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The measure of success of president-elect Barack Obama's new "Afghan strategy" will be directly proportional to his ability to delink the war from its geopolitical agenda inherited from the George W. Bush administration.

It is obvious that Russia and Iran's cooperation is no less critical for the success of the war than what the US is painstakingly extracting from the Pakistani generals. Arguably, Obama will even be in a stronger negotiating position vis-a-vis the tough generals in Rawalpindi if only he has Moscow and Tehran on board his Afghan strategy.

But then, Moscow and Iran will expect that Obama reciprocates with a willingness to jettison the US's containment strategy towards them. The signs do not look good. This is not only from the look of Obama's national security team and the continuance of Robert Gates as defense secretary.



Central Asia

On the contrary, in the dying weeks of the Bush administration, the US is robustly pushing for an increased military presence in the Russian (and Chinese) backyard in Central Asia on the ground that the exigencies of a stepped-up war effort in Afghanistan necessitate precisely such an expanded US military presence.

Again, the Bush administration's insistence on bringing Saudi Arabia into the Afghan problem on the specious plea that a Wahhabi partner will be useful for taming the Taliban doesn't carry conviction with Iran. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on Wednesday pointedly stressed the need to be vigilant about "plots by the world's arrogance to create disunity" between Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Russian-Iranian proximity

It seems almost inevitable that Moscow and Tehran will join hands. In all likelihood, they may have already begun doing so. The Central Asian countries and China and India will also be closely watching the dynamics of this grim power struggle. They are interested parties insofar as they may have to suffer the collateral damage of the great game in Afghanistan. The US's "war on terror" in Afghanistan has already destabilized Pakistan. The debris threatens to fall on India, too.

Most certainly, the terrorist attack on Mumbai last month cannot be seen in isolation from the militancy radiating from the Afghan war. Even as the high-level Russian-Indian Working Group on terrorism met in Delhi on Tuesday and Wednesday, another top diplomat dealing with the Afghan problem arrived in the Indian

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capital for consultations - Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Mahdi Akhounjadeh.

Speaking in Moscow on Tuesday, chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces, General Nikolai Makarov, just about lifted the veil on the geopolitics of the Afghan war to let the world know that the Bush administration was having one last fling at the great game in Central Asia. Makarov couldn't have spoken without Kremlin clearance. Moscow seems to be flagging its frustration to Obama's camp. Makarov revealed Moscow had information to the effect that the US was pushing for new military bases in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Coincidence or not, a spate of reports has begun appearing that Russia is about to transfer the S-300 missile defense system to Iran. S-300 is one of the most advanced surface-to-air missile systems capable of intercepting 100 ballistic missiles or aircraft at once, at low and high altitudes within a range of over 150 kilometers. As long-time Pentagon advisor Dan Goure put it, "If Tehran obtained the S-300, it would be a game-changer in military thinking for tackling Iran. This is a system that scares every Western air force."



S-300 Missile

It is hard to tell exactly what is going on, but Russia and Iran seem to be bracing for a countermove in the event of the Obama administration pressing ahead with the present US policy to isolate them or cut them out from their "near abroad".

Aviation Week magazine recently quoted US officials as claiming that Moscow was using Belarus as a conduit for selling the SA-20 missile systems to Iran. "The Iranians are on contract for the SA-20," one of the US officials said. "We've got a huge set of challenges in the future that we've never had [before]. We've been lulled into a false sense of security because our operations over the last 20 years involved complete air dominance and we've been free to operate in all domains."

The US official said the deployment of SA-20 around Iranian nuclear facilities would be a direct threat to Israel's fleet of advanced but "non-stealthy" F-15Is and F-16Is. Ha'aretz newspaper reported on Tuesday that the head of political-military policy in the Israeli Defense Ministry, Major General Amos Gilad, was traveling to Moscow with a demarche that Russia should not transfer S-300 to Iran.

Evidently, Moscow is maintaining an air of "constructive ambiguity" as to what is exactly happening. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented in October that Moscow would not sell the S-300 to countries in "volatile regions".

But, on Wednesday, Russia's Novosti news agency cited unnamed Kremlin sources as saying that Moscow was "currently implementing a contract to deliver S-300 systems". Again, on Wednesday, the deputy head of the Federal Service of Russia's Military-Technical Cooperation, Alexander Fomin, publicly defended Russian-Iranian military cooperation as having a "positive influence on stability in this region". Fomin specifically commented that systems such as the S-300 benefited the whole region by "preventing new military conflicts".

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The US thrust into the Russian backyard in the Caucasus and Central Asia will most certainly have a bearing on the Russian-Iranian tango over the S-300. Moscow and Tehran will be on guard that despite the stalemate of the Afghan war and the mounting difficulties faced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, the cold warriors in Washington continue their great game in the Hindu Kush.

