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Negotiations and great games in Afghanistan

By Brian M Downing

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Hopes for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan are beginning once more, but the problematic Byzantine geopolitics are not readily apparent. It is not the bipolar confrontation between Britain and Russia that it was in the 19th century. Nor is it simply the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) against the Taliban.

The war in Afghanistan involves Pakistan against India, China against India, the Pashtun Afghans against the northern peoples, Saudi Arabia against Iran, and Russia against China. So arcane and intricate are these conflicts that the US is allied with enemies and at odds with allies.

Pakistan against India

Afghanistan has long been a theater in the long conflict between Pakistan and India. The two states have been rivals since their inception and thus far India has been the political, economic, and military winner - a disturbing imbalance which decisively shapes the outlooks of the Pakistani army and parts of the population.

Following Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 war in which it lost East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) it embarked on infusing religion with nationalism, and the aspirations and animosities of the army became part of education in the country's *madrassas* (seminaries). In the absence of a significant national school system, this meant that army ideology became pervasive.

Afghanistan took on immense strategic value. The foreboding mountainous regions along the Af-Pak line offered a solid redoubt from which the army could continue the fight should India's demonstrably superior conventional forces conquer the Punjab, Sindh, and other low-lying areas. Behind the mountains dwell the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan - fellow Muslims and close cousins of the Pashtun in Northwest Pakistan.

The army spread its nationalist-Islam across the Af-Pak line via indigenous mullahs and students who came from Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan. It was hoped to solidify the potential Afghan redoubt and to counter Indian influence with non-Pashtun people in northern Afghanistan, but it soon became part of a more global contest.

United States and Pakistani intelligence urged Afghans to revolt against the Kabul government then aligned with the Soviet Union. The ensuing Soviet war and Pakistan's role in funding mujahideen groups are well known. Nonetheless, it bears noting that Pakistan allocated US and Saudi funds with an eye to bolstering its position against India and that reliable Pashtun forces were better funded than those closer to India.

In the chaotic aftermath of the 1989 Soviet departure, Pakistan threw its support behind the Taliban - a group that to some extent evolved from the Hizb-i-Islami (Khalis) mujahideen force. The Taliban served Pakistan well by subduing warlordism and banditry, which had hindered commerce between Pakistan and the Central Asian republics that came into being with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Taliban drove the India-backed forces into a remote corner of northern Afghanistan and the east was used for base camps of the various proxy groups Pakistan deploys against India, including Jaish-i-Mohammed, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-i-Taiba.

At present, these groups wage war on India by attacking its diplomats and aid programs in Afghanistan, by fighting an insurgency in India-administered Kashmir, and by striking inside India itself as with Lashkar-i-Taiba's 2008 attack on Mumbai.

India counters Pakistan by building support among the non-Pashtun peoples of the north. It supported them during the Soviet war and stayed with them during the civil war and the Taliban rule. Indian teams are building roads and other economic assets and are almost certainly keeping contact with the northern commanders it has backed over the past 30 years.

Pakistan is in a strong position to influence a negotiated settlement. It gives insurgent groups and key leaders safe haven; it has proven able to assassinate politicians involved in negotiations; and it controls a good deal of US and ISAF logistics, especially the lethal materiel thought banned by Russia from its routes.

Pakistan will likely insist that Afghan resources flow out to world markets through Pakistani ports and that Central Asian resources (especially gas from Turkmenistan) use the same routes. Pakistan will also insist that Indian influence be minimal and that any connections to Baloch separatist movements be terminated.

China against India

The decades-long conflict between the two largest Asian powers began with border disputes that flared into skirmishes and in 1962, into a brief war. Each side sees the other as supporting insurgencies and separatist movements inside its territory.

Across South Asia, India and China compete through building capital ships and acquiring port facilities. China has naval bases in Myanmar and Sri Lanka and may be seeking another in the Seychelles, between India and China's key trade partners in Africa. India is holding naval maneuvers with Vietnam, another country that has had border incidents with China; and in conjunction with the US, India is seeking to detach Myanmar from China's fold.

In Central Asia, India and China contend for local influence by developing economic opportunities and at least pondering military bases. China was a minor supporter of the mujahideen during the Soviet war but has skillfully remained above the fighting there today. It has nonetheless become the big winner in carving out mining and hydrocarbon enclaves in Afghanistan, with the world's largest copper mine already in operation and a potentially lucrative oil deal signed in late 2011.

