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## **The AfPak Strategy and its Implementation**

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**Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra**, University of Mumbai (India)

### **Opinion Paper**

**Abstract:** *The article focuses on the AfPak strategy and implications from an Indian perspective. The strategy that mainly aimed at peace and stability in one of the most trouble-torn regions of the world further got bolstered with the US announcement for a surge in troops in the AfPak region recently. The article argues that however noble the intentions behind the strategy may be, it will be a difficult task to accomplish the desired goals primarily owing to the multilayered complexity of the problem and also due to conflicting interests pursued by the parties involved in the politics of the region. For the success of the strategy, the article argues, it is necessary to widen the collaborative format in the region with the simultaneous move to win the confidence of the people and to establish a stable democratic regime.*

### **1. The Strategy**

On 27 March 2009 the US President Barack Obama unveiled the new AfPak strategy, which called powers like India, Russia and China to collaborate with the US in combating terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He called terrorism as 'an international security challenge of the highest order,' and appealed these nations to be part of a contact group to tackle the menace in the region that has 'descended into chaos.' Perhaps for the first time since the 9/11 in 2001, the US has called for collaborative effort in forming a Contact Group comprising powers with diverse policy orientations to fight terrorism. All the three countries India, Russia and China have received the Obama initiative with guarded optimism. This initiative fits well with the common objective of these countries as they have on many occasions called for an international approach to the global menace of terrorism. Similarly, Obama's emphasis on the role of the United Nations in the task is reflective of his difference of policy approach from the previous administration.

The main idea underlying AfPak strategy is the consolidation of the whole Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a single point of agenda in countering terrorism and religious fundamentalism. The Obama initiative has implications not only for the future of AfPak, or the immediate neighbours, but also for other powers of the region and for the world. One of the first premises on which Obama has developed the strategy is his realization of the difficult enterprise of going solo in AfPak in fighting terrorism and religious fundamentalism. Since 2001 when the US sent forces to defeat Taliban in Afghanistan, the situation has been protracted and after about eight years it has been further precarious. The US has lost about 700 personnel in the meantime while civilian casualties number thousands. Afghanistan has become a hotbed of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. The more worrisome factor was its spilling out of Afghanistan to borders areas of Pakistan particularly Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North West Frontier Province. Reportedly, the rugged mountain terrains of these areas have sheltered Al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden.

As the terror attack in Pakistan's police academy in Lahore on 30 March 2009 shows, just within four days of announcement of the US strategy, the Taliban has further encroached to Pakistan's eastern areas. The Pakistani Taliban's leader Baitullah Mehsud has already claimed responsibility for the attack which killed about ten people and injured many. President Asif Ali Zardari has admitted the increasing influence of Taliban in Pakistan's border areas. Hence, when the US resolves to 'to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future', it realizes the necessity of a collaborative approach for the task. The strategy targets to build an Afghan army of 134,000 and a police force of 82,000 by 2011. Without mincing any words, Obama made it clear Pakistan must be accountable for every dollar the US pays it to counter terrorism. He committed \$1.5 billion annually for a period of five years to support Pakistan. The US intelligence agencies have confirmed the complicity of Pakistan's intelligence with terrorist organizations and the Taliban, hence it would be interesting to see how the new strategy rejigs to break the logjam.

Another aspect of Obama's strategy is to include Iran in the contact group. The Iran episode particularly the stand off regarding the nuclear issue is well known. Obama has probably intended to draw Iran to the US orbit by invoking its important role in Afghan crisis. Iran too seems to be worried about terrorism and drug trafficking in its east. Its distaste of the Saudi, Sunni influence on Taliban in Afghanistan might motivate Iran to join in the collaborative effort. It will be also interesting to see how Obama will co-opt Iran in its new strategy while the US is embroiled with it on so many issues. As the recent deadlock over its nuclear programme shows, co-opting Iran in the AfPak strategy will indeed be a difficult task.

Equally important is to invite India to be a member of the contact group on AfPak. Though India has traditionally enjoyed good relations with Afghanistan, Pakistan has viewed it with suspicion. In July 2008 the bomb blast at Indian embassy in Kabul has killed 40 people with senior Indian diplomats. India accused Pakistan intelligence for the attack, further corroborated by the US intelligence. Similarly the attack on the Indian embassy in October 2009 killed 13 people. Obama's advocacy for constructive diplomacy between India and Pakistan to resolve bilateral issues has been received in New Delhi cautiously. India has expressed interest in Obama strategy but with regard to Obama's utterances about rivalry between nuclear powers has received a wait and watch approach from India. However, the recent trend in the Indian strategic thinking has moved towards an approach of supporting the AfPak strategy as an appropriate measure to tackle the Taliban in Afghanistan. At the same time the Indian policy makers have argued that unless the Taliban forces and their networks are not routed out from the whole AfPak region, their defeat only in Afghanistan will not solve the terror problem.

