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China maps an end to the Afghan war

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The article "Afghan peace needs a map" [1] which appeared in the English-language China Daily newspaper on Monday should receive careful attention. China Daily is government-owned and the article is a very rare piece of focused opinion that proposes concrete steps to be taken on the way forward in unlocking the Afghan stalemate.

The article is credited to the deputy general of the China Council for National Security Policy Studies, Li Qinggong. A conspicuous increase in the Chinese reportage on Afghanistan is noticeable lately. Conceivably, in the period since unrest appeared in Xinjiang, there is heightened concern in China over the deepening crisis in Afghanistan, which impacts China's national security.

The timing of the publication is also important. A tipping point has appeared in the eight-year Afghan war, with the international community furiously debating the pros and cons of alternate scenarios for Afghanistan. The war is at a crossroads, with the Taliban fighting to a stalemate the formidable North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces led by the United States. NATO has all but acknowledged that "victory" over the Taliban in the war may no longer be possible and what is within the realms of possibility is staving off defeat and scoring "success" in the "Afghanization" of the war.

The timing of the article is also significant insofar as the Barack Obama administration is revisiting its seven-month-old Afghan war strategy, which was enunciated in March. Broadly speaking, the pendulum of the American debate is swinging between stepping up the war effort via the augmentation of troop strength in Afghanistan or scaling down the scope of the war to a counter-insurgency operation.

There is much piquancy in that the debate is also unfolding against the backdrop of the tide of American public opinion turning against the US military involvement in Afghanistan. Then, there is the annual debate in the United Nations Security Council on Afghanistan, which began in New York on Monday. Also, the UN proposes to convene an international conference in Afghanistan within this year.

The China Daily article makes several important points. First, it bluntly calls on Washington to forthwith bring the US military operations in Afghanistan to an end. There are no caveats here while making this demand, no alibis. Simply put, the war has only resulted in aggravating the political and social turmoil in Afghanistan, causing great turbulence and violence and it has brought neither peace and stability as the George W Bush administration promised nor any "tangible benefits" to the US itself. "On the contrary, the legitimacy of the US military action has been under increasing doubt."

Clearly, therefore, the urgent necessity arises to promote reconciliation among the warring Afghan groups and this effort needs to commence with the US forthwith ending its military operations.

Second, the dramatic shift in US public opinion - with 58% of people opposing the war, according to the latest estimates - and growing skepticism about the war on Capitol Hill - especially the groundswell of opposition within the Democratic Party - casts shadows on the trajectory of the Obama administration's Afghan strategy. Certainly, Obama "cannot afford to bet his political fate on an unpopular war".

However, Obama can exploit the public and political mood in the US to salvage his presidency from the Afghan war. The article points out that from the time he assumed office as president in January, Obama has been under pressure from the Pentagon to step up the war effort. Now, "the young US president [has] the best chance to extricate himself from the Pentagon's pressures" if he chooses to tap into the rapidly growing anti-war sentiments in the country.

Obama should factor in that, if he decides to stop the war, "that would not only meet the US public expectations and save more American lives, but also help recover the US's peaceful image and enhance the president's personal political prospects".

The article stops short of drawing any historical analogy with the Lyndon Johnson presidency or the Vietnam war, but the warning comes out loud clear that the war can seriously damage Obama's political career and demolish the prospects of a second term as president.

Third, what lies ahead if the US stops its military intervention in Afghanistan? The answer is that it opens the way to a political settlement. And how is it that a settlement can be worked out? The answer is that there is no alternative but to seek a political settlement via national reconciliation. Any reconciliation process must involve all the "key actors that can play an influential role in deciding the country's prospect", especially the Afghan government, the Taliban and the forces that are commonly called "warlords".

Such an approach is predicated on the belief that the Afghan war is also principally a fratricidal strife involving Afghan factions, much as there is currently the "US factor". In actuality, various contending forces are locked in a "chaotic battle" today, which involves the US-led coalition forces, "the Afghan government troops and domestic warlords", the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces. By implication, the battle lines have blurred.

Fourth, the confusion emanating out of the Afghan political scene has added to the already existing "domestic chaos". The presidential election of August 20 has failed to produce a final result and the lingering uncertainty, which may last months, over the recount of votes adds to

the confusion, with the US urging President Hamid Karzai to go through a second-round runoff. The article stops just short of alleging that US interference muddies the Afghan political waters.

Fifth, picking up the thread from the above, the article says, "It seems that Karzai has hammered home the perception that the US is not a reliable partner that can help end Afghanistan's current predicament. Talks, he thinks, are the only way out. The Afghan president is likely to open the process of tripartite talks with the Taliban and major warlords, provided that the US ends its military action."

Sixth, the article then turns to the role of the international community. On the one hand, it calls for support from the international community for an essentially intra-Afghan peace process. On the other hand, it suggests that the international community should take advantage of the mounting anti-war sentiments in the US and "prompt" Obama to end the war and withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

Obama may find it useful to cite the "international pressures" as "another excuse" to withdraw US troops. Three major European powers - Germany, France and Britain - have sought an international conference to be held within the year to discuss the vacation of occupation of Afghanistan. The United Nations Security Council should henceforth take the lead role to organize the conference on the basis of a consensus among the permanent five as regards a road map and timetable of Afghan settlement.

A "ticklish issue" still remains as to whether the parties concerned can accept the Taliban as a key player and also as to how to "dispose of" the al-Qaeda forces, and this has a "key bearing" on the outcome of the forthcoming international conference.

Finally, the article proposes that once the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, an international peacekeeping mission will be needed to assist the Afghan government and its security forces to exercise effective control. It doesn't spell out the nature of the international force, which can be presumably under the UN or regional auspices.

This is the first time that a Chinese commentary has openly called for the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan in immediate terms as a pre-requisite of peace. What the article doesn't say becomes equally important. One, it differentiates the Afghan problem from the so-called "AfPak" approach. The article doesn't make a single reference to Pakistan, either.

However, it must be assumed that the Chinese perspective disfavors a US military presence in the region as a whole and that includes Central Asia as well as Pakistan. Two, the article puts the primacy on an intra-Afghan search for settlement with the Taliban implicitly as a legitimate Afghan faction. Nowhere does the article even remotely suggest that the Taliban are propped up by Pakistan.

Equally, the article nowhere doubts that the so-called "warlords" can be overlooked as serious protagonists on the political chessboard. This is an endorsement of Karzai's pragmatic approach and a rejection of the opportunistic stance taken by the US and its Western partners to keep out Karzai's allies from the power structure.

Three, the article doesn't visualize the al-Qaeda as a big factor justifying the continuance of

the war. Needless to say, the article rejects the contention by NATO that the Afghan war is integral to safeguarding the Western world from threat posed by international terrorism. Again, it is indifferent to the fate of the alliance's much-trumpeted first-ever "out-of-area" operation.

The geopolitics of the war have been completely left out in the article. This is consistent with the Chinese view that the Afghan people should be principally in charge of their destiny. Thus, the article gives the go-by altogether to the controversial thesis propounded by some experts regarding a regional solution to the war, with the US entering into "grand bargains" with the main regional countries such as Russia, China, Iran, India and Central Asian states.

The accent, on the contrary, is on the UN Security Council assuming the responsibility of guiding and monitoring a settlement in Afghanistan, and within that, the five permanent members will be the key arbiters.