Politics of transit routes

This becomes glaring if we look at the saga of the US's supply routes to Afghanistan. Recent events have shown that militants are capable of holding NATO to ransom by disrupting the supply routes to Afghanistan via Karachi port. Logically, the US ought to look for alternate supply routes.

Apart from the Karachi route, there are three alternate routes to supply the troops in Afghanistan: one, via Shanghai port straight across China to Tajikistan and to Afghanistan; two, the Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan/Turkmenistan land routes up to the Afghan border on the Amu Darya; three, the shortest and the most practical route via Iran.

Russia has both road and rail links connecting the Afghan border. China, on the other hand, has at present only one rail connection to Central Asia - the line from Urumqi in Xinjiang Autonomous Province ending on the Kazakh border. But China is currently working on two additional loops - one from Korgas on the Kazakh border to Almaty and the second from Kashi to Kyrgyzstan. Both these loops connect China to the Central Asian rail grid of the Soviet era leading to the southern Uzbek port city of Termez on the Amu Darya, which is a traditional gateway to Afghanistan.

But surprisingly, Washington wouldn't look at any of these alternate routes. Iran is understandably a no-go area (even though, in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan the Bush administration sought and obtained logistical support from Iran). But the US is equally wary of involving Russia and China in the war effort. It apprehends that tomorrow these countries might well demand a say in war strategy, which has so far been the US's exclusive turf. Then, there are other implications.

The containment strategy towards Russia and China cannot be sustained if there is a critical dependence on these countries for the US's war effort in Afghanistan. Again, their involvement will effectively freeze any expansion plans for NATO into Central Asia - let alone the scope for establishing new US military bases in the region. All-in-all, therefore, by involving Russia and China in the supply routes for US troops in Afghanistan, the US would be under compulsion to shelve its entire "Great Central Asia" strategy, which aims at rolling back Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

So, what does the US do? It has decided on a three-pronged approach. First, the US will motivate the recalcitrant Pakistani generals not to create problems for NATO convoys passing through Pakistan. Thus, US Senator John Kerry, who visited India on route to Pakistan last week on a mediatory mission, pledged, inter alia, that the US would urgently act on the Pakistani top brass's demand for upgrading its F-16 fleet capable of carrying nuclear weapons, apart from expediting a fresh multi-billion dollar new aid package for Pakistan.

Second, the US had began working on an entirely new supply route for Afghanistan which steers clear of Tehran, Moscow and Beijing and which, more importantly, not only dovetails but holds the prospects of augmenting and even strengthening the US's containment strategy towards Russia and Iran.

US's Caucasian thrust

Thus, the US has begun developing an altogether new land route through the southern Caucasus to Afghanistan, which doesn't exist at present. The US is working on the idea of

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ferrying cargo for Afghanistan via the Black Sea to the port of Poti in Georgia and then dispatching it through the territories of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A branch line could also go from Georgia via Azerbaijan to the Turkmen-Afghan border.

The project, if it materializes, will be a geopolitical coup - the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. At one stroke, the US will be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Furthermore, the US will be effectively drawing these countries closer into NATO's partnership programs. Georgia, in particular, gets a privileged status as the key transit country, which will offset the current European opposition to its induction as a NATO member country. Besides, The US will have virtually dealt a blow to the Russia-led Collective Security Treat Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Not only will the US have succeeded in keeping the CSTO and the SCO from poking their noses into the Afghan cauldron, it will also have made these organizations largely irrelevant to regional security when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two key players in Central Asia, simply step out of the ambit of these organizations and directly deal with the US and NATO.

Third, Russian newspaper Kommersant reported on December 12 that the US was also concurrently setting up a presence in Almaty. It said, "The talks that the US administration officials are having in Central Asia confirm the view that a new project exists. Last week, Kazakhstan's parliament ratified memorandums of support for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. They allow the US to use the military section of Almaty airport for emergency landings by military planes."

Therefore, the US is making a determined bid to render Russian diplomacy on Afghanistan toothless. Interestingly, the US has allowed NATO at the same time to negotiate with Russia for transit route facilities, which Moscow will be hard-pressed to refuse. Last week, the NATO envoy for Central Asia, Robert Simmons, visited Moscow. If Moscow had calculated that assisting the NATO supply route would enable it to gain influence on other issues of Russia-West relations or on Afghanistan, that is not going to happen as the US would have no dependence on Russia as such and would have no compulsion to reciprocate.

