

Afghanistan

A Tale of Pakistan's Lies and Deceit

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Centre for Land Warfare Studies
New Delhi



KNOWLEDGE WORLD
KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
New Delhi

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ISSN 23939729

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CLAWS Army No. 33098

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflicts and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

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KNOWLEDGE WORLD

www.kwpub.com

Published in India by

Kalpana Shukla

KW Publishers Pvt Ltd

4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

Phone: +91 11 23263498 / 43528107 email: knowledgeworld@vsnl.net • www.kwpub.com

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Abstract | 1 |
| 2. Introduction | 1 |
| 3. Kunduz Offensive and the Aftermath | 3 |
| <i>The Timing of the Offensive</i> | 3 |
| <i>Strategic Importance of Kunduz</i> | 4 |
| <i>Taliban's Terror Base Shifts from Pakistan to Afghanistan</i> | 4 |
| <i>Pakistan's Aims and Objectives in Afghanistan</i> | 5 |
| <i>Taliban's Strategy</i> | 6 |
| <i>Pakistan Back-stabs Afghanistan</i> | 6 |
| 4. The Drama of Negotiations | 7 |
| <i>Chinese Interest</i> | 8 |
| <i>Fake Negotiators: What Does it Mean?</i> | 8 |
| <i>Sending Fake Negotiators is a Habit</i> | 9 |
| 5. Afghan Peace Talks | 10 |
| 6. The Canard of Taliban's Political Office in Doha | 11 |
| 7. Pakistan's Efforts to Impede Peace Talks | 13 |
| 8. The Mullah Omar Story | 14 |
| 9. Mullah Mansoor | 19 |
| <i>Mullah Mansoor's Death</i> | 21 |
| 10. Is Pakistan Involved in the Growth of Daesh in Afghanistan? | 23 |
| 11. US Flip-Flop in Afghanistan: What are the Intentions? | 25 |
| <i>US Dealings with Pakistan's Military</i> | 27 |
| <i>Russia Prepares to Counter US Moves in Afghanistan?</i> | 28 |
| 12. Conclusion | 28 |
| Notes | 31 |

Afghanistan

A Tale of Pakistan's Lies and Deceit

Abstract

The Afghan muddle, engineered by the Pakistan-US combine is a very complex issue. Despite the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan the creator of the Taliban and other terror groups in the region, continues to nurture these forces to manipulate the situation in Afghanistan. It hopes to seize power and rule the country through its surrogates and, thus, create a so-called strategic depth in the country at the cost of Afghan suffering and blood.

The US went into Afghanistan and wasted a decade and a half without being able to bring about any peace or stability in the country. Today, the Taliban, Haqqani network and Daesh, the new entrant on the Afghan scene, threaten not only Afghanistan but pose a grave danger to the countries of the region. The world continues to remain a mute spectator to the goings-on in the country, without being able to fathom a way forward.

Pakistan the malefactor in the game does not appear to have changed its course. This paper traces back the relevant events to highlight its misdemeanour in this tangle, and flags the signs of the revival of the Cold War. The emerging situation points to a new type of World War which has the potential of engulfing the entire world in this terror madness. The world seems to have no choice but to act now.

Introduction

The 9/11 terror attack in the US and the 26/11 Mumbai attacks amongst many others have proven beyond doubt, Pakistan's role in these acts of violence and evil. It has created terror groups, provided them shelter, training and funded them as a part of its state policy and employed them under the tutelage of its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Lt Gen Mahmoud Ahmed, the head of the ISI, was removed and retired from his post as the ISI chief on October 08, 2001, just prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan for his role in wiring \$100,000 to the World Trade

Centre (WTC) hijacker-attacker Mohammed Atta from Pakistan. It was an act of war. Loss of innocent lives and the extent of damage to properties in the US were enormous. The world expected the US to demand that Pakistan's General and those in the chain be questioned and punished. Yet the US failed to act. Why?

All along, the US has been saying that Pakistan's intelligence agency supports the Haqqani network, based in Pakistan's tribal areas, as a tool to extend its influence in Afghanistan. Speaking at the Senate on September 22, 2011, alongside Defence Secretary Leon E. Panetta, Adm Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff blamed Pakistan's ISI for undermining the US efforts in Afghanistan and went on to state, "We also have credible evidence that they were behind the June 28th (2011) attack against the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul and a host of other smaller but effective operations." In short, he said, "The Haqqani network acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency."¹

In July 2008, the United States confirmed that the ISI was behind the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul based on intercepted communications of the concerned ISI officers. The US' top military official said that Pakistan's spy agency played a direct role in supporting the insurgents, who carried out the deadly attack on the American Embassy in Kabul in September 2011.²

The US went into Afghanistan without a clear aim. The long-term strategic aims of bringing about broader stability in the region were forgotten and the destruction of Al Qaeda took centre-stage. Under Pakistan's influence, no efforts were made to integrate the country within the region. Instead, Afghanistan was outsourced to Pakistan, with its unholy aims and objectives intact. Nothing concrete was done to lift up the Afghan economy, some 90 percent of which is still dependent on foreign aid.

The US military strategy in Afghanistan failed to take into account the fact that insurgency in Afghanistan is shaped, aided, and armed from across the border by Pakistan's military, with its intelligence arm, the ISI controlling the war. With Pakistan providing shelter to militants across the Durand Line and the terror commanders tucked into safe houses inside Pakistan, how could any military operation in Afghanistan succeed without the terror bases in Pakistan being tackled in tandem? The result was the increasing number of body bags returning to the US and other Western countries day after day.

The facts and the reality in Afghanistan are crystal clear. Pakistan continues to be the epicentre of terror in the world, posing a grave threat to the region and humanity. The USA, one of the world's greatest powers, which dominated Afghanistan's security scene with a huge military for over 15 years, appears to lack the will to put an end to the rot that is spreading across the world. It has failed to act decisively to bring about peace and stability in that country.

As Pakistan continues its proxy war in Afghanistan, peace in the country appears a distant dream. Pakistan's signature is visible in the recent Taliban offensive in Kunduz and their subsequent terror attacks in Afghanistan besides Daesh's entry into the country. Pakistan appears to be making all efforts to confront the Afghan security forces in the ensuing campaigning season while masquerading as the mediator for peace talks and harmony in Afghanistan. The world and its major powers are yet to fully realise the complicity of Pakistan in the Afghan violence in pursuance of its long-term objectives and its larger implications.

As of today, Pakistan appears well poised to set up its proxy government in Afghanistan.

Kunduz Offensive and the Aftermath

The Timing of the Offensive

The Taliban launched its largest spring offensive ever in Kunduz, a province in Northern Afghanistan on April 24, 2015, with Pakistan remaining a mute spectator to the ongoing incursion. The assaulting terrorists, consisting of foreign fighters of Chechen, Pakistan, Tajik and Uzbek origin, had moved in from North Waziristan driven by Pakistan's military operations "Zarb-e-Azb" launched on January 15, 2015.

The Army brass had decided in principle that preparations for military operations in North Waziristan should be completed between 2010 and 2011 and the operations would commence the same year³. The operations were, however, launched only on January 15, 2015, after pausing for the US withdrawal which was scheduled for December 31, 2014.

The delay in launching military operations in North Waziristan is being attributed to the former Army Chief Gen Kayani's indecisiveness in giving the

go-ahead.⁴ However, in hindsight, the delay appears to be based on sound military logic. Pakistan's military aim was to use the military operations to drive the militants out of North Waziristan and shift the terror base from its soil to Afghanistan. The militant groups were meant to be used as Pakistan's instrument to overthrow the government in Afghanistan and establish its proxy government in that country. The movement of terror groups before the US withdrawal would have meant transient militant groups being targeted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) resulting in their disorientation and disorganisation. The situation could have also forced the US to postpone the withdrawal schedule. The need for shifting the Haqqani network cadres to safe places and the time required for the militant groups to settle down in their new found base before launching military operations in Afghanistan had to be catered for.

