

# INSIDE THE LABYRINTH: NATO'S MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF PAKISTAN

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An impression that is being created by recent media reports about Afghanistan is that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO's) military campaign is failing in meeting its objectives while the political influence of the Taliban has spread to a larger portion of the country in comparison to previous years. If this is the case, there is an urgent need to look at the repercussions on the region of a total failure of NATO's mission, and its withdrawal. The states surrounding Afghanistan share ethnic and cultural ties with that country and can be affected by the political instability that will follow in the wake of a NATO withdrawal. As is well known, there have been historical precedents like the situation when the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan helped fuel conflicts in Kashmir, Central Asia and Chechnya. What makes the possibility of an onset of a total breakdown in Afghanistan dangerous this time is the situation in Pakistan. Since 2001, Pakistan has witnessed growing 'Talibanisation' in two of its major provinces, continuing ethnic insurgency in Balochistan, clashes between Islamist militants and security forces and the assassination of a former prime minister. These events have threatened to tear the country apart. This paper will look at the major trends in the NATO military campaign in Afghanistan and will try to understand the reasons for its ineffectiveness. It will finally look at the possible implications of a NATO withdrawal from the region. An important element that will be explored in this paper is the enhanced relevance of Pakistan in Afghan affairs since 2001.

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#### **THE POLITICS OF NATO'S INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN**

What makes the conflict in Afghanistan different from the one in Iraq is that while the latter began with a joint intervention by the US and Britain, the Afghan invasion was conducted by the US without any major help from any other Western power. It is very clear that the invasion of Afghanistan was conducted in reaction to the 2001 terrorist attacks in America and not because of any

larger strategic interests. One of the major reasons for the US support to the Taliban in the 1990s was the possibility of gaining access to the Central Asian energy resources. But the continuing conflict and instability in Afghanistan led to the abandonment of that option. The enormity of the present situation in Afghanistan must be understood from the fact that it is for the first time that the US has asked NATO to assume huge responsibilities in a conflict situation that it initiated by itself. It is clear by now that because the US did not accord any strategic importance to Afghanistan in the post-1990s period, it had no clear strategy while going into that country, and the complexity of the situation was understood only at a later point of time.

From the perspectives of the European NATO members, political pressure from Washington alone could not have led them to undertake a major operation outside the European theatre for the first time in the history of the alliance. Europe was faced with a global 'war on terror' which was led by the US and termed by the American leadership as an ideological contest between Western democratic values and Islamist fundamentalism. European leaders also felt the need to act lest Europe becomes sidelined in world affairs and the need for a NATO alliance in the 21st century is questioned. This must also be seen in a context where many of the European countries are facing a

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burgeoning Muslim population and resultant political and social problems due to the encounter between two very different value systems. The tide of terrorist attacks in Europe since the 'war on terror' was declared must have also pushed European leaders to take a decision in favour of a NATO mission in Afghanistan. While it is not possible to recount the exact series of events that led to NATO's intervention in Afghanistan, the NATO summit at Prague in 2002 was the turning point when member countries envisioned a role for the alliance outside the NATO Treaty area for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a UN mandated multinational force in Afghanistan which was initially led by NATO members Britain, Turkey, Germany and the Netherlands, was placed under the command of NATO in 2003.<sup>2</sup> From October 2006, the ISAF began operating in all parts of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> While NATO assumed command of the ISAF, the nature of deployment of troops by individual NATO member nations reflected differences in the way they looked at the mission in Afghanistan. Deployments came along with what is termed as 'national caveats' whereby each NATO

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member decided on the number of troops to be stationed, the area in which they are to be deployed, and the nature of their duties. The United States, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands are the main countries involved in counter-insurgency operations against the Taliban in the south and east of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Greece are deployed in more stable areas and are not involved in combating the insurgency.<sup>5</sup> The Afghan mission has begun to create political differences between NATO members. Recently, Canada stated that it would withdraw its troops early next year unless NATO sends reinforcements of at least 1,000 troops to support its mission in the south. Poland has agreed to commit more troops and helicopters to assist Canadian soldiers.

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1. <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2003/issue2/english/art3.html>
  2. [www.un.org/sc/ctc/sm2003/nato\\_contribution.doc](http://www.un.org/sc/ctc/sm2003/nato_contribution.doc)
  3. <http://www.nato.int/issues/isaf/index.html>
  4. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7227663.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7227663.stm)
  5. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7233971.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7233971.stm)

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The US has promised to send an extra 3,000 marines. Germany rejected a US appeal to send more troops to Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> The Germans, who are stationed in the north, insisted that continuity of their mission is necessary to build up on successes achieved in that part of the country.<sup>7</sup>

Besides such differences between NATO allies, the resurgence of the Taliban in recent months has also created an impression that the NATO mission is faltering. In 2007, it was reported that the area under Taliban influence had grown by around four times more than that in 2006.<sup>8</sup> These developments have created complications between Western countries like Britain and the Afghan government. In December, 2007, the British ambassador to Afghanistan was asked to explain why a man working for the British was talking to the Taliban. President Hamid Karzai told journalists that British troops had made things worse in Helmand province.<sup>9</sup> Lord Paddy Ashdown was rejected as the UN envoy to Afghanistan by Karzai.<sup>10</sup> A growing realisation that the Taliban and Al Qaeda cannot be completely defeated by the US and NATO has led to calls by several senior Afghan leaders for opening up talks with 'moderate' elements in the Taliban. Afghanistan is proving to be a difficult mission for NATO and its success or failure can have a tremendous impact on the credibility of NATO in other parts of the world, including Europe. The ISAF was modelled on the precept that counter-insurgency and reconstruction must proceed simultaneously in order to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. Therefore, drawbacks in the strategy on both fronts have led to weakening of the effectiveness of US and NATO military and reconstruction efforts in that country.

