

CONTAINING THE TALIBAN: PATH TO PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Taliban, the Islamic warriors of Afghanistan, live up to their words. "Taliban victory will set a model for other Muslim nations to follow," Maulvi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, the Taliban Foreign Minister, told me in an interview in Kandahar in February 1995. The Taliban had by then captured only one-third of Afghanistan and their victory in the rest of the country was far from certain. But what was increasingly visible was the expansionist ambitions of the Islamic student militia: "We will go and fight for our Muslim brethren elsewhere in the world, in Bosnia and Chechnya," said Maulvi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the former Information Minister, recently appointed as the Taliban Emissary for Peace.¹

Now, six years later, the Taliban control around 90 percent of Afghanistan, and their rival United Front, led by the Afghan-Tajik commander, Ahmad Shah Masood, is struggling to survive in the north-eastern regions of the country. The extent of the Taliban success in exporting Islamic extremism into regions bordering Afghanistan and beyond - from Chechnya in Russia to Kashmir in India to Xinjiang in China - can be gauged from the fact that it has forced the emergence of an alliance of world powers and regional states to contain the regional and international spill over of Islamic extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan.

The United States, Russia, China, India, Iran, Israel, Belarus, Armenia and all Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan have created various anti-terrorism networks, strategic partnerships and collective security plans to combat the Taliban monster. In fact, a regional-cum-global polarisation is increasingly visible, with Afghanistan and Pakistan on one side and the rest of the international community on the other. On one side, we have the Islamic warriors of Afghanistan ready to wage jihad anywhere in the world, and a military regime in Pakistan that courts their cause and ignores its own jihadi forces. On the other side, we have a civilised world, which is increasingly adopting democratic and secular norms and values in accordance with the spirit of globalisation.

The Taliban have made a huge impact on inter-state ties by turning former friends into current enemies, such as Pakistan and Iran, and previous allies into present competitors, such as Pakistan and Turkey. The interests of traditionally rival great powers such as the United States, Russia and China, and regional states such as India have suddenly coincided in the wake of the growing threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism from Taliban-led Afghanistan. This is despite the fact that, in the New Great Game being fought over Central Asian oil and gas riches, these countries have clashing ambitions.

THE GROWING DANGER FROM THE TALIBAN

Ironically, Pakistan, the creator and sustainer of the Taliban, is facing the worst repercussions from the rise of religious militia in Afghanistan. Its support for the Taliban has backfired in multifarious ways. In particular, radical Islamic forces have gained significant clout in its state structure and society. While there appears to be no end to the killing of Shiahs by two extremist splinter groups of the Jamiat-ul-Ulma-e-Islam (JUI) - the Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi - a number of jihadi organisations fighting a liberation war in Indian Kashmir have started to operate from Pakistani territory with total immunity from the state authorities. The Taliban have mostly originated from JUI madrassas (seminaries) located in the Pashtun belt of the Frontier and Balochistan provinces. The Interior Ministry under Lt.-Gen. (retd.) Moinuddin Haider has tried to exert its control over these and other madrassas across the country by proposing to change their curriculum and surveying

their operations. On both fronts, it has finally chosen not to proceed beyond verbal proclamations after fearing a widespread extremist Islamic reaction in Pakistan.²

The Taliban factor has also partly contributed to the demise of democracy in Pakistan. In the creation and sustenance of the Taliban, the role of civilian authorities in Pakistan - including two successively elected prime ministers, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - has always been marginal. It is the military establishment, particularly its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, which has been the main force behind the Taliban. Pakistan's civilian leaders backed the Taliban until late 1997 to realise a gas pipeline agreement involving Pakistan, Turkmenistan, the Taliban, as well as American Unocal and Saudi Delta construction companies, which were to build a gas pipeline from Dauletabad gas field in Turkmenistan to Pakistan's city of Multan through Afghanistan. However, both the Americans and Pakistan's civilian leaders finally realised that it was futile to proceed on the proposed pipeline deal as long as factional warfare did not end in Afghanistan and an all-Afghan government was not formed. The Taliban were not ready to co-operate for the achievement of these two goals. Thus, as the year 1998 began, both Unocal and Delta withdrew from the proposed deal. Since then, the wedge between Pakistan's civilian and military leaders over Afghanistan has been widening. For the civilian leadership, the only motive behind Pakistan's backing for the Taliban was the realisation of the proposed pipeline project. For the military, even if the economic objective had not materialised, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan still fulfilled military objectives vis-à-vis India: achieving strategic depth for the Pakistan Army in case of war with India and ensuring the continuity of Arab and Afghan militancy in Indian Kashmir. The growing differences on Afghanistan between Prime Minister Sharif and Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf partly led to the 12 October 1999 military coup in Pakistan.³