India was a more prominent supporter of the mujahideen, especially the northerners who were given short shrift by the Pakistani army, which allocated US and Saudi funds to its Pashtun favorites. In this respect, India and China cooperated in opposing the Soviet Union.

After the USSR and US packed and left in the early 1990s, India continued to support the northern resistance to the Taliban. This has won India a measure of respect with northerners but it lags behind China in persuading President Hamid Karzai to grant business operations.

India's goals are geopolitical though and extend outside Afghanistan. It has gotten an airbase in Tajikistan only a few kilometers north of Afghanistan - and quite close to China's oil tracts in Afghanistan's Kunduz province. Its influence in Central Asia will be limited by Moscow's continued influence there and its reluctance to make its southern periphery a theater in the Sino-Indian contest.

China shares a small, odd border with Afghanistan, but it is of little economic use. Northern routes to China pass through volatile parts of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that are experiencing Islamist unrest and emerging insurgencies.

Pakistan, then, is vital to China's geopolitical and economic ambitions in Afghanistan. Copper and iron ore are trucked south to Pakistani ports; a railroad is being built connecting the oil tracts in Kunduz with the Khyber Pass and then to Pakistani ports.

China, however, is becoming wary of over-reliance on Pakistan. Its South Asian partner is wracked by political instability, sectarian conflict, horrific crime, and separatist movements. Baloch separatists have been known to target Chinese personnel. Pakistan's ties to various terrorist groups are becoming problematic, both internally as the groups occasionally turn against Pakistan itself and externally as they may be leading Pakistan into becoming a pariah state.

Pashtun against non-Pashtun

Conflict is simmering between the Pashtun and non-Pashtun peoples of Afghanistan. Though it to some extent overlaps with the ongoing insurgency and entails foreign intrigues, the conflict rests on ethnic mistrust that goes back decades.

It's well known that Afghanistan contains a number of different ethnic groups. A local witticism says that when the world was made, all the peoples who didn't fit anywhere else were placed in what became Afghanistan. State and society worked reasonably well as long as the former stayed weak and the latter stayed independent - "mutual indifference" as Olivier Roy described it.

The arrangement came apart in the late 1970s when Kabul embarked on a modernization effort that called for a stronger state with a greater presence in the localities. Decades of insurgency, civil war, and warlordism ensued and recreating a new political arrangement has been elusive.

The non-Pashtun peoples of northern Afghanistan - Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmen and others - have become wary of, if not hostile to, the Pashtuns of the south. Northerners contend that the Pashtun overstate their population to claim a majority and the right to govern. (In fact, they are probably about 42%.) Non-Pashtuns point to a long list of Pashtun emirs, kings, and presidents who have blundered, come under the influence of foreign powers, and otherwise misgoverned the country - some egregiously so.

Karzai, a Popalzai Pashtun, is, in the northerner perspective, only the most recent Pashtun on the list. Karzai's artlessness in selecting provincial and district officials and his openness to cash payments have undermined efforts to rebuild the state and greatly contributed to the disquiet that insurgent groups have built upon.

Northerners also see Karzai as too willing and too naive to negotiate with the Taliban - another Pashtun government whose return to power northerners dread. Karzai's political failures have put the country at risk of falling back into the hands of the Taliban and their army overlords in Pakistan.

Northern elders and politicians are searching for a way to reduce Pashtun political control and escape another round of Taliban rule. Publicly they call for a federal form of government that will give them regional autonomy. In private they discuss breaking away altogether with the help

of the army, the rank and file of which are northerners who resent the haughty and inept Pashtun officer corps.

Tensions between Afghans are plain enough to regional powers. Pakistani intelligence is thought complicit in assassinating northern politicians who present obstacles to Taliban and Pakistani control in Afghanistan. India, fearful of Pakistani influence in Central Asia, is supportive of northern autonomy but is not in a position to bring it about. Events, however, may be leading something close to it.

The US wishes to keep Afghanistan intact, but the strength of the insurgency in the south and the political and logistical need to reduce its troop levels require withdrawal from many parts of the Pashtun south. The US effort, then, may have to concentrate in a handful of enclaves in the south and in the northern provinces - a move that will be most welcome in the north.