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6. n. 4.

7. <http://www.canada.com/reginaleaderpost/news/world/story.html?id=6cdb1112-cc54-4786-acd2-91fa5f625a98&k=73088>

8. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/15259/cordesman.html?breadcrumb=%2Fregion%2F280%2Fafghanistan>

9. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7231083.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7231083.stm)

10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7219156.stm>

## INSURGENCY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

### *US and NATO Military Strategy and Tactics*

Drawbacks in US military strategy and tactics have weakened the efforts to defeat the insurgency. It has been argued that the drawbacks have occurred because of an inability to understand the true nature of the conflict. Once the Taliban collapsed, it had ceased to become a conventional enemy. As the war became unconventional, the US response became more conventional. There was need for a shift from attrition warfare to manoeuvre warfare. The military theoretician Edward Luttwak has noted that all armed forces combine elements of attrition warfare and manoeuvre warfare. The closer a military is to attrition warfare, the more inward the focus. Internal administration and operations receive the most attention, and the organisation is much less responsive to the external environment comprising the enemy, the terrain and the specific phenomenon of any one particular conflict. On the other hand, manoeuvre warfare is more externally focussed. Studying the enemy, identifying his weaknesses, and configuring one's own capabilities to exploit those weaknesses achieves victory. Special forces are an effective tool for fighting manoeuvre style warfare if properly used. The attrition style warfare of the US which includes heavy aerial bombardment has been criticised as it has resulted in civilian casualties which, in turn, has antagonised the population and contributed to swelling the ranks of the insurgents.<sup>11</sup> It is the strategy of the insurgents to drag the US military into attrition style warfare by deliberately fighting in villages and thereby provoking air strikes and casualties. As it is a part of the Pashtun tribal code for the male relatives of a Pashtun warrior killed in battle to take revenge,

**While the chain of command was advantageous for unconventional warfare before the collapse of the Taliban, it became more conventional when the need was exactly the opposite.**

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11. Hy. S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2006), pp. xiv-3.

the Taliban is not lacking in recruits.<sup>12</sup>

While the chain of command was advantageous for unconventional warfare before the collapse of the Taliban, it became more conventional when the need was exactly the opposite. The ever increasing size of the military command and control system in Afghanistan has created delays in getting permission for special forces operations. In this manner, the initiative is lost to the insurgents. The focus on attrition has resulted in less attention on providing security to the local population. Intelligence is the principal source of information on insurgents. But the lack of safety and assurance about the fact that the insurgents are losing has prevented the population from providing intelligence. The lack of unity of effort among the government agencies further increases the problem. Wave after wave of Coalition forces from different units and organisations invade the villages and towns of Afghans in pursuit of the same objectives, earning the displeasure of the population. There are also differences in the approach of the US Army units and the special forces. While both forces were involved in Operation Mountain Sweep in August 2002, the US Army's lack of awareness about the local culture resulted in the loss of whatever the special forces had achieved in the previous six months in terms of counter-insurgency and intelligence operations.<sup>13</sup> Most of the US troops are not well trained in cultural awareness and even fewer can speak elementary Pashto. Reliance on Tajik interpreters has caused further miscommunication.<sup>14</sup>

The anti-Taliban military operations by US/NATO forces have also contributed to Pashtun disaffection against the Kabul government. The Northern Alliance is suspected of diverting attacks against Pashtun rivals by providing false information in the name of combating the Taliban. The US Air Force has bombed Pashtun villages and convoys wrongly identified by US allies as harbouring Al Qaeda and Taliban elements. The mistrust of US intentions has revitalised the support for the Taliban among the Pashtuns.<sup>15</sup> Rather than an

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12. Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Orbis*, vol. 51, no. 1, (Winter 2007), pp. 87-88.

13. Rothstein, n. 11, pp. 13-141.

14. Johnson and Mason, n. 12, p. 87.

15. Kathy Ganan, *I is for Infidel: From Holy War to Holy Terror: 18 Years Inside Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), p. 114.

increase in the special forces component, most of the special forces soldiers were soon pulled out of Afghanistan to serve in Iraq. There has also been a downsizing in vital air assets like helicopters. US troops in the southern parts of Afghanistan are forced to respond to minor Taliban attacks in Humvees. With an average overland speed of 5-10 miles an hour over rocky terrain, Taliban insurgents are long gone before the US forces arrive. In the case of Afghanistan, the United States and NATO have committed the least amount of troops for any peace-keeping mission since World War II. The ratios of peace-keepers to citizens in the missions in Bosnia and Kosovo were better than in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> The US' handing over the security of southern provinces to NATO has increased doubts about America's commitment to Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

***Military Strategy and Tactics of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Combine***

The war waged by the US against the Taliban in the fall of 2001 was an unequal one as a rudimentary militia was pitted against the most technologically advanced armed force that the world had ever seen. Faced with a combination of US air power, US Special Forces and the Northern Alliance ground troops, the Taliban government quickly crumbled. The remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda fled into the mountains on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. It was then believed that the US and its allies had assumed effective control of Afghanistan. **Almost six years later, the US and its NATO allies are facing a deadly insurgency campaign by a resurgent Taliban.** In order to understand the present insurgency, it is important to accept the fact that the war had not ended with the fall of Kabul to the Northern Alliance. Sporadic action by the insurgents against the US forces, separate from major US initiated campaigns like Operation Anaconda, had continued even after the main Taliban force had been decimated. Examples of such attempts include the attack on a US

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16. Ganon, *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

17. Seth G. Jones, "Averting Failure in Afghanistan," *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 1, Spring, 2006, p. 111.

helicopter near Gardez, capital of Paktia province, and the rocket attack on Khost air base which was held by US troops. Both these attacks took place in March 2002, and the first incident resulted in the death of six US soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

It is understandable that the frequency of attacks against US and NATO troops has increased in the past two or three years. The Taliban needed time to regroup, gain new recruits to replace those who were killed and develop base camps in a sanctuary away from the main area of fighting. Three main insurgent groups are fighting the Coalition forces. They are the Taliban, the Hizb-i-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and, finally, the foreign  *jihadists*  or Islamist radicals under the Al Qaeda. The insurgency is divided into civilian support, the underground, guerrillas and front commanders. The civilian support includes individuals who assist the guerrillas by acquiring supplies, conducting intelligence campaigns, operating medical facilities, recruiting new guerrillas or supporters, operating the communications system and acquiring and maintaining equipment. The underground includes the insurgency's political and financial support network.