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has also had implications for Iran, even though not as grave as those for Pakistan. For being staunchly anti-Shiah, the Taliban have harboured the activists of both Ahl-e-Sunnah Wal Jamaat and Mujahidin-e Khalq, the two opponents of the Islamic regime in Iran. However, since Iran is predominantly Shiah, the Taliban have not posed a serious threat to its socio-political set up. Owing to its military support for the United Front, Iran was twice close to physical fighting with the Taliban in the last six years: first in September 1995 when the Taliban captured Herat, the strategic western province bordering Iran, and, second, in August 1998, when the Taliban executed 11 Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif after capturing this northern city.

Like Iran, the ascendance of the Taliban has threatened China, which is terrified of insurgency from Muslim separatist Uighurs in north-western Xinjiang province. Xinjiang touches the north-eastern tip of the Wakhan Corridor, which is still under the control of the United Front. China believes that many of the Uighurs receive military training, arms and ammunition from the Taliban. During his visit to Islamabad in July 2000, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Jang Jiaxuan, reportedly expressed serious concern over the issue with the authorities in Islamabad.⁴

Although India does not share borders with Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban has had serious repercussions for its territorial integrity. The war of liberation in the Indian side of Kashmir, which started as soon as the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in late 1989, has to a significant degree been fought by Islamic militants of Afghan, Arab and Pakistani origin, who previously participated in the Afghan jihad against Soviet troops. Most of the Islamic militant groups that are now fighting in Kashmir, including Harkat-ul-Mujahidin, are products of the Afghan war. One recent incident linking the Taliban's Afghanistan with Kashmiri militancy was the December 1999 hijacking of an Indian airliner. The hijackers, who were Kashmiri militants, took the plane to Kandahar, where the Taliban headquarters is located. For several days, they negotiated their demands with the Indian authorities through the Taliban. In the end, the Indian External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh, had to personally accompany the jailed Harkatul Mujahidin leader of Pakistani origin, Maulana Masud Azher, and exchange him with the hijacked plane and its passengers.⁵ Since India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices in May 1998, Kashmir has emerged as a nuclear flash point. The Taliban are an important external agent fuelling the fire of Islamic militancy in Kashmir, which may cause another war between India and Pakistan - a war that may not be limited to the use of conventional arms.

The Taliban have also posed a serious threat to Central Asia and Russia. Three of the five Central Asian states - namely, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - share borders with Afghanistan. While Turkmenistan has declared itself a neutral state in the Afghan conflict, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have supported their respective anti-Taliban Afghan warring factions. Since the fall of Mazar-e Sharif, the buffer zone between the Afghan territories held by the Taliban and these two Central Asian republics has disappeared - and, with that, the Taliban have started to export to those republics and beyond, what they have to offer: Islamic extremism, terrorism, heroin, smuggled goods and refugees. While the last three items have had serious social and economic consequences in Central Asia - although less than in Pakistan and Iran - it is the export of Islamic extremism and terrorism that has deeply worried the Central Asian republics and Russia.

