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Middle East

News

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The US military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq are dragging on. After a lull of few months, a suicidal attack on a German bus carrying German soldiers home took place on June 7 near Kabul killing four German ISAF soldiers and wounding 29. It was the biggest attack on peacekeepers since the fall from power of the Taliban regime in Oct 2001.

While commenting on the terrorist attack the German Defence Minister Peter Struck pointed out that most likely it was some Arabs with al-Qaeda connections. Earlier the May 12 suicidal attacks in Riyadh, in which 35 people died including some US families, and then the Casablanca bar incident also points to al-Qaeda linkages. According to UN Security Council report, nearly 800 al-Qaeda 'third generation' operatives are spread out around the globe and ready to target Western tourist or economic targets, especially the US and its coalition partners.

In fact, the US-led coalition forces remain engaged in a 'difficult and dangerous war,' says the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Afghanistan belongs to the category of failed states. Ethnicity, ideology, and vicious internal fighting make it an ungovernable country.

The Afghan society was quite stable at the time of constitutional monarchy of King Zahir Shah. The 1979 Soviet military invasion and later internal fighting for two decades has ripped apart the fabric of Afghan society. The Taliban regime established in the early to mid-1990s was another setback.

After their forcible exit in 2001, and the installation of a transitional government, law and order problems still exist. Refugees continue to linger on in Iran and Pakistan, not sure whether to return or not. Warlordism is rife where Karzai government exercises a tenuous or weak control over the provinces. The problems of reconstruction are formidable and the funds are not forthcoming as expected. Taliban and al-Qaeda are regrouping in south and southeastern regions and are a thorn in the side of the Karzai government.

Therefore, prospects of a unified Afghan state emerging in the foreseeable future are bleak. A lot will depend upon the role and assistance by the US, regional neighbours, and international community. Notwithstanding US claims of continued engagement in the region, the Iraq preoccupation has palpably affected the US concentration and focus in Afghanistan. Will the US come to have sustained interest in Afghanistan for some years? Contrary to post-1988 developments in that country, when the Soviet Union decided to with-

draw, the US in a year or so exited with 'indecent haste' from the region.

However seemingly its stakes are too high in the region to re-enact a similar sudden departure. For Afghanistan was a hub of terrorism through the al-Qaeda network, which inflicted terrorist strikes on the US mainland in September 2001. Further, the US proximity and interests in Central Asia have grown in salience. Besides, its forces' recent physical lodgement in oil-rich Iraq, and need for support and monitoring of political developments in nuclear Pakistan all militate for continued and perhaps presence in the region for the foreseeable future. This interest may not necessarily mean that there might be early rebuilding of Afghanistan, which ideally should be the top priority, if the benighted country has to be extricated from the vicious cycle of poverty and terrorism.

But unlike Iraq, Afghanistan today is a shattered state as a result of 22 years of internal warfare and external intervention. It lacks basic infrastructure, and a skilled educated class. It is littered with mines, has a large population either internally displaced or living outside as refugees. Unlike Iraq, high illiteracy, and lack of natural resources act as big impediments. Moreover, its professional class has either emigrated or is reluctant to return till peaceful conditions return in that country. Iraq too is passing through a critical transition from a despotic dictatorship that had ruled for three decades. With tribal traditions and a repressive regime in power, prospects of immediate return to democracy in both countries are grim, albeit Iraq fares somewhat better than Afghanistan due to higher literacy levels and human resource levels. Anti-US feelings in both countries are running high and the US-British forces are seen as occupation armies.

Some observers remain very sceptical of US-Pakistan relations in future, despite positive trends of Musharraf's visit in June to the US. Should Pakistan fail to control 'cross-border terrorism' in Kashmir (it is very difficult to guarantee a peaceful border after having sponsored militant elements for years), or should Pakistani domestic scene see resurgence of Islamist forces, or terrorist acts, this will sound an alarm bell in Washington and other Western circles about the safe custody of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. In that extreme scenario, the US-Israel-India tripartite nexus may come into play with an aim to 'defang' Pakistan's nuclear programme. After all, the US leadership has been constantly harping on the theme of 'preventive' and 'pre-emptive' strikes against 'rogue states' or states where nuclear weapons are under the threat of falling into the hands of extremist/militant forces and likely to be used in a

fit of desperation or rage.

Now, NATO forces will be stationed in Afghanistan when the ISAF comes under NATO command. The headquarters will be at the air force base in Bagram, north of Kabul. It also serves as the headquarter of 11,500 US led coalition troops now sweeping the south and southeast of the country and trying to flush out remaining but active Taliban and al-Qaeda elements. It seems that the US will be in Afghanistan for a long haul and foreign troops will remain there for the foreseeable future.

Close by in the Gulf, Iraq is militarily occupied with sizable US and British forces. Iran, its immediate neighbour, is under threat and stands neutralised in its open support for Pakistan. China, the latter's all weather friend and neighbour is circumspect not to irk the US at this stage. Afghanistan has some grievances against Pakistan, the foremost being the latter's complicity in conniving and supporting the Taliban elements seeking sanctuary in its tribal regions. The MMA governments in the two neighbouring border provinces of Pakistan have a soft corner for the Pushtun Taliban, and are opposed to the Tajik-dominated leadership of Afghanistan.

In this scenario, the space for political manoeuvre by Pakistan is getting quite restricted. The present efforts at rapprochement with India are the result of compulsions of both India and Pakistan, and an attempt by Pakistani leadership to ease the mounting pressure on Pakistan.

In the meanwhile, President Hamid Karzai is on a spree of foreign tours in a desperate bid to secure the much-needed aid for rehabilitation of Afghanistan.

Surely, this is a crucial moment for Afghanistan. A failure to provide the Afghans with much-needed security and economic assistance could push that country back to the state of anarchy, that in the first place gave rise to the Taliban and allowed al-Qaeda to base itself there. Continued turmoil in Afghanistan remains a headache for Pakistan and the region.

President Musharraf has done well in his recent foreign trip and won international kudos for trying to steer Pakistan out of dire straits. Unfortunately, it is the weight and sins of dysfunctional and myopic foreign and domestic policies that has brought Pakistan to the present state of affairs.

This course-correction in foreign policy is overdue and should have been done much earlier. A lot of time has been wasted in protecting vested interests, dilly-dallying, harbouring illusions and indulging in fulfilment of wishes. One wishes President Musharraf the best of luck in his endeavours.

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