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## Can 1996 Repeat itself in Afghanistan?

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By B.Raman

As the US troops prepare to thin themselves out of Afghanistan starting from next year, India has to worry whether 1996 can repeat itself in Afghanistan, when the Taliban, with the help of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), captured power from the Afghan Mujahideen in Kabul and enforced its rule.

2. In searching for an answer to this question, one has to remember what happened after the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988:

1989: The Afghan Mujahideen, with ISI's help, tried to have Najibullah's army defeated at Jalalabad, so that they could set up a base there. They were defeated by Najibullah, who demonstrated the strength of his army.

1992: The Afghan Mujahideen succeeded in overthrowing Najib by taking advantage of a US-encouraged split between Najibullah and Rashid Dostum and setting up their Govt in Kabul.

1994: Naseerullah Babar, Benazir Bhutto's Interior Minister, promoted the formation of the Taliban in Kandahar to escort Asif Ali Zardari's cotton convoys from Turkmenistan. The US established secret contacts with the Taliban to secure its support for a gas-oil pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan being planned by UNOCAL.

1996: The Taliban, with the ISI's support, overthrew the Mujahideen Government in Kabul and set up its Government.

1996: Ahmed Shah Masood set up his Northern Alliance to counter the Taliban.

1996: Osama bin Laden shifted from Khartoum to Jalalabad and from there to Kandahar where Mulla Omar, the Amir of the Taliban, was based.

1998: bin Laden formed the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Crusaders and the Jewish People for fighting against the US and Israel.

1998: Al Qaeda carried out explosions outside the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. US carried out reprisal Cruise missile attacks on Al Qaeda camps in Jalalabad. Not successful.

1999: The US demanded that the Taliban should hand over bin Laden to it. It also demanded that Pakistan should force the Taliban to hand over bin Laden to it. Both the Taliban and Pakistan evaded the US demand.

11/9/2001: Al Qaeda carried out its terror strikes in the US homeland.

October, 2001: The US declared its war on the Taliban and Al Qaeda and ordered military action in Afghanistan. The Taliban was overthrown, but Omar and bin Laden crossed over to Pakistan, where they were given shelter by the ISI. The Northern Alliance collaborated with the US in its operations.

3. The sequence of events mentioned above was due to the following reasons:

- The sudden and abrupt withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan.
- The differences between the Pashtoons and the Uzbeks and the consequent lack of unity in the Najibullah Government.
- The ambivalent US policy towards the Taliban. It hobnobbed with it initially in the hope of getting its support for the projected UNOCAL pipeline project and realised too late the pernicious nature of the Taliban.
- The USA's misplaced faith in Pakistani co-operation against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

4. What is the position now as the US prepares to thin itself out?

- Just as the Soviet troops withdrew in 1988 before effectively defeating the Mujahideen, the US is going to thin itself out before effectively defeating the Neo Taliban and the Haqqani Network, both of which continue to operate from Pakistan.
- The command and control of Al Qaeda based in Pakistan has been badly disrupted, but not eliminated.
- There could be political instability in Afghanistan after President Hamid Karzai completes his term next year leading once

again to ethnic differences between the Pashtoons and non-Pashtoons.

- The ambivalent US policy towards a possible political role for the so-called good Taliban post-2014 could add to uncertainties and instability.
- In 1988, to facilitate the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan ensured that there were no attacks on the withdrawing Soviet troops by the Mujahideen. Pakistan had better control over the tribal areas on the Afghan border. Today, Pakistan has little control over the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and will have little ability to facilitate the withdrawal of US troops and equipment.

5. Qualitatively, the ground situation post-2014 will differ from that which prevailed in 1988 as follows:

- The Soviet withdrawal in 1988 was abrupt and total with no Soviet presence left in Afghanistan. There was no air cover for the Soviet troops due to the effective use of the US-supplied Stinger missiles by the Mujahideen. The US withdrawal is going to be gradual and not abrupt and total. The US will still have some presence with the required air cover in Afghan territory to enable the Afghan troops perform their security role. The Soviet troops left Najibullah all alone without any back-up support to counter the Mujahideen. The US is unlikely to leave the Karzai (his successor's) Government all alone.
- The US fleet of Drones and their effective use will enable the US to prevent the Neo Taliban, the Haqqani network and Al Qaeda under Ayman Al-Zawahiri from re-grouping.

6. From 2014, the US will have the limited objective of preventing a come-back by a Neo Al Qaeda that could again pose a threat to the US homeland. The Neo Al Qaeda is presently focusing on Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Africa. After the US thin-out, it might be tempted to re-focus on the Af-Pak region. To prevent this, the US will need a continued capability to maintain a limited ground presence in Afghanistan and operate its fleet of Drones.

7. What should be India's options and policies? If the post-1996 events are repeated in Afghanistan, India may again face serious security problems in Jammu & Kashmir and even in hinterland India. To prevent this, Indian policies should be focused on the following:

- Continue to strengthen the Afghan security forces through training and supply of arms and ammunition.
- Strengthen trilateral intelligence co-operation involving the intelligence agencies of India, Afghanistan and the US.
- Encourage the US not to repeat the Soviet mistake of total withdrawal, but to maintain a minimum presence in Afghan territory to keep weakening the Neo Taliban and Neo Al Qaeda.
- Encourage the US to continue using its Drone fleet and if the US faces any difficulty in using them from Afghan territory, allow the US to operate them from Indian bases.
- Work for a smooth political transition after Karzai completes his term.

( The writer is Additional Secretary (retd), Cabinet Secretariat, Govt of India, New Delhi, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies, Chennai, and Associate of the Chennai Centre For China Studies. Twitter: @SORBONNE75 )

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