Saudi Arabia against Iran

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the most dangerous one in the world today as ongoing events in the Persian Gulf attest. They vie in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and throughout the Gulf. Afghanistan is another theater of this contest.

Tensions between the two powers can of course be traced back to the Sunni-Shi'ite chasm but all was held in check when both played roles in the US's "twin pillars" strategy for Gulf security. With the fall of the shah (1979) and Ayatollah Ruhollah's Khomeini's call for uprisings throughout the Islamic world, however, antagonisms grew, even though Khomeini's calls were generally ignored.

The ouster of Saddam Hussein (2003) greatly destabilized the region. Saudi Arabia saw Saddam's military state as a strategic obstacle to Iranian-Shi'ite expansion. Riyadh counseled Washington not to oust him, as it would lead to a majority Shi'ite government that would ally with Iran and endanger the region. Events have shown Riyadh to be the wiser judge.

Iran has longstanding interests inside Afghanistan. The Hazara people are Farsi-speaking Shi'ites who constitute about 9% of the population and who suffered greatly under the Taliban which deemed them heretics. The Tajiks are about 25% of the population and though chiefly Sunni, have linguistic and cultural ties to Iran.

Hazaras and Tajiks along with other northern peoples enjoyed Iranian support during the Soviet war and the long internal fighting that ensued. Hazara clerics look to fellow Shi'ite authorities in Iran on religious matters, though not necessarily to the ayatollahs who rule the country. Indeed, the authority of Hazara clerics has prevented the warlordism that has plagued the rest of Afghanistan, which has helped to make Central Afghanistan relatively tranquil.

Saudi Arabia has sought to counter Iranian influence in Afghanistan. In 1990, in the chaotic aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal, the Saudis, in conjunction with Pakistani intelligence and a Pashtun mujahideen commander, attempted to oust the Iranian-backed northern government. It

was thwarted, paradoxically enough, in part by US diplomatic pressure. Memory of the coup is not far from mind among concerned parties.

Iran sees the Taliban as another Saudi-Pakistani force - an aberrant, intolerant Sunni sect. Taliban zealotry stems from the Deobandi madrassas of Pakistan which enjoy lavish subsidies from the Saudi state and Wahhabi clerics. These schools put forth militants eager to join with anti-Shi'ite groups inside Pakistan such as Sipah-i-Sahaba, which the Pakistani army created to suppress Shi'ism following the Iranian revolution. During the Taliban's rule, they massacred tens of thousand of Hazaras, seized the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, and killed several diplomats.

Outside Pakistan, the Deobandi faithful serve in Saudi forces that repress Shi'ite movements calling for civil rights in the Gulf region. They also form key components of the Saudi army where they serve with Sunni veterans of the Iraqi army. They are soldiers in the Saudi campaign to surround and contain Iran - successors to Saddam Hussein's army that invaded and devastated Iran.

The Taliban nonetheless draw limited support from Iran as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) provides weaponry to Afghan insurgents and trains them on its Zahedan base just inside Iran. It does so in the hope of deflecting them from the anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'ite path that the Saudis promote, but perhaps more importantly as a warning to the US. Should the US or one of its allies attack Iran, the Afghan insurgents will enjoy far more assistance from the IRGC.

The effort against Iranian influence in Afghanistan may have developed a new dimension with the suicide bombings last December on the Shi'ite Hazaras as they observed Ashura. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a Pakistani militant group with a long history of attacking Shi'ites and anyone else deemed impure, has taken credit for it. The LeJ broke away from Sipah-e-Sahaba and has taken part in murders and assassination attempts on politicians and continued its intimidation of Shi'ites and Christians, primarily inside Pakistan.

The suicide team's training, weaponry, and long passage from sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan to targets in the south and north imply considerable assistance. LeJ's robust anti-Shi'ite credentials may have caught the eye of Saudi intelligence. Striking at the Hazaras is an indirect attack on Iran and it may augur a direct attack from Iran's east.

China against Russia

Aside from the insurgency, ethnic mistrust, and intrigues of neighboring countries, Afghanistan is a place of contention between China and Russia. Though there is Russian triangulation at work, the US is closer to Russia in this nettlesome situation.