For instance, in Uzbekistan, the challenge posed to the government of President Islam Karimov by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has assumed grave proportions. In February 1999, President Karimov narrowly escaped a IMU bomb attack in Tashkent, after which the IMU's leader, Tahir Yuldashev, took refuge in Afghanistan. In August 1999, another IMU leader, Juma Namangani, marched, along with around 1000 Islamic militants (mostly Uzbeks but including Afghans, Pakistanis, Arabs and even Uighurs) into the Fergana valley, which straddles Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. They took several Kyrgyz citizens hostage. Although the Islamic rebellion was finally crushed through Uzbek air strikes, it has cautioned the Kyrgyz government of President Askar Akayev against the rising wave of Islamic extremism and forced Turkmenistan to strengthen its border defences. As for Russia, the conflict in Chechnya continues to haunt it despite the Russian army's successive military victories against Chechen rebels. Moscow accuses the Taliban of training and financing Chechen rebels. Reportedly, Chechen militants have had in their ranks Arabs, Afghans and Pakistanis, who accompanied the Chechen militants that captured parts of Daghestan in July 1999. To stop the infiltration of Islamic militants from Afghanistan into Russian territory, Moscow has increased the strength of its security forces along the Tajik-Afghan border. In April 1999, Tajikistan agreed to allow a new Russian military base in central Tajikistan, doubling the existing 15,000 troops in the republic.⁶

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has also had serious international repercussions. As soon as the last of the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the United States lost interest in the Afghan issue. It abandoned the Afghan Mujahidin, who had defeated the Soviets primarily with US arms and money. Washington also distanced itself from Pakistan, which was the main conduit of US arms and money for the Mujahidin. It was Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden who had played a key role in recruiting thousands of Arab warriors for the Afghan jihad, in which he himself took part. In 1990, after finishing the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, Osama left Afghanistan for Sudan. But the Afghan Mujahidin, including Arab Afghans led by bin Laden and Pakistanis who either participated in the Afghan jihad or helped the CIA supply arms and money to the Mujahidin, felt betrayed by the United States. And thus started a trans-national Islamic terrorist campaign against the United States, and this has gained momentum ever since the Taliban's rise and particularly since bin Laden's May 1996 return to Afghanistan.⁷

The most recent terrorist act against the United States was the 12 October 2000 bombing of the US Navy destroyer Cole off the Yemeni coast of Aden, resulting in the death of 17 American sailors. US investigators perceived bin Laden's hand behind the terrorist act. He is already indicted by a US court for the August 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Soon after the bombings, Washington launched a cruise missile attack against bin Laden's hideouts inside Afghanistan, killing some 20 militants. However, following the USS Cole incident, both the Taliban and Pakistan warned the United States not to undertake any such venture as it could have serious consequences. Bin Laden continues to live inside Afghanistan despite US and UN sanctions against the country. These were imposed in 1999 due to the Taliban's refusal to hand bin Laden over to the United States. The Taliban argue, "Osama lives in Afghanistan as a guest who has never been allowed to use Afghan soil against others."⁸

THE TALIBAN: ENGAGEMENT OR CONFRONTATION?

The United Nations as well as the great powers and regional states concerned about the threat from Afghanistan have so far adopted twin-strategies of stick and carrot - confrontation and engagement

- vis-à-vis the Taliban. Neither has worked: engaging the Taliban has proved to be futile and the strategy of confrontation has lacked the required punch.

On 4 July 1999, the US President, Bill Clinton, issued an executive order "blocking property and prohibiting transactions with the Taliban." Washington accused the Taliban of "providing a haven to Osama and allowing Al-Qaida organisation to use their territory as a base." In July 2000, the US emergency against the Taliban was extended for another year. On 15 October 1999, the UN Security Council also announced a freeze on the Taliban's foreign assets and a ban on air traffic to areas under their control unless they hand bin Laden over to Washington within 30 days. On 14 November 1999, UN sanctions came into effect.⁹ Have these sanctions hurt Taliban? Yes, but not so much as to weaken their military strength to conquer Afghanistan or ideological resolve to spread Islamic extremism and terrorism across Afghan frontiers.

