

# OPINION

## Time for Paksitan to do a rethink of Afghanistan

Subhash Chopra\*



Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's latest critique of Pakistan that the Taliban cannot lift a finger without the help of Islamabad has predictably taken the ties between the two neighbours to a new low. The candid criticism comes on the heels of his visit to India where he signed a "strategic pact" of mutual cooperation and on the eve of the tenth anniversary of US-led invasion which brought down the Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001.

Karzai's remarks in an interview to the BBC about the "failure" of Nato allies till now in tackling Taliban and Pakistan have not just infuriated his critics in Pakistan but also emboldened his detractors in the West who regard him as the weakest link in the fight against the Taliban. What has

sharpened their attack on him is his reported declaration that he would quit office at the end of 2014, the deadline which the US and British have set themselves for withdrawal of their forces and handover of security to the Afghan authorities.

There is widespread pessimism among the Nato allies, particularly in Britain, about any successful conclusion to the Afghan war. Some of the British commentators are issuing dire warnings to India about using its non-military "soft power" to help Afghanistan. Ridiculing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assurance to President Karzai that "India will stand by the people of Afghanistan," a Guardian columnist warned: "India's leaders one day may come to rue their vainglorious generosity in picking up the hot potato that the US, Britain

*\*Subhash Chopra is a freelance journalist and author of "Partition, Jihad & Peace-South Asia after bin Laden".*

and the rest all gingerly dropped, it seems a high price to pay for outflanking Pakistan.”

London also witnessed a “Stop the War” rally on Sunday (October 8) with participants including Jemima Khan, the ex-wife (but still a good friend) of Pakistani cricketer and anti-American prime ministerial hopeful Imran Khan. However, the governments of both US and Britain, the leading anti-Taliban countries, have a wider perspective and don’t regard their military exercise as a failure. They are hopeful of leaving Afghanistan as a better country in terms of education, development and even security however patchy that may be. They certainly have no plans to leave the country ready for a re-takeover by Taliban and the last few remnants of al Qaeda.

Notwithstanding declarations and deadlines, only time will tell the quantity and quality of Anglo-US withdrawal or Karzai’s 2014 resignation and the shape of the post-2014 government in Kabul.

What Karzai’s critics fail to understand is that his talk of resignation and Nato’s failure is a reflection not of defeatism but of desperation at the failure of US and Nato allies to drive home the message to Pakistan that it must end

its clandestine links with Taliban and their operations against Afghanistan. US President Barack Obama’s exhortations to Pakistan to stop regarding India as its “mortal enemy” have fallen on deaf ears so far. For long the US was almost afraid of mentioning the India word to Pakistan, as only a couple of years ago Washington bowed to Pakistan’s insistence to exclude India from the London conference on Afghanistan attended by almost 60 countries. No longer so. The US is now repeatedly and openly asking Pakistan to change its mindset on India which would be beneficial to itself and the entire region. Pakistan, like India, should join in the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Short of asking Pakistan to emulate India, the advice from the US — and Britain — has shown a full circle change.

As things stand today the Pakistani military establishment is in no mood to listen to anybody, aid or no financial aid from the US. Of course, Islamabad knows Washington can’t do without it while the US is still caught in the Afghanistan war trap. Both are engaged in the toughest round of calling each other’s bluff. In all probability the bluffing fight will be called off at the last moment. The donor and the recipient can’t do

without each other.

Karzai's signing of the strategic pacts with India last week clearly has not endeared him to the Pakistani establishment. His description of Pakistan as Afghanistan's "twin brother" and India as a "friend" hasn't cut much ice. Pakistani establishment's paranoia about India shows no sign of diminishing at least for now. Nor does Pakistan look any nearer to realising the full danger it faces from the Taliban. Perhaps it still believes that it can control Taliban by playing the Islamic card. The lesson of Taliban attacks on Pakistani civil and military outfits, including the attack on the high security Navy base in Karachi, has not been learnt. Perhaps Pakistan has not yet reached its tipping point. But sooner than later it will have to confront the prospect of dismounting the tiger called Taliban, which is not going to be easy

the longer it is delayed. In the final analysis, Taliban are no friends of Pakistan. The sooner the military establishment realises its monumental folly the better for Pakistan. And not just for Pakistan but for Afghanistan and the entire region too.

The other obsession which Pakistan must get rid of is its concept of using Afghanistan as its "strategic depth" backyard. This obsession has earned Pakistan the extreme distrust, virtual enmity, of Afghanistan. The "trust deficit" between the governments of the two countries is becoming wider by the day and needs to be arrested for the sake of both sides. Pakistan cannot treat Afghanistan as its fifth province. If super powers like the erstwhile Soviet Union, Britain and America can't control Afghanistan, what chance has Pakistan got? Instead Pakistan should join India and Afghanistan in trilateral cooperation with others for a better world all round. ■