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Summary of Discussion

The enunciation of the new “*Af-Pak*” strategy by the US President Barack Obama is an acknowledgement of the fact that Pakistan as a key factor in the Afghan problem, the issue of terrorism is intrinsically linked to these two countries. In fact the *Af-Pak* region has emerged as an epicenter of terrorism and the most dangerous place in the world. This assessment is recognition of the distinct prospect of Taliban/Al Qaeda coming to power in these two countries. Equally significantly, India has been cited as having a major role to play in countering the threat posed by these extremist organizations. However, within Pakistan diverse sections look at the US from widely varying perspectives. While some think the US is an untrustworthy ally, the influential strategic community continues to underscore the usefulness of Al Qaeda and Taliban as most important instruments in enhancing Pakistan’s strategic leverage rather perceiving them as potential destabilizers especially in the context of rapidly growing strategic bonhomie between Washington and New Delhi. Continued apprehensions about American long-term commitment in the region on one hand, and unending suspicions about the security threat India poses seem to be blunting American counter-terrorism efforts. Further, recent events suggest how ill-conceived and dangerous American attempts to reach out to the so-called “moderate or good Taliban” are. As a result, in order for the US to succeed it needs to sort the Pakistan issue out simultaneously.

At the domestic level, a major dimension of the Afghan issue has been drug production and its income fuelling the *jihadi* cause of the extremist elements. The data clearly demonstrate the fact that there is no ostensible link between poverty and poppy cultivation, but there is a strong correlation between security and drugs. The many relatively poorer regions of Afghanistan are

refraining from drug production because of better security situation compared to certain areas in the south, which though are relatively better off but drug cultivation is rampant. Improving security must be a priority but to do that, as suggested by a think tank study, what is needed is more boots on the ground, i.e., more forces to fight the Taliban/Al Qaeda.

There is no question that Afghanistan has made enormous and visible progress economically but rampant corruption may be undermining the goodwill the generous aid packages had generated.

India's involvement in Afghanistan so far has been confined to extending assistance to economic reconstruction. The nearly US \$1.2 billion aid that India has extended includes some high-profile projects, such as construction of highways, power transmission lines, and hydroelectric dams, as well as several training programs and financial assistance in the education field. It appears, for a variety of reasons, apart from their progress being tardy (the foundation stone of the parliament building that India had committed to in 2004 is yet to be laid), they not necessarily are premised on a long-term strategy of securing and advancing Indian interests. Hence, it may be time a thorough revamping of these programs is undertaken. Particular emphasis is warranted in enhancing Afghanistan's educational infrastructure where India is in advantageous position.

In view of recent developments, New Delhi needs to reassess its strategy in Afghanistan, including its aid policy and security involvement. While keeping in mind the distinct possibility of Americans quitting Afghanistan abruptly and the implications thereof, it is time other options are evaluated. It may be prudent to look at the prospect of working with Iran, which had consistently opposed Al Qaeda/Taliban, and Russia and China that are equally concerned about the spread of religious extremist forces. The option of even joining hands with Pakistan with a commonly shared agenda in providing political stability to Afghanistan need not be dismissed outright.

- Professor G.V.C.Naidu

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