The guerrillas are the armed insurgents who conduct the military and paramilitary operations. The front commanders provide strategic command while tactical and operational control is given to the guerrilla units. The main front commanders include Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Mullah Muhammad Omar. The foreign Islamist radicals are also organised like the other insurgents with the smaller units having tactical and operational autonomy while taking strategic guidance from senior Al Qaeda commanders. While most Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami insurgents are part-time fighters and have civilian jobs by day, the foreign Islamist radicals are professional fighters. Though the foreign fighters are much better equipped, trained and motivated than other insurgents, they have not always been tactically competent.<sup>19</sup>

The insurgency led by the Taliban has adapted according to changing conditions. While most of the insurgent attacks were conducted against Coalition forces in 2002 and 2003, the present attacks target Afghan civilians and personnel

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18. Sreedhar, "The Taliban-al-Qaida after One Year of War," *Aakrosh*, vol. 5, no. 17, October, 2002, pp. 57-62.

19. Ganon, n. 15, pp. 116-117.



from non-government organisations (NGOs). This can be attributed to an increase in US forces from 10,000 in 2003 to nearly 20,000 by 2005. This has prompted the insurgents to go for softer targets.<sup>20</sup> In order to cripple the Afghan government, the Al Qaeda made an attempt to assassinate President Hamid Karzai<sup>21</sup> and have assassinated Cabinet ministers.<sup>22</sup> In 2004, US and Coalition forces noted a change in the size of the guerrilla units, from large bands of up to a hundred fighters to much smaller units of less than ten. This has enabled the guerrillas to evade detection by Coalition forces and allowed them to blend into the population when necessary.<sup>23</sup> But in 2006, it was noticed that there was again a change from hit-and-run tactics by small groups of guerrillas to frontal assaults on government security posts by groups of more than 100 fighters.<sup>24</sup> This shows that insurgent tactics are flexible and adapt to changing conditions.

The insurgents have used tactics used by the Mujahideen forces against Soviet and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Army forces during the Afghan War of the 1980s. The insurgent groups have left the population centres to US and Afghan forces, operate from rural areas, distribute propaganda to the local population and opposition forces and threaten and intimidate the local population.<sup>25</sup> Most of the insurgent attacks take place in the south and east of Afghanistan in Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost and other provinces.<sup>26</sup> Taliban insurgents who operate in the southern Afghan provinces of Kandahar, Oruzgan, Helmand and Zabol have significant support networks in such Pakistani provinces as Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The Taliban have regained a lot of area in the south and east that had been lost to Coalition troops.<sup>27</sup>

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The increasing expertise of radical Islamist groups in conducting insurgency

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20. Ganon, *Ibid.*, p. 113.

21. Rothstein, n. 11, p. 164.

22. Sreedhar, *Afghanistan in Transition* (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2003), p. 11.

23. Ganon, n. 15, p. 117.

24. Johnson and Mason, n. 12, p. 81.

25. Ganon, n. 15, p. 118.

26. Ganon, *Ibid.*, p. 114.

27. Johnson and Mason, n. 12, p. 81.

operations is having its impact on the conflict in Afghanistan. Before 2001, the Al Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups had not got an opportunity to play a major role in any insurgency. It is now understood that the impact of radical foreign Islamists (who are otherwise known as the 'Arab-Afghans') on the ground operations during the Afghan War of the 1980s was minimal. At best, they provided a few recruits for the various conflicts like Kashmir, Tajikistan, Bosnia and Chechnya during the course of the 1990s. Their specialisation was suicide bombing operations like the ones that were conducted in East Africa in 1998 and the dramatic September 11, 2001, attacks in the US. But the Iraq conflict after the 2003 US invasion saw the coming of age of the Al Qaeda. The Al Qaeda in Iraq has gained plenty of expertise in conducting attacks against US troops. It is now understood that these skills are being passed on to the insurgents fighting in Afghanistan. Afghan insurgent groups are using this assistance to construct increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including remote control detonators. There are Al Qaeda-run training facilities and IED factories in such places as North and South Waziristan. There is also evidence that a small number of Pakistani and Afghan militants have received training in Iraq.<sup>28</sup> The insurgents usually slip behind NATO frontlines and set off these roadside bombs.<sup>29</sup>

Another effective device that is used by the insurgents is the 'TV bomb', first developed by Iraqi groups. It is a shaped-charge mechanism that can be hidden under a bush or debris on a roadside and set off by remote control from more than 300 metres away. A major tactic of the insurgents is suicide bombing which was not the norm in Afghanistan. This tactic has been used in major cities like Kandahar and Kabul. It is believed that suicide bombing was adopted by the Afghan insurgents after they learned about its effectiveness through videos of suicide attacks conducted in Iraq which were widely available in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>30</sup>. The number of suicide attacks increased from one in 2002 to two in 2003, six in 2004 and 21 in 2005. There were over 100 suicide attacks in Afghanistan in 2006, more than the total committed in the

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28. Ganon, n, 15, p. 21.

29. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6237290.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6237290.stm)

30. Brian Glyn Williams, "Suicide Bombings in Afghanistan," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, September, 2006, p. 7.

entire history of the country. Suicide attacks allow insurgents to achieve maximum impact with minimal resources. Such attacks have increased the level of insecurity among the Afghan population. This has caused some Afghans to question the government's ability to protect them.<sup>31</sup> The insurgents also threaten the local population and warn them about providing support to the US troops. The insurgents have also conducted beheadings of prisoners similar to the ones in Iraq in order to terrorise foreigners and the local population.<sup>32</sup>

### THE AFGHAN ECONOMY AND RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS

Afghanistan has been ravaged by incessant war for more than 30 years. This has resulted in the complete destruction of the Afghan economy. Besides the war against the Soviets, the civil war between the various Mujahideen factions has taken a heavy toll on the socio-economic life of the Afghans and whatever was left of the infrastructure after the Soviet withdrawal. After the Soviets withdrew, Afghanistan ceased to be of strategic interest to the superpowers and the wider international community. Rather than improve the situation, Afghanistan's neighbours and regional powers added fuel to the fire by supporting the various warlord militias in order to protect their own interests. Besides the weapons provided and abandoned by the two superpowers, a continuous supply of weapons by external players contributed to the massive loss of life and destruction of property in Afghanistan. Therefore, it can be said that the new Afghan government and the US were trying to rebuild an economy that had seen no growth since the late 1970s. This task has become all the more difficult because of the nature of the relationship that exists between the socio-economic conditions and the continuing instability. Growth of the economy is necessary for millions of Afghans to resume a normal life resulting in the stabilisation of the political environment. But building the Afghan economy has become a complicated task as the existing commercial activities are of an illegal nature that profit from continuing instability. An example of this is the Taliban agreement to ban poppy cultivation in 2000 which adversely affected the Afghan economy in

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31. Ganon, n. 15, pp. 22-23.

32. Hekmat Karzai, "Strengthening Security in Contemporary Afghanistan: Coping with the Taliban," in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Building a New Afghanistan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: World Peace Foundation, 2007), p. 65.

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2001 as there were no seeds or fertilisers available to grow alternative crops.<sup>33</sup>

*The Drug and Weapons Trade*

The drug trade has long been associated with continuing instability in Afghanistan as it is a source of revenue for warlords, insurgents and criminal organisations. The high profit from the sale of drugs is used to buy new weapons and provide wages to the members of the different militias. Before the Taliban banned the growing of poppy, there was more reconstruction going on in Kandahar, the place where most of the poppy was grown, than in other parts of Afghanistan because of profits from the trade. Though the Taliban wanted to ban poppy cultivation as soon as they captured Kandahar, they were worried about earning the displeasure of the local population. In turn, the Taliban derived income from this activity by taxing the opium farmers. The opium production of Afghanistan had rivalled that of Burma and production grew further as the Taliban's control extended over other parts of Afghanistan. While Pakistan was the major centre for heroin production during the 1980s, the centre for poppy cultivation shifted to Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power because of a crackdown in Pakistan on the drug trade. Laboratories for refining opium into heroin which were located in Pakistan were shifted to Afghanistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, became a major transport route for the Taliban's heroin exports during the late 1990s.<sup>34</sup>

In the post-2001 period, poppy cultivation rose from 74,045 hectares in 2002 to 131,000 hectares in 2004, and then dipped slightly to 104,000 in 2005. The income of Afghan opium farmers and traffickers is equivalent to roughly 40 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country. Afghanistan's share of opium production is also 87 per cent of the world total. The number of provinces where opium poppy is cultivated increased from 18 in 1999 to all 32 in 2005.<sup>35</sup> Heroin processing-laboratories have also reappeared in

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33. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: Pan Books, 2001), p. xii.

34. Rashid, *Ibid.*, pp. 118-122.

35. Jones, n. 17, p. 115.

Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> Another lucrative illegal commercial activity is the weapons trade. There are reports that Northern Alliance militias have sold new weapons to the Taliban through arms dealers as they get little in return for surrendering weapons to the central government and the US/NATO forces. There is a significant rise in the price of weapons in the arms bazaars in northern Afghanistan when the Taliban conducts its spring offensives in the south and east. The weapons traders stick to circuitous routes while transporting the weapons to avoid inspections by NATO and US troops. The arms dealers prefer the Taliban as they pay a higher price for weapons than others like Baloch militants and sectarian outfits.<sup>37</sup> The attempts to stop these illegal commercial activities depend a lot on the success of the reconstruction programme of the US and its ability to create a viable economy.

### ***US Reconstruction Programme***

Since 2001, US and NATO forces have conducted a range of civic-action operations to provide assistance to the government and population. These activities include training, equipping and advising the Afghan security forces. Assistance is also provided for police, fire, rescue and disaster preparedness and response missions. Afghan civil agencies have also been provided assistance by the Coalition forces. The United States and NATO also established provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) under US and NATO command. Each team of 60-100 personnel comprises civil affairs units, special operations forces, force protection units, psychological operations personnel and civilians. The PRTs have helped build health clinics, schools, government buildings and other infrastructure in major Afghan cities. They are a key part of the counter-insurgency campaign in winning indigenous support, extending the authority of the central government and helping facilitate development and reconstruction.<sup>38</sup> PRT teams have been led by different countries including New Zealand, Lithuania, Germany, Italy, Canada, Great Britain, Netherlands and Spain.<sup>39</sup> There

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36. Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective," *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 3, Winter, 2006/07, p. 44.

37. Maqbool Ahmed, "Awash in Weapons," *Herald*, vol 38, no. 3, March, 2007, pp. 70-71.

38. Rothstein, n. 17, pp. 118-119.

39. Jones, n. 11, p. 116.

**Even after the fall of the Taliban, foreign countries continue to provide aid to the different warlords.**

are 25 NATO PRTs in different parts of Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> The main aim of the PRTs is to build a secure environment in which normal political and economic activities can be conducted. By this yardstick, the reconstruction efforts have been criticised

because of several shortcomings.

