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‘Green on Blue’: Clash of Colours in the Afghan Coalition

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Abstract

Afghanistan has proved to be the quagmire that has sunk many an invader. Getting in is not always easy, and getting out even more difficult. This is also now the experience of the United States and other foreign forces. The ‘green on blue’ attacks are symptomatic of the existing complexities. The plan to leave behind a large Afghan National Army, also without assured requisite funding upon Western withdrawal in 2014, is not a good one. The chances are, as before, and as has happened in the case of Libya, the Army will dissolve into militias on ethnic and tribal lines, exacerbating intra-mural conflicts. It will be more worthwhile spending the available resources on ‘peace-building’ projects, some of which have already been tested, than on a non-existent sense of central, or Kabul-based, security.

Introduction

Invading Afghanistan must surely be one of the most difficult undertakings in the annals of warfare. Holding on to it must be even more so. For thousands of years this arid patch of inhospitable territory has been the graveyard of foreign armies. For the same amount of time it has also been their lure like a Lorelei of the desert, inducing them to enter, with its fatal attractions and then destroying them. The attractions are not resources or riches but mainly

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Afghanistan's strategic location as gateways to South, Central and West Asia. To this one should add a modicum of romance fed by the tales of a wild, often seen as fiercely freedom-loving and nomadic culture of the many tribes that inhabit this land. From Alexander the Great in 326 BC, through Ahmed Shah Durrani in the 1700s, to the British in the 19th and the Russians in the 20th to the Americans and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) in the 21st centuries, conquerors have achieved only varying degrees of success. None has entirely prevailed. History has repeated itself with relentless regularity. Alas, man has not drawn lessons from it. Not even to this day!

Foreign Forces in Afghanistan

In all fairness it must be said of the US and NATO forces that none of the above attractions of romance or resources caused the Western invasion in 2001. The reasons were more urgently political and pressingly immediate. Afghanistan was serving as a haven for the terrorist Al Qaeda. Its Taliban rulers led by Mullah Omar was sheltering the alleged master-mind of the New York '9/11' plot, Osama bin Laden. The US demanded that Osama be handed over. It was a demand unlikely to have been met because of a variety of reasons including the Pashtunwali culture that accorded enormous privilege to guests, including to the most undesirable ones. Moreover, US popularity by then had been considerably dented in the Muslim world because of President George W. Bush's Iraq imbroglio. As a result, the Taliban were not predisposed to easily oblige. In the event, even if bin Laden could not be had, the dislodging of the Taliban was a fair prize. So the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. The Taliban decamped from Kabul, Mullah Omar and bin Laden, however, proving as elusive as the Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq.

Thereafter the United Nations Security Council got into the act. And in December that year, UNSC Resolution 1386 gave mandate-cover to the foreign presence on Afghan soil. It created the International Security Assistance Force which drew troops, often in token numbers, from many countries. However, the brunt was to be borne mainly by the US and the United Kingdom. A government led by Hamid Karzai was installed in Kabul. While in the circumstances he was condemned to be tainted by a touch of the Manchukuo in terms of his reputation, also, as luck would have it, his government appeared to fall into corrupt ways. The Taliban retreated, regrouped, and returned in 2003, with the leadership allegedly headquartered at Quetta in Pakistan.

What followed was a war of attrition comparable in time and effect to the siege of Troy in the Classical Age. Or, even the deadly and indecisive battle of the Marne in Modern Times (World War I). The alien presence gave the Taliban an opportunity to sharpen and hone their asymmetric-warfare skills which they did with gay abandon. When President Barack Obama came to office, he understandably focused on ending the 'no-win' situation. He ordered a 'surge'

of 33,000 troops, akin to further 'bleeding' (in older medical parlance) to end the pain. The result was only mixed. Thereupon he invited the US allies to Chicago in May 2012, laid out an 'exit strategy' and declared a complete pull-out by 2014. Security would thereafter be the responsibility of the Afghan police and Army who would by then number 352,000. These were being raised and trained. On paper it seemed like a neat plan.

The rub lay in its execution. Afghans are being recruited into these forces as planned. The problem is that not all Afghans see their Western 'coalition partners' as friends and comrades. Of late their numbers appear to be on the rise. Often they turn their guns on the Americans, the British and other allies. This is called 'green on blue' named after the colours of their respective uniforms. Till mid-September this year, 51 international troops have been killed by their Afghan colleagues, while the number last year was 35. This, compared to a total of nine in the three previous years combined. It is not the numbers that are important. It is the psychological impact. The American, the British or the Australian has no way to tell which Afghan is friendly, and which is not. Many are in understandable awe of the armed Afghan in their midst. They can be forgiven for thinking that the day the Afghan colleague has not shot at them is a day he has spent on planning, and waiting! The resultant paranoia has led many joint operations to be scaled back. This doubtless will have implications for any future co-operation, and for now any future without such co-operation is inconceivable.

