
Ground Truths about the US War on Terror in Afghanistan

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Stable peace in Afghanistan is still a distant dream. The Taliban has been a thorn in the flesh in its south along the Durand Line, especially in Waziristan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Al Qaeda has been driven into the hills on both sides of the border. Iraq appears to have stabilised after the surge operations, the fresh conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in Gaza has come to an end, and relations between India and Pakistan have taken a nose-dive after the Mumbai attacks. All these ominous developments taken together certainly portend overall escalation beyond the limits of the war on terror which deeply involves the United States. A bit of introspection over past mistakes and a bit of crystal gazing, is certainly called for.

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan was launched in gross violation of the basic principles of war enunciated by military pundits such as Clausewitz and Liddel Hart, viz, Selection and Maintenance of Aim. The US led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces went to war in such unholy haste, without a clear, unambiguous and singular aim. What to speak of selection, the aim underwent several revisions within the first three weeks of the war itself. Consequently, the long-term strategic aims of bringing about broader stability in the region and the surrounding areas were mixed up with the immediate aim of destruction of the Taliban and the imperative need to bring about a regime change. Concomitantly, the emphasis later shifted to destruction of Al Qaeda. Another violation was on the Principle of Economy of Effort, in which more than three weeks of air battle continued to pound civil and military targets in mountainous terrain, which did not achieve results commensurate with the effort put in.

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The US also did not learn from the Russian experience. What they did not anticipate was that both the Taliban and Al Qaeda's recruiting organisation framework in Afghanistan had remained intact for its future cadres. After operations, Al Qaeda gave up its state sanctuaries by clandestinely occupying warehouses and small innocuous sites for its survival. These, in turn, provided the launched pad for the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba in global terrorism with the help of sympathetic Afghan communities.

US strategy to defeat Al Qaeda on its own turf required excellent intelligence, special operations capability (such as covert forces) and pinpoint air-strikes, and of the three, intelligence held the key. Human intelligence required a reasonable gestation period. American led NATO forces lacked human intelligence at the induction stage, as intelligence acquired from unmanned aerial vehicles and satellites does not always prove very effective in guerrilla warfare of this blend. Right now, does one even know whether Al Qaeda exists or not? (Since they have not carried out any worthwhile operations after 9/11.)

What is relevant is the joint capabilities of the Taliban and new groups, a factor which the US had apparently not assessed. The Taliban, whether in Afghanistan or Pakistan, has the advantage of operating in known terrain with a network of tribal supporters and superior intelligence about current American/ NATO forces dispositions, their likely future actions and timings of their strike. That the Taliban declines combat on unfavourable terms and strikes when the American led NATO forces are the weakest are normal guerrilla tactics. Predictably, despite enjoying superior force and firepower, the Americans led forces achieved very little. Hot pursuit operations to destroy the Taliban inside Pakistan, or to cut the supply lines and destroy the Taliban's base camps would have been possible if only the Americans had the troops to operate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The single most important factor of the war in Afghanistan was that it hardened anti-US sentiments throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Today, virtual anarchy prevails in Afghanistan, with the revival of warlordism, banditry and opium production (read narco terrorism) impeding the resumption of humanitarian relief programmes and return to normalcy. The loyalty of all six power centres, in existence in Afghanistan today, is suspect (given below) and so is the genuineness of the US led NATO forces' intentions.

- Areas around Kabul to its northeast and parts of the Pashtun south are loyal to Karzai; 12,000 Tajik militias are in readiness to challenge other factions. Burhanuddin Rabbani, former Afghan president and leader of the Northern Alliance, who favours the Pashtuns, has joined in.

- Five other radical Pashtun alliances of fundamentalist leaders and groups outside the government or on its sidelines including the Peshawar group, followers of former Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Haji Abdul Qadir, head of the Pashtun Eastern Council, former Taliban dissident and Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, are currently allied with former Afghan President Rabbani.
- Area around Kandahar of four southern provinces under Pashtun Gul Agha Shirzai, the rival warlord governor of Kandahar, devoted to King Zahir Shah, but highly sectarian. Commands 3,000 to 5,000 troops.
- Area Mazar-i- Sharif under Uzbek Northern Alliance, 5,000 to 8,000 forces of Gen Abdul Rashid Dostum, deputy defence minister, remain strongly independent. Controls five provinces.
- Area Herat. Northern Alliance warlord Ismail Khan controls five western provinces and 5,000 Tajiks opposed to the Uzbeks.
- Area Bamiyan province. Northern Alliance warlord Mohammad Karim Khalili, leader of the Shiite Hazara party coalition. Controls a larger swathe of the Afghan interior and commands as many as 8,000 fighters opposed to both Uzbeks and Tajiks.