The United States, Russia, China, India, Israel, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus recently created various anti-terrorism networks, strategic partnerships or collective security plans to contain the Taliban. Since Michael Sheehan, the US Co-ordinator for Counter-Terrorism, visited India in October 1999, Washington and New Delhi have been trying to co-ordinate efforts to combat the growing threat of Islamic terrorism originating from Taliban-held territories of Afghanistan. At the start of 2000, they established an Indo-US Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, which meets periodically to co-ordinate the counter-terrorism strategies of the two countries. As part of the same process, the United States has started to share sensitive intelligence information with India. In July 2000, India also established with Israel a Joint Commission on the Prevention of Terrorism.¹⁰

While India hopes through these counter-terrorism networks to put a check on Kashmiri militancy originating from Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States, with Israel's help, wants to check international terrorism, whose main point of origin in the post-Cold War period has been Afghanistan and Pakistan. In July 2000, Washington also agreed with Moscow to establish a US-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan. In its first meeting, held in August 2000, "The US and Russian sides reviewed the threat posed to regional and international stability by Taliban support for terrorism. They explored bilateral, regional and multilateral options for addressing that threat." In September 2000, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, visited India, where he and the Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, concluded a Strategic Partnership Accord to "pool efforts to combat international terrorism and religious extremism."¹¹

Iran has also established close working relationships with India and the Central Asian states to check the Taliban. Tehran also provides arms and ammunition to the United Front and frequently hosts meetings of its leaders to co-ordinate the Front's military strategy against the Taliban. The Taliban threat has also pushed Turkey into a greater understanding with its regional rival Iran. Since Turkey has invested heavily in the Central Asian republics, it has a stake in peace and stability in the region. Moreover, Ankara supports the Turkic minorities in Afghanistan, such as the Afghan-Uzbeks. It has provided financial support to the Afghan-Uzbek general, Rashid Dostum, and twice gave him a home in exile. Like Turkey, Israel has a stake in Central Asian peace and stability for similar reasons.¹² Moreover, Islamic militancy, whether it is Shiah or Sunni, poses an obvious threat to Israel, especially as Tel Aviv confronts the Palestinians' growing violent resistance.

Since June 2000, not a month has passed in which the Central Asian states have not created a joint anti-terrorism centre or signed a collective security pact among themselves or in alliance with outside powers. From June to September, four such initiatives were taken. In June, the CIS summit established a joint Anti-Terrorism Centre in Moscow. In July, the presidents of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Dushanbe and agreed to create a Joint Anti-Terrorist Centre in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, to "fight cross-border incursions involving Islamic extremism and drugs." The club of five countries, known as the Shanghai Five, meets once a year to review the threat from the Taliban. India is also vying to join the Shanghai Five. Soon after the capital of Takhar province, Taloqan, fell to the Taliban on 5 September, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed a Counter-Terrorism Agreement to "counter the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism." Then, in October, the presidents of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, at their emergency meeting in Bishkek, agreed to a long-term mutual security plan. The meeting also urged

the UN Security Council to hold a special session on Afghanistan and take immediate measures "to prevent the escalation of war in Afghanistan and outside of its borders."¹³

Despite the imposition of UN and US sanctions for well over a year, the Taliban have continued to score military victories against the United Front, indicating that sanctions have failed to effectively choke the Taliban's internal and external sources of money and arms. In September 2000, the UN Security Council threatened to impose harsher sanctions against the Taliban. However, it did not go beyond expressing "concern at the growing spread of the Afghan conflict beyond its borders."¹⁴ Nor has the Security Council taken any notice of Central Asian and Russian demands to convene a special session of the Council to adopt stringent measures against the Taliban. Instead, the UN has adopted a conciliatory and appeasing posture towards the Taliban.

For instance, on 5 October 2000, the UN special envoy to Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, after meeting Taliban leaders in Kabul, stated they were willing to enter "unconditional talks."¹⁵ How could the UN envoy say so when just two months before he himself had accused the Taliban of "initiating the latest round of fighting in the northeast"? And, on 15 August, the Taliban Foreign Minister, Maulvi Mutawakel, had in turn accused Mr Vendrell of "undermining peace efforts with harsh comments against Taliban."¹⁶ The international appeasement of the Taliban, even if it is accompanied by confrontational measures such as the imposition of UN and US sanctions and the establishment of anti-terrorism networks, has made the religious militia more defiant. For instance, when the UN Security Council announced its intention to impose harsher sanctions against the Taliban, their reaction was that even harsher sanctions would not force them to hand bin Laden over to Washington. Then, on 15 September, the '6+2 Group' of countries (composed of the United States, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) met in New York, where UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the Taliban were bent upon finding a military solution to the Afghan conflict. The Group called upon the warring factions to observe a cease-fire and settle the conflict through talks. "We reject what the '6+2' has said in its meeting...It is nothing but a joke" said the Taliban arrogantly.¹⁷