A Russian geological survey found great mineralogical promise in Afghanistan, as did a recent US study. Metal ores and increasingly strategic rare earths abound, and preliminary studies suggest appreciable oil and gas reserves.

Further, Afghanistan is part of, and a gateway to, Central Asia. A vast region left largely

undeveloped while under Soviet rule, it is now open to development. Corporations and states are scrambling for advantage.

China has a leg up in Afghanistan. It operates the largest copper mine in the world and is building sizable iron mines too. It recently obtained oil licenses in Kunduz province in the north-central part of the country and is well along in linking Kunduz by rail to the Khyber Pass. Curiously, Chinese operations proceed without incident, even in regions with insurgent activity, leading some to suspect that China has, through its Pakistan ally, arranged a modus vivendi with the Taliban.

To the north, in Central Asia, China is acquiring oil licenses in Kazakhstan's Tenghiz field - in at least one case after a peculiar termination of US rights. China has built a pipeline connecting these fields to northwest China - the center of domestic oil production. The pipeline rivals a Russian line to the Far East, which poses an economic and diplomatic threat too as Russian relations with Japan and South Korea are shaped by Russian oil.

China is expanding, economically and diplomatically at this point, into areas that Russia considers areas of profound national interest. Further, China's growing economic and military power and the ominous ambitiousness revealed in recent novelist ventures are causing concern in Russia, whose trans-Ural territories are vast, resource rich, and indefensible. Parts of Siberia, after all, were seized from China in centuries past - events not considered historical trivia in either capital.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Russia helped the US secure bases in former Soviet republics to support the Northern Alliance in ousting the Taliban and rebuild Afghanistan. Since then, as US relations with Pakistan deteriorate and supply lines from Karachi become more unreliable, Russia has been invaluable in US/ISAF logistics.

Russia has a decided ambivalence about the US presence in Afghanistan. It has profound misgivings about the proximity of troops of a recent mortal enemy and present-day adversary on many issues, but it has even graver misgivings about Islamist militancy along the Af-Pak frontier and in Central Asia.

Among the Pakistani army's client groups are a number of Chechens whose organizations strike inside Russia, even in Moscow. Remnants of the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan and a kindred group from Tajikistan operate with al Qaeda and seek to return to their countries one day. The Fergana Valley, which stretches from Kyrgyzstan through Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, seethes with social and religious unrest and is of considerable concern in and out of the region.

Russia has a growing Muslim population and a stagnant Christian one. Its younger, educated people are emigrating in worrisome numbers. It looks warily at Islamic and Islamist tides near its former republics and the oil-bearing Caucasus region. Russia would prefer to see the US wear down the Taliban or consolidate in northern Afghanistan to continue the effort. If Russia did not want the US there, it could stop the supply trains and maroon an American army on the Afghan plains.

Russia also wishes to encourage the continuance of the US-backed containment around China's periphery, from South Korea to Vietnam and India. China is now the focus of US foreign policy and Russia wishes it to remain so, without its own participation in the arrangement.

Russia also encourages non-Chinese investment in Central Asia, which in the absence of sufficient Russian capital and expertise, is preferable to the region's becoming a Chinese sphere of influence or more - as is Afghanistan, or at least large parts of it. Basic commodities such as iron and copper and the increasingly valuable rare earths must not be so concentrated in Chinese hands as to allow Beijing to control prices and exert pressure on foreign states.

The US response to 9/11 plunged it into a bewildering geopolitical maze that it is only now appreciating. The US now finds itself sharing key strategic interests with an enemy, Iran, as both support the northern Afghans and oppose the Taliban. Saudi Arabia, US ally against Iran elsewhere, supports Pakistan and indirectly its Taliban proxy. Strange bedfellows.

The prospects for US and Taliban negotiators weighing and balancing the interests of various powers are not promising. Nor is the prospect of Pakistan acting as impartial mediator, attractive and inevitable as that will seem to the Pakistani army.

More promising, however, is the widespread hostility to the Taliban and its supporters in the Pakistani army. All the concerned powers see the Pakistani army as the institutional sponsor of an array of militant groups, including the Taliban, that enjoy safe have along the Af-Pak line and threaten Russia, Iran, China, India, and many Afghans as well.

In this respect, the prospects for a settlement are more likely if arrived at in conjunction with the various concerned powers, unattractive and unforeseen as that maybe to the Pakistani army.