

## Beyond 2014

WHETHER OR NOT AFGHANS WOULD HAVE LASTING PEACE AND formal democracy after the withdrawal of Nato troops in 2014, Pakistan and Taliban have already changed the way the game will be played. India continues to harbour the grand illusion that sharpening of contradiction between the US and Pakistan, in recent months, would help it to have a solid footing in post-NATO Afghan polity. But that is unlikely to happen anytime soon as the US strategy in the region continues to pin too much hope on Pakistan, despite strained bilateral relations between them, remains unchanged in view of the broader American-Israeli plan of containing rising Iran where a regime change is all that Washington strategists are talking about implying a war in the long run. For all its pronouncements to the contrary, the essential aim of the American administration is to strike a deal with Pakistan and its assets, the Taliban and dozens of insurgent outfits, while keeping the world at large in good humor.

Some 1000 delegates gathered at the one-day Bonn summit on December 5 to discuss the future of Afghanistan after the NATO pull out and they found no short-cut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades since the invasion of Soviet Russia in the seventies. The tragi-comedy side of the event was that Afghan president Hamid Karzai urged the international community to back his strife-torn country for another ten years by way of providing military logistics and liberal financial grants. In other words he was pleading for direct American presence on Afghan soil beyond 2014—the deadline for transferring Afghan security to Afghans.

The very idea of withdrawal of some 1,40,000 foreign troops from Afghanistan, possibly in a phased manner, seem to be sending shivers down the spines of the Karzais. America's Iraq quagmire is not yet over and given its huge economic and social problems at home, the Obama administration is not in a position to commit too much to Karzai. The Bonn summit was an exercise to mobilise world opinion in support of America-scripted post-NATO scenario in Afghanistan. Despite veiled military threat Pakistan didn't join the meet on the plea that its sovereignty was at stake as NATO troops killed 16 Pakistanit soldiers just on the eve of the all important Bonn conclave.

Islamabad being a trusted Anglo-American ally, both regionally and globally, all through its 64 years of existence suddenly finds itself in a bind from which it is trying to get out even by openly courting Chinese magnanimity. The Pakistan army chief's initial reaction to NATO strike on Pakistani soldiers was jingoistic and their quick decision to ask Americans to vacate the Shamsi airbase in Baluchistan was a bit tough even for pro-Pakistan lobby in the American administration. Then Washington had no option but to announce the closure of Shamsi air-base by December 11. But Islamabad's hard stance didn't last long as Pakistan Prime Minister Yusuf Raja Ghilani's overtures towards re-building age-old US-Pakistan bi-lateral ties were welcomed by Uncle Sam.

Pakistan military is the major beneficiary of America's Afghan war. And Generals despite their visible discomfiture with America's hostile behaviour may not dig their own graves by further aggravating the present level of antagonism between the policy-makers of Islamabad and Washington. Their Beijing card won't act at the time of crisis because China always plays it safe when it is the question of confronting American misdeeds.

America's relentless efforts to make a power-sharing arrangement with the so-called moderate Taliban have failed because of Pakistan's refusal to lose its dominance in post-2014 Afghan affairs. Hawks in Pakistan like their counterparts in India are equally expansionist in outlook in respect of Afghanistan, otherwise the most vital gateway to central Asian resources and Iran. At a time when anti-Iran tirade is in full swing and a possible US-Israeli adventure, rather misadventure, in Iran is gaining currency across the globe, Karzai may heave a sigh of relief that Uncle Sam won't abandon them in distress as the Bonn event's host, German foreign minister Mr Guido Westerwelle insisted at the press briefing there would be no rush to the exit.

The hard fact is that America won't hesitate to dismember Pakistan if it suits its interests. Not that angry Pakistanis across the country are protesting against Pakistani junta which is in the main, responsible for humiliation inflicted by America on them. After all Pakistan is a limited company of Generals and their close relatives. Today they are asking Washington to leave Shamsi airbase from where America monitored hundreds of thousands of drone attacks that took place over the years killing unarmed civilians in the north-west frontier region. Tomorrow they might invite the Pentagon to open more bases. They can ill-afford to lose unlimited privileges and perks that Washington showered on them in exchange of the loyal service to the cause of empire. For the people of Pakistan who have all along been mute spectators the real problem at this critical juncture lies elsewhere—the whole of Pakistani leadership now doesn't have a united stance against America. □□□