

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپائی

[Asia Times Online](http://AsiaTimesOnline.com)

Ill-wind blows for a 'neutral' Afghanistan

By M K Bhadrakumar
7/23/24/2010

Maybe there is an air about the brooding Hindu Kush mountains that lends inscrutability to politics and history. It touched Tuesday's Kabul international conference on Afghanistan, where the subtext was of far greater interest than the open agenda. In fact, when it comes to the Afghan problem, it is almost inevitably the case that the surreal takes precedence over the real.

Thus it was surreal that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is still not quite done, after failing to win in Afghanistan, with its first "real" war in its six decades of history as a military alliance, and it is certainly not contemplating a return to its natural habitat. NATO seems to have fallen for the adrenalin rush of the primeval tumult that people of the Hindu Kush live with and seems to loathe the dull prospect of returning to the predictability of a settled life in Europe.

NATO's longing for adventure seems to have been a key subtext of the Kabul gathering on Tuesday, which was attended by 60 countries. The big players at the conference danced around it, poking a finger or two at it to test how real it is or could be in the coming days and weeks in a setting like Afghanistan where nothing is quite certain until it physically arrives.

The statements made by the foreign ministers of the US, Russia and China at the Kabul conference assume significance in this regard.

Rasmussen's shot in the air

The stage for the shadow play was duly set by none other than the NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. In an extraordinary "curtain-raiser" on the eve of the conference, exuding a high degree of optimism about the war, Rasmussen wrote that NATO was "finally taking the fight to the Taliban" aimed at the "marginalization of the Taliban as a political and military force ... [which] will encourage many who joined the Taliban to quit their ranks and engage in the reconciliation effort."

But tucked away more than halfway down in his highly-publicized article was a curious sub-text: BLOCKQUOTE> Starting the transition does not mean that the struggle for Afghanistan's future as a stable country in a volatile region will be over. Afghanistan will need the continued support of the international community, including NATO. The Afghan population needs to know that we will continue to stand by them as they chart their own course into the future. To underline this commitment, I believe that NATO should develop a long-term cooperation agreement with the Afghan government.

Very little ingenuity is needed to estimate that Rasmussen would never venture into the public airing of such a profound thought regarding NATO's future in the post-Afghan war Central Asian region - the hidden agenda of this Clausewitzian war all along - without checking out in advance with Washington, nay, except at the bidding of the Barack [Obama administration](#).

By a coincidence, Rasmussen's idea has appeared on the eve of the expected award of a contract by the US Defense Department to build a sprawling US Special Forces base in northern Afghanistan near Mazar-i-Sharif. The US is undertaking the project on a priority footing at a cost of as much as US\$100 million. The base, in the Amu Darya region straddling Central [Asia](#), will become operational by the end of 2011, or at the latest by early 2012.

According to available details, the 17-acre (6.8 hectare) site of the new [American military](#) base is hardly 35 kilometers from the border of Uzbekistan and it seems set to become the pendant of a "string of pearls" that the US is kneading through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan along the "soft underbelly" of Russia and China's Xinjiang.

How would the countries in the region size up the startling prospect that the US and NATO are possibly quitting the Afghan war by 2014 and yet preparing to settle down for a long stay in the Hindu Kush?

Moscow reacts

The only forthright reaction so far has come from Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointedly underlined in his statement at the Kabul conference the importance of recognizing Afghanistan's future "neutral status", which would preclude any sort of permanent foreign military presence. To quote Lavrov:

The restoration of the neutral status of Afghanistan is designed to become one of the key factors of creating an atmosphere of good-neighborly relations and cooperation in the region. We expect that this idea will be supported by the Afghan people. The presidents of Russia and the US have already come out in favor of it.

Indeed, what is surprising is that [Obama](#) not merely seemed to favor the idea of a "neutral" Afghanistan but explicitly referred to it as a "commitment" as recently as last month when he received Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Washington. The US-Russia Joint Statement of June 24 on Afghanistan, in fact, began with the following opening statement:

The United States of America and the Russian Federation confirm our commitment to Afghanistan becoming a peaceful, stable, democratic, neutral and economically self-sufficient state, free of terrorism and narcotics, recognizing that further significant international support will be needed to achieve this goal.

Has Obama backtracked? The point is, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton uttered not a word about a "neutral" Afghanistan in all of her intervention in the Kabul conference on Tuesday, whereas she seemed to deliberately circle around Rasmussen's thought process, preferring to dilate on issues such as the importance of upholding women's rights in a future Afghanistan.

Interestingly, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi chose to visit the idea of a "neutral" Afghanistan, but somewhat tangentially. He said on Tuesday:

The international community must give continued attention to Afghanistan and follow through on the commitments made in London [conference in January] and the previous international conferences on Afghanistan. *We should respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and work together towards the early realization of 'Afghanistan run by the Afghans'. We want to see a peaceful, stable and independent Afghanistan ...* [Emphasis added.]

US holding breath

At the end of the day what really matters is [Clinton's](#) silence. It needs to be carefully weighed.

It indicates the US seems to be wary of a rebuff from the region and is gingerly going about with the unveiling of the idea of setting up permanent US/NATO bases in Afghanistan? Of course, it has been fairly well known for quite a while among regional observers that the Pentagon has been feverishly beefing up the US military bases in Afghanistan, including construction of some new ones, at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars and equipping them with facilities that enable the American troops to maintain a familiar lifestyle far away from home, which is of course conducive to the presence of long-staying GIs into a distant future among people famous for their hostility toward foreign occupation.

This was exactly what the US has done in Iraq, too, despite the end of the "combat mission" as such by September.

The US diplomats have been gently persuading capitals in the region in recent months

that, contrary to what Afghan history might suggest, the idea of a "neutral" Afghanistan isn't all that good for regional security and stability in a milieu where violent Islamist radicals are at large. Washington hopes to capitalize on the visceral fears in those capitals of a radical Islamist avalanche once the Taliban is co-opted in the power structure in Kabul.

New Delhi, for instance, has explicitly used the term "neutral" Afghanistan in its past policy pronouncements, but the Indian minister S M Krishna used a noticeably milder variant in his statement on Tuesday - and that too, rather as a barb aimed at Pakistan than as a well-thought out stance regarding Afghanistan's neutral status - by merely observing that "India is committed to the unity, integrity and independence of Afghanistan underpinned by democracy and cohesive pluralism and free from external interference."

The idea of concluding a Status of Forces Agreement with President Hamid Karzai's government, which the US officials have been considering with the active encouragement from London, now seems doable. Compared with the past year or two, the Afghan leader nowadays gets on fairly well with his Western patrons. And he may even find physical advantages in having the US and NATO provide him with a security umbrella to safeguard against any nasty surprises that the Pakistani intelligence may spring on him in the downstream of the "reconciliation" with the Taliban.

The fact of the matter is that despite exuding confidence regarding a future beyond 2014, by when he wanted the foreign troops to end the combat mission and withdraw, in his heart of hearts Karzai cannot be having the sort of requisite faith in the performance of the Afghan Army - indeed, whether the army would even hold together as an entity in the foreseeable future - if there is a determined, well-crafted putsch by the Taliban with the able backing from its Pakistani mentors once Western forces withdraw from the battle field in 2014.

Significantly, Lavrov appealed to the "Afghan people" - and not to Karzai's government, which hosted the Kabul conference - to voice the demand for the neutrality of their country and the rejection of long term foreign military presence.