

# TALIBAN'S AFGHANISTAN: LOOKING INTO FUTURE An Indian Perspective\*

SREEDHAR

Historically Afghanistan is part and parcel of the Indian psyche at two levels. It is the land of Gandhari (a princess from today's Kandahar), the wife of the king Drutrashtara, one of the principle characters in the 5000-years old Indian epic *Mahabharata*. It is a land of brave warriors, kings and emperors and a cradle of civilisation. At a popular level, it is the land of Kabuliwallah, a fictitious character in a short story written by the Nobel Laureate Ravindranath Tagore. Kabuliwallah literally means the man from Kabul. In the story, there is a tall Pashtun with a long beard, whom the mothers recall whenever children become naughty and mischievous. The tall and ferocious looking Pashtun, away from home for long years for his business in India, misses his family. One day he suddenly finds solace with a little child. This story was originally in Bengali, a language spoken in eastern India. It has been translated in to all the Indian languages and became a part of Indian folklore, with the result that a Pashtun is associated with bravery, honesty, kindness and affection. This is the reason why there was

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*Sreedhar is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. He co-authored the book Afghan Buzkashi, Power Games and Gamesmen, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2000.*

\* Opinions expressed in this paper are author's personal views only.

public outrage at the way Talibanised Pashtuns handled the hijacked Indian Airlines plane in December 1999. No one could believe that a Pashtun could entertain hijackers and their accomplices.

These popular perceptions apart, independent India has always considered Afghanistan a friendly country. In the 1960s, Afghanistan emerged as one of the largest recipients of Indian economic aid. India even played a critical role in bringing together various factions of the Afghan left movement in the 1970s. All this underwent a sudden change after the former Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The US decision to support the Afghan refugees' fight with the Red Army made India suddenly realise that Cold War rivalry had finally come to the doorsteps of the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan put a spin on these developments by converting the refugees into Mujahidin overnight and designating their fight against the Red Army as a jihad, thereby adding a new dimension. The Indian concern was for the effects any spill over from these developments in Afghanistan and Pakistani policy towards it would have on the Islamic world in general and on the 150 million Muslims in India.<sup>1</sup>

The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was seen only as a partial resolution of the Afghan problem. The failure of Afghan refugees who had fought against the Red Army to come to an agreement and Pakistani efforts to install a government friendly to them created new uncertainties all around in the region. The arrival of the Taliban on the Afghan scene in August-September 1994 is seen as another clever Pakistani twist made to recapture the initiative lost after the installation of the Burhanuddin Rabbani government in Kabul in 1992-93. India took no major initiative to intervene in Afghanistan in this period. The reasons are too obvious. India was trying to rework its foreign policy framework due to the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union. For almost three decades,

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical perspective on Indo-Afghan relations see J. N. Dixit, *An Afghan Diary: Zahir Shah to Taliban*, Konark, Delhi, 2000, pp. 1-52.

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Indo-Soviet relations had been one of the key elements in India's foreign policy. Therefore, the need to rework a new policy framework became an urgent necessity. Equally important was the post-Cold War world order. The Indian economy was trying to get its bearings in the rapidly changing global economic scene. The process of economic liberalisation of a forty-year-old mixed economy had created its own problems for India. Lastly, the simmering discontentment in the Indian Union's northern province of Jammu & Kashmir, which is geographically adjacent to Pakistan, resulted in new security problems.

In this paper an attempt has been made to explain how developments in the Taliban movement and Afghanistan are likely to unfold in the coming years. Until now, the literature on Taliban shows that both in academia and at policy making levels the Taliban is regarded as a phenomenon that can be contained.

