



CLAWS

In Search of a New Strategy in Afghanistan

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War in Afghanistan has now been correctly redefined as the “AF-PAK war”. Earlier, it was being projected as a Taliban uprising against the Afghan government. In reality, it is a broad, borderless regional conflict with its origin in the Pushtoon belt, two-thirds of which lies in Pakistan. The Taliban, influenced by Al Qaeda and covertly supported by the Pakistan military and intelligence, seek to maintain and expand a hold on both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, they also use these bases to have potshots at the US, Europe and India.

As US President Obama simultaneously crafts a new strategy for the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, there is an increased orchestrated view by a group of critics who say that a “surge” will send the country towards an “unmitigated disaster,” the brunt of which will be borne by the Afghan civil and Pakistani tribal population. There is also a view which argues that trying to eliminate the Taliban and Al Qaeda threat is untenable, but finding a way to live with, contain and deter, the Taliban and their allies is a more achievable aim and better suited to American power. Implied in this assessment is the possibility it offers the US and NATO for an early exit. This, unfortunately, is a dangerous oversimplification. Should the US and NATO withdraw prematurely, it will leave the field open for the Taliban to take over a substantial portion of the country, even Kabul again. The terrorist safe havens, in such an eventuality, are likely to expand not only towards Afghanistan but also into the heartland of Pakistan. Consequently, US prestige, clout and credibility will suffer a serious blow. The situation in Pakistan will get worse and adversely impact the stability of the region.

Fluctuating Goal

Till as late as April 2008, there was a very broad bipartisan support for a “surge” in Afghanistan. Most experts advocated “more soldiers, good governance, better counter-insurgency plan to encompass unity of effort amongst allies, emphasis on coordinated institution building.” The Obama Administration, however, indicated a change in its policy on assuming office. In a testimony to Congress at the end of January 2009, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates said, “Our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorists and extremists to attack the United States and our allies, and whatever else we need to do, flows from that objective.” What he did not say but what was implied was that efforts for methodical nation-building were also to be dumped and the US was preparing to exit sooner than later, irrespective of the consequences to the state of Afghanistan. The US Administration is projecting the nation-building exercise to be an expensive, untenable humanitarian gesture for which the US has no time, energy or use. This is once again an oversimplification and betrays gross ignorance of the tenets of successful conduct of counter-insurgency operations. The support of common Afghans which gets translated into invaluable intelligence, would only be forthcoming as long as the US and its allies have something substantial to offer the Afghans in terms of security, education, employment, improved quality of life and hope for a better/responsive government. If the Americans appear to be abandoning them, not only they would get no or minimal help from the people, which would render them clueless

No. 8, April 2009

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in an alien environment, but also it would result in pushing the unwilling people into the camp of their most determined enemy. This is a recipe for disaster.

The Afghanistan crisis is the outcome of decades of internal conflict, chronic neglect in terms of economic development, law and order machinery, as well as judiciary, lack of essential infrastructure and, above all, absence of security which has allowed the Taliban free access from their bases in Pakistan to large swathes of Afghanistan. No short-term solutions will resolve this crisis overnight. Time and patience are needed to rebuild the nation and stabilise the Afghanistan state as well as root out and neutralise *jehadi* influence. There can be no easy exits from this region.

The Policy of “Return”

With the change of guard in Washington, quite a few ideas are being propagated by different think-tanks. One such idea talks of contracting the deployment of US and NATO troops to the so-called strategic areas (meaning main urban centres) in a short time span, and handing over responsibility of the overall security to the Afghans in a phased manner so as to pave way for the withdrawal of foreign troops. They say that the US can always return to hammer the Taliban again and that would be cheaper in blood and money than trying to build a “rule of law” state where no state ever existed. Such thinking not only betrays ignorance about the history of Afghanistan but also lack of knowledge of the basic rudiments of the conduct of counter-insurgency operations as well as the degree of difficulty in getting political consensus/public support for a given up cause.