Strategic Importance of Kunduz

Kunduz, with Mazar-e-Sharif, the third largest city in Afghanistan to its west, Kabul to its south and Tajikistan, a Central Asian state in the north, is strategically located and provides a gateway to Central Asia and Fergana valley. Fergana valley is divided among three countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and is a hotbed of Islamic radicalisation. Being a transport hub, Kunduz is a transit point for the smuggling of drugs to Europe through Central Asia. Control of Kunduz by militant groups would help the militant cause economically and militarily while adversely affecting the security of Afghanistan and Central Asia. As of today, the Taliban controls 80 percent of the rural areas in Afghanistan.⁵ The road from Sher Khan, the dry port located on Tajikistan's border, connects Kabul, through Kunduz, Baghlan and the strategically important Salang Tunnel. The Northern Distribution Network, the main supply route of the ISAF passes through these provinces. Interdiction at these vital areas will affect military and civil supplies to Afghanistan besides isolating and containing some of the major towns and cities in Afghanistan.

Taliban's Terror Base Shifts from Pakistan to Afghanistan

Gen Mirza Alam Beg, a former Pakistan Army Chief, has signalled that the pivot of resistance of the Taliban has shifted from Pakistan to north of

Afghanistan.⁶ The Taliban's focus has clearly been directed towards Kabul besides setting the stage for Al Qaeda's expansion to other regions in its radar. Ayman al Zawahiri, the supreme leader of Al Qaeda, in his first *Guidelines for Jihad*⁷, issued on September 14, 2013, had indicated his targets thus, "It is a right of our Muslim brothers in the Caucasus to perform *jihad* against the Russian aggressor and its allies. It is a right of our brothers in Kashmir to engage in *jihad* against the criminal Hindus. It is equally a right of our brothers in Eastern Turkistan (read Xinjiang) to engage in *jihad* against the Chinese oppressors."

Pakistan's Aims and Objectives in Afghanistan

Having shifted the terrorists and their bases from Waziristan to Afghanistan, Pakistan aims to destabilise the country and storm Kabul to install a pliable Taliban dominated government. Thus, it hopes to create 'strategic depth' against an imaginary Indian invasion, besides turning Afghanistan into a safe haven for terrorists. Though Pakistan could not veto Kabul's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) due to the circumstances, it has impeded Afghanistan's political and economic integration within the region⁸ in many ways. The aim is to keep the country dependent on it so as to force a yielding government on the people of the country. Directing terrorists operating from Afghanistan's soil to achieve its goals in India and elsewhere provides Pakistan the much needed deniability.

Peace in Afghanistan is definitely not Pakistan's objective. Consequently, it has undermined every effort to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban. Bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table would run counter to Pakistan's larger plans. That explains why Pakistan remained sluggish in bringing the Taliban for talks despite assurances that this would happen by mid-March 2015. Pakistan had enough influence to direct Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, their protégé, and their appointee Amir of the Afghan Taliban, living in an affluent locality called Satellite Town in the neighbourhood of Pakistan's Quetta city, to ensure that the talks were held.

No Afghan government or Taliban has ever accepted the legitimacy of the Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, drawn by the British in 1893. With its proxy government in Afghanistan, Pakistan hopes it will end Afghan claims to its territory besides stifling Pashtun

nationalism and calls for Pashtunistan, the envisaged homeland for Pashtuns in parts of Baluchistan, as well as similar claims in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

Pakistan's intentions have an inherent danger. Having established itself in Afghanistan, there is every possibility that Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS), in power, will destabilise Central Asia and pose a serious threat to Russia and China in an attempt to achieve their larger goal of establishing a pan-Islamic Caliphate throughout the world. Afghanistan will become the sanctuary and the training ground for Daesh besides India-centric militant outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), causing much harm to peace and stability in the region.

Taliban's Strategy

Writing about the Taliban's strategy, Gen Mirza, Aslam Beg, a former Chief of Pakistan's Army states,⁹ "Their new support base now is well-established in the provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Faryab, Zabul, Baghlan, Jozjan, Baghdiz and Kunduz. They will continue to expand their control over the interior areas, thus, limiting the space for maneuver to the defenders". He goes on to state, "They have now started interdiction of the main supply routes to important cities and towns, and are trying to capture the dry port of Sher Khan, on the Tajikistan border, to cut off civil and military supplies to Afghanistan. Similarly, the road to Salang Tunnel and to Kabul is threatened to achieve isolation and containment, leading to tactical siege of cities and towns, thus, forcing the defenders to seek peace or capitulation. This process is likely to continue, during the winter months and then would follow the main battle, to capture strategically important besieged cities, including a few air bases, where American troops are stationed".

Pakistan Back-stabs Afghanistan

The role of Pakistan in the Kunduz offensive did not go unnoticed by the countries of the world, including the US and China. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, and Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif rushed to Kabul on May 12, 2015, in an attempt to soothe Chinese and US indignation over the onslaught at a time when the world was yearning for peace and stability in the country, besides the concerns for forestalling spread of militancy beyond

the boundaries of Afghanistan.

In the third week of May 2015, the premier intelligence agencies of Afghanistan and Pakistan signed an intelligence sharing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Ever since, there has been a spate of terror attacks inside Afghanistan with a view to terrorise Afghanistan and its people into submission. The Parliament came under attack on June 22, 2015, at the very heart of the country. On July 07, 2015, the sub-office of Afghanistan's spy agency, National Directorate of Security (NDS), was attacked. The intelligence sharing arrangement was meant to fight the Taliban but, on the contrary, Pakistan's hidden intent was to make use of the agreement to gain influence in Kabul besides exploiting the "intelligence sharing provision" to effectively infiltrate the Afghan intelligence apparatus.

Afghan law-makers accused the Pakistani spy agency, the ISI, of being behind the Taliban attack on their Parliament. They alleged that the legislature was punished for opposing the intelligence sharing deal that the NDS had signed with the ISI.

The decision on the ISI-NDS pact was taken by Ghani, not the Afghan government. He took a personal risk and ventured to shake hands with the ISI as he realised that without the Taliban being on board, the peace process would be a non-starter and he would need the ISI to get the Taliban leaders to the negotiating table. It was with these issues in mind that he roped in China, a close ally of Pakistan to broker the peace process. He was anticipating that China would push Pakistan to cooperate in its path to peace.

The Drama of Negotiations

Consequent to the Kunduz offensive, Pakistan's ISI flew three former so-called Taliban leaders, Mullah Abdul Jalil, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rahmani, and Mullah Abdul Razaq, who had formerly served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Governor of Kandahar, and Minister of the Interior, respectively, to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region to calm down China.¹⁰ The reality, however, was that these individuals had no connection with the Taliban's Political Commission nor did they wield any influence in the Taliban hierarchy.¹¹

On May 19 and 20, 2015, with observers from the ISI and China's Ministry

of State Security present, the fake Taliban representatives met Afghan Peace Envoy Mohammad Masoom Stanikzai.¹² The Taliban were quick to disown the meeting by posting an official statement in their website, rejecting as “rumors” that a “delegation of the Islamic Emirate met with representatives of Kabul administration’s fake peace council in Urumqi city of China.”¹³ Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan’s National Security Adviser, however, claimed in Pakistan’s Parliament that Islamabad had arranged a secret meeting between the Afghan peace negotiators and members of the Islamist Group in the northwestern city of Urumqi.¹⁴

Chinese Interest

Why did China take up a proactive role in promoting peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban? The state-owned China Metallurgical Group has spent \$3 billion to mine copper at Mes Aynak, about 30 miles south of Kabul, only to see the project stalled because of insurgents and the discovery of Buddhist artifacts at the site.¹⁵ The China National Petroleum Corporation, the nation’s largest oil company, agreed in 2011 to develop Afghanistan’s Amu Darya basin and has started extracting oil from the basin.¹⁶ This project is estimated to yield about \$7 billion in profits. This venture was disrupted in June when men loyal to Uzbek warlord Gen Abdul Rashid Dostum intimidated Chinese engineers in the area, demanding a share in the proceeds, government officials in Kabul said.¹⁷

Chinese concerns can be discerned from China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s statement made during a visit to Afghanistan in early 2014 that “the fate of Afghanistan will directly affect the stability and security of China’s west.”¹⁸ It is in this context that China probably had decided to take the initiative in arranging the peace talks. Obviously, in the Chinese assessment, Pakistan is incapable of bringing about peace in Afghanistan or it may decide to act in its self-interest to install its proxy Taliban government which may not be to the advantage of peace and stability in the region.

Fake Negotiators: What Does it Mean?

On June 24, 2015, the Pakistan based spokesperson of the Taliban made a statement that their leadership did not authorise the meeting in China. He went on to state that the political office in Doha “is responsible for

handling all the internal and external political activities related to the Islamic Emirate.¹⁹” By making this statement, the Taliban either wanted to place on record that those negotiating peace on their behalf were not genuine or were forced to make such a statement by Pakistan’s ISI.

By specifying the role of its political office in Doha and indicating the appropriate authority for negotiations, the Taliban was crafting an escape clause for Pakistan and its cohorts to evade implementation of any agreement arrived at during the talks. It was also meant to convince the world that Pakistan’s capacity to force the Taliban into a negotiated settlement is limited. The declaration by some senior government officials of Pakistan to Voice of America that, with the passage of time, Pakistan’s leverage with the Taliban insurgents has also “gradually shrunk because of the emergence of a new breed of insurgent field commanders” and their assertion that the Taliban commanders “act independent of the Taliban’s political leadership and, thus, are making it difficult to bring them all on the same page for talks with the Kabul government” suggests the intent.²⁰ Either way, the message is clear: any arrangements arrived at during the negotiations which do not serve Pakistan’s larger aims, will not be acted upon.

Sending Fake Negotiators is a Habit

Sending fake leaders for international negotiations is nothing new for Pakistan. A series of meetings at a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) military base in Kandahar culminated in the supposed Taliban leader being flown to Kabul in a British military plane to meet Karzai some time in July / August 2010. It is said that the talks were started by the Afghan government, duly approved by the former American Commander, Stanley McChrystal. Thousands of dollars were paid to the imposter as “goodwill payments”. Afghan intelligence later claimed that the visitor was actually a shopkeeper from the Pakistani city of Quetta²¹.

Speaking about the hoax representative produced as a Taliban representative, President Karzai’s Chief of Staff, Mohammad Umer Daudzai said that the British brought a man purporting to be Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, a senior Taliban leader, to meet Karzai. He went on to add that the impostor may have been dispatched by Pakistan’s spy agency to “test the system,” but “we can’t say for sure.”²² The undisputed fact, however is, that

a charlatan had met the Afghan President and he was entertained. A Pakistan based publication claimed that a senior member of NATO in Afghanistan had stated that the Taliban imposter was “someone the ISI had groomed to delay and counter check us.” The publication further went on to assert, “We are on top of things. We know where the guy went to and deposited those briefcases.”²³

Afghan Peace Talks

With pressure mounting from the US and China to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, Pakistan directed its proxy Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, who was masquerading as the Taliban’s deputy leader (more about him later), to nominate a Taliban delegation to meet with an official Afghan delegation, on July 07, 2015, at the resort town of Murree. The Afghan delegation was led by Haji Din Mohammad, a senior member of the High Peace Council. The Taliban delegation was headed by Mullah Abbas Akhund besides Abdul Latif Mansur, and Ibrahim Haqqani. These individuals were said to be members of the Taliban’s liaison committee with the ISI. Ibrahim Haqqani represented the Haqqani network. No member of the Taliban political office in Doha attended. The meeting was chaired by a Pakistani diplomat, with top ranking military officers from the ISI and mid-level observers from the US and China being present.

A member of the Taliban’s political office in Doha Qatar claimed that the talks had been “hijacked by Pakistani officials.” He said they brokered the meeting with an unauthorised Taliban representative²⁴. As anticipated, without giving details of the ‘elements’ trying to sabotage the talks, the Pakistani military spokesman tried to justify the statement by saying that the ‘elements’ fear that the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban could undermine their interests. As later events would suggest, Pakistan leaked out the information regarding Mullah Omar’s death three weeks after the first round of peace talks to put a halt to further talks.

It transpires that one of the proposed Taliban negotiators of the July 07, negotiations was Yahya Haqqani, a brother-in-law of Sirajuddin Haqqani. US officials who were present as observers in the meeting objected to his presence as he had a \$ 5 million American bounty for his capture on terrorism charges. According to Mohammad Asim, one of the Afghan delegates, the

Haqqanis thereafter dropped him from the delegation.²⁵ Is there a need for any more proof of Pakistan's perfidy?

In an interview with the pro-Taliban Pashto language website Nun.Asia (Asia Today), the commission's spokesperson, Naim Wardak, said that the Taliban delegates had participated in the talks as "hostages" of Pakistan. On July 09, 2015, an article was published on the Taliban website, only to disappear four hours later. "When the dust settles," it said, "the much hailed talks between Taliban officials and Ghani-administration officials in Islamabad will be revealed as nothing more than Pakistan delivering a few individuals from the Islamic Emirate to speak in their personal capacity."²⁶

Prior to 2001, Afghanistan was both a haven for, and an ally of, terrorists, and it would be so once again if the Taliban was to return to power either by itself or as a partner of the existing elected government. With Pakistan's aims and objectives in Afghanistan intact, trusting Pakistan and handing over the responsibility of being the peace-maker and a mediator in that country would be a grave mistake.

The Canard of Taliban's Political Office in Doha

The proposal for a Taliban political office in Doha, capital of Qatar, has been on the cards since 2011. Several senior Taliban figures have been living in Qatar for many months for the purpose but the group had not publicly accepted any plans for peace talks. The US, with a view to open direct talks with the Taliban, had agreed to drop a series of preconditions that had previously held back negotiations over the future of Afghanistan. The plan was for the political representatives of the Taliban to meet Afghan and US officials in Doha, discuss an agenda for "peace and reconciliation" followed by further talks with Afghan government representatives. The move came on the day the NATO forces handed over official control of nationwide security to the Afghan troops.

White House officials said that they believe the Taliban delegation at the talks represents the movement's leadership, and includes more radical groups such as the Haqqani network. Officials said the US would have a direct role in the talks starting this week in Doha, but the substantive negotiations over the future of Afghanistan would then be led by the Afghan government.²⁷ There was a sense that the Taliban's willingness to open this office and its inclination

to move towards talks was the result of an active effort on the part of an increasingly cooperative Pakistan.²⁸ Later events, however, show that, the US trust and belief has been belied.