The arrival of the Taliban in fall 1994 on the Afghan scene has not taken anyone in India by surprise. By that time Pakistan had created dozens of such outfits to achieve its objectives *vis-à-vis* neighbouring countries. For instance, by the mid-1990s, to achieve its objectives in Jammu & Kashmir, Islamabad floated more than three dozen outfits to confuse the adversary.<sup>2</sup> According to a compilation of these outfits, they are funded by Pakistani agencies and their militants underwent training in acts of terrorism and violence under the direct supervision of Pakistani military personnel. Therefore, the Indian response was predictable. The Indian Embassy in Kabul was closed down the day Taliban captured the city. The Minister for External Affairs made a statement in Parliament saying that the territorial integrity of Afghanistan should be maintained and a broad-based government formed as soon as possible. However, India noticed two specific features about the Taliban:

<sup>2</sup> In the decade 1988 to 1998, the number of these outfits documented by various people reached 184. Out of these, 21 are in Afghanistan, 72 in Pakistan and 91 in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. *Involvement of Pakistan in Terrorism in J&K*, mimeographed (place and year of publication not given), pp. 165-167.

- The open involvement of Pakistani military personnel in Taliban campaigns to neutralise its opponents. This involvement was not restricted to logistic support or tactical planning as it had been in the past. The Pakistani army publicly got involved in supposedly Taliban campaigns to capture territory from their adversaries. The international media documented this fact in coverage of the Taliban assault on Kabul in September 1996.<sup>3</sup>
- The amount of financial power the Taliban is able to wield surprised every one. Though Taliban ideologues managed to establish Islamic solidarity organisations in a number of countries, the contributions were not as high as expected.<sup>4</sup> So, the Taliban co-opted the narcotic mafia. The shifting of poppy cultivation into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has increased substantially during the last five years.<sup>5</sup> This gave the Taliban the necessary manoeuvrability to sustain their campaign and continue their chequebook campaign. This open nexus between narcotics and the Taliban movement has added a new dimension to the security environment of the region.

This nexus made Taliban's success quite easy; but in the process, they lost their credibility as an independent movement. Except for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the international community refuses to recognise them on one pretext or the other. The Taliban's assumption that once they had captured Kabul they would automatically be recognised as the legitimate government proved incorrect. Their success in capturing Kabul only confirmed the rest of the world's worst suspicions about the movement. The success brought out in public the Taliban's policies of gender discrimination, ethnic cleansing and unwillingness to form a broad

<sup>3</sup> One Indian journalist from the *Indian Express* group of newspapers who was in Kabul in the first week of October 1996 told me that he met some of them on condition they would not be photographed.

<sup>4</sup> An Indonesia senior official of the Interior Ministry told me in October 1997 that a bunch of Islamic solidarity organisations with sympathies to the Afghan Mujahidin came through South-east Asia. They were collecting donations from individuals and groups and the respective governments were keeping a close watch on them.

<sup>5</sup> See UN ODCCP, 'Chronicle', *Afghanistan and Pakistan*, June 2000, No. 1, p. 10.

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based government. This further complicated the issue of the new rulers of Kabul's acceptability to the international community. The Taliban's insistence on finding only a military solution to Afghan's problems hardened the position of the entire neighbourhood, including India.

The arrival of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi billionaire, from Sudan in May or June 1996 as a guest of the Taliban, created fresh apprehensions about the Taliban movement. People who are aware of Osama's ideological leanings started wondering what turn the Taliban movement would take. These apprehensions were based on four factors:

- Saudi Arabia extensively funds the so-called *madrasas* in Pakistan where only orthodox Wahhabi Sunni Islam is taught. The ideological indoctrination is so intense in these *madrasas* that the students are committed to the cause.<sup>6</sup>
- The arrival of Osama to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan changed the situation. Suddenly, the Taliban movement had acquired a charismatic leader from the Islamic world, and that too from the holiest place of Islam. Mullah Omar, the Taliban supremo, is exactly the opposite of Osama. He is supposed to have run for his life as a refugee to Pakistan when the Soviet army entered Kabul. Later, Pakistani agencies handpicked him and sent him to Afghanistan to fight.

The Osama's case is totally different. He was born into a rich Saudi family. He was sent to Afghanistan to help the Afghan refugees in their fight against the Soviets with the blessing of the custodian of the Holy Shrines of Islam.<sup>7</sup> He voluntarily gave up his riches to fight along with his fellow Muslims in

<sup>6</sup> Ghulam Hasnain, 'Ready for Jihad', *Outlook*, New Delhi, Vol. XL, No. 37, 25 September 2000, pp. 31-40.