The 'Insider Attacks'

How is this phenomenon of the so-called 'insider attacks' to be explained? Why are the 'green' turning on the 'blue'? What is causing the clash of colours to morph into conflict in this coalition? Simply to say that the Taliban has infiltrated the allied ranks is insufficient, though it is partly true. Infiltration is very much a part and parcel of asymmetric warfare in which the Taliban seem to excel. But there are other causes as well. It should come as no surprise that there are many Afghans who are now out to avenge the killing or maiming of a near and dear one, whether a collateral victim or otherwise of allied action. Revenge is looked upon as an obligatory reaction and indeed as a mark of manliness in that society. Unfortunately the one upon which it is wreaked is not always the one who is guilty. Yet another cause is common to all societies, a feeling of resentment against the foreign occupier. Afghanistan may not as yet always inspire nationalistic patriotism, but it does have strong tribal identities which lead to viewing the alien as the enemy. Finally recent events such as the anti-Islamic movie in the US or the objectionable cartoons on the Prophet of Islam in a French magazine have fuelled a sense of deep anger. The common Afghan soldier may not be in a position to appreciate principles of 'freedom of speech' and, consequently, may have the predilection to use the weapon in hand to avenge a grave perceived slight.

For a nation of fighters (or various nations, as to bracket together the northern tribes of Taziks and Uzbeks with the Pashtuns of the south will require papering over some sharp fault-lines, both ethnic and ideological), the Afghans more often than not had a weak central army. That is because central governance was seldom powerful, and the tribes being nomadic were largely rootless. Necessities of livelihood or security caused them to move from place to place, often from province to province. But for their animals, they had few possessions and therefore little impediments to this kind of lifestyle. Yet geographically and strategically the territory was important. This rendered Afghanistan a prey to the powers of the day – principally Russia and Britain – which were locked in a conflicting relationship that was named ‘the Great Game’ in the 1840s by Arthur Conolly, an officer of the British-Indian Sixth Bengal Light Infantry. The Afghan Army was first organised in the early 18th century by the Durrani rulers. After the Anglo-Afghan wars the British sought to re-organise it in the 1880s. In contemporary times, King Amanullah and Zahir Shah attempted, with some success, to modernise it. It performed poorly, however, in the fight against the Mujahideen during the Soviet occupation between 1978 and 1989. There is not much to show for the fact that it will not be the same, this time under Western tutelage vis-à-vis the Taliban. Dauntless individual warriors do not necessarily collectively make a powerful force.

Post-Withdrawal Development-Paradigm

Mere understanding of a problem does not necessarily lead to a solution. But it surely helps in moving towards it. Some of these problems will be automatically resolved with the passage of time. When the foreign forces have largely withdrawn, then the collateral damage suffered by Afghans will also diminish, and the cause for revenge will probably disappear substantially. Over time the slights from cartoons and movie-clips will be forgotten, and with the spread of education curiosity about alien cultures will be enhanced in a way that is both positive and healthy. Between then and now, the best strategy should to comprehend the nature of provocation and deliver as less of it as possible.

It is a fact that in a changing world, in those parts we are talking about, the friendly Mahbub Alis to Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Kim’ is perhaps on the decline. The local surrogate who would enable a replay of the Great Game will be increasingly difficult to locate. The solution of the Afghan problem cannot be crafted in distant capitals but must be left to the region, to those immediately concerned. The time may have come to intellectually accept a Taliban-oriented government in Kabul, perhaps in not-too-distant future. But it can be an enlightened one unlike its previous incarnation. The answer may lie in nation-building interventions, like those introduced by some regional civil societies. Asked if a programme like ‘girls’ education’ would not go against the grain of local culture, the head of one such civil society, BRAC of Bangladesh, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed told the author: “The purpose of intervention is to change the culture”. The current behaviour-pattern of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt may serve as a case in point.

It must be added that BRAC has been involved in many areas in Afghanistan in such fields as micro-credit, education of women and health for some years now. BRAC officials have confirmed to the author that the Taliban have been, contrary to received wisdom, enthusiastically receptive. These should be the components of any post-withdrawal development-paradigm in Afghanistan. This would also provide development-oriented Western countries, including those of the European Union, a more positive method of engagement with the Afghans. Such activities can form the core of ‘peace-building’ in Afghanistan, and constitute the best chance to ensure that there is no slide back into the conflict-situation of status quo ante.

Conclusion

The vast projected force of 352,000 Afghan men in arms is too ambitious, and costly. NATO has calculated it would require US\$ 4 billion annually. The US is to bear the lion’s share and the others are to fork out US\$ 1.3 billion every year. There is absolutely every reason to believe that any future Administration in Washington would find this unpalatable. This is all the more true, because the ‘green on blue attacks’, unlikely to completely subside even in the post-withdrawal phase (indeed the smaller number of foreign troops that remain might become more vulnerable) will empower those in the Congress who will argue for complete cut-off. To date the UK has assured only US\$ 110 million of security support every year. Others have not been heard from on the subject. Even in the unlikely situation that such vast sums are forthcoming, it would be a pity to spend it for security while development remains starved. That would only bring us back to square one.

Not only will the planned Army be too large for the immediate post-withdrawal Kabul government to control, but factors such as lack of funding will force it to fragment into militias, as in Libya, and along tribal and ethnic lines. We are all witness to the efforts of the Libyan authorities to curb their lawless militia that have given the Arab Spring a bad name. As in medicine, also in the lexicon of politics, prevention is better than cure. So the Afghan Army must be smaller and leaner. Many may challenge Lenin’s ideological legacy, but he has left behind a number of gems as aphorisms, and one such was when he said: ‘Better fewer, but better!’

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