Although the United States was the first to announce sanctions against the Taliban, it has also not abandoned the option of engaging the Islamic warriors. The most recent contact between the two countries occurred on 29 September 2000, when the Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister, Aburrahman Zahid, met the US Under-secretary of State, Thomas Pickering, in Washington to discuss "peace, human rights, narcotics control and bin Laden."¹⁸ In Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are two countries offering overtures to the Taliban. In June 1999, the Uzbek Foreign Minister, Aziz Kamilov, met Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Supreme Leader of the Taliban, in Kandahar to initiate a peaceful way out of the Afghan quagmire. For this purpose, in July 1999, Uzbekistan hosted a meeting of the '6+2 Group' in Tashkent, but this failed to produce a result. On 30 August 2000, the Turkmen Foreign Minister, Boris Sheikmuradov, visited Kabul to forge a regional consensus for the initiation of an intra-Afghan dialogue. Like the Uzbek initiative, the Turkmen initiative failed to achieve its aim, except that it secured from the Taliban the release of 85 prisoners of war belonging to the United Front.¹⁹

Such conciliatory gestures by the UN and the countries that are so deeply concerned about the export of Islamic extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan embolden the Taliban. Consequently, the Taliban have become increasingly intransigent in their external dealings. What the international community and these countries have to realise is that the Taliban have risen to power only through sheer military might. It is essentially a military force, which cannot - and should not be expected to - negotiate peace with its rival Afghan factions. The Taliban simply cannot share power with others. That is why none of the peace efforts to achieve an all-Afghan government - undertaken in the last six years by the UN, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), and individual countries such as the US, Turkey,²⁰ Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and the civilian leaders of Pakistan - has ever materialised. The Taliban talk of just one physical reality: that they control 90 percent of Afghanistan. On this basis, they seek international recognition for their regime in Kabul. The question is: how can a military conquest be politically legitimised, especially when it has occurred in utter violation of the UN-supervised Geneva Accords on Afghanistan?

The existing measures to contain the Taliban, such as the various anti-terrorism networks, seem to be defensive arrangements since they aim to address the consequences of the Taliban's rise in

Afghanistan rather than its causes. Such measures are premised on the assumption that the danger of Islamic extremism and terrorism from Taliban-led Afghanistan is so grave that the institutionalisation of a security and defence mechanism has become essential. In the first place, why did the international community allow this danger to become so grave? And now, if it really has assumed grave proportions, why not crush it by undertaking the steps which deny the Islamic warriors any venue for political manoeuvrability in the comity of nations, and disrupt their internal and external sources of military re-supplies and finances? It is with financial help from outside sources and revenue generated through drug trafficking and smuggling consumer goods that the Taliban finance their war against the United Front,²¹ whose survival in Afghanistan now depends on its ability to withstand and reverse the Taliban's recent military push in north-eastern regions of the country. Any further rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan - meaning its capture of the remaining north-eastern territories, particularly the last province of Badakhshan - will have a destabilising impact on regional and international security.

While there is no harm in creating or institutionalising existing bilateral and multilateral containment measures, the UN Security Council is the best forum to credibly contain the Islamic warriors of Afghanistan. The Council can make its sanctions regime vis-à-vis the Taliban stronger by adopting measures such as imposing a ban on the foreign travel of Taliban officials. Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN envoy to Afghanistan, had strongly argued for the imposition of an arms embargo on the warring factions in Afghanistan. Mr Brahimi resigned in October 1998 in utter frustration after blaming the Taliban for their intransigence, the complaining of the support given to them by thousands of madrassa students from Pakistan and continued outside interference.²²

Given the fact that the Taliban now fully or partly control 29 of Afghanistan's 30 provinces, the UN arms embargo on Afghanistan should specifically aim at hurting the religious militia. The UN and great powers have at their disposal various instruments, including international financial institutions, which can be employed to force the external backers of the Taliban to comply with the terms and conditions of the UN embargo and economic sanctions against the Taliban, and these can also be made more stringent. Since the leading political forces in Pakistan are against the Taliban - contrary to the ruling military establishment, which courts the religious militia - the international community should use every means possible to strengthen those forces and to re-introduce democracy in Pakistan. The key to the demise of the Taliban lies in breaking the Taliban-ISI nexus, and this can occur only through a radical reassertion of civilian political forces in Pakistan.