<sup>7</sup> An Indian diplomat who was present at the airport ceremony for Osama bin Laden's departure to Afghanistan in the second half of the 1980s described it as a royal send off.

their jihad against the 'infidels'. In no time, he became a cult figure among the Muslims of the Arab world and even among the Afghans. His network is global and he appears to have had success in mobilising resources. Since he was coming from a business family, his organisational skills are undoubtedly better than that of Mullah Omar and his Pakistani mentors.<sup>8</sup>

- Since coming to Afghanistan, Osama appears to have reset the agenda of Taliban. As events started to unfold, the Osama-Taliban combine accelerated the process of the Taliban's consolidation within Afghanistan and started extending their spheres of influence all around. Dissidents in countries around Afghanistan got safe havens in Kabul. There were reports of Mujahidin-e-Khalq of Iran, the Xinjiang Liberation Front of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Hizbul Mujahidin operating in the Jammu & Kashmir province of India and similar outfits operating in Pakistan getting training in Taliban training camps in Afghanistan or in camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (see map 1). By 1998, the Taliban and Osama's organisation Al-Qaida became umbrella organisation for all these dissident movements. The Taliban even went to the extent of recognising the Chechen rebel government in January 2000.
- One could see that by 1996 the Taliban, Mujahidin and *jihadis* had become synonymous terms. In Afghanistan, they are the Taliban, in Chechnya they are the *jihadis* and in Xinjiang or Kashmir they become the Mujahidin.

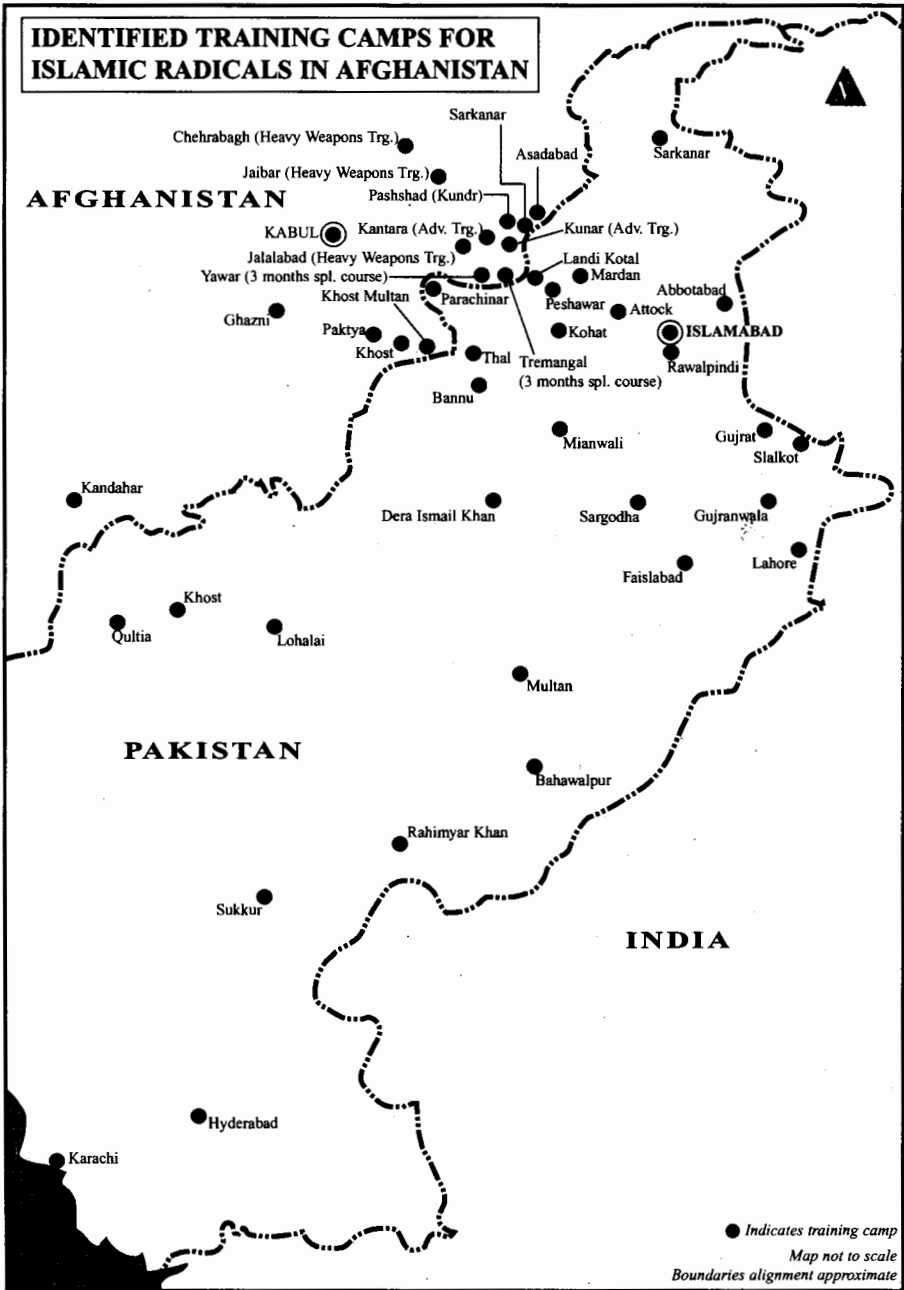
Osama-Taliban's assertion of their agenda is also reflected in some of their other actions:

- Attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998;

<sup>8</sup> For a concise account of Osama bin Laden's business empire see Sreedhar and Mohinder Ved, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2000, Vol. 1, pp. 66-67.

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**Map 1**



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- Failed attack on the life of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in February 1999;
- The Indo-Pakistan war of summer 1999 saw a combined participation of Taliban trained militants and Pakistani military personnel;
- The hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane to Kandahar in December 1999;
- Attacks on security forces in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in August 2000;
- The attack on the destroyer *USS Cole* on 12 October 2000.

All these indicate that the Taliban movement has acquired a new pan-Islamic agenda (see map 2) along with Osama's original idea – the US must vacate Islamic land.

During the Taliban's August-September 2000 campaign to capture Afghanistan's provinces bordering the Central Asian republics, the international aid agencies working there provided rough estimates of the Taliban's troop composition – forty percent for the Taliban troops were non-Afghans. UN and Western diplomats estimate that the Taliban's force is comprised of at least 15 nationalities, including 3000 Pakistani Islamic students, 1000 Arabs loyal to Osama bin Laden, several hundred from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and others.<sup>9</sup> They include Philipinos, Bangladeshis, Kashmiris, Chechens and Uighurs from the Xinjiang region of China. The Taliban also include students from Pakistani *madrasas*. The strength of the force that participated in the attacks is estimated to be around 15,000. An earlier estimate of Taliban's armed forces strength was around 30,000-35,000.

