

To End Afghan War

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The recent horrifying incident of an Afghan woman being shot to death after she was lashed for alleged crime of adultery should be sufficient lesson to the people who demand NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and endorsing the policy of “reconciliation” and “reintegration” with Taliban who would abide by the conditions set forth in the 20th July Kabul Conference on Afghanistan.

There are moderate Muslims but it is doubtful if there are moderate Taliban with whom the international community would be able to do business with. If the US administration’s objective is to destroy al-Qaeda numbering at most 100, according the CIA Director Leon Panetta, then there is no logic to have more than hundred thousand NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. If the objective is to destroy the “extremists” Taliban then the West has to find out “non-extremist” Taliban like looking for a needle in haystack.



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The Taliban rule, uprooted by President George Bush, demonstrated the real character of the Taliban who prefer a literalistic observation of the scriptures with vicious punishment reserved for the “deviants”. Hamid Karzai’s threat to join the Taliban due to his suspicion of alleged US intervention in the messy Presidential elections (which he won) and his overtures with Haqqani group and other Taliban, perhaps, are due to his belief that the West would eventually leave him in the lurch to face the fate of Soviet puppet Najibullah and that faced by Benito Mussolini,

Yet it does not absolve the US administration of leaving the civilized world at the mercy of the Taliban. The governments have to educate their citizens that there are no “moderates” among the Taliban and the only way to ensure the peoples’ good night sleep is not Neville Chamberlain’s Munich Treaty when on return to London Chamberlain told the British people to go to sleep as peace had been secured while Hitler told Ribbentrop to shred the document.

The horrific story referred to earlier about stoning to death of a couple who had eloped to marry is reminiscent of the bloody Taliban rule before they were sent packing by President George Bush after the events of 9/11. The barbaric stoning incident reflects the resurgence of Taliban influence in the areas they had lost influence. Besides the participation by family members in stoning to death has the worrisome aspect of popular support for such “crimes”. Less than a week earlier the national Ulema Council brought together 350 religious scholars who called for more punishment under sharia law indicating stoning, amputations, and lashing. The Ulema Council criticized the Afghan government for not following “Islamic laws” that they thought would hinder reconciliation.

There is debate, however, about the legality of the stoning incident. According to some the State is the proper authority to dispense Islamic justice and the court’s decisions are to be implemented by Presidential decree. Afghan Constitution recognizes the sharia to be the law of the State. The question being asked whether the Sharia laws and the ones insisted upon by the Ulema Council have the same interpretation. Afghanistan is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights conventions. It is, therefore, of great importance that both interpretations should coincide along with Afghanistan’s obligations under international law. But if Afghanistan is again going to be ruled by the Taliban the West would find it difficult to leave Afghanistan alone with a band of people convinced of the superiority of Islam practiced in the 6th century over the post-modern world.

The Americans must be made to understand that Vietnam War waged during the Cold War to prevent the domino effect in South East Asia did not directly affect their security. In Henry Kissinger’s words Vietnam was a limited war “which a sector of US population wanted to lose the war in order to purify America’s soul. To a lesser extent that was also the case with Iraq”. Afghanistan, Kissinger believes to be a new experience. “You can’t fight a war for an exit strategy”.

During the cold war period democratic Europe was “safe” due to balance of terror between the two super powers. But this war

though being fought in far away and in an inaccessible land that the Americans rarely heard of before 9/11 has direct bearing on national security. Side by side the Islamic world by words and deeds has to stand by the West to make it abundantly clear that great majority of Muslims abhor the Taliban terrorism and war currently being fought to the finish is not war on Islam.

The West at the same time must demonstrate that the Muslim Diaspora now negotiating a perilous journey to retain their second class citizenship is no less patriotic than the natives. This gesture also has to embrace all Muslim countries who need to graduate from poverty to prosperity because as President Obama told the West Point audience in May this year "Extremists want a war between America and Islam, but Muslims are part of our national life including those who serve in the United States Army".

Despite Presidential assurance to the Muslims prejudices die hard. Former House of Representative Speaker Newt Gingrich's strong opposition to Obama's support to build a mosque near ground zero in New York as "deliberately insulting" and depicting Cordoba Initiative to build a bridge between Islam and the West as triumphalist force trying to build a monument of Muslim victory near the site of the twin towers is indicative of the big divide caused by al-Qaeda and a testimony to civilizational conflict. According to author William Dalrymple (The Muslims in the Middle-The New York Times) the extremists in the West "show a dangerously inadequate understanding of the many divisions, complexities, and nuances within the Islamic world a failure that hugely hampers the Western efforts to fight violent Islamic extremism and to reconcile Americans with the peaceful adherents of the world's second largest religion". William Dalrymple laments that had Bush administration been more understanding of the irreconcilable differences between the Salafist jihadist of al-Qaeda variety and the secular Baathists of Saddam Hussein's Iraq the US would not have blundered into the Iraq imbroglio and nation building efforts in the Muslim world.

