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By B. Raman

There has been some understandable curiosity and puzzlement over a statement attributed to the Afghan Taliban which was disseminated on June 17, 2012, through the Internet.

2. The statement, provided it is authentic, appeared to be a reaction to the recent visit of Mr. Leon Panetta, the US Defence Secretary, to India and Afghanistan. During his stay in New Delhi, there was speculation in the local media that Mr. Panetta, who made no secret of the USA's continuing exasperation with Pakistan, was keen that India should play a greater role in the training of the Afghan Army. This, if true, was a reversal of the past reluctance of the US to encourage an Indian military training role in Afghanistan lest it add to the concerns of Pakistan.

3. These reports regarding Mr. Panetta's interest in a greater Indian military training role led to excited comments by non-governmental analysts, but the Government of India itself maintained a discreet silence on the subject. This discreet silence has now been interpreted by the Taliban in the statement attributed to it as amounting to a rejection of the US nudging on this issue.

4. The Indian policy generally has been not to be amenable to pressure from the US to play a military role in areas of strategic interest to the US lest perceptions of Indian military collaboration with the US affect India's own interests. When Mr. George Bush was the US President and Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee was our Prime Minister, the Government of India had resisted US pressure to send Indian troops to Iraq. India did agree to allow its naval ships to escort through the Malacca Straits US ships on way from the Pacific to the Gulf, but beyond that declined

to play any military role.

5. Now that the administration of President Barack Obama is planning to reduce the US military's operational role in Afghanistan and to increasingly confine the US role to training the Afghan Security Forces, it seems to be keen that India should supplement the US efforts in this regard by undertaking more training missions. This, if correct, would be a reversal of the past policies of the US.

6. US policies with regard to any Indian military training role in Afghanistan have passed through various stages. In the days when the US relations with Islamabad were good, the US was opposed to any Indian military training role keeping in view the concerns of Pakistan. Subsequently, the US did not oppose any training of Afghan military personnel in India, but continued to have reservations about any Indian role on the ground in Afghan soil. The reports on Mr. Panetta's discussions in New Delhi carried by the Indian media indicated that as a result of the US exasperation with Pakistan over its stopping the transit of logistic supplies for the NATO forces through its territory, the US was inclined to reduce its reservations and encourage a more active Indian role. It is not clear whether the reported change in the US views was tactical to spite Pakistan or strategic and would be enduring.

7. The Government of India needs to be congratulated for not jumping into responding positively to the US suggestions and for taking time to examine the implications of an increased Indian military training role. While there need be no reservations about increasing the training of Afghan military personnel in Indian territory, increased ground involvement of Indian military personnel in Afghan soil could have long-term implications that need to be carefully examined with our feet firmly on the ground.

8. The Taliban has chosen to interpret the lack of open Indian enthusiasm for the ideas of Mr. Panetta as Indian rejection of the US feelers on this issue. One should not be surprised if the Taliban statement encouraging India to turn down the US feelers had been drafted in consultation with Islamabad.

9. The Taliban statement goes beyond giving its reactions to the perceived lack of positive outcome to Mr. Panetta's discussions in New Delhi. It repeats a formulation of September 1998 of the Taliban, issued when it was in power in Kabul, in which it had expressed its benign intentions towards India and sought to remove any impression that it might be hostile to Indian interests because of India's close association with the Government of Najibullah. It had claimed in that statement that the Taliban did not believe in exporting jihad to other countries and that while the Taliban supported the right of the Kashmiris to self-determination, it would not get involved in the insurgency on the ground in Jammu & Kashmir. An analysis made by me in September 1999 on the attitude of the Taliban and Al Qaeda to India may be seen at <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers%5Cpaper83.html> ^[1]

10. Things have changed considerably on the ground since then. Gulbuddin Heckmatyar's Hizbe Islami, which was having serious differences with the Taliban in 1998, is now its ally. The Hizbe Islami, close to the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, has been actively involved in training ISI-sponsored Pakistani jihadi organisations that are active against India. The Haqqani Network, which had no importance in 1998,

has now come to the forefront and has been acting in tandem with Al Qaeda on the one side and the Taliban on the other.

11. Both the Hizbe Islami and the Haqqani Network are implacably opposed to India. The involvement of the Haqqani Network in acts of terrorism against the Indian Embassy in Kabul, in complicity with the Lashkar-e-Toiba, was strongly suspected. The Taliban has done nothing to dissociate itself from the anti-India activities of the Hizbe Islami and the Haqqani Network. The Taliban may not believe in exporting jihad to other countries, but it has not discouraged or condemned terrorist attacks on Indian nationals and interests in Afghanistan.

12. Against this background, caution should be the keyword in determining our reaction. Our interests in Afghanistan, which are considerable and important, will be best served by strengthening the durability and the stability of the Hamid Karzai Government which has entered into a strategic partnership with India. It is not in our interest for the Taliban to prevail on the ground in Afghanistan.

13. We should continue to work in close co-operation with the Hamid Karzai Government while examining whether we should expand our supportive role in Afghanistan and how. At the same time, sense of realism should indicate that the Taliban is not a spent force. It has shown tremendous resilience. It is going to be an important factor in the ground situation. It would, therefore, be in the common interest of India and the Karzai Government not to spurn the positive-seeming feelers of the Taliban.

14. We should maintain a low level of backchannel interaction with the Taliban by taking advantage of its presence in Qatar in order to understand its positive feelers and encourage it on the path of national reconciliation in Afghanistan.

(The writer is Additional Secretary (retd), Cabinet Secretariat, Govt of India, New Delhi, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies, Chennai, and Associate, Chennai Centre For China Studies. E-Mail: seventyone2@gmail.com^[2] . Twitter: @SORBONNE75)

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