



## Through night vision goggles, Afghan conflict becoming a proxy war

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In Cold War era folklore it used to be said that the supply of stinger missiles to the Afghan Mujahideen, in the 1980s, was a masterstroke by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The stinger apparently unnerved Soviet pilots and effectively put an end to the air superiority of the Red Army in Afghanistan – and probably hastened the victory of the so-called Afghan jihad against Soviet intervention.

Are we now tiptoeing toward another “masterstroke” – this time around, ironically, directed against the open-ended US occupation of Afghanistan?

Reports say that in devastating attacks on security personnel in Kandahar and Farah provinces on successive nights on Monday and Tuesday, Taliban used night vision technology and laser weapons. Unofficial accounts put Afghan casualties at over 70 security personnel.

It seems obvious that someone made those high-tech weapons available to the Taliban in the recent past and explained how they could be used effectively.

In the great transition that takes place when what used to be an insurgency gets overlaid with geopolitics and assumes the nature a proxy war, it is difficult to pinpoint the inflection point. Equally, it would not be easy to pinpoint the culprit behind the Taliban’s weaponry upgrade.

Are we witnessing the early signs of a shrewd calibration of the tempo of the war from outside Afghanistan by masterminds who know precisely how to manipulate an asymmetrical war to best advantage?

An angry Taliban commentary on November 13 said that in the downstream of “the new aggressive strategy of war-monger President Trump,” the US military has stepped up its bombing operations – nearly 750 bombs were dropped in September, “which is the highest bombing recorded since 2012 of illegitimate and brutal foreign occupation of our beloved homeland.”

It took note that the US is deploying F-16 jets and B-52 bombers for “indiscriminate bombing,” which has inflicted “heavy casualties and financial losses on the innocent civilian people”; and

that “a batch of 4 ‘black hawk’ helicopters were handed over to the stooge Kabul regime recently.”

An Afghan policeman looks at bloodstains outside a mosque in Kabul where a suicide bomber detonated a bomb, on June 16, 2017. Photo: Reuters / Omar Sobhani

Following the attacks in Kandahar and Farah, Afghan security spokesmen admitted they didn't have the capabilities to match the Taliban's night vision goggles and laser weapons.

All indications are that the US military is going for that one big proverbial push to tilt the military balance, which currently favors the Taliban. That is also the conclusion to be drawn from a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels last week.

NATO will send 3000 more troops to Afghanistan to augment US forces. Two scholars at the Cato Institute commented that “NATO's decision emphasizes the importance of making sure that the United States and its allies have good reason to keep going after such a long, costly and ineffective occupation.”

There had been grounds to assume that Afghanistan might figure in talks in Beijing during Donald Trump's “state visit-plus” to China last week. That turned out to be a misplaced hope, however.

In the entire press briefing that the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson gave in Beijing on November 9 regarding Trump's discussions with Chinese leaders, he never once mentioned Afghanistan.

Curiously, four days later, on November 13, Xinhua carried a news analysis on the Afghan situation, which noted in an acerbic tone that the US and its western allies do not have a plan to work for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

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On the other hand, Xinhua noted, “regional countries including Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia and Central Asian States are engaged in diplomatic efforts to encourage peace negotiations.” The catch is that the US not only wants to exclude Russia and Iran from everything concerning Afghanistan, it also prevents Kabul from engaging in any “active diplomatic efforts by regional countries.”

In sum, the US is like the dog in the manger. It has no peace plan and it won't let regional initiatives gain traction, either.

Significantly, two days ago – while in the Philippines for the East Asia Summit – Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev compared the current tensions in Russian-American relations to those of the 1980s.

The Russian Defence Ministry also alleged on Tuesday that in Syria the US was protecting ISIS fighters from Russian air attacks and helping them to regroup near the city of Abu Kamal on the border with Iraq. The Pentagon called it a “lie.”

On Wednesday, the Russian news agency TASS reported that “Six Tu-22M3 long-range bombers, which have taken off from the territory of Russia and flown over Iran and Iraq, have delivered a massive air strike” at ISIS formations near Abu Kamal and wiped out them out.

The big question is how long the Afghan war can remain insulated from the proxy wars in the Middle East. Time is running out.