Decades back as a young Harvard University faculty Henry Kissinger in his book Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy advocated limited war featuring conventional war with a tactical nuclear exchange of one or two. But then President Dwight Eisenhower rejected the option because he feared that the Soviet Union if pushed to a corner would not confine itself to a limited war but would turn it into a thermonuclear holocaust. But Kissinger insists that deterrence to be taken seriously the party to be deterred has to be convinced that deterrence would be taken to its ultimate limit.

The Taliban understands the language of force. They must not be allowed to believe that time is on their side and they can play games with the international community feigning "acts of negotiations" and bide time for the US forces to leave Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, a country according to WikiLeaks, that has been playing a double game of betrayal with the US by assisting the Taliban the NATO forces were fighting.

If the US can continue to have bases in South Korea, Japan and Germany fifty years after the Second World and the Korean Wars then why the US should be reluctant to have bases in Afghanistan to ensure that the Taliban would confine their activities within the Afghan and possibly part of Pakistan territory and would not export terrorism across the border to India and to the West? The problem will be Pakistan. Since US base personnel have to be regularly supplied with arms and rations the only accessible route will be through Pakistan's badlands susceptible to armed interruptions and Pakistan using anti-Indian Taliban for insurgency inside India.

In the words of South Asian expert Bruce Riedel: "Pakistan almost uniquely is both a major victim of terrorism and a major sponsor of terrorism. It has been the scene of horrific acts of terrorist violence, including the murder of Benazir Bhutto, and it has been one of the most prolific state sponsors of terror aimed at advancing its national security interests. Over the course of the past three decades, Pakistan's army has built a complex network of relationships with numerous jihadist terror groups, including the Taliban, and with terrorists like Osama bin Laden. Fear of India is the driving force behind the army's pursuit of these relationships.

For the next American president, there is no issue or country more critical to get right, which means developing a policy that will move Pakistan away from being a hothouse of terror. Engaging Kashmir should be part of that new approach". New York Times (Secret assault on terrorism) in one of its recent issues wrote about stealth war, begun by George Bush but expanded by Barak Obama, fighting al-Qaeda in roughly in a dozen countries "from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet Republics crippled by ethnic and religious strife". President Obama's counter terrorism chief John Brennan terms the operations as using the scalpel instead of the hammer. For example, the quiet war being fought in Yemen has escaped US public attention that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have not. Yet skeptics like Harvard Professor Micah Zenko examining the "discreet military operations" since 1991 found these operations achieving neither military nor political objectives.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Empire NATO is in search of a rationale for its existence in Europe. Its expansion towards the former countries of East Europe and Central Asian countries, in the face of Russian resistance, is not in consonance with John Foster Dulles' theory of forming NATO to safeguard the Western way of life. But the "out of the area" Afghan war and possible establishment of US base there would not only check al-Qaeda/Taliban export of terrorism abroad but would also contribute to the badly needed stability of Pakistan.

There are compulsive reasons for the US to have bases in Afghanistan. Firstly, it is generally recognized that due to Indo-Pak tension with both countries possessing nuclear weapons South Asia is the most dangerous part of the world. Since even a cold war warrior like Ronald Reagan said that a nuclear war can never be won and therefore should never be fought, it is incumbent upon the US as the pre eminent power in the world, and perhaps as the global hegemon, to create conditions so that nuclear conflagration does not enter the imagination of the people wielding power in India and Pakistan.

It is said that democracies do not generally go to war because declaration of war has to be processed through many stages. According to this maxim the possibility of India going to war with looming nuclear exchange is remote. But can one be certain about Pakistan? The country has been ruled by military dictators for most part since the partition of India in 1947 who fought and lost three wars with India and had almost come to blows though a misadventure in Kargil. The point to be noted is that Pakistan is not fettered like India in declaring a war more so as generations have been taught to regard India as the number one enemy.

Pakistan also has the psychological disadvantage to consider itself as the place of last resort for the "persecuted Muslims" of the world. Already saddled with 170 million people with high birth rate and pervasive poverty Pakistan is considered by many as a failing state. Frequently assaulted by Islamist terrorists, fuelled by sectarian violence, weak infrastructure discouraging foreign investment essential for industrialization and employment to reduce dependence on agriculture as an important component of Gross National Product the dream of wearing the mantle of leader of the Muslim world as the only possessor of nuclear weapons should be shed once and for all.

