

Escalating War in Afghanistan
– Can Peace Return to the Troubled Region?

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Title:

UN, NATO and Afghanistan War

Speaker:
Vijay Mehta

President, VM Centre for Peace
Chair, Action for UN Renewal
Co-chair, World Disarmament Campaign

Other speakers include: Bill Rammel, Bruce Kent, Dawood Azami, Peter Gilchrist and Michael Griffin

Vijay Mehta
vijay@vmpeace.org

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Introduction

Good Evening. What I plan to do is to explore why US, NATO and UK troops are fighting a unwinnable war, the signing of UN agreement with NATO, the dangers of escalation of Afghan war and the strategies and solutions we can adopt to bring stability in Afghanistan.

The stark fact about Afghanistan war is that 100,000 US, NATO troops and 200,000 Afghan army are fighting Taliban (5%) of the population and non-existent Al-Qaeda who have gone away to Pakistan, Middle East and Africa. Billions of dollars have been spent on a war running into the 9th year with little or no return. The only thing to show for is rampant corruption, mismanagement and compromised fraud-run re-election of President Karzai.

At present, British, US and NATO troops are bogged down by a bloody, unpopular conflict. Afghanistan has demonstrated again that it remains true to its reputation as a graveyard of empires. The present occupation by NATO troops is a reminder of what happened to the defeat of the British at the war of Kabul in 1842, and the humiliating retreat of the Soviet Union in 1989, just before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

UN-NATO Agreement

Before I start the solutions to the Afghan war, it is necessary to examine the UN-NATO agreement. A sad fact about Afghanistan is NATO troops acting on behalf of the United Nations, which gives them credibility to organisation whose sole purpose is to create threats and fight wars in different lands. In September 2008, an accord was signed between the United Nations and NATO Secretaries General, Ban Ki-moon, and Jaap de Hoop-Scheffer. This took place without any reference to the United Nations Security Council. Both secretaries general committed themselves to acting in common to meet threats and challenges.

In these current times of confrontation, one expects from the United Nations secretariat an especially high level of political neutrality. The UN/NATO accord is anything but neutral and will thus not remain without serious consequences. The United Nations was created to promote and maintain worldwide peace. NATO exists to assure the self-interest of a group of 27 UN member countries. Its mandate, grounded in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, originally dealt with the defense of its member states.

Several important questions thus arise: Is the United Nations accord with NATO – a military alliance with nuclear weapons – in contradiction with Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, which requires that conflicts be resolved by peaceful means? Can UN and NATO actions be distinguished when three of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are also NATO members? How can future violations of international law by NATO be legally prosecuted? Is an institution like NATO, which in 1999, without a UN mandate, unlawfully bombed Serbia and Kosovo, a suitable partner for the United Nations?

However, the Afghan conundrum remains, as it did in 2001, the epicenter of intra- and inter-religious conflict. It is a country troubled by the historic divisions between Sunni and Shia communities, the effective limitations upon any central government posed by the mountainous terrain, and a culture shaped by strong traditions of local governance. The overthrow of the Taliban regime by the American-led NATO invasion in 2001 has failed to dislodge the Taliban as a political and military force in various parts of the country and its survival has effectively undermined the NATO occupation. The institutional weakness of the NATO-backed government of Hamid Karzai has done little to reassure anyone that the colonial project of creating a Western-oriented regime will be successful. As the recent fraudulent election has shown, the domestic legitimacy of the Karzai regime remains in question.

The test of Obama's commitment to turning the page on the Bush-Cheney misadventures in the Islamic world is already upon him with the current debate about the way forward in dealing with Afghanistan. It is no secret that there are reservations among the members of NATO about the American approach to Afghanistan and the reckless use of military force including the use of drones (pilotless planes) that has resulted in the killing of civilians. Further, the tactical alliance that has emerged among China, Iran, and Russia has been shaped by the perceptions in these countries that the US has sought to use Afghanistan as a base for contesting their influence in Central Asia. The war in Afghanistan has also had a spillover effect upon the politics of Pakistan where there has been increasing unease with the growing influence of American strategic concerns in shaping Pakistan's domestic priorities.

The situation in Afghanistan is serious; neither success nor failure can be taken for granted. Although considerable effort and sacrifice have resulted in some progress, many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating. One faces not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans - in both their government and the international community - that undermines one's credibility and emboldens the insurgents. Further, a perception that one's resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align against the insurgents.