Because of the cultural and ethnic diversity in Afghanistan, the experiences of the various PRTs in dealing with the local population have been very varied. These cultural variations have posed enormous challenges to the PRTs. For example, PRTs operating in the Persian speaking areas in the north have found it relatively easier to conduct their work as Persian is an easy language to learn as compared to the south where Pashto, a language difficult to master, is more common.<sup>41</sup> The number of people allotted for the PRTs is insufficient for the actual requirements. The present ratio is one PRT in Pashtun areas for every one million Pashtuns. In 2005, the entire province of Paktika had only a handful of buildings, fewer than a dozen high school graduates, and no telephones or paved roads. There were two clinics which were not sufficiently equipped and two doctors. Due to manpower shortages, the PRT in Paktika and seven others have been disbanded.<sup>42</sup> The lack of permanent security allows criminals, warlords, and insurgents to reclaim areas once the PRTs have moved from their operational areas.<sup>43</sup>

For the Afghan government, to maintain permanent security there should be sufficient numbers of Afghan National Army soldiers and Afghan National Police officers. The current number of Afghan National Army soldiers is not enough to maintain security. The biggest shortfall is in the number of police officers and this has an adverse impact on attempts to maintain law and order.<sup>44</sup> There have also been gun-battles between Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army forces. Another major problem is the absence of a viable justice

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40. [www.nato.int/docu/review/2007/issue3/english/art2.html](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2007/issue3/english/art2.html)

41. [www.nato.int/docu/review/2007/issue3/english/art2.html](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2007/issue3/english/art2.html)

42. Johnson and Mason, n. 12, p. 85-86.

43. Rothstein, n. 11, p. 116.

44. Jones, n. 17, pp. 119.

system. No major drug traffickers or warlords have been prosecuted in Afghanistan. Warlord commanders who control the areas vacated by the Taliban have authority over some local courts. Factional control of courts has led to intimidation of centrally appointed judges. Widespread corruption also reduces the effectiveness of the justice system.

The continuing influence of the warlords also hampers attempts to stabilise the situation. The warlords of the Northern Alliance have significant influence in both politics and commerce throughout much of Afghanistan. The warlord militias extract customs and tolls at unofficial checkpoints and dominate the trucking industry, thereby, having an important share in the profits generated by the cross-border transit trade, the second most lucrative commercial enterprise after the opium trade. The militias are also responsible for grabbing land in the environs of Kabul and elsewhere in the country.<sup>45</sup> Though warlords like Herat Governor Ismail Khan and Kandahar Governor Gul Agha were removed from their positions, it has had little impact on the influence of the different warlords. Even after the fall of the Taliban, foreign countries continue to provide aid to the different warlords.<sup>46</sup> The amount of aid that the US is providing to Afghanistan is also much less compared to the effort in Iraq. Without taking into account the biggest reconstruction project undertaken which is the repaving of the Kabul to Kandahar road, annual US aid to Afghanistan over the last five years has averaged just \$13 per Afghan. The United States spent more money every 72 hours on the war in Iraq than it spent on Afghan reconstruction in 2007.<sup>47</sup>

**There has not been a sea-change in the Pakistani military establishment's game plan of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan.**

## **PAKISTAN: THE KEY TO AFGHANISTAN**

The withdrawal of Pakistani support for the Taliban and President Pervez Musharraf's support for the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan created

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45. Marten, n. 36, pp. 55-56.

46. Marten, Ibid., pp. 114-116.

47. Johson and Mason, n. 12, p. 85.

**The Pakistani strategy is to eliminate the presence of Al Qaeda and other foreign militants of mainly Central Asian or Arab origin and not act against the Taliban insurgents.**

the impression that Pakistan has finally ended its support for radical Islamist groups. In reality, there has not been a sea-change in the Pakistani military establishment's game plan of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan to counter India in the region. Pakistani support for the Taliban continues in a much more covert manner than before. Also, the links that exist between radical Islamist groups and the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment is a legacy that has lasted for more than 25 years

and has become sufficiently institutionalised. Pakistan's volte face after 2001 was a ploy to secure the rule of the military regime. In the course of the present insurgency in Afghanistan, the Pakistan military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Pakistani intelligence agency, provide a wide variety of support to the Taliban. Pakistan's ISI has reportedly provided weapons and ammunition to the Taliban and helped in training Taliban and other Afghan insurgents. The ISI is also suspected of providing intelligence to Taliban forces about the location and movement of Afghan and US led Coalition forces, which has undermined several anti-Taliban military operations.<sup>48</sup>

#### ***The Military Campaign in the NWFP and FATA***

Currently, the Pakistani military is engaged in a military campaign against tribes in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) who provide shelter to the Taliban. Almost 70,000 Pakistani troops are involved in this campaign.<sup>49</sup> The Pakistani strategy is to eliminate the presence of Al Qaeda and other foreign militants of mainly Central Asian or Arab origin and not act against the Taliban insurgents who mostly comprise Pashtuns from the Afghan-Pakistan border regions.<sup>50</sup> This is because taking action against the Taliban insurgents who are much more in number is likely to

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48. Seth G. Jones, "Pakistan's Dangerous Game," *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 1, p. 18, Spring, 2007, p. 18.

49. Jones, *Ibid.*, p. 19

50. Husain Haqqani, "Pakistan and the Islamists," *Current History*, vol. 106, no. 699, April, 2007, p. 147.



create a wave of anti-government sentiment in the region and can result in a major revolt. But the present strategy is not likely to work as the links between the Pakistani-Afghan Islamists and the foreign radicals run too deep and an attack on one will be considered as a threat to the interests of the other.

Also, another factor that works against the success of these operations is the nature of the political administration in this area and its geographical terrain. The NWFP, populated by the Pashtun ethnic community, includes territories which are termed as FATA. Though technically a part of the NWFP, FATA has its own customary form of government based on the Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of honour. The Pashtun tribal chieftains are responsible for maintaining law and order in these areas.<sup>51</sup> This practice has continued even after the formation of the state of Pakistan till the present time. The writ of the Pakistani government does not run in FATA.

The failure to create effective state control over these regions since the creation of Pakistan has become most obvious in the post-2001 period. One witnesses the spectacle of the Pakistani authorities trying to negotiate with, and persuade, the tribes not to provide shelter to the foreign fighters. Even such efforts have borne little fruit as the frequent ceasefires have been broken by abrupt clashes between the security forces and tribal militias, making it much harder to achieve the main goal. The mountainous terrain of the region has also hampered the efforts of the Pakistani military as it makes it very difficult for large military forces to navigate and easier for the insurgents to hide in.<sup>52</sup>

The bulk of the current military operations are conducted by the Frontier Corps which is composed of tribal militias taken from within the region and regular army units. This has resulted in the slackening of the morale of the government forces as military operations can result in intra-tribal warfare which

**The border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan have become safe havens for Taliban and Al Qaeda members who fled from Afghanistan.**

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51. Rizwan Hussein, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005), p. 34.

52. Jones, n. 48, p. 24.

**A generation of Afghans grew up in refugee camps with little understanding about Pashtun tribal traditions.**

can continue for generations. Finally, the fact that certain elements in the military and the intelligence establishment continue to support the Taliban has not helped matters. The militants have increasingly resorted to suicide attacks against military convoys and even kidnapping of soldiers active in the area. It is noticeable that retaliatory attacks for the government crackdown on the Lal Masjid in Islamabad took place in the NWFP as most Lal Masjid cadres were from that region.<sup>53</sup>

Because of these reasons, the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan have become safe havens for Taliban and Al Qaeda members who fled from Afghanistan. Since 2001, there have increasingly been attempts to impose a Taliban-inspired Islamisation programme in the NWFP region by the Pakistani allies of the Taliban. Many vigilante groups have come up in the tribal areas calling themselves 'Taliban' although they have no direct links with the Taliban militia in Afghanistan. They have carried out their own campaign to enforce their version of a religious moral code. Post-2001, the NWFP and Balochistan have emerged as the focal point of efforts by the Taliban to conduct military operations against the US led Coalition forces in Afghanistan and spread their ideology within Pakistan. By establishing a sanctuary in Pakistan, which entails established infrastructures and base areas, it has become difficult to defeat the Taliban insurgency.<sup>54</sup> Many of the top Taliban leadership are believed to be based at Quetta in Balochistan.

***Taliban and the Pakistani Islamist Parties***

It is not just the Taliban's ability to muster the loyalty of the tribes in the NWFP that has helped it sustain its insurgency in Afghanistan. Its close ties with Pakistani Islamist parties and wider *jihadi* networks have helped it to draw financial and ideological support from other parts of Pakistan and the wider

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53. Ghaffar Ali Khan, "Cloning the Masjid," *Herald*, vol. 38, no. 8, August, 2007, p. 43.

54. Jones, n. 48, p. 24.

Islamic world. In the post-2001 period, assistance by Pakistani Islamist parties to the Taliban and Al Qaeda has continued by various means. This assistance has come in the form of funds collected as *zakat* (the tithe) at mosques in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the larger Muslim world. *Jihadi* funding also comes from wealthy Muslims abroad, especially from Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

It is reported that Al Qaeda personnel have met with wealthy Arab businessmen during the Tablighi Jamaat annual meeting in Raiwind, Pakistan, which attracts one of the largest concentration of Muslims after the Hajj.<sup>55</sup> The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of religious political parties and movements like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the two factions of the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam which had come to power in the NWFP and Balochistan in 2002, are also a source of support for the Taliban. The MMA, though composed of Pakistani organisations, has more or less become the political face of the Taliban against the Musharraf government and the US occupation of Afghanistan. Before the bad showing in the recent Parliament elections, the alliance had tried to enforce Taliban type restrictions in the provinces in which it had political control.

**If a total Western withdrawal takes place from Afghanistan, a civil war is bound to break out between the various ethnic communities.**

As stated earlier, most of the Taliban leadership and cadre were educated in Deobandi-Wahhabi oriented *madrassas*. A generation of Afghans grew up in refugee camps with little understanding about Pashtun tribal traditions. They favoured the *Shariah* or Islamic law more than the Pashtunwali. Their goal of establishing an Islamic theocracy helped them to forge strong links with Pakistani Islamist organisations and radical Islamist groups in the wider Muslim world. At the same time, their kinship ties with the Pashtun tribes in Pakistan helped them to gain sanctuary in that country in the post-2001 period. Therefore, it can be said that the multiple identities of the Taliban have helped them to gain the support of a wide array of forces in Pakistan and sustain their insurgency in Afghanistan.

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55. Jones, *Ibid.*, p. 25.

**It would be in the interests of the Taliban and fundamentalist Islamist parties in Pakistan to gain considerable influence in Pakistan rather than take complete control.**

#### **RAMIFICATIONS**

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, it is important to foresee the consequences of an American and NATO withdrawal from that country as it can have a huge impact on the wider region and might set in motion a series of events that will be hard to control. The growing strength of the insurgency is not good news for the US and NATO. Success in Afghanistan is vital for the West, as a withdrawal from

Afghanistan can severely hurt the credibility of the world's most powerful military alliance. The differences of opinion among NATO members over the issue of contributing further troops and the regions to which they should be sent can actually hasten a NATO withdrawal. While it is often stated that the US has tremendous influence over NATO and its European members, it should be accepted that it does not have complete control over decisions taken by the governments of influential member states in Western Europe. In fact, by not contributing more to NATO's mission, countries like Germany and Italy have placed themselves in a position where they can decide on NATO's future in Afghanistan, unlike Britain and Canada which seem to be running out of options.