Pakistan holds the key to US efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. Pakistani interests lie in its own instinct for survival-based on developing an alternative structure of Pashtun power in Afghanistan without allowing portions of its territory to be sucked in. It has common security concerns and religious, ethnic, and institutional ties with Afghanistan. Broadly, its earlier role in the war on terror was to effectively seal the border in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) with Afghanistan along the Durand Line, control cross-border terrorism and infiltration and protect the soft underbelly of US led NATO operations. Part of the deal was an understanding that the US led NATO troops would not act unilaterally on Pakistani soil and the US would reimburse the cost incurred on Pakistani troops and reschedule its foreign debts, pay for logistical support provided from Karachi port facilities onwards till the forward administrative base in Afghanistan. It was further stipulated by Pakistan that Israel and India would not form part of the forces employed in its war on terror.

US President Obama has made his intentions very clear that, by the middle of 2009, the security fulcrum of the war in the Middle East and South Asia is likely to shift towards Afghanistan. US long-term interests are to prevent Russian and Iranian influence and build up a stable Afghanistan. Obama now clearly intends

to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan, thereby intensifying pressure on the Taliban while opening the door for negotiations with them. Ultimately, this would see the inclusion of the Taliban elements in a coalition government. Gen Petraeus pursued this strategy in Iraq with Sunni insurgents, and it is also likely to be adopted in Afghanistan.

The situation on the Afghan-Pakistan borders has made the American led NATO operations in Afghanistan more difficult. What is disturbing are the uninhibited moves by the Taliban in liberated areas around Peshawar, and the Swat Valley and its support to Al Qaeda. The United States must now seek fresh strategic goals in Afghanistan. The first could be total destruction of the remnants of the Al Qaeda core group, based in Afghanistan. The second could be to use Afghanistan as a base for destroying Al Qaeda, Taliban and other Islamist terror groups such as the banned LeT and its front organisation, Jamaat- ud Dawa in Pakistan.

The US would be quite willing to task Pakistan de novo, in more unambiguous terms, as follows:

- Continue to effectively seal its border areas in Waziristan, FATA and NWFP areas with two divisions.
- Provide intelligence on the Al Qaeda, Taliban and other terror networks and undertake visible operations under NATO command to destroy them.
- End military support for the Taliban and other terror groups while pressuring them to surrender and participate in the nation building process in Afghanistan to refurbish the US image.
- Rein in the activity of pro-Islamic extremists engaged in insurrectionary activities inside and outside Pakistan (principally in Afghanistan and Kashmir) and force recruitment areas for Al Qaeda and Taliban to dry up.
- Assemble an alternative Pashtun leadership from among leaders and groups living in exile and from the Taliban for confining the pan-Pashtun movement to Afghanistan only, preventing the emergence of Pashtun political tendencies that might seek to form a greater "Pashtunistan" (comprising portions of Afghanistan and Pakistan).

These actions do call for a dramatic reorientation of Pakistan's foreign and security policy. Along with internal instability and a weakened external security position, the grave void in leadership after Benazir Bhutto and Musharraf has now been filled by the military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Notwithstanding the nuclear symmetry, the military establishment believes that for keeping the

Kashmir issue from going into cold storage, exercising a high risk option such as suicide bombing of the Indian Embassy and the government's Interior Ministry should serve as a reminder.

Disownership of Islamic terror groups by Pakistan is nothing new. The changed international environment and privatisation scenario has brought in a new form of threat, i.e., by non-state actors. It also gives rise to the speculation that the ISI is controlling these non-state actors, privately owned security agencies comprising ex-Servicemen and mercenaries in the role of terrorists, working identically on the lines of the US-based company Blackwater, in Iraq. Mumbai was one such venture under the aegis of the ISI, executed with finesse.