CHARTING THE PATH TO PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

The containment of the Taliban has to be the starting point for any peace settlement in the war-torn and famine-hit country. The traditionally tolerant multiethnic society of Afghanistan does not deserve to be ruled by the Taliban, who exercise a reign of terror in the territories under their occupation. They have won global notoriety for their maltreatment of women, who are denied the right to education, work, move and speak freely. Women are forced to wear shuttlecock burqa (cloth covering the entire body, except hands and feet). Those accused of illicit sexual ties are stoned to death and men accused of murder are shot dead by the victim's relatives if they refuse blood money, and this deadly drama is played right before the eyes of hundreds of people usually in sports stadiums. The hands or legs of thieves are amputated likewise. The Religious Force of the Ministry of Fostering Virtue and Preventing Vice recently disrupted two friendly football matches between Afghan and Pakistani teams in Kandahar and Kabul in July and October 2000, respectively. In the first instance, the heads of Pakistani players were shaved because they violated the Taliban's dress code by wearing shorts and, in the second case, the players were chased from the stadium because the timing of the match violated the Taliban's spiritual leader, Mullah Omar's, recent edict prohibiting people from taking part in sports after 4 pm.²³

The Taliban justify such ridiculous acts and harsh punishments by taking shelter under the Shari'ah. The question is, are they qualified enough to understand the Shari'ah? Even if the Shari'ah may have sanctioned such acts or punishments during the initial phase of Islamic history, are these applicable in today's post-modern era? Also, is it not God's will that Muslims interpret Islam in accordance with the spirit of the times? How can peace, happiness and justice prevail in a society ruled by barbaric, bigoted Islamic warriors, who consider listening to music, watching television and going to the cinema heathen habits?

Suppose the international community is finally able to contain the Taliban, turning it into a militarily insignificant force, then which peace process will be suitable for Afghanistan? Three separate negotiating processes on Afghanistan have been underway in recent times, including the UN-supervised '6+2', the Contact Group of the OIC, led by Iran and Pakistan, and the Rome Peace Process, involving the peace option of Loya Jirga initiated by former Afghan king Zahir Shah, who ruled Afghanistan for 40 years from 1933 to 1973.

In October 1997, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, set up a Group of Concerned Countries at the UN, which was nicknamed the '6+2 Group' and included six of Afghanistan's neighbours, plus Russia and the United States. The Secretary-General had hoped that this forum would encourage Iran to talk to Pakistan as well as re-engage the United States in a search for peace. Another aim was to implement an arms embargo on Afghanistan and to start talks between the Afghan factions. In over three years, the '6+2' initiative has failed to achieve any of these aims. Iran and Pakistan continue to fight a proxy war in Afghanistan. The US policy on Afghanistan remains unnecessarily embroiled in the bin Laden affair, which forces Washington to undertake controversial military ventures such as the August 1998 cruise missile attack on Afghanistan. As for the UN-proposed arms embargo, none of the regional states has shown any serious interest in realising it through UN good offices. In sum, the '6+2 Group' has come to be just a forum of discussion among the foreign ministers of the member countries and the UN envoy for Afghanistan. As long as the Taliban remains an unrivalled military force in Afghanistan, the '6+2 Group' will be unable to bring about any credible change towards peace and amity in the country. Of course, if the religious militia is reduced to a non-entity, then it remains the best forum for creating an all-Afghan political order in Afghanistan.²⁴

As far as the OIC Contact Group on Afghanistan is concerned, it is plagued by the same problem as the '6+2 Group'. While Iran and Pakistan are militarily backing rival factions in Afghanistan, how can they arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to the Afghan question? The last meeting of the Group took place in Jeddah in May 1999²⁵ and the leaders of both the Taliban and the United Front also participated. However, the only area where the participating sides made some progress was on the exchange of each other's prisoners of war. They even did not agree on a cease-fire, not to speak of installing a broad-based government in Afghanistan. Again, as is the case with the '6+2 Group', without the Taliban becoming a military non-entity in Afghanistan, the OIC initiative is likely to fail. Even otherwise, the OIC has proved a paper body, whose performance ends at issuing hollow declarations and proclamations. Thus, if the Taliban are ever made an insignificant force through collective international resolve and action, the best forum to address the future course of events in Afghanistan would be the '6+2 Group' acting on behalf of the UN Security Council.