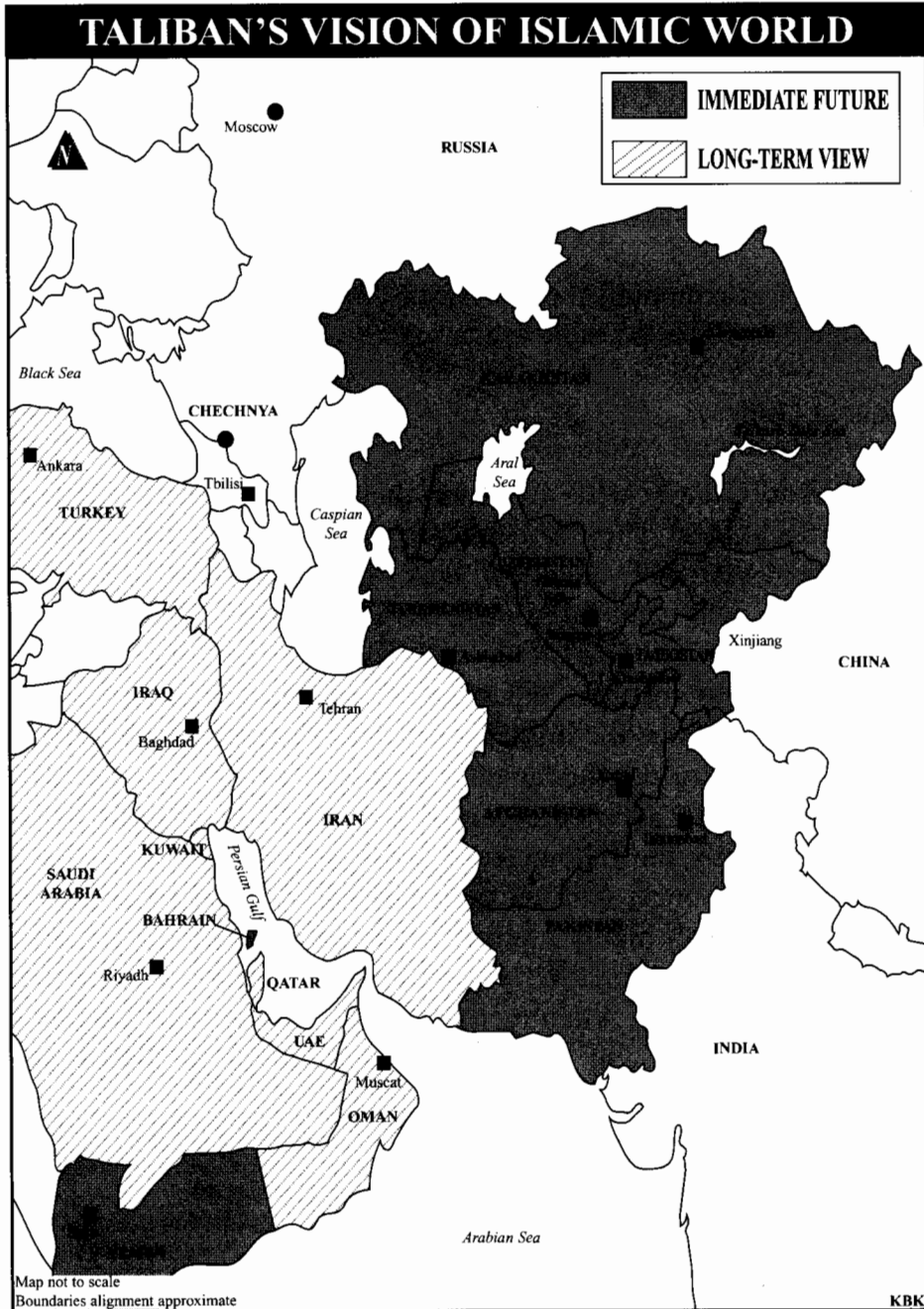
This clearly indicates that Osama and the Taliban are successful in organising an international army. If the only Muslim army of the Islamic world with nuclear weapons, Pakistan, could be

<sup>9</sup> According to Indian security officials I interviewed, there are at least 18 nationalities in the Taliban-Osama army.



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Map 2



merged in this multinational force, it would be a formidable one. If the reports coming from Pakistan are taken into consideration, a section of the armed forces there, especially in the ranks, feel the panacea for all Pakistani problems is to establish an Islamic form of governance.<sup>10</sup> The question now remaining is whether the Pakistani armed forces can be lured sufficiently into Taliban's evolving concept of a pan-Islamic empire.

If this assumption about Taliban-Osama's agenda is correct, one can foresee four possible scenarios:

### Scenario One

Taliban-Osama will continue their low intensity conflict northwards longer. They are not yet fully equipped to fight a conventional war with anybody. This became obvious after their confrontation with Iran in August 1998 and in the Kargil war in summer 1999. Therefore, it is unlikely they will try to move eastwards or westwards. The underdeveloped Central Asian republics appear to be the immediate target. There the governments are fragile and are dependent on Russia for border security. The Taliban are feeling quite confident in dealing with Russian armed forces. Apparently, the Taliban feel that the Russian army, which was already defeated once, will not take the risk of getting themselves involved again with highly motivated Islamic radicals. In addition, the Taliban seems to be cleverly exploiting the differences between Russia and the Central Asian republics.<sup>11</sup> The distant extra-regional powers like the US will not commit their troops to places like

10 There is an intense debate going on in Pakistani army about the character of the armed forces. If it is going to be an Islamic army with all its trappings, what is to be done with non-Muslims in the armed forces? These non-Muslims are a microscopic minority in the Pakistani army, but their status needs to be addressed. Siddiqui, 'The Failed Coup: Islam and the Army', *Nation*, Islamabad, 13 August 1996.