Myths about the Taliban

The Taliban are not a standing army but a disparate network of groups that have no significant public support amongst the war-weary Afghan population. A BBC-ABC news poll carried

out on February 20 showed that only 4 percent of the people in Afghanistan desired the Taliban. A vast majority of people in the region remain more fearful of what would happen if the foreign troops were to leave. The US and NATO forces can succeed against their much weaker foe, provided the safe havens and support they receive from Pakistan are curtailed, and the Pakistan military as also its intelligence agencies can be induced to initiate measures to deal with this problem. But with Pakistan embroiled in political turmoil, reeling under the fear of financial collapse, and the rise of radical Islam in the face of half-hearted efforts by its military, US officials say that they have few illusions that they would be solely able to rely on Pakistani forces. There would, therefore, be a likelihood of increase in US covert operations not only in the tribal belt but also the settled areas of Pakistan. However, each strike by predators or special forces reverberates in Pakistan, and President Obama will have to weigh its cost and manage the same.

Talks with Taliban

The idea of talks with the Taliban is gaining ground, but this too has not been thought through. According to some intelligence reports, there could be approximately 15,000 Taliban in Afghanistan, spread over 17 provinces. There exists no consensus on whom to talk to. Pakistan, however, has gone ahead and made a series of deals with people like Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan. In addition, they have also struck deals with the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) which led to the release of their leader Sufi Mohammad. On 16 February 2009, the Government of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) signed a peace deal which allows the TNSM to enforce Sharia Law in Swat Valley in return for an undertaking that they would not attack Pakistan forces. This is a model for other tribal areas as well. Some time back, the Pakistan Army in Bajaur declared a truce that led to another peace deal. Immediately thereafter, groups led by Mesud, Gul Bahadur and Mullah Nazir declared that they were forming a tight alliance in Waziristan to fight the US and NATO forces, but promised to spare the Pakistan military. These deals, thus, are more of appeasement for the self-preservation of the Pakistan Army, and pave the way for the domination of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan rather than to bring peace and stability in the region.

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Whereas the “strategy of dialogue” should be the ultimate aim, it can only be conducted successfully once the insurgents are under intense pressure and have no alternative but to talk or face annihilation. In the current environment, where there is a general perception that the US and NATO forces are under pressure, why should the Taliban or Al Qaeda accept to talk when they can smell victory? An invitation for talks would indicate abject appeasement as well as surrender to the forces which want to drag the region into a medieval and lawless era. Hopefully, President Obama would use patience and wait for a more appropriate juncture for talks with the *jehadis*. This certainly is not the time for such moves. The situation in Afghanistan is far from hopeless. With a slightly greater commitment of resources, and introduction of sensible and verifiably united strategic plan for all the allies, the US can turn the tide against the Taliban.

Tackling Pakistan

Pakistan has now become “the most volatile nuclear state in the world that threatens security everywhere.” Even to the most optimistic, the conditions in this country inspire a doomsday scenario with its spiralling downward movement marked by political assassinations, and import of low-level *jehadi* warfare from the countryside to major cities. The combined assault of Islamic *jihadism*, aided and abetted by the Pakistan military and intelligence agencies, feuding and weak civilian leadership, along with economic bankruptcy, has brought this country to its lowest ebb.

Addressing the political drama in Pakistan – where cooperation on the war in Afghanistan is essential – should be high on Obama’s agenda. Washington’s leverages in the current Zardari–Sharif tussle are limited. As things stand, Sharif appears to be emerging as the leading actor in the Pakistani political games. Should he be propelled to the top of the political hierarchy, Sharif’s well-publicised Islamist ties may not determine his policies but from the US perspective, they are troubling. It must, however, be understood that the Sharif-led government, (should it come about) would have limited options for curtailing the partnership with the US. Sharif’s own survival and that of Pakistan depends on reining in the *jehadis* who are bent on destroying the country. He could perhaps create a political consensus against extremism by using his recently demonstrated public support. As far the Pakistan military is concerned, it fully understands that though it remains the most powerful institution in the country, it will not be acceptable as the ruler for the time being. This lack of commitment and grit in tackling insurgency is not going down well with the people of

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Pakistan who are increasingly getting alarmed by the spread of radical Islam. The Obama Administration also must be wary of not getting carried away by the Pakistan military’s well known ploy and excuse of using the imaginary threat from India as a principal reason for not committing wholeheartedly to counter-insurgency operations. Having milked the US for \$10 billion, it must now be made to take on this threat frontally or expect no more aid from America.