For some years, the option of a Loya Jirga has been widely considered as the most workable way out of the lingering Afghan impasse. The United States and the European Union appear to seriously consider the realisation of a Loya Jirga. In September 1996, King Zahir Shah, living in exile in Italy since his ouster, announced his decision to end exile and return to Afghanistan. On 26 September 1999, as part of the Rome Peace Process, he proposed an emergency meeting of the Loya Jirga to be chaired by him and with the participation of Afghan elders living inside or outside Afghanistan, and representing all ethnic and religious groups. The two main objectives of the Loya Jirga would be to establish a representative government and achieve peace in the beleaguered country. Loya Jirga and provincial councils of sardars (tribal chiefs) were two traditional institutions that, along with the religious establishment, played an important role in confirming legitimacy on the Afghan king, and approved constitutional and legal changes in the country. The institution of Jirga also functioned at the local levels to adjudicate disputes between individuals and among tribes.²⁶

The Afghan king has made it clear that he does not want any political role for himself in Afghanistan. All he wants is that peace and stability should return to his country so that it could be reconstructed and its population rehabilitated. Those who support Zahir Shah - including the US, EU and moderate Afghan elders and notables living mostly in exile - believe that Zahir Shah is the only Afghan leader who can reunite Afghanistan. One of the main objectives of the Rome Peace Process is to create some role for the moderate factions that have been marginalised by the warring factions. Known for enjoying deep respect among the Afghan population, Zahir Shah may serve as an important political figure in garnering international support and reunifying various Afghan groups under the umbrella of Loya Jirga.

On 15 July 2000, the US Under-secretary of State for South Asia, Karl Inderfurth, told the Senate Sub-committee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs that the US did not recognise the Afghan conflict simply as a two-state affair. "Our strategy is to promote the greatest possible involvement of Afghans in the search for peace in their own country. What is needed in our view is a sincere negotiating process among the Afghans themselves towards a broad-based, inclusive government which the Afghan people, first and foremost, and then the US and the rest of the international community can accept, and which can take up the cause of rebuilding the country. This will require the involvement of a wide spectrum of Afghans inside and outside the country - more than just the Taliban and the United Front."²⁷ The same month, the Afghan former Foreign Minister, Hedayat Amin Arsala, visited Pakistan and Afghanistan as a special envoy of Zahir Shah to enlist their reaction to the former king's proposal on Loya Jirga. While Islamabad showed some interest in the matter, the Taliban altogether refused to consider it.²⁸ Like all other peace bids, the Rome Peace Process has also stalled due to the intransigence of Taliban.

How long will the world community continue to be blackmailed by the Islamic warriors of Afghanistan? The genie of the Taliban can be put back in the bottle if the UN Security Council - particularly the United States, Russia and China who are equally concerned about the growing danger from the Taliban - shows the required political resolve and acts credibly against the religious militia. Reversing the tide of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and its regional and global fallout is in the common interest of all the peace-loving nations of the democratic world. More so, doing so is in the interest of Pakistan, for whom the social, economic and political consequences of backing the Taliban have been horrific. Like the United States and Saudi Arabia, Islamabad should realise that supporting the Taliban has been its gravest foreign policy miscalculation to date. As for the peace settlement of Afghanistan through the creation of a broad-based governmental structure, it can never be realised as long as the Taliban remain at the helm of Afghan affairs.

1 See Ishtiaq Ahmad, 'Leave Afghans Alone to Decide Their Future', *Nation*, 27 February 1995; and 'Peace Will Remain a Distant Dream in Afghanistan', *Nation*, 2 March 1995.

2 Ahmed Rashid, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 1999, pp. 24-28.

3 *ibid.* See also Philip Bowering, 'Central Asia Tries to Avoid a New Great Game', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 April 2000. For the US acquiescence of the Taliban, see Richard Mackenzie, 'The United States and the Taliban', in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1998, pp. 90-100.

4 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London: I B Tauris, 2000, pp. 196-204; and Ahmed, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', *op. cit.*, pp. 28-31.

5 Zahid Hussain, 'In the Shadow of Terrorism', *Newsline*, Karachi, February 2000, pp. 17-25.

6 See Anthony Hyman, 'Russia, Central Asia, and the Taliban', in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1998, pp. 104-114. Also see Paul Newberg, 'Tragedy of a Region Rife with Intolerance', *Nation*, 28 November 1999.

7 One of the best books on Osama bin Laden and his alleged linkage with international terrorism is written by John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, London: Pluto Press, 1999. For the Saudi millionaire's love and hate relationship with Washington, see pp. 215-241.

8 *New York Times*, 30 September 2000. By the end of November 2000, the United States was reportedly putting together a plan, in collaboration with Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan-members of the US-sponsored Partnership for Peace program- "to strike at the military camps of bin Laden, other militant groups who have sanctuary in Afghanistan and Taliban military assets in Afghanistan." For details, see Ahmad Rashid, "Raids on Osama Camps Imminent," *Nation*, 23 November 2000. For

their part, Taliban were reported to have imposed a ban on all foreigners to travel by road without seeking permission from their Foreign Ministry in Kabul (Nation, 25 November 2000). However, as it had happened in August 1998, any military strikes on bin Laden hideouts (or Taliban assets in Afghanistan) may not serve any purpose. It is only through a multi-dimensional approach adopted within the ambit of the UN Security Council that the threat from Taliban and their foreign compatriots can be tackled effectively.

9 News, Islamabad, 3 July 2000.

10 News, Islamabad, 5 July 2000.

11 Times of India, 2 October 2000.

13 News, 12 October 2000.

14 News, 27 September 2000.

15 Dawn, Karachi, 6 October 2000.

16 News, 16 August 2000.

17 See Nation, 17 September 2000 and News, 18 September 2000.

18 Washington Post, 30 September 2000.

19 Bronwen Maddox, 'High Stakes for Peace in Hindu Kush', The Times, 5 August 2000 and Dawn, 31 August 2000.

20 Turkey has long aspired to hold a conference of all Afghan factions in Istanbul. Foreign Minister Ismail Cem proposed this idea to the government of Pakistan during his visit to Islamabad on 2 April 1998. In an interview, he told me, "We want all sides to get together and form a transitional government consisting of all ethnic groups in order to create conditions which are conducive for a broad-based settlement of the issue." See Nation, 3 April 1998.

21 Rashid, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', *ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

22 Rashid, Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, *op. cit.*, p. 78. In his report published by the Nation (24 November 2000), Mr Rashid predicted that the UN Security Council was set to pass new 'Taliban-specific' sanctions, "dominated by an arms embargo against the Taliban and possibly include an embargo on fuel supplies, the closure of their offices abroad, limiting Taliban officials' around the world and the seizure of Taliban assets outside Afghanistan." However, even if the Security Council was to pass such stringer sanctions, its ability to implement these sanctions would still remain limited as long as external sources of money and arms for Taliban, mainly originating from Pakistan, were not closed.

23 Michael Fathers, 'Frozen in Time', Time, 29 May 2000; and Nation, 25 October 2000. The international press widely distributed the Reuters photo of the head-shaved Pakistani footballers. For an alternative perspective on the Taliban, see Peter Mardsen, The Taliban: War, Religion, and the New Order in Afghanistan, New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999.

24 Rashid, Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-66.

25 Umer Farooq, 'Two Parallel Processes for Afghan Peace', News, 8 June 2000.

26 See Ishtiaq Ahmad, 'Only Zahir Shah Can Unite Afghanistan', Nation, 21 September 1996.

27 Washington Post, 16 July 2000.

28 See Christian Science Monitor, 16 July 2000; and News, 19 July 2000.