11 All the Central Asian republics seem to have opened lines of communications with the Taliban. The latest seems to be Uzbekistan. According to a report in *The Economist* (London), the Uzbek President's special representatives had an unofficial meeting with Taliban's representatives. *The Economist*, 14 October 2000, p. 39.

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Afghanistan. A repeat performance of their August 1998 demonstrative cruise missile firings at selected targets would not achieve any immediate objective. Afghanistan is already in ruins and there is nothing more to destroy. But it would certainly bring in a wave of anti-American sentiment against the US in the Islamic world. If such a development took place, US allies in the Islamic world would be in a dilemma.

This new Islamic empire's philosophy would be Wahhabi sunni-ism as interpreted by Taliban-Osama. They would try to protect the interest of Muslims everywhere in the world.

Their immediate task would be to continue the guerrilla warfare and to work on co-opting the Pakistani armed forces. If they succeeded in their latter objective they would be a powerful state that could wield considerable clout in the international system. With the viability of the Pakistani state structure at a crossroads,<sup>12</sup> the Taliban-Osama leadership feels strongly that they can succeed in their overtures. Already rebel Chechen leaders like Zalim Khan talk about the Pakistani armed forces being converted into an Islamic army.

### **Scenario Two**

The contradictions in Taliban-Osama come to the forefront. Though the Taliban are successful in bringing peace and order to the areas they control, they are not successful in providing the population with the necessities of life. This automatically results in discontentment in some Taliban-occupied areas. From the beginning of 2000, bomb blasts, prison break ups and demonstrations against local administrations have been reported from Kandahar, Kunduz and Herat.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Robert Kaplan, Pakistan could be a Yugoslavia in the making, but with nuclear weapons. The bewildering complexity of ethnic and religious divisions is what makes it so fragile. See Robert D. Kaplan, 'The Lawless Frontiers', *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 286, No. 3, September 2000, p. 68. Also see Sreedhar and Nilesch Bhagat, *Pakistan: a Withering State?*, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 1999.

The Taliban's ethnic cleansing of some of its occupied areas has created apprehension about the Pashtun dominated Taliban movement. The non-Pashtun groups like Tajiks and Uzbeks are already organising themselves to confront the Taliban in the northern areas of Afghanistan where they dominate. For instance, there were reports in September 2000 that General Dostum, the Afghan leader of Uzbek origin, deposed from Mazar-e Sharif in 1998 by Taliban, was in Moscow for consultations. In all probability, Uzbekistan is likely to provide facilities for him to reorganise his forces. Similarly, the revered General of the Afghan army, General Ismail Khan, who escaped from a Taliban prison in March 2000, is reported to be in Iran organising a force of Afghan refugees to confront the Taliban.<sup>13</sup>

At another level, sensing the threat from Taliban-Osama, if it goes unchecked, the international community is likely to impose fresh sanctions against the Taliban on a priority basis to cripple its war machinery. Pakistan, which has been a major source of sustenance for the Taliban's war machinery, may also be told to stop extending material help to the Taliban.<sup>14</sup>

All this adds up to saying that the Taliban movement may not succeed and may wither away or come to accept a UN-sponsored and administered peace plan.

### **Scenario Three**

The Taliban movement as it has emerged over the last six years is not a cohesive force. Groups within the Taliban insist that a process of consolidating the Taliban's gains of the last five years

13 Ahmed Rashid, 'Worst Humanitarian Crisis in N. Afghanistan', *Nation* 12 September 2000. Also see my article 'Can Taliban be Disciplined', *Aakrosh*, New Delhi, Vol. 3, No. 8, July 2000, pp. 77-88. Here I listed incidents of opposition to Taliban's rule.