The Taliban opened its office in Qatar on June 18, 2013, with a press conference in which two spokesmen presented their movement as a government in waiting. With the old Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan flag behind them, Sohail Shaheen, in English and Mullah Naeem, in Pashto portrayed the insurgency as a “*jihad* to put an end to the occupation and form an independent Islamic system utilizing every lawful means.” It was a propaganda coup. The US called it an Afghan-led process and, in the words of President Obama, an “important first step towards reconciliation”. As per the US Administration officials giving a background briefing²⁹ to journalists, the Taliban were required to say two things: “*First, that they oppose the use of Afghan soil to threaten other countries; and second, that they support an Afghan peace process. These are two statements which we’ve long called for and together, they fulfil the requirements for the Taliban to open an office, a political office, in Doha for the purposes of negotiation with the Afghan government*”.

The Taliban spokesmen did duly say³⁰ that the “Islamic Emirate”, “never wants to pose harm to other countries from its soil, nor will it allow anyone to cause a threat to the security of countries from the soil of Afghanistan”, but he also said: “...*at world level, it considers the struggles and efforts by the miserable and oppressed nations for achievement of their legitimate rights and independence as their due rights, because people have the right to liberate their countries from colonialism and obtain their rights*”.

The spokesman failed to say that they supported an ‘Afghan peace process.’

There was an ominous silence from the Afghan government, followed by the announcement that President Karzai had suspended talks with the Americans over the post-2014 Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). President Karzai, in a statement, said, “As long as the peace process is not Afghan-led, the High Peace Council will not participate in the talks in Qatar,” Karzai’s spokesperson Aimal Faizi also added, “The President is not happy with the name of the office. We oppose the title ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ because such a thing doesn’t exist.”³¹

In 2012, the Taliban leadership had sent members of their political

commission to open a political office in Qatar. The families of the team members were also sent along with them. Pakistan's ISI facilitated their move to Doha by providing the necessary travel documents and possibly the funds needed for their move. The members of this office subsequently went to China and Norway with the same travel credentials. Obviously, these were the ISI's proxies in Doha to safeguard the interests of Pakistan.

The engineered controversy forced the office to close. This could have also been done to prevent the political office from entering into any negotiations with Kabul directly or brokered by some foreign government, or under Pakistan's instructions. The office was, however, allowed to continue to function unofficially with the purpose of opposing the peace talks and to bail out Pakistan when forced by the international community to broker peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government. By branding the Taliban representatives who attended the meeting at Murree as "unauthorised Taliban representatives" the Taliban political office was doing precisely this by projecting to the world that while Pakistan was making efforts to bring about peace in Afghanistan, the peace process was not yielding results because of internal differences within the Taliban. The drama was being enacted from two different stages at Qatar and Murree. The aim was not to allow the peace process to bear fruit. Can Pakistan install a proxy government in Kabul if the peace talks continue, and succeed?

Pakistan's Efforts to Impede Peace Talks

In 2005/06, Mullah Omar appointed two deputy leaders, Mullah Baradar (actual name Abdul Ghani) and Mullah Obaidullah, the Taliban regime's former Defence Minister. Both these individuals had the stature to assume his place if the need arose. They led the movement during the period when the Taliban rose from the ashes of the 2001 defeat.

Baradar was arrested in 2010 by Pakistan after he met representatives of the Karzai government without the consent of Pakistan.³² This was followed by a whole wave of arrests of the Taliban.³³ All those arrested were seeking political negotiations with the Afghan government, bypassing Pakistan. Obaidullah had been arrested even earlier and died in Pakistani detention in the same year, that is, in 2010. His death was announced by the Taliban two years later. The Karzai government repeatedly sought a meeting with

Baradar. In 2013, when the High Peace Council was finally permitted to see him, it is said that Baradar was flown in from Karachi to Islamabad and he was “sedated and unable to speak.”³⁴

The arrest of the Taliban’s deputy leaders appointed by Mullah Omar suggests that the relationship between Pakistan and Mullah Omar had soured by then. Pakistan had also probably decided to get rid of Mullah Omar and install Mullah Mansoor as the Taliban’s Amir. The presence of Mullah Baradar and Mullah Obaidullah would have meant allowing one of them, the selected deputies, to succeed Mullah Omar after his death, which did not suit Pakistan.

Taliban hardliners backed by Pakistan have repeatedly targeted Afghans engaged in reconciliation talks, making it clear that only the initiatives that they sanction would be permitted to go forward. These extremist elements remain the chief suspects behind the September 2011 and May 2012 assassinations of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani³⁵ and former Taliban Minister Maulvi Arsala Rahmani³⁶—two leading figures in the peace process and both members of the High Peace Council created by President Karzai to engage the Taliban.

Why would Pakistan subvert every effort towards reconciliation and peace? Obviously, the ISI wants to exercise full control and authority over the Afghan negotiations and its outcome. It will obstruct negotiations that do not further its interests. The fate of the two deputy leaders of the Taliban, the Afghan peace negotiators and other arrests, besides the delayed announcement of Mullah Omar’s death, raise serious questions about Pakistan’s role in destroying the peace process in Afghanistan.

The question is, if Pakistan wants peace in Afghanistan and is honest when it says that the talks are between the Taliban and the Afghan government, why would it eliminate everyone who tries to bypass Pakistan and talk to Kabul directly?

The Mullah Omar Story

In 2001, after 9/11, Mullah Omar’s regime in Afghanistan was overthrown. Pakistan, however, decided to provide sanctuary to the Taliban leadership on its soil. The Taliban cadre and its leadership were, thus, protected from NATO operations in Afghanistan. In return for the hospitality, Mullah Omar

refrained from any action against Pakistan.

Coll Alex Strick van Linschoten, a Dutch scholar who has been based in Kandahar since 2007 and has conducted extensive interviews with the Taliban leaders and sympathisers, has said that he believes Mullah Omar is “in a safe house in Karachi,” the Pakistani port city, and that Omar’s movements and activities are closely monitored by Pakistan’s ISI. The Taliban-connected individuals with whom Strick van Linschoten has spoken recently, described Omar “as essentially a prisoner.” “All access to him is controlled by the ISI or some sub-version of that.” Anand Gopal, a journalist who has worked in Kandahar in recent years, and who has completed, with Bette Dam, an investigation into Mullah Omar’s biography, said that he, too, had concluded from the interviews, that the Taliban leader is in Karachi and effectively under house arrest.³⁷

Pervez Musharraf had, however, denied vehemently that Pakistan had anything to do with the Taliban’s revitalisation. The ISI is a “disciplined service staffed by seasoned military officers who follow my orders,” Musharraf told Nancy Pelosi, then the Speaker of the House, early in 2007, according to a cable published by WikiLeaks. The accusation that the ISI was sheltering Mullah Omar was inaccurate, Musharraf added. “I do not believe Omar has ever been to Pakistan,” he said.³⁸ Afghan officials, including President Hamid Karzai, however, have all along accused Pakistan of harbouring Omar. Mullah Omar has not been seen in public since 2001. With the \$10 million US State Department bounty on his head, the world assumed that he was in hiding.

On May 23, 2011, TELO News from Afghanistan quoted unnamed sources as saying Mullah Omar had been killed by the ISI two days earlier.³⁹ The Afghan Taliban rejected the claim saying he was alive and in Afghanistan. Latfullah Mashal, a spokesman for the Afghan intelligence agency, the NDS, told a news conference “We can confirm that he has disappeared from his hideout in Quetta in Baluchistan for the last four or five days,”⁴⁰

This raises two pertinent questions: why would Mullah Omar abandon his place of sheltered stay in Pakistan while the NATO led IASF were on the lookout for him, with a US \$ 10 million bounty on his head, and move elsewhere? Secondly, if he was indeed in full control of the Taliban, would Pakistan have allowed him to slip out or formally leave the country? The only logical answer is that the Taliban was not under Mullah Omar’s

control and he was unhappy living in Pakistan more as a prisoner than as a guest. Obviously, there were differences between him and the ISI. The so-called peace negotiations with the Afghan government were obviously not supported by him but were being projected as such by Pakistan with Mullah Mansoor acting as its tool so as to avoid dissensions within the ranks of the Taliban and to placate the US and China. Be that as it may, whether Mullah Omar was killed then or not is anyone's guess.