Washington has certainly done some smart thinking. It is having the best of both worlds - NATO taking help from Russia with the US at the same time puncturing the CSTO and undercutting Russian interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

What hits Russian interests most is that if the Caucasian route materializes, the US would have consolidated its military presence in South Caucasus on a long-term basis. Ever since the conflict in the Caucasus in August, the US has maintained a continuous naval presence in the Black Sea, with regular port calls in Georgia. The indications are that the US is planning a carefully calibrated ground presence in Georgia as well. Talks are in the final stages for a US-Georgia Security and Military Agreement. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Bryza visited Tbilisi on Tuesday for consultations in this regard.

According to reports, Washington is finalizing a document that includes helping Georgia fulfill the criteria for NATO membership and promoting "security cooperation and strategic partnership". As a US expert summed up, "The South Caucasus option is more expensive but incomparably more secure. It is also immune to Russian political manipulation ... a larger flow of supplies by land and air would presuppose

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an unobtrusive US military-logistical presence on the ground. It would also require reliable control of Georgian and Azerbaijani air space."

Another dramatic fallout is that the proposed land route covering Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan can also be easily converted into an energy corridor and become a Caspian oil and gas corridor bypassing Russia. Such a corridor has been a long-cherished dream for Washington. Furthermore, European countries will feel the imperative to agree to the US demand that the transit countries for the energy corridor are granted NATO protection in one form or the other. That, in turn, leads to NATO's expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Surely, the renewed Taliban threat in Afghanistan and the escalation of combat is providing a fantastic backdrop. For the first time, the US would be establishing a military presence in the Caucasus and the distinct possibility emerges for a Caspian energy corridor leading to the European market. Both Russia and Iran will feel directly threatened by the US military presence virtually in their border regions, and both would feel outplayed by Washington in the Caspian energy sweepstakes.

These maneuverings over the supply routes bring out the full range of the bitterly fought geopolitical struggle in the Hindu Kush, which mostly lies hidden from the world opinion that remains focused on the fate of al-Qaeda and Taliban. The fact is, seven years down the road from the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the US has done exceedingly well in geopolitical terms, even if the war as such may have gone rather badly both for the Afghans and the Pakistanis and the European soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

US holds trump card

The US has succeeded in establishing its long-term military presence in Afghanistan. Ironically, with the deterioration of the war, a case is now being built for establishing new US military bases in Central Asia. While the US's close partnership with the Pakistani military continues intact, the search for new supply routes becomes the perfect backdrop for expanding its influence into the Russian and Chinese (and Iranian) backyards in Central Asia.

The veiled threat of reopening the "Kashmir file", which is patently aimed at keeping India at bay, also serves a useful purpose. Plainly put, the US faces a real geopolitical challenge in Afghanistan if only a coalition of like-minded regional powers like Russia, China, Iran and India takes shape and these powers seriously begin exchanging notes about what the Afghan war has been about so far and where it is heading and what the US strategy aims at. So far, the US has succeeded in stalling such a process by sorting out these regional powers individually. Indeed, Washington has been a net beneficiary from the contradictions in the mutual relations between these regional powers.

On the whole, the US holds several trump cards, given the contradictions in Sino-Indian relations, Sino-Russian relations, the situation around Iran, India-Pakistan relations and Iran-Pakistan and, of course, Russia-Pakistan relations. The US's number one diplomatic challenge at this juncture will be to pre-empt and scatter any sort of incipient coordination that may take place between the regional powers surrounding Afghanistan in the nature of a regionally initiated peace process. The US has done its utmost to see that the SCO proposal for holding an international conference on Afghanistan doesn't materialize.

But as the Russian-Indian and Iranian-Indian consultations this week in Delhi testify, the regional powers may be slowly waking up and becoming wiser about the US's geostrategy in Afghanistan. The time may not be far off before

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they begin to sense that the "war on terror" is providing a convenient rubric under which the US is incrementally securing for itself a permanent abode in the highlands of the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs, Central Asian steppes and the Caucasus that form the strategic hub overlooking Russia, China, India and Iran.

The million-dollar question is Obama's sincerity. If he genuinely wants to end the bloodshed and the suffering in Afghanistan, tackle terrorism effectively and enduringly, as well as stabilize Afghanistan and secure South Asia as a stable region, he has to make a definitive choice. All he needs to do is to feel disgusted with the "collateral damage" that the great game is causing to the human condition, and seek an inclusive Afghan settlement in terms of the imperatives of regional security and stability.

Such a break will be consistent with what he claims his sense of values to be. The existential choice is whether he will break with the past out of principle.

No doubt, Obama faces a tough call, being a quintessential "outsider" in Washington, as he will run into the vested interests of the US security establishment, the military-industrial complex, Big Oil and the influential corpus of cold warriors who are bent on pressing ahead. The war in the Hindu Kush enters a decisive phase for the New American Century project.

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