The future also seems to be bleak for American forces stationed in the Afghan theatre as a NATO withdrawal would mean facing the brunt of the insurgency and simultaneously managing reconstruction efforts which are so vital for stabilising the country. Domestic pressure for withdrawal is bound to grow in the US if NATO leaves Afghanistan. Moreover, the US will find it hard to stabilise two conflict zones at the same time. In such circumstances, America will be forced to choose between Iraq and Afghanistan and focus efforts in one area, while severely cutting back on troops and resources in the other. The overall trend of US aid and funding to Afghanistan points to a preference for Iraq where the Americans have made huge commercial investments in its energy sector. If a total Western withdrawal takes place from Afghanistan, a civil war is bound to break out between the various ethnic communities.

There is a temptation to compare the Karzai regime with that of Najibullah. It is predicted that withdrawal of American support would result in the government of Hamid Karzai meeting the same fate as Najibullah's government which did not survive for long after Soviet troops withdrew. But it must be kept in mind that the Afghan Mujahideen against Soviet occupation and its beneficiaries included the militias of the different ethnic communities in Afghanistan. Karzai's government is supported not just by the US but also by the major non-Pashtun ethnic communities. Therefore, the ensuing conflict would in some ways resemble the civil war that took place after the Mujahideen took over Kabul in 1992. But, again, the similarity ends here. Even that conflict, though it caused massive destruction, was more or less controlled by 2001 when the Taliban captured almost 90 per cent of the country with effective Pakistani backing.

**Pakistan is not as prone to an Islamist takeover as popularly believed.**

Even after a Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, there would be international, especially US, pressure on Pakistan not to get involved in a civil war in Afghanistan. As a result, no clear winner might emerge and the conflict is bound to be long lasting and more destructive. The Taliban, Al Qaeda and radical Islamist groups can fight an insurgency effectively only in the Pashtun dominated areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. They cannot fight an insurgency in the north which is dominated by non-Pashtun ethnic communities like the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. During the 1990s, the Taliban took over these territories by bribing local commanders or by using Pakistani conventional military strength. Pakistani military personnel manned the battle tanks and flew fighters for the Taliban. Without conventional superiority, the Taliban cannot take control of the whole of Afghanistan and such capabilities can be provided only by the Pakistani military. It is in the interests of radical Islamist groups present in the Pashtun tribal areas of the Pak-Afghan border to gain access to the borders of Central Asia as these groups include members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) led by Tahir Yuldshev.<sup>56</sup>

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56. V. Nagendra Rao, "Religious Extremism in Central Asia," in V. Nagendra Rao and Mohammad Monir Alam, eds., *Central Asia: Present Challenges and Future Prospects* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2005), p. 107.

**The counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan should be about winning the trust and confidence of the people living in the conflict zones rather than merely assuring the destruction of the Taliban and the Al Qaeda.**

Taking these factors into consideration, it would be in the interests of the Taliban and fundamentalist Islamist parties in Pakistan to gain considerable influence in Pakistan rather than take complete control of that country in order to ensure Pakistani military commitment in Afghanistan. A complete Islamist revolution in Pakistan on the lines of Iran is not possible because of the differences that exist between Sunni and Shia Islam. While Shia Islam has a hierarchical structure with different ranks of clerics, Sunni Islam has no organised clergy system, making it difficult for the various

Sunni clerics to accept the leadership of one supreme theocratic leader. Also, in Pakistan there are differences between traditional religious clerics and the leaders of Islamist political parties who have considerable political influence but are not theologically qualified. In Iran, this difference was not that obvious as Ayatollah Khomeini was accepted as an Ayatollah Ozma or Grand Ayatollah. Another factor that complicates the possibility of an Iran-style revolution in Pakistan is the existence of several sects and various schools of thought and movements within those sects as opposed to Iran where the majority believe in Ithna Ashari Islam or Twelver Shia Islam. There are not just disagreements but even violent conflicts between Sunnis, Shias and Ahmadiyyas. Within Sunnis, there are differences between the Deobandi and Barelvi movements.

If a Western withdrawal takes place from Afghanistan, there is considerable risk for Pakistan as the Taliban and radical Islamist groups can concentrate their efforts in the latter country in order to attain their objectives. Presently, only the NWFP and Balochistan are thought to be under the threat of radical Islam. Punjab and Sindh are more stable because of the presence of effective state authority. But this does not mean that radical Islamist groups are not present in these provinces. The Jamaat-i-Islami, Lashkar-e-Tayebba and the various Sunni-Shia sectarian militant outfits like the Sipahi-i-Sahaba and the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi

have considerable influence in these areas.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned earlier, rather than a complete takeover, the Islamists will look to regain their influence in the decision-making process which they had lost in the post-2001 period. These efforts will extend over a longer period of time as dramatic changes in Pakistan have made the task of the Islamists much harder. Attacks targeting the army and the ISI headquarters have sensitised the military establishment to the dangers of radical Islamists.<sup>58</sup> There is also the possibility of US rollback of vital economic aid to Pakistan if the military decides to intervene in a major way in Afghanistan. Because of the sheer diversity that exists in Pakistani society, its political culture and the strength of its government institutions, Pakistan is not as prone to an Islamist takeover as popularly believed. Nevertheless, events in Afghanistan can have a huge impact on the situation in Pakistan.