Four years later, the Afghanistan media, on July 29, 2015, reported that Mullah Omar has been killed.⁴¹ Abdul Hassib, a spokesman for Afghanistan's security services told BBC's Afghan Service that Mullah Omar had died of health problems at a hospital in Pakistan. A statement from the office of Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani said that it believed, "based on credible information", that Mullah Omar died in April 2013 in Pakistan.⁴²

Mullah Omar's death was confirmed by a splinter group of the Taliban. On July 23, 2015, the Afghanistan Islamic Movement Fidayi Mahaz, posted in FaceBook that Omar was assassinated by Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, the present head of the Afghan Taliban and Gul Agha Ishaqzai, the Taliban finance chief. The group's spokesman Qari Hamza had stated in July 2015, that Mullah Omar was killed two years earlier in the same month of July.⁴³

Taliban's top commander Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, the brother of former senior Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah who was operating in the southern Helmand province before being killed in an operation in 2007, also confirmed that Mullah Omar did not die naturally but was assassinated. He confirmed reports suggesting that Mullah Omar was mysteriously killed in April 2013 in a hospital in Karachi city of Pakistan.

The Afghan intelligence agency NDS said on August 17, 2015, that the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar was mysteriously killed in a hospital in Karachi city of Pakistan.⁴⁴

The other story going around about Mullah Omar's death needs mention. Taliban Commander Omar Khitab, the head of an Islamic group called Fidayi Mahaz has claimed to a London daily that an investigation conducted by him has revealed that Mullah Omar died after years in exile at his southern Afghanistan hideout in the afternoon of April 23, 2013. He was suffering from a kidney ailment, a disease worsened by poisons slipped into his medicines. It

is alleged that when Mullah Akhtar Mansoor realised that Mullah Omar had not pronounced him his successor in his final will, voiced prior to his death to his inner circle in his presence, Mansoor had shot him. It was further alleged that Mansoor had struck deals with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Iran, which the now imprisoned once all-powerful ruler of Afghanistan could not object to, being too ill. Omar is also reported to have said that he could not give the Taliban leadership to someone who wanted to do such dishonourable deals. Khitab has confirmed that he had visited Omar's grave at Zabul province in southern Afghanistan and he has pictures of the grave. The burial site, he said, was being kept secret in case intruders abuse the body of the man who created the Taliban in 1994.⁴⁵

On August 07, 2015, at the National Assembly, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif declared that Mullah Omar had neither died nor was buried in Pakistan. He, however, failed to clarify when and where he had died.⁴⁶ This claim is in line with the story narrated by Omar Kithab.

In either case, with Mullah Mansoor under its watchful eye in a colony in the outskirts of Quetta, would Pakistan have been in the dark all these days about Mullah Omar's death?

Omar has been dead for at least two years. During these years, Pakistani officials have been facilitating "meetings" and "parleys" with Mullah Omar or his so-called representatives. Pakistani officials, from former President Pervez Musharraf down, have categorically denied that Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri or Omar were living or had ever lived in Pakistan. Now that it has become clear that Omar has been dead since 2013 or earlier, it is evident that the fiction of his existence has been fabricated by Pakistan with ulterior motives. Or else why would Pakistan keep the matter a secret?

The religious clerics in southern Kandahar province of Afghanistan believe that Pakistan revealed the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar days before the Afghan officials were due to meet the Taliban for the second round of talks just to safeguard its own interests in Afghanistan by jeopardising the peace efforts.⁴⁷

The entire world, including the Afghan government, besides the US and China, the major powers that were involved in the so-called peace negotiations, have been fooled into believing that the peace negotiations have been initiated with representatives of Mullah Omar. Obviously, all the

statements made ostensibly by Mullah Omar during this period – the most significant one being his endorsement of the recent peace process—were fabrications. Can one expect the Taliban to abide by the statements or the commitments if any that were made during these talks? Can the world ever trust Pakistan?

Mullah Mansoor, a Pakistan protégé and the then Chief of the Taliban has been deceiving his fellow operational commanders and his fighters by claiming to pass on orders and messages from Mullah Omar. That could not have been done without Pakistan's tacit approval and concurrence. Asked how the death of Mullah Omar would affect the Taliban, Amrullah Saleh, the former Director of NDS who had served the organisation from 2004 until his resignation in 2010 said, "Mullah Omar was never behind making strategies and planning operations. He was a myth kept in a mythical space. It was the ISI that planned and organised everything, then and now⁴⁸." Indeed, for many years, he has neither been involved in the movement's decision-making nor been in communication with his lieutenants.

It is now amply clear that it was Pakistan's ISI that was waging war in Afghanistan against the Afghan government and ISAF using Mullah Mansoor, the Taliban commander, as its proxy, and not Mullah Omar. Unfortunately, the Western world has been unable to decipher the treachery. The sad part is that the Mullah Omar myth was exploited by Pakistan not for bringing about peace but to wage war.

The finances for supporting the Taliban's war efforts in Afghanistan came from Pakistan's ISI and indirectly from the US. Joseph V. Micallef, the best-selling author of *Military History and World Affairs*, writing in the *Huffington Post* states,⁴⁹ "Pakistan has supplied the Taliban with a broad range of arms, supplies, and financial help. In addition, the ISI has also assisted the Taliban's smuggling operations, indirectly adding to their financing. A significant portion of the Taliban's Pakistani financing, in turn, came, ironically, from American sources. Pakistan has been a major recipient of US military and financial aid for the past 15 years. Direct US military and economic assistance to Pakistan has amounted to over 20 billion dollars since 2001. Moreover, a significant amount of additional US aid to Pakistan was channeled through third party contractors. Pakistan was also reimbursed by the ISAF for various services that it provided to American and coalition troops." He goes on to add, "The

Afghan government estimates that actual cash transfers to the Taliban from the ISI have been in the range of 200 to 400 million dollars yearly.”

The arrangement of using Mullah Omar’s name to control the Taliban benefited Mullah Mansoor, and allowed him to gain time to thwart the opposition to his leadership within the group, besides consolidating his position in the ranks. It enabled him to move closer to unseating the elected Afghan government and putting in place a government headed by him or by a group dominated by him and his coterie. As for Pakistan, it was a win-win situation, with the Taliban acting on its directions under Mullah Mansoor and doing the dirty work which would enable its proxy government being installed in Kabul. In this entire game, Pakistan retains the option to change the leadership of the Taliban at any time, with an inbuilt deniability factor.

Mullah Mansoor

Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor lived in the neighbourhood of Quetta (Pakistan), in a complex known as Satellite Town. According to high ranking Taliban leaders and other people who know him, he, along with some other Taliban leaders from the same Pashtun tribe, the Ishaqzai, have built homes in the township. Senior Afghan officials say that though he is on the UN no-fly list, Mullah Mansoor has travelled by air in and out of Pakistan. Mostly his destination has been Dubai where he is said to have a house and several investments under different names. These trips could have also enabled him to collect contributions to the Taliban’s war efforts in Afghanistan from its supporters.

Mullah Mansoor is living in a Pakistani town in an open unrestricted environment. He enjoys freedom of movement. The large detachment of plainclothes security personnel in his part of Satellite Town increased conspicuously around the time he was announced as the Taliban’s leader.⁵⁰ Where is the question of Pakistan being ignorant of his presence in the country? Obviously, Mansur enjoys a special status from the Pakistani authorities. Is it possible that the US was not told of his presence in Pakistan?