## **2. The Surge and its Implications**

Barack Obama on 1 December 2009 announced a 'surge' of troops in Afghanistan as a measure to further bolster the AfPak strategy. A careful analysis of the new plan brings forth mainly four things. First, Obama wants to increase the number of troops by 30,000 (thus further

adding to already stationed 71,000 US troops in the region). As he argues, it will help tackle the Taliban menace by providing training and building the Afghan security and police forces. This will help in the process of routing out the Taliban. It will also help building stability and development in the trouble-torn region. Second, there needs to be a political base that can be created by a surge in the security forces, which can help bring diverse parties in the conflict on a common platform towards a common goal. The new plan envisages luring the Taliban to join the political process by applying carrot and stick policy. It envisages employing the moderate Taliban as foot soldiers in an effort to wean away them from extremism. Third, the US led NATO does not want to station its forces for a long overhaul, but a gradual withdrawal after 2011 from the territory, then likely to be peaceful without the menace of terrorism, religious fundamentalism and drug trafficking. Here lies the crux of the new programme as well as its tenability.

The responses of the US' NATO allies and other major powers are so far cautious and guarded. The European powers like France and Germany have not yet committed to add to the troop surge in Afghanistan. So far only the UK has expressed its policy to increase its troops to the tune of 500 (thus totaling its contribution to 10,000), by way of aiding to the NATO troops in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister of UK, Gordon Brown has appealed to the international powers to contribute and support to the Obama initiative in Afghanistan. In a venture to assess the situation in the AfPak, London is organizing an international conference on 28 January 2009, in which all 43 NATO members will take part to decide the further agenda of the NATO in the region. Among the NATO countries, Poland has become enthusiastic and announced increase of its troop by 638. The Polish step might be motivated by the desire of the Poland to show its eagerness to the US that it is a strong ally of the US despite the US negligence of it. In fact the recent Obama decision to withdraw anti-missile defence plan from the Eastern Europe caused much embarrassment to Poland. Russia has taken the new Obama initiative in a 'positive' way, but has argued that the initiative must be undertaken with the collaboration with international bodies like the UN.

With the recent troop 'surge' the total number of NATO troops in Afghanistan will be about 140,000 to fight about 25,000 strong religious and violent extremists called Taliban. How far it will be successful is yet to be seen. The complex Afghan situation cannot be resolved by mere increasing of troop unless the confidence of the local people is won over. In this context the US needs collaboration from regional powers like Pakistan to control over the situation. In fact the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan Taliban have in their agenda to promote radical Islam and to target everything that oppose their global agenda. In fact after their defeat from the Afghanistan after the 9/11, the Taliban forces have deeply entrenched to the north west of Pakistan. In this context, Obama's recent letter to the Pak president, Asif Ali Zardari, which urged the Pak leadership to stop the use of the terrorist elements as a matter of state policy needs special mention. In return, the US promised Pakistan partnership, arms and aids. But again the question remains how far the US, which is looked with suspicion by many people in Pakistan including the part of establishment with suspicion, can deliver with these grand designs unless the Pakistan army and civilian establishment come forward together to support the strategy.

Some analysts have compared Obama's plan to increase troops in Afghanistan to Bush's policy to increase troops in Iraq. The comparison can not sustain longer as the geography, political situation, ethnic set up and regional factors in both the cases are different. At the same time, the mountain terrains in the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan that shelter many terrorist organizations make it difficult to fight these elements which are well equipped and trained to continue and sustain guerrilla type warfare for long. Further, the malaise of corruption and mismanagement that afflict the Karzai government (the recent election too seen by many as irregular and won by fraud), thus further feed to the popular suspicion whether the US increase in troops will in fact contain the Taliban. There is also another shred of argument that the Taliban will now adopt a cool and calibrated policy of hiding and gather and enhance strength till the moment the NATO withdraw troop, and then come back with the bounden force to rule Afghanistan, and spread its tentacles to other regions.

### **3. A Global Approach**

Besides terrorism there would many other factors such as geopolitical dynamics of the region and power rivalries that would come to picture when the AfPak strategy is put into actual practice. The detail ground work would determine the seriousness of the US administration in its new strategy. It is a truism and needs to be factored in foreign policy discourse of all the powers including India, Pakistan, Russia and China that the AfPak region has witnessed the proliferation of Al Qaeda, Taliban and their ilk, which need to be tackled. Almost all of these countries have suffered from terrorism in varying degrees. Regarding the new strategy, Russia would be looking at the issue from a fresh perspective as Obama has spoken of 'resetting' relations with Russia. China faces the terror problem in its Xinjiang region while India's confrontation with terrorism is well known. The Mumbai terror attack on 26 November 2008 brought to the global scale the Indian experience. The world powers perhaps have the right opportunity to show their unity in approach to tackle one of the deadliest scourges of the 21st century.

For the success of any strategy to contain Taliban in Afghanistan following factors must be kept in mind. Afghanistan needs an international strategy with all the players including Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and China involved in the game plan to contain Taliban. The idea to invite regional powers including India and Pakistan to the forthcoming London conference on Afghanistan may be a welcome step in this regard. In addition, Pakistan must guard its policies in terms of cutting off all kinds of supports to Taliban and their ilk. The Pak policy of using these elements at some places and deterring them at some other places has already proven dangerous. Besides, the Afghanistan people and various tribal leaders must be taken into confidence for any policy measure to be successful. The majority of Afghans do not like Taliban, but also they do not have many options to choose. Hence, and equally importantly it is the responsibility of international players to see that there is a transparent, effective governance system which can cater to the needs of the common people. The

***Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, University of Mumbai (India)***

AfPak strategy will be a test case for the US' global diplomacy initiated under the leadership of Barack Obama, who has already generated much hope among the people and nations of the world.