### THE WAY OUT

Within Afghanistan, there is a need to build bridges between the various ethnic communities who have been isolated from each other not just by geography but also because of the strategic interests of outside powers. The creation of dependencies between these communities by establishing commercial relations cutting across ethnic divides can go a long way in creating a necessity for peace. During such attempts, the interests of any one community cannot be sidelined as in the case of the Pashtuns who are not given adequate representation in the government. This can prevent elements like the Taliban and warlord militias from assuming the role of the protector of their respective communities. There is also the necessity to terminate the linkages that exist between the Afghan economy and the conflict. A new economy that can prosper only in a stabilised environment should be created in the place of the old one.

Neighbouring countries should be prevented from providing support to any of the various Afghan factions. The counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan should be about winning the trust and confidence of the people living in the conflict zones rather than merely assuring the destruction of the Taliban and the

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57. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, "The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, February 2000, p. 177

58. William Dalrymple, "On the Long Road to Freedom, Finally," *Tehelka*, vol 5, no. 9, March, 2008, p. 29.

Al Qaeda. There is a need for a deliberate attempt to revive the traditional and tolerant form of Islam that has been always practised in Afghanistan to make up for the extremist indoctrination of a generation of Afghans in Pakistan. As the nature of the problems that confront Afghanistan is complex, there is a need for a much larger commitment by the US and the international community to restore peace in the country. All said and done, the solution to the Afghan problem lies in Pakistan as it has been the source of most of the troubles affecting the region.

Presently, Pakistan is facing pressure from the US to crack down on radical Islamist groups. But a campaign against religious extremism has to be fought on various fronts. The withdrawal of the state from areas like education and public health helped Islamist organisations to step into the vacuum and provide these services, thereby winning recruits and sympathisers to their cause. Pakistan is receiving substantial aid from the United States for its role in the 'war on terror'. But this aid must be connected to the state's success in providing health and education services to the population. It is not just enough that more schools and hospitals are built. The curriculum in the education system is heavily influenced by strong Islamist content and anti-India propaganda. Pakistan must face pressure in the same manner as Saudi Arabia to reform its education system. More attention should be given to the long neglected Federally Administered Tribal Areas. At the present moment, it is difficult for the Pakistani state to enforce its control over those regions as the Pashtun tribes have enjoyed autonomy for a long period of time. It is going to take time for the government to exercise its control over these areas and there is a need for patience and tact. The above mentioned efforts like spreading health and education facilities must target the FATA as it is likely to produce better results than a military campaign which will be fiercely resisted.

The fact that the tribes are in control over a certain area does not naturally mean that shelter would be provided to the foreign radical Islamist groups. Tribal and clan loyalties and traditions are anathema to fundamentalist Islamist principles. This has resulted in clashes wherever the two have come into contact. In Anbar and Diyala provinces in Iraq, the Sunni tribes have organised themselves against the Al Qaeda. Within the FATA, clashes were reported



between the South Waziristan militants led by Maulavi Nazir and radical Islamist Uzbeks of the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan led by Tahir Yuldshev.<sup>59</sup> Further clashes have been reported in North Waziristan between the tribal leader Gul Bahudur and the followers of the Iraqi national, Abu Okash.<sup>60</sup> The state must exploit such differences between the foreign Islamist radicals and tribal militants. Most important of all, there should be better coordination between efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US bombings of Pashtun villages on the Pakistani side of the border, presumably without warning the Pakistani government, has reinforced impressions in the tribal regions that the state has lost the ability and authority to assert its sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> This will complicate efforts to fight the Taliban insurgency in these areas. A settlement of the Pak-Afghan border dispute can go a long way in building trust and cooperation on both sides. This can lead to the establishment of stronger links between the security establishments of both sides to effectively combat insurgency, terrorism and smuggling of weapons and drugs. Unlike any other time in the past, greater cooperation between the two neighbours is essential now as the future of both countries is at stake.

**Without the complete cooperation of Pakistan, the present efforts in Afghanistan cannot bear fruit.**

## CONCLUSION

The challenge for the Greek hero Theseus was not merely killing the Minotaur, a creature that was part bull and part man. It included navigating himself through the complex maze-like construction called the labyrinth which was the dwelling place of the Minotaur. Theseus managed to find his way back with the help of his lover, Ariadne, who gave him a ball of thread so that he could retrace his path. When the US and later NATO intervened in Afghanistan, it is doubtful if they ever realised that the labyrinth included not just Afghanistan but also Pakistan. The two countries cannot be seen in isolation as they belong to a single geo-political complex. The land inhabited by the Pashtun tribes on both sides of

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59. Shafiq Ahmed, "The Jihad Within," *Herald*, vol. 38, no. 4, April, 2007, p. 92.

60. Ahmed, *Ibid.*, p. 93.

61. Ismail Khan, "Settled no More," *Herald*, vol. 38, no. 7, July, 2007, p. 71.

the border is what links the destinies of both countries. Because of the linkages that bind Pakistan and Afghanistan, solutions to the problems faced by the two countries can be seen only in a unified manner. These linkages extend from the socio-cultural to the commercial.

The factors that led to the emergence of the Taliban exist even today and strong steps must be taken to decrease their relevance in the society and politics of Afghanistan. While US and NATO efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan are continuing, a much larger commitment than the present is needed to stabilise the situation. Without the complete cooperation of Pakistan, the present efforts in Afghanistan cannot bear fruit. There is an urgent need to reverse the Islamist programme initiated by Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan, the consequences of which have affected the entire region. Pakistan must be given a clear understanding that its attempts to achieve parity with India will not be tolerated any longer and that it has to bring under control not just the foreign Islamist extremists but also the indigenous militants operating in its territory. It must also be persuaded to meet all its responsibilities as a state, provide the necessary services to its population and establish effective governance in areas like FATA. While one does not know if the term 'exit-strategy' was derived from the myth of the Minotaur, it is clear that NATO and the US need a better understanding of the complexities involved in the Afghan conflict and must formulate a more effective strategy than is currently being pursued.