Roughly three-quarters of US and NATO supplies bound for Afghanistan are delivered at Karachi and moved in trucks to the Afghanistan border; 80 per cent fuel used by NATO forces in Afghanistan is refined in Pakistan and delivered via the same route. There are two crossing points, one near Afghanistan's Kandahar province opposite Chaman, Pakistan, and the other through the Khyber Pass. It is believed that the army launched operations against radical Islamist forces, presumably, the Taliban which had attacked supply depots and convoys, and the route remained closed for several days.

If these two routes through Pakistan from Karachi are closed or even meaningfully degraded, other viable routes would be through Russia via Turkmenistan/ Uzbekistan and via Iran, west of Gwadar port. The US is also holding out this threat to Pakistan for greater accountability in its role in the war on terror in Afghanistan. Going by the recent statements of both leaders on pre-conditions for talks, relations between Tehran and Washington appear to have improved.

The US may also have to give concessions to Russia in return for a declaration that Washington will not press for the expansion of NATO to Georgia or Ukraine, or for the deployment of military forces in non-NATO states on the Russian periphery, specifically, Ukraine and Georgia or guarantees that NATO and the United States will not place any large military formations or build any major military facilities in the former Soviet republics (now NATO member states) of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Another demand the Russians will probably make is that the United States guarantee eventual withdrawal from any bases in Central Asia in return for Russian support for using those bases for the current Afghan campaign. At present, the United States runs air logistics operations out of Manas Air Base

in Kyrgyzstan. Other demands might relate to the proposed US ballistic missile defence installations in the Czech Republic and Poland.

If driven to the wall by the failure of all available options to safeguard its line of communications for the Afghanistan War, the US, as a last resort, may have to look after its own security from Karachi onwards and through the Baluchistan corridor, overriding Pakistan protests.

After Mumbai 26/11, the Americans, despite their preoccupations with the ongoing economic recession, are also quick to realise that Pervez Musharaff had fooled them on his banning of the LeT in 2002. Today, the LeT is a global contender in place of a steadily weakening Al Qaeda and has the motivation to conduct Mumbai type attacks on American soil if the opportunities arise and if the cost-benefit calculus shifts in favour of such assaults. The LeT has fully demonstrated its remarkable ability to forge coalitions with like-minded Islamic extremists across South Asia in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Afghan Taliban / Haqqani network) ; in Central Asia, with both the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and local Islamist rebels in the Caucasus; and in Europe, with the Muslim resistance in Bosnia, while raising funds and building sleeper cells in countries such as Spain and Germany. Closer home in our country, contacts have been established in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The Bush Administration's failure to confront Pakistan about its continued abetting of terrorism against India (and against Afghanistan), despite eight years of significant assistance to Islamabad, only succeeded in fragmenting Pakistan. Pakistan has become a well developed epicentre of global terrorism during the last thirty years as a consequence of American Cold War policies.

India, till recently, a known soft state and strong status quo power, has neither been able to prevent many of the terrorist acts that have confronted it over the years nor is capable of retaliating effectively against either its terrorist adversaries or their state sponsors in Pakistan. The existence of unresolved problems, such as the dispute over J&K, has also provided both Pakistani institutions and their terrorist clients with the excuses and there is no assurance that a satisfactory resolution of the Kashmir problem will conclusively eliminate the threat of terrorism facing India and the West. However, it remains to be seen if Pakistan is able to extract any more concessions in J&K from India, in return for a renewed US pitch for the regional solution to the Afghanistan crises, should any proposal to include India as a working partner be mooted.

Growing disenchantment in the United States with Pakistan's performance in the war on terror and President Obama's determination to correct the imbalance

in the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship offers Washington an opportunity in the new found Indian resolve to combat terrorism with all its might and resources. Unless the US makes Pakistan realise that its war on terror in Afghanistan is very much its own war in India and on Pakistani soil, there is little which can be gained from the continuation of the war on terror.

Some initiatives which the Americans may be forced to take to rejuvenate the flagging war on terror pertain mostly to comprehensive intelligence sharing with India and Pakistan about specific terrorist groups; training of the law enforcement and intelligence communities, particularly in the realms of forensics; improved weapons and tactics; effective intelligence fusion and organisational coordination for joint operations on Indian and Afghanistan soil. For any meaningful bilateral cooperation to take place, the Indian government in power must rise above all petty partisan issues, be prepared to accept the flak from all quarters and execute what serves our national interests best.



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