It was obvious that Obama was signaling his willingness to work with the UN and the international community to resolve the problem of Afghanistan. His statement implied a focus upon the destruction of Al Qaeda and the consolidation of stable governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan - a far cry from the Global War on Terror and unilateralist policies pursued under the Bush-Cheney administration.

Today, Afghanistan provides the Obama administration with an opportunity to set America on a path to reassert both domestic and international legitimacy. In that quest, it may be useful for the administration to revisit the wisdom of the most successful American general of the 20th century and one of its most able Presidents, Dwight Eisenhower. As he was departing the Presidency in January 1961, Eisenhower warned against the growing influence of the military-industrial complex in American life and government, and I quote:

"In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

There was also a very trenchant observation that Eisenhower made in that speech which has a resonance for contemporary America and the Obama administration

"As we peer into society's future, we - you and I, and our government - must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow."

It is advice that the Obama administration should heed as it surveys the wreckage in Afghanistan and at home that has resulted from the Bush-Cheney administration's injudicious pursuit of wars of choice.

Solutions to the Afghanistan conflict

A fundamental rethinking of Western strategy is therefore urgently required to bring security, stability and justice to the region. If we have to bring troops out of Afghanistan, in the next few years, the most important will be to put the infrastructure to run the country and to root out the corruption. This will require leadership that is transparent. This could include:

*** Hold a regional conference.**

The problems of the greater Middle East and South Asia can only be resolved on a regional basis. Therefore, it is important that the West acknowledges the deep interests of the main regional players who also seek stability in the region, and should involve them in the solution of the conflict. Instability in Iraq and terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan are of more immediate concern to the countries in the region than they are to the West. Therefore, what is needed is to form a meaningful peace conference with the participation of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, China and India, as well as of the representatives from the West, under UN auspices. It is only through local solutions reached by all these countries through dialogue and consultation that any arrangement can have a lasting effect in settling the issues of terrorism and insurgency. Any unilateral imposition of ill-conceived designs by the West would only prolong the tragedy. The history of the past one hundred years of meddling in the affairs of the region, with tragic consequences, should have taught us this fundamental lesson if nothing else.

*** Declare a unilateral ceasefire.**

Seven years of fighting should have been enough to show that there is no military solution to the problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A brave gesture of reconciliation, telling the Afghans and Pakistanis that US forces will be leaving by a set date in the near future can win back many more moderate elements who have been alienated. This, combined with the announcement of a regional conference aimed at peace and reconciliation, could encourage more moderate elements in the region to look for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts.

*** Start negotiations with the Taliban and the Pashtuns.**

As a part of this process, there should be political negotiations with the Taliban and with Pashtun tribes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the aim of separating them from al-Qaida. While most Pashtuns are warlike and fiercely independent, there is no reason to believe that most of them would support al-Qaida, which is mainly a foreign organisation dominated by Wahhabi Arabs. It should be also borne in mind that the Taliban was not a native product of Afghanistan. It was imposed on Afghanistan by Pakistan, with US support. It is believed that nearly half of the Taliban forces that initially conquered Kabul were made up of regular Pakistani forces. Many Afghans do not agree with the Taliban's harsh and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, in fact, the traditional form of Islam in Afghanistan has been mild and moderate with strong mystical leanings. Their tentative support for the Taliban is partly due to their opposition to the presence of foreign forces in their country.

Equally, if the Pashtuns were left to themselves they would return to their old ways of independence based on their tribal loyalties. The introduction of Western-style democracy is not something that can be imposed on them by force. Democracy is not a product but a process. It is something that can grow as the result of education and greater integration with the outside world. Initially, a resolution of the situation in Afghanistan would require guaranteeing the autonomy of the tribal areas, under a loose form of federation and a symbolic central government, which has been the pattern in Afghanistan's history.

We should replicate the peace process in Northern Ireland, once we negotiated with the IRA who were once called terrorist, as today we talk in the same language about the Taliban. A process of reconciliation and reintegration of Afghan society, including amnesty to Taliban, should be a starting point for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

*** Provide bread not guns.**

While putting an end to its military presence, the West should provide substantial financial subsidies to the Afghans in reparation for the enormous damage that has been done to them both during the war against the Soviet invasion, as well as during the subsequent US invasion. Afghanistan is now one of the poorest countries in the world, with a shattered economy and almost non-existent infrastructure, like roads, hospitals, schools and factories. The unemployment rate is estimated to exceed 50 per cent.