As soon as Mullah Omar’s death became public knowledge, Mullah Mansoor got active and worked on winning the leadership struggle. In a series of *Shuras* — consultative meetings that his detractors claimed had been packed with his friends and tribesmen — he crafted consent. Some who

were opposed to him were not invited to the *Shura's* gatherings. Mansoor's main rival was Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoub supported by Mullah Zakir, his longtime rival. The leadership of the Haqqani network was also said to be behind the rival group. It is alleged that Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoub walked out of the meeting convened for the purpose of appointing Mullah Mansoor as Mullah Omar's successor and later criticised the choice. With the help of cash payouts and Pakistani influence, according to Afghan and Western officials, he secured the loyalty of his rivals. Officials with the NDS said they had intercepted a message in which Mullah Mansoor offered more than \$14 million to Mullah Zakir through an intermediary in Helmand province.⁵¹ Two weeks later, the Taliban released statements which stated that Mullah Yaqoub and his family members had agreed to pledge their loyalty to Mullah Mansoor.

The most significant announcement relating to the Taliban leadership was posted in the Taliban website *Shahamat* by the Quetta Shura, the Taliban governing body. It declared Maulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada, the Taliban's former judiciary chief and a Haqqani network member, and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani network and the son of its founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani, the two deputy heads of the Taliban.⁵² The appointment of two powerful Haqqani leaders as the two top leaders of the Taliban is significant considering that Pakistan wields substantial influence over the Haqqani network.

The appointment of senior Haqqani leaders as the deputies of the Taliban would pose a major predicament to the American Administration that had all along tried to draw a distinction between the Taliban who had earlier governed Afghanistan and the Haqqani network. Now that the leadership of the Afghan Taliban includes the Haqqani leaders, the Americans will have to find an excuse to save face. These appointments further strengthen Pakistan's influence and control over the Taliban and its role and activities in Afghanistan.

Mansoor's alliance with the ISI had enabled him to quash internal dissent, though powerful. He received the ISI's support to shift base from FATA to the northern parts of Afghanistan. Such strategic military moves could not have been directed without the planning, support and strategy developed by the Pakistan Army and the ISI. The timing of these moves, which are

linked with Pakistan's military operations Zarb-e-Azb and the US withdrawal, further reinforces Pakistan's involvement.

Mullah Mansoor's Death

Xinhua,⁵³ quoting Afghanistan officials, confirmed that Mansoor was critically injured in a gunfight on December 02, 2015, in an argument with commanders in the militant group. A number of people were reportedly killed in the clash, including the former commander, Mullah Abdullah Sarhadi, who reportedly led an insurgent splinter group in Zabul, southern Afghanistan. The meeting was apparently an attempt to iron out differences between the mainstream Taliban and a splinter faction that recently took up arms in Zabul province. In an unprecedented challenge to the central leadership in November 2015, the infighting in Zabul led a dissident commander, Mullah Rasool, in Farah province, to declare himself head of the group.

The Taliban's official website on December 03, 2015, carried a statement titled, "Rumour about leader of Islamic Emirate being wounded is absolutely baseless".⁵⁴ The statement reads:

Some media outlets published reports today from the mouths of Kabul intelligence circles that the leader of Islamic Emirate (Mullah Akhtar Mansoor) was attacked and wounded in Kuchlak region of Quetta city yesterday. We categorically reject this fabricated claim of the enemy intelligence apparatus... (Mansoor) has no presence in the stated area and neither has a security incident occurred there. The enemy falsely claimed that the incident took place in the home of a commander named Mullah Abdullah Sarhadi, despite the fact that his home is not even based in the Kuchlak region.

Pakistan's local Urdu TV Channel 24⁵⁵ quoted its own sources from Afghanistan as saying Afghan Taliban Chief Mullah Akhtar Mansoor had reportedly died and the Taliban had appointed Maulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada one of the two officially appointed deputy leaders of the Taliban and member of the Supreme Council as the new caretaker chief.

The Afghan and Western leaders mistakenly believed that Pakistan's role in Mullah Mansoor's rise and rule would provide Pakistan the leverage to persuade and force the Taliban to accept a peace deal, and Pakistan would

use it to bring about peace in the country. Pakistan's larger aim and obstinacy in gaining control in Afghanistan, irrespective of the measures adopted, were somehow missed. Because of pressure from the US and China, Pakistan had no option but to force the Taliban to participate in the peace talks; its aim of installing its proxy government in Afghanistan, though, does not appear to have undergone any change.

Mullah Mansoor's closeness to Pakistan has enabled him to consolidate his position but it has also been a political liability, estranging him from some Taliban leaders who resent Pakistan's influence on the leadership. They are unlikely to forgive his dishonesty and deceit in counterfeiting Mullah Omar's control over the Taliban and, thus, manipulating his own rule over the organisation. Some alienated commanders have pronounced their affiliation, and, in some cases, support, to Daesh, an Al Qaeda offshoot that is gaining a foothold in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many within the Taliban are of the opinion that choosing a leader in Pakistan was a mistake and that the Taliban leaders should relocate to Afghanistan to preserve their independence. Within the Taliban, an aversion to peace talks and Mullah Mansoor's close ties with Pakistan remain potent issues for those who have not yet accepted his leadership. Many believe that the shifting of the militant base from FATA to Afghanistan and victory in Kunduz had restored and strengthened Mullah Mansoor's position within the organisation to a large extent, which, obviously, it did not.

Pakistan began goading the Taliban leadership to officially meet for the first time an Afghan government delegation, as a prelude to the peace talks. Until that meeting, in early July near Islamabad,⁵⁶ the Taliban had for long refused to meet with the Afghan government. A senior Afghan official said that Mullah Mansoor had, in fact, acquiesced to sending a delegation to the meeting, under heavy pressure from Pakistani officials. But as the talks were being prepared, he suddenly shifted tack, advising several possible Taliban emissaries that they should refuse to attend the talks. Mullah Mansoor then disappeared for a while. His phones were turned off and he went missing.⁵⁷

Mullah Mansoor's volte-face can be attributed to his fear of opposition from, and possible revolt by, leaders of various Taliban groups or to instructions from Pakistan to stall further talks and make the world believe that there were dissensions within the Taliban which may block and hinder

further talks, giving Pakistan an escape route while it was clandestinely preventing the peace talks from succeeding. Afghan intelligence officials and a Western diplomat who had read intelligence reports on the issue said Mullah Mansoor was probably worried he would lose the loyalty of the Taliban commanders. Only time that will reveal the real reason behind the slide back.

Some see Pakistan as being in a hurry to start the dialogue with the Taliban even before the issue of Taliban leadership has been resolved. Considering that bringing about peace in Afghanistan has to be Afghan-led, it is being said that this hurry may be aimed at putting Afghanistan in a position where it has no option but to concede to Pakistan determining the Taliban leadership in all probability from the Haqqani network, which will invariably be of Pakistan's choosing. This may result in the international community being presented with a *fait accompli* to accept the network in the role of the new Taliban leadership.⁵⁸

After Mullah Mansoor's assassination, Pakistan has remained silent on his death and is probably looking for yet another pliable Taliban leader to head the organisation. Presently, Pakistan appears to be involved in selecting as the leader of the Taliban someone who would be acceptable to it, with minimum opposition from the various factions of the Taliban or is capable of arm-twisting the dissenting groups to make its next move. Voices coming from within the Taliban suggest that Pakistan is now engaged in a new policy to allow divisions within the group so as to retain control over the fragmented force and be able to pitch one group against the other should any of the groups operating within Afghanistan pose an obstruction to its larger aims.

