghans seek to avoid at any cost. However, more training

contingents should not be suggested by India unless the Afghans and the US are especially forthcoming.

- On the question of welcoming any Balkanisation, it must be kept in mind that if Pashtunistan becomes a reality, there would be much unrest, instability and spillover in India for the foreseeable future. And if there is Indian interest to continue developmental work in Afghanistan, it wouldn't fit in a Balkanised future. It must be kept in mind that the forces of Islamic radicalism are very potent. So the rational view to take would be to protect oneself if Balkanisation does become a reality, but there is no reason to actively promote or instigate it.
- The UN does have presence on the ground and a role to play in Afghanistan, but the larger question which bears asking is that of any UN effectiveness. The major powers tend to run roughshod on them, to fulfill their own objectives. Increasingly, the UN is no longer at the forefront of resolving international conflicts, or following its own charter.
- Refugees from Afghanistan, no matter their ethnic background, have always been treated improperly, as sub-standard citizens, even in their ethnic homelands. Such ill-treatment has fostered a fierce sense of nationalism within them. While they may fight each other for their space in Afghanistan, they will unite, as Afghans, against any intervening parties. This pervasive sense of nationalism cannot be disregarded.
- India must place Afghanistan squarely within Indo-Pak relations – it is as central to it as Kashmir. For India, it should function as one front of Pakistan. And since the Indian desire has been to open a second front, this one should be pursued. However, such a front need not be necessarily military – it may be economic, cultural, or via training. But given that India is well-regarded in Afghanistan, it is an opportunity which must not be squandered.

Closing Remarks: Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd), Director, CLAWS

There is strategic stalemate in Afghanistan, with neither side capable of winning, nor wanting to give up. The trend lines for transition are not promising. The Pakistan Army is playing a double game, which leads to counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan being even more ineffective. India should consider putting troops on the ground, as part of a regional effort post-US exit. To begin with, a brigade group could be supported from the air, or through the Bandar Abbas-Zaranj-Delaram route. If Pakistan is not keen on India being involved in the east and south, Indian troops can be sent to either the north or the west. Once the logistics are worked out, the strength should be ratcheted up to a division. Strategically, an Indian infantry division on Pakistan's western border would be very meaningful.

(Report compiled by Samarjit Ghosh, Associate Fellow, CLAWS)