State of Governance

One of the most important characteristics of a functional democracy should be its quest for listening to, and gaining the confidence of, the population at large. The Taliban, despite their unsavoury reputation, are beating the government at this game. Both the Americans and the Karzai government must take the blame for this: the US and its allies for not providing the requisite secure environment; and the Karzai government for not making efforts to reach out to the people even if it is a risky venture. Another problem is that the provincial governors and city mayors are selected rather than elected by the people and, hence, can afford to treat them with contempt and get away with it.

Without a responsive, accountable and transparent government, no counter-insurgency operation can succeed. The highly centralised structure of the government as existing today, has failed to win favour with the people at large. A certain amount of devolution of power to the provinces, after retaining strong checks and balances at the Centre, must be put in place. US and Afghan efforts should be directed at bringing the government to the people and empowering them to elect or reject those who matter the most for their well-being and security.

Development Strategy

According to a rough estimate, the country needs a secure environment and sustained growth for at least 10 years to reduce poverty levels significantly. The growth would have to

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favour the poor by building their productive assets. Much of it is expected to come from non-poppy agriculture that contributes about half of the licit Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and provides employment to two-thirds of the workforce. In 2004, the Afghanistan government estimated that the amount required for minimal investment in rural roads, power and water so as to increase access and provide an impetus to the rural economy for reducing hunger and malnutrition would be \$ 27.5 billion over a period of seven years. The US could play the all important role by contributing a major portion of the funds and induce other donors to follow its lead. This apart, since Afghanistan has long served as a trade and transit bridge amongst three main regions – Central, South and West

Asia – the extension of inter-regional economic ties would revive its historical role and contribute to its security and economic recovery.

Review of Counter-Insurgency Operations Strategy

Conduct of counter-insurgency (CI) operations in Afghanistan appears to be suffering from many infirmities. Assumption of command of CENTCOM by Gen David Petraeus provides an ideal opportunity for putting in place a streamlined and responsive command structure. He is, however, stuck with some NATO contingents lacking the motivation to fight, making a substantial portion of an already insufficient number of troops less effective. Gen Petraeus is also not sure whether the core issue of elimination of “safe havens” in Pakistan would be tackled effectively by the Pakistan military, leaving no option but to increase covert/special operations to deal with this problem.

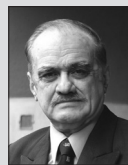
The building up of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to its full potential would in the long run

be the most important prerequisite for conduct of effective CI operations in Afghanistan. Fortunately, the ANA is widely considered a success as a multi-ethnic national institution. It has benefited from having US support, with resources and attention not seen in other areas. Once brought to a level of not less than 200,000, it could gradually replace US and NATO ground troops.

India's Role

India has not wavered in its intentions to assist Afghanistan in its quest for nation-building and is amongst the top aid givers to Afghanistan. Indians are also contributing in a large measure for human resource development in diverse fields to include training manpower from civil servants/diplomats to imparting low level skills as well as giving a large number of scholarships to students for education in India. This would not only continue but is also in the process of being enhanced.

Pakistan has once again commenced its clamour to the US to get India to decrease its level of troop deployment on the Indo-Pak border to allow Pakistan to shift its troops to its western border. This is a lame excuse. India has no aggressive intentions against Pakistan. Let the Indian government call off Pakistan's bluff by offering to decrease the number of troops on the Indo-Pak border on the condition that Pakistan would dismantle the terror infrastructure on its soil and hand over the accused involved in planning and executing the Mumbai carnage. Also, would the US guarantee against Pakistan pulling off another Kargil if we lower our guard?



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Views expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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