As of now, there is very little news coming out about the present Taliban leadership and its ability to influence other groups operating within Afghanistan. Perhaps Pakistan is still in search of a leader to be appointed or is in the process of inducting the Haqqani network to take command of the Taliban and the operations in Afghanistan.

Is Pakistan Involved in the Growth of Daesh in Afghanistan?

Gen Campbell, the American commander of the international coalition force has estimated that there were 1,000 to 3,000 Daesh fighters in Afghanistan. Ever since June 2015, Daesh has been trying to establish its stronghold in Nangarhar province. The fighters' goal, Gen Campbell said, was to move

into the city of Jalalabad, expand to neighbouring Kunar province and eventually establish control of a region they call Khorasan, an area that includes Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁹ In hindsight, it is clear that while shifting the Taliban from its soil to Afghanistan under a well-conceived military plan, Pakistan's military has directed the Taliban to the north while reserving space for the ISIS in the east.

Initially, many believed that the ISIS in Afghanistan was nothing but the breakaway faction of the Taliban in Afghanistan using the name 'Islamic State'. However, it now transpires that the IS, which has declared a caliphate in much of Syria and Iraq, had delivered several hundred thousand dollars to the Afghan fighters, which has helped them gain ground and recruits. As is its form, in due course of time, it may buy out the other terror groups, as it did with Boko Haram in Nigeria, besides sending foreign fighters to Afghanistan as a part of an exercise to introduce international expertise to war-fighting in the country.⁶⁰

The Afghan Taliban has claimed that the ISIS affiliates operating in Afghanistan are mostly Pakistani nationals, with a few young Afghan men recruited by the group.⁶¹ Fazal Ahmad Shirzad, the Police Chief of Eastern Nangarhar province in Afghanistan is on record stating that Pakistan's ISI is leading the Daesh militant group in his province.⁶² It has also been reported that in Nangarhar, the ISIS pays its soldiers up to \$600 a month.⁶³

According to intelligence sources⁶⁴ who discussed the Afghanistan situation with Joseph Farah's *G2 Bulletin*, the funding for the ISIS in Afghanistan is coming from Pakistan's ISI. "ISI apparently is funding all parties over here (in Afghanistan), Taliban and ISIS," a US intelligence analyst in Afghanistan had informed the *G2 Bulletin*. If true, this exercise is aimed at using these outfits one against each other, if either of them goes out of the control of the ISI; or to use the ISIS to spread violence in case any peace agreement is forced on the Taliban which may not suit Pakistan's larger strategic aims in Afghanistan.

An unconnected report⁶⁵ names Qatar, as Daesh's sponsor in Afghanistan, aiming to meet its geo-political and economic interests and to sustain its dominant position in the global market as the supplier of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). Consequently, Daesh may be employed to prevent construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and subsequently the proposed 'Power of Siberia'

pipeline designed to supply Russian natural gas to China by interfering with the project in Xinjiang. Is this yet another source of money coming into Afghanistan to sustain Daesh?

The interrogation of ISIS suspects in India also suggests that the ISI is channeling its help to the ISIS through a militant group, Ansar-ul-Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind (AuT), headed by Shafi Armar. AuT pledged its allegiance to the ISIS in September 2014 and has been recruiting Indians for the ISIS since then.⁶⁶ According to officials, the ISIS suspects wanted to set up training camps in Uttar Pradesh and Telangana, where they planned to give weapon training to youths. “Eight such meetings to discuss the modalities of these training camps were held in Lucknow, Saharanpur, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Tonk and Pune in the past two to three months,” an official said. With this information coming in, the ISI’s role in the induction of ISIS in Afghanistan appears corroborated and likely.

If these reports are true, isn’t Pakistan fooling the entire world at the cost of the common man’s blood in Afghanistan? Where does Pakistan get all the money from? Is it the US money in the form of the ‘Coalition Support Fund’ or is Pakistan acting as a conduit for the flow of Arab money to Daesh in Afghanistan?

US Flip-Flop in Afghanistan: What are the Intentions?

Obama had announced⁶⁷ in May 2014, that by end of 2015, the US military strength in Afghanistan would come down to approximately 5,900 troops and by the end of 2016, the strength would be restricted to normal embassy presence in Kabul.

Towards the end of December 2014, the US announced that it would not target the Taliban leader Mullah Omar and other militants after January 02, 2015,⁶⁸ despite the fact that there was a \$10 million bounty on his head. Was the announcement based on the assumption that he would become a good terror group head after that date? It is yet another matter that developments after the announcement indicated that Mullah Omar had already died two years earlier. Is it possible that the US had been kept in the dark about the developments by its so-called ally? Was the US fooled once again by Pakistan?

On January 28, 2016, Lt Gen John Nicholson, the new US commander

designate in Afghanistan, during his presentation to the Senate Armed Forces Committee, indicated that the US might reevaluate the size of US troops presence in Afghanistan, thereby suggesting that there may be an increase in the quantum of troops deployed in the country. He also declared that US forces in Afghanistan will not be targeting the Haqqani network militants.⁶⁹ This reflects the possibility of Pakistan bringing in the Haqqani network to the negotiating table for the second round of peace talks, either directly or indirectly, represented by the two appointed deputy leaders of the Taliban, Maulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani, belonging to the Haqqani network. If that happens, Pakistan's role and the objective of the move, as discussed elsewhere in this paper, would stand vindicated.

It may also be recalled that Lt Gen Michael Flynn, former head of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), in an interview given to Al Jazeera's Mehdi Hasan,⁷⁰ confirmed that the US's choice of not interfering with the rise of anti-government *jihadi* groups in Syria that finally degenerated into the Islamic State, was a "willful decision". While taking the decision, was the possible future employment of these militant groups in Afghanistan and Central Asia a consideration?

The US has been struggling to "degrade and defeat" Daesh for nearly two years in Iraq with very little success until the Russians intervened a few months ago and showed that the war against Daesh could indeed be fought better. The Russian air strikes have torched more than 1,000 tankers, taking stolen crude oil to Islamic State refineries. This blow against the *jihadists* comes as the Russian Air Force hit 472 terrorist targets in two days in Syria, making 141 sorties.⁷¹ A major oil depot was destroyed 15 km southwest of the city of Raqqa. Russian Su-34 bombers also hit a terrorist-controlled oil refinery some 50 km south of Raqqa, the unrecognised capital of the Islamic State terrorists. A major source of terror funding has been hit and this is likely to have a major impact on the ISIS' capability and strength that fuels terrorism the world over. The US now appears to be refreshing the war in Afghanistan on the plea that a potential IS threat could be surfacing in that country. What do we make of this?

Certainly, the USA could not be misreading the Afghan situation time and again. Obviously, it has been interpreting and assessing the situation in Afghanistan to suit its convenience. The question is: why this flip-flop?

In yet another report, the Iranian News Agency FARS quoting Imam

Khamenei Battalion Commander Haidar al-Hosseini al-Ardavi, has stated, “It seems that the US intends to evacuate the ISIL terrorist group’s infamous ringleaders secretly (with helicopters) from Ramadi to unknown places.” His remarks came amid efforts by the Iraqi security forces to gain ground in Ramadi’s central areas, where hundreds of Daesh terrorists were trapped under siege.⁷² By rescuing the ISIL in Iraq, is the US getting closer to the Daesh so as to use Daesh in Afghanistan as an instrument to contain Russia and China in Central Asia?