Pakistan's newly found position as a country of strategic importance is due to al-Qaeda terrorism, suspected by many that the core is still living in the Pak-Afghan hills, and suspicion by some among her allies that Pakistan is playing both ends of the West-Al Qaeda war game as revealed by WikiLeaks, Hillary Clinton's latest visit to Pakistan promising billions of dollars of assistance could be seen as the helplessness of the US that she cannot but fight the war against the Islamic extremists without Pakistan's help. Indeed US leaders on several occasions have publicly declared the acute need for Pakistan's participation in the war against Muslim zealots. Robert Kaplan (Lawless Frontier-Sept 2000-The Atlantic) writes that the communist ideology brought by the Soviets to Afghanistan during the occupation period had to be fought by an equally harsh response, one akin to Deobandism line of thinking of Maulana Maududi who propagated a form of Islam with striking resemblance with totalitarianism. Maududi believed that the Holy Quran had to be accepted in full and any deviation influenced by Western "moral corruption" had to be abandoned. Islamic laws, he asserted, should override all other laws of the state.

On Taliban Kaplan writes they "embody a lethal combination: a primitive tribal creed, a fierce religious ideology, and the sheer incompetence, naiveté and cruelty that are begot by isolation from the outside world". Pakistan's reliability as a partner in the US war against terrorism had been a question mark for many years. Leon Hadder(Pakistan in America's war against terrorism-strategic ally or unreliable client-May 2002-Cato Institute) had opined that then President Pervez Musharraf's positive response to then US Deputy Secretary of State's warning that "either you are with or against us" in the War on Terror signified a tactical and not a structural transformation in Pakistan's policy. Leon Hadder had then advised "Washington (to) view Pakistan with dictatorship, failed economy, and insecure nuclear arsenal as a reluctant supporter of the US goals at best and as a potential long term problem at worst". Hadder likened Musharraf's policy as those temporary ceasefire signed by the Muslims with non-believers in the early stages of Islamic history.

Bruce Riedel writes: While in Kabul Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters that "somebody in this Pakistani government does know where Usama bin Laden is hiding" within Pakistan. It is an extraordinary statement, one that the Secretary has made before, and it illustrates dramatically the difficulty America has in working with Pakistan..... According to leaked information James Headley reportedly told his Indian interrogators that Pakistani intelligence paid for the boat that took the ten terrorists from Karachi to Indian waters and that Pakistani naval frogmen had provided intensive commando training for them. The sole survivor of the terror team who has been convicted of murder in India apparently has also told Indian investigators about the naval training. India's Home Secretary G.K. Pillali said that the Headley revelations show that Pakistani intelligence was "literally controlling and coordinating the attack from the beginning to end."(Lashkar-e-Toiba, al Qaeda and

Pakistan-Saban center of Middle East Policy-July 2010).

Yet a ray of hope can be seen in the eternal narrative of dysfunctional relationship in South Asia. A report by The Wall Street Journal (16-8-10) states that Pakistan's main spy agency ISI for the first time since 1947 considers homegrown terrorists more of a threat than India. Professor Bruce Hoffman (Georgetown University) considers the shift in threat perception as "earth shattering" with possible change in troop deployment from Indo-Pak border to Pak-Afghan border. India, wary of decades long trans-border terrorism, is cautious of the report and would like to see how it is implemented on the ground. But since the devil is in the details the tension may not be reduced if Pakistan distinguishes between "good Taliban" i.e. those who fight the Indians in Kashmir and "bad Taliban" who fight the Pakistanis. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is reported to have killed 7000 civilians since 2003. The difficulty in implementing ISI threat perception would be decades long in the anti-Indian sentiment embedded in the people and propagated by the politicians. A recent poll conducted by the Pew Center found 53% of Pakistanis feel India is the greatest threat versus 23% for Taliban and only 3% for al-Qaeda.

Albeit Pakistan has marched a long way from Musharraf's dictatorship to the present democratic set up. But it remains questionable whether Pakistan now itself a victim of terrorism by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan can remain a functioning member of the international community while at the same time being Talibanized. While unrest in Balochistan and anarchy in NWFP are understandable the incursion of Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Punjab is worrying. In the richest and most populous of the provinces in Pakistan bomb blasts in Lahore, particularly near the tomb of Sufi saint Data Ganj Baksh, and in other cities are bound to have long term effects on sectarian conflict in the country. But the Americans have to convince the Pakistanis that Taliban terrorism and not Indian "threat" is the main problem if the West is to eliminate the al-Qaeda and contain the Taliban.

This article is premised on the assumption that the Taliban will stay on in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. To contain its spread to the region, Central Asian Republics and hurt Western interests, the US tax payers have to take on a burden of maintaining one or more US bases in Afghanistan for decades, if necessary.

It is only the US that can take up this responsibility and none other can. Hamid Karzai or those following him in Kabul's seat of power are illusions and not reality.

SAAG

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