14 How far UN sanctions would contain a regime is a debatable issue. The UN sanctions against the white rulers of South Africa proved to be ineffective in the long run. Similarly, the ongoing UN sanctions have had no impact on Saddam Hussein's rule. The November 1999 UN sanctions against Taliban appears to have had no effect on Taliban's position.

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must start. Already the Taliban's mentors in Pakistan are talking in terms of the need for a dialogue between various groups to form a representative form of government.<sup>15</sup>

With the type of support Ahmad Shah Masood is getting from neighbouring countries, by-passing his fortress-like Panjshir valley and containing him there would be an ideal move for the Taliban's strategists. Since Ahmad Shah Masood is unlikely to participate in any Taliban-led government, the latter can safely argue that the intransigence of Masood led to failure in talks and that, therefore, the Taliban should get the needed international recognition.

This would automatically bring in the necessary aid from the international community for economic reconstruction of war ravaged Afghanistan.

This scenario assumes that the Pakistani government is still in full control of the Taliban and that they can contain the radical Islamic elements within the Pakistani polity, which are the prime supporters of the Taliban.

### **Scenario four**

Any Pakistani efforts to contain the Taliban before it completes its agenda may have a backlash effect both on Pakistan and the moderates in the Taliban movement. Right now, radical Islamic elements within the Taliban set the Taliban agenda. Radical elements within the Pakistani armed forces are collaborating with it. A quick look at some of the facts illustrates this point.

- Everyone in Pakistan seems to have forgotten the international boundary, Durand Line, between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is a *de facto* scrapping of this boundary line.

<sup>15</sup> For Pakistan's changing perceptions of the Taliban, see Amir Mir's dispatch from Lahore, 'The Friendship Thorn', *Outlook*, Vol. XL, No. 41, 23 October 2000.

- The Pakistani authorities are not able to control the *madrasas* students going in large numbers and participating in Taliban campaigns.
- The Pakistani authorities are not able to regulate people crossing the border in the name of trade. One may also say Pakistan is unwilling to stop this movement of people.
- The Pakistani authorities' efforts to regulate the flow of traffic between the two countries brought strong protests from the local population.
- The Taliban is a Pashtun dominated movement and Pashtuns constitute a majority in the adjoining North-west Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. There are blood ties between Pashtuns on both sides.
- With the Pashtuns joining Pakistan reluctantly in 1947, there is a considerable amount of resentment among the locals against Islamabad. During the past fifty years of independence, the Pakistani ruling élite have rarely addressed the problems of the NWFP. With the result that the NWFP is trying to carve out a separate identity for itself. Afghan rulers, until the Soviets invaded Kabul, were making claims to a large chunk of territory in the NWFP.<sup>16</sup>

In the new situation emerging in Afghanistan, with the boundary line almost vanished, a Greater Pashtunstan will result. This scenario envisages a redrawing of the map of Pakistan-Afghanistan. One could also envisage that the Mullah Omar-Osama bin Laden combine would not be averse to the idea of a confederation of the two in which they would set the agenda. Already some of the Islamic radicals in Taliban camps have even talked of an Islamic empire with its own army.

<sup>16</sup> Smriti S. Patnaik, 'Pakistan's North-west Frontier Under A New Name', *Strategic Analysis*, New Delhi, Vol. XXII, No. 5, pp. 761-782.

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To sum up, troubled times are ahead for the South-west Asian region. To think that Taliban's pan-Islamic movement can be contained directly or through Pakistan is too simplistic a view of the developments taking place in Afghanistan and Pakistan. One has to be an astrologer to predict when the situation will stabilise. The situation is complicated by a mixture of underdevelopment, lack of popularly elected governments and the high aspirations of the people in the region. A section of the local population appears to think that the panacea to all this is taking recourse to Islam, an untested tool for governance in modern times. Therefore, it will take at least a decade for the situation to settle down – say by 2010.