The West should make sure that the assistance that is provided is spent on education, health care and social services, rather than on maintaining an inflated and corrupt military establishment. The best guarantee against extremism and radicalism is the hope of a better future and prospects of jobs and security.

*** Build modern schools instead of religious madrasas.**

Pakistan is still a mainly rural country with more than 64% of the population living in villages. Less than half of the population can neither read nor write, while girls enrolment is among the lowest in the world, lagging behind Ethiopia and Yemen. One in three school-age children does not attend school, and many of those who do, attend madrasas that offer almost no instruction beyond the memorising of the Koran, thus creating a large pool of volunteers for militant Islam.

*** Stop drone attacks.**

The most immediate step the US government must take is to put an end to drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even the top adviser to the US army chief in Afghanistan, David Kilcullen, has observed that the US drone strikes are creating more enemies than eliminating them, hence the need to have them "called off." The impersonality of the drones and the large number of casualties that result alienate and infuriate most Pakistanis. Pakistani leaders have repeatedly condemned these attacks and have called on the United States to stop them. Their inability to change US behaviour further humiliates and enrages the public and turns them against their own government.

Beware of a massive volcano in the region

As the wars that are raging in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, and now Pakistan and elsewhere are intensifying anti-Western feelings among a large section of the public in those countries, one must beware lest those aroused masses come together and create a volcano beyond anything that one can imagine.

What the world hopes to see under President Obama is a radical shift away from militarism and foreign adventures to peaceful resolutions of conflicts all over the world. There should be a paradigm shift away from a military-dominated outlook to one based on old-fashioned diplomacy, and a policy of winning hearts and minds. At the moment, the budgets of the Pentagon, CIA and other intelligence and military organisations dwarf the budget of the State Department and foreign aid. There should be a reversal of this balance.

A genuine multilateralism will not only help put an end to many conflicts in the world, it will also turn the United States into a beacon of hope for humanity and a major player in the advancement of democracy. The United States is the only country that can either destroy the world, or can remake the world with its power of idealism, energy and passionate belief in freedom and democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to draw attention to a bigger danger than the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is of US sliding into a military dictatorship. This has been recently said by none other the political writer, Gore Vidal. I quote:

"We'll have a military dictatorship soon on the basis nobody else can hold everything together. Obama is inexperienced and has a total inability to understand military matters. He's acting as if Afghanistan is the magic talisman: solve that and you solve terrorism. Obama would have been better off educating the American people."

I would say that is also true of Afghanistan. Educate Afghanis and you have saved the country from utter chaos and opened the way for forging peace and stability.

Thank you for listening.

Notes

The following publications were consulted and excerpts have been taken from them during the writing of this article:

- 1) *Tobago & Trinidad Review*, November 2, 2009
- 2) Vijay Mehta, *NATO at 60*, June 2009 (This paper was a resource for the European Parliament election).
- 3) The Times, *We are at risks of dictatorships says gore Vidal*, 30 September 2009
- 4) Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World
- 5) The Independent, *The Afghan strategy is finally beginning to shift*, 20 November 2009
- 6) Newsweek, *Deployments and Diplomacy*, 12 October 2009
- 7) John Pilger, *War is peace: Ignorance is strength*, 16 October 2009
- 8) New York Times, *Held by the Taliban*, November 2009
- 9) Time, *'Talking with the Taliban,'* 20 November 2009

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

- VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org
- Action for UN Renewal www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk

Biography: Vijay Mehta

Vijay Mehta is president of VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org , Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity www.fortuneforum.org , Chair of Action for UN Renewal www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk and co-Chair of World Disarmament Campaign. He is an author, a champion for truth and global activist for peace, development, human rights and environment. Some of his notable books are *The Fortune Forum Summit: For a Sustainable Future*, *Arms No More*, and *The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century*.

His latest book is on Global Warming and is called 'Climate Change IQ,' which is available to download free of charge in electronic form from the website www.climatechange365.co.uk

He along with his daughter Renu Mehta founder of Fortune Forum charity held three summits in London in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage. The keynote speakers for the first and second summit were Bill Clinton, former US President and Al Gore, former US vice-President, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2007. The guest speakers in 2008 were Ted Turner, Founder of CNN, Amritya Sen and Sir James Mirrlees both Nobel Prize winning Economists.

Vijay Mehta has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Ajtak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Sunday Times, Independent, Observer, Irish Times and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet.