

Afghanistan

Scene

Indian security presence

By MK Bhadrakumar

The US and Britain have hitherto been averse to any role for India — in deference to Pakistani sensitivities. Why, now, a change of heart?

THE Indian “debate” about Afghanistan is narrowing down to a single agenda: ensuring the security of hundreds of Indian nationals involved in Indian projects in that country. Since the killing of Maniappan Ramankutty in November last, the Government began substantially augmenting the paramilitary forces deployed in Afghanistan. It reportedly decided on deploying the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) in Afghanistan even ahead of Suryanarayana’s death last week.

It took the Dutch parliament an agonising six months to make up its mind whether a few hundred troops could be sent to Afghanistan. The “debate” deeply divided the Dutch public. An entire team of parliamentarians from the House of Commons travelled to Afghanistan at great risk to their personal safety before the parliamentary select committee could decide what conditions and preconditions had to be fulfilled before British troops were despatched to southern Afghanistan under the commitment to NATO. (Of course, senior British journalists separately travelled to Afghanistan for making their own assessment.)

India, regrettably, is yet to reach that level of sophistication in policy-making — its tragic experiences in Sri Lanka nearly two decades ago notwithstanding. Secondly, Afghanistan is — it has been for a long time and may well remain for the foreseeable future — an enigma. Ambiguities surround every “incident” like the one involving Maniappan or Suryanarayana. Things are never quite

what they may appear to be. This is inevitable when intrigues double up as politics. What Selig Harrison wrote in his classic work *Out of Afghanistan* — that the Soviets actually blundered into Afghanistan in 1978 — has since been borne out by the declassified archival materials of the Cold War period in Moscow and Washington. A perception was deliberately created by the Western intelligence that they were using Afghanistan as a battlefield to threaten long-term Soviet strategic interests.

That is to say, there must be greater clarity as to who killed Maniappan and Suryanarayana. All that can be said with a

presence in Afghanistan.

While speaking of a Pakistani animus to an Indian presence in the sensitive Afghan border regions, would we countenance with equanimity Pakistani nationals appearing in their hundreds on India’s border regions with Nepal or Bangladesh or Sri Lanka? Yet another question arises. Without compromising the commitment to “reconstruct” Afghanistan’s economic infrastructure, is it not possible for Indian activities to sidestep for the present the highly explosive region bordering Pakistan and instead concentrate on the west, north, east, and the centre of the country till such time as there is less volatility in Pakistan’s

Without compromising the commitment to ‘reconstruct’ economic infrastructure, is it not possible for Indian activities to sidestep for the present the highly explosive region bordering Pakistan and instead concentrate on the west, north, east, and the centre of the country till such time as there is less volatility in Pakistan’s Balochistan

measure of confidence is that they were political murders (which does not make them any less horrendous). Intriguingly, Hamid Karzai did not blame the Taliban for Suryanarayana’s murder. Actually, for the past few days Kabul has been excited about the new overtures being made by the United States and Mr Karzai to the Taliban leadership for a genuinely serious political dialogue aimed at working out a credible power-sharing arrangement.

The discourse in India has been to point to the possibility of a Pakistani intelligence hand in the killing of Indian workers in Afghanistan. The possibility is fast becoming a probability. With that, the “case file” is all but closed. And, it is time to move on to modalities of augmentation of the Indian security pres-

ence in Afghanistan or Waziristan regions?

After all, the Taliban’s insurgency is more or less confined to a certain belt along the border with Pakistan in southeastern Afghanistan. Arguably, the Northern Alliance groups, which are still dominating the other regions, would welcome a deeper Indian “re-engagement” on their turf. Such an approach will not detract from India’s sincere desire to show goodwill to the Afghan people either. At the same time, the safety or security of our aid workers will be better taken care of.

Actually, the issues involved in augmenting Indian security troop presence in Afghanistan are profound for the geopolitics of the region. According to reports, the British Prime Minister’s Foreign Policy Adviser, Nigel Shinwald, conveyed to Prime

Presence in Afghanistan

Minister Manmohan Singh at a meeting in Delhi on May 3 that London would be supportive of any Indian decision to assume a bigger security role in Afghanistan.

The British demarche comes on the heels of Suryanarayana's killing and appears a sympathetic gesture. But it signifies a change of course in Anglo-American thinking. The US had been hitherto averse to any role for India — in deference to Pakistani sensitivities. Why, then, such a change of heart?

The shift in thinking has appeared soon after NATO's "informal" meeting of Foreign Ministers at Sofia on April 28, putting the seal on its assuming full responsibility

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for Afghanistan's security — paving the way for an eventual American troop pullout from Afghanistan.

From all accounts, NATO remains extremely wary of its new role in Afghanistan. The Afghan resistance has a formidable reputation historically. (Britain should know better than any country.) There is no certainty that the NATO troop level of 17,000 will suffice. But it is virtually impossible to get NATO member countries to commit additional troops. Washington, on its part, is raring to wind down its troop strength. The overstretch in Iraq is hurting.

These concerns are legitimate. Not a day passes without leading opinion makers in the Western media highlighting the Taliban's resurgence. The current US overtures to the Taliban are a tacit acceptance

of the ground reality.

NATO indeed has an option to approach other regional organisations to lend a hand. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) has been on standby for over a year, willing to coordinate with NATO on stabilising the Afghan situation. But as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov informed President Vladimir Putin at a Kremlin meeting on May 2 regarding the outcome of the Sofia meet, "our NATO colleagues are still not ready to work out cooperation with the CSTO".

Mr Lavrov indirectly explained the factors behind NATO's reticence. He said: "We conveyed our position that . . . we will build our overall relations with NATO depending on what direction the internal transformation process within the alliance takes, and also depending on NATO's expansion plans, and, in general, the extent to which the principles of international laws are observed and Russia's legitimate interests are taken into account in the context of the changing geopolitical situation in the world".

Now, from NATO's perspective, the Russians are literally asking for the moon. As far as NATO is concerned, the Afghan saga is expected to substantiate before the world audience that with or without the UN, it has the credentials as the sole security organisation with a global reach that is in a position to perform peace-keeping (and peace-enforcing) roles in far-flung regions of the world — be it Central Asia, South Asia or the Middle East and the Caucasus.

All that NATO requires is to "bring into the fold" non-member countries, which are prepared to commit troops that assist its operations. With specific reference to Afghanistan, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer explained at a press conference in Brussels on April 27: "The sensitivities of countries like Pakistan and India must be considered as

NATO takes on missions like its current role in Afghanistan. You have to pay attention to your relationship with India. You are not operating in a vacuum or in a void.

"And, that's why I said, 'bringing them into the fold'. Because I have not a specific structure in mind to do that. One very concrete structure is building it around NATO's operations and missions.

"But, how exactly you're going to develop this political dialogue is, of course, another matter — if you do that in a structured way or if you do that on an ad-hoc basis. This is simply because we are only starting this discussion."

Either way, Mr. Shinwald, who came to Delhi as Tony Blair's envoy, would know that NATO would find it extremely useful if Indian paramilitary forces came into Afghanistan in strong numbers. NATO's concern is to coax the Taliban into accepting the American offer of political reconciliation. Pakistan cannot be pressured.

Overriding domestic opposition, Pervez Musharraf has already signed an agreement for providing logistical back-up for reaching supplies to the NATO contingents in Afghanistan. (Central Asian airspace is controlled by the CSTO.) Islamabad has just consented to NATO's inclusion as a full member of the joint commission of the US, Pakistan, and Afghanistan overseeing the "war on terror". Thus, Pakistan is graduating into an institutionalised relationship with NATO — like Finland, Sweden, Austria or Switzerland.

"Non-NATO allies" like Pakistan constitute a key element in the alliance's overall strategy. For, as Mr Scheffer explained, the idea is to make NATO into "an alliance with global partners" — rather than "a global alliance". This might seem a matter of semantics, but it is a crucial distinction for a western alliance of countries that are chary of fighting wars in faraway lands. COURTESY THE HINDU