US Dealings with Pakistan’s Military

Preceding Nawaz Sharif’s visit to the US, Lt Gen Rizwan Akhtar, the ISI chief was on a lonely mission to the US.⁷³ It appeared that he had been sent to the US in advance to prepare for the Prime Minister’s visit. In the US, he was met by the CIA chief and heads of the other US security and intelligence agencies besides Susan Rice, the US National Security Adviser (NSA). The NSA in the US has regular and direct access to the President. She also chairs meetings with the Secretaries of State and Defence in the absence of the President. Is it usual for the NSA to meet visiting intelligence chiefs in the US? Does it in any way strengthen the hands of the democratically elected Chief Executive of the country who has been struggling to ward off military rule? Does such visible closeness to the military, undermining the legitimately elected representative, strengthen the democratic system in Pakistan? Not only that, immediately following the Prime Minister’s visit, Gen Raheel Sharif, the Army Chief made a visit to the US and he was met by US Vice President Joe Biden at the Roosevelt Room in White House, a rare honour to a visiting military chief.⁷⁴

There was no official comment or even any mention of Akhtar’s visit by either Pakistan or the US. Nawaz Sharif had to delay his departure to the US to receive Akhtar’s feedback. With both the military men visiting the USA, one after the other, what was left for the Prime Minister of the country to discuss with the US? No wonder, Nawaz Sharif had cut short his visit to the US by two days.⁷⁵ If it was considered necessary for the US to discuss certain military related issues with Pakistan’s military commanders, wouldn’t it have been prudent for the US to request Pakistan to include these two men in the Prime Minister’s team and discuss intelligence and military issues in his presence? Or

was this separation planned on purpose to deliberate on issues that the US did not want the Prime Minister and the political establishment of Pakistan to know?

Russia Prepares to Counter US Moves in Afghanistan?

In a recent development, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has declared that contact has been established between Moscow and the Afghan Taliban.⁷⁶ *The Sunday Times* reported that “Putin is said to have met Mansour over dinner at a late night meeting on a military base in Tajikistan in September (2015).” It went on to add, “A Taliban commander told *The Sunday Times* that his group had been promised Russian arms and financial support.”⁷⁷ Why this bonhomie and dinner diplomacy with a militant commander? Is Russia planning to employ the Taliban to counter Daesh and, in the process, counter the US’s undisclosed containment policy against Russia and China in Central Asia?

It is to be hoped that the US, Russia and Pakistan are not returning to their ways of the 1980s. Looking back, Hamid Karzai, the erstwhile President of Afghanistan, might have been right when he said that the US interest in Afghanistan was to use the country as a platform for prosecuting a New Great Game against Russia and China in Central Asia.⁷⁸

These are disturbing reports which may or may not be true but the fact remains that the Afghan soil is being used by one and all with impunity and with total disregard for the harm and bloodshed being caused to its people. The US, China, Russia and Pakistan seem to be assuming that the Taliban and Daesh would remain confined to Afghanistan and would not expand northward into Central Asia and beyond or eastward into Pakistan. The Taliban and Daesh would, without doubt, extend operations into Central Asia either as an alliance of the Islamic radicals in Central Asia and in Fergana Valley like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the anti-China terror movement. Whether Daesh and Taliban would join hands or their fighters would team up in this expansion plan is a matter only time will reveal.

Conclusion

The world needs to see the reality that Pakistan has mastered the art of play-acting to be the arbitrator to bring about peace in Afghanistan while

supporting the very same terror outfits that are fighting in that country. It receives funds from the world powers in the name of fighting terror and siphons off the very same funds to the very same terror units to prop them up. It shelters terror commanders and fighters and has the audacity to deny the same when confronted, as happened in the case of Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders. It sets up terror groups and nourishes them as its strategic assets and as a matter of state policy. It funds terror. It is a party to the growing number of terror camps on its soil and in areas under its control. The world is aware of these facts but turns a blind eye to it and adopts an ostrich like attitude due to its own debauched interests. Countries forget that though terrorism may not be affecting them directly today, it is bound to hit them very hard some day.

Now, with the Taliban on the offensive and gaining ground and control over large swathes of Afghan territory, would it give up arms and settle for partnering the democratically elected government in Afghanistan? Would it relinquish its larger aim of establishing a pan Islamic caliphate in Afghanistan and beyond, governed by *Sharia* law? The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) on Afghanistan seems to want the Taliban and the Afghan government to “enter into early talks to resolve all differences politically.”⁷⁹ Is it a question of resolving differences? We seem to be grossly underestimating the enormity of the problem. It is a conflict of ideology, faith and beliefs. It is about the type of rule and governance that the Taliban is seeking to establish in Afghanistan. It is about an external power trying to establish its control in the country illegitimately and by force, to achieve its objectives.

As of now, do any of the militant commanders in Afghanistan have the ability to implement a peace deal even if they want to, especially with Daesh entering the fray in Afghanistan and elsewhere on the world stage? Is Pakistan capable of reigning in the multifarious terror groups which it was instrumental in creating, funding, training and launching in Afghanistan? Would Pakistan now, at this stage, give up on its objective when it seems to be getting closer to achieving it? The world seems to be making a mistake.

Should the world continue to goad Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and hope that the Taliban and Pakistan will listen to logic and reason? Even if that were to happen would that end the terror that is raging and waiting to explode in other parts of the world?

In all likelihood, we might have reached a stalemate which cannot be broken or handled by any single country. The major powers of the world, some of which are responsible for the state of affairs today, have been struggling with the issue in different parts of the world for over two decades, without any respite or serenity in sight.

What we are witnessing today in the form of terrorism is not an isolated event or confined to a limited area. It has affected a large number of countries in the world, cutting across continents in one form or the other. Those countries that have been saved the agony of witnessing the contours of terrorism yet, may be affected sooner than later. It is a question of time. It is time the world realised that it is on the threshold of a new type of a World War.

This menace cannot be tackled piecemeal or with countries of the world pulling in different directions. The tools that were used during the earlier wars may not yield results in this war. The war will have to be fought at the ideological, economic, as well as military and law enforcement levels. The linked issues of drugs, money laundering and law and order will have to be challenged. As a matter of rule, no country in the world can be allowed to become a haven for transitional terrorists. In this war, the safety and well-being of the people of the world is paramount and cannot be ignored. Terror has already drawn enough blood the world over. Accordingly, the war-fighting strategy will have to be rewritten and the tools shaped keeping in mind the constraints and the essentials.

The directions and the legitimacy for the war and the battle will have to come from the world body and handled at the regional level with participation by all the countries of the world in one form or the other, without exception. The major powers of the world will have to play a constructive and responsible role, leaving aside their differences and larger geo-political, economic and strategic aims. Countries that are playing a negative role in this war will have to be reined in by force.

Pakistan is a nuclear power, duly supported by the major powers of the world, with over 110-130 warheads and an unknown quantity of fissile material in its possession. It has four operating plutonium production reactors. The nuclear facilities in the country are under the control of the Pakistan Army, with the political establishment having no jurisdiction over any

of these facilities or the employment of these weapons of mass destruction. A part of Pakistan's military is radicalised. A large number of terror groups are flourishing in the state and individual terrorists move around freely in the country. A number of Pakistan's major military establishments have been penetrated and hit by the militants in the past. Doesn't the world see the danger of fissile material or weapons from Pakistan's nuclear establishments falling into the hands of the terrorists? Should we wait for that to happen before we decide to act?

A way will have to be found to remove all weapons of mass destruction from the world scene. Stringent measures to prevent weapons and other tools of war-fighting from falling into the hands of non-state actors and proxies of countries will have to be enforced. Financing crimes and terrorism will have to be treated as high treason acts and the perpetrators along the chain punished in a time-bound manner. Necessary laws where required for the purpose, will have to be created at the level of the world body.

Countries hoping that they may not be affected will be making a grave mistake. The sooner we unite and confront the menace, the lesser will be the struggle and the loss and damage to humanity.

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