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Afghanistan Under Siege

Mahendra Ved*

*[*Mahendra Ved is a Senior Journalist and author of 'Afghan Buzkashi: Great Game and Gamesmen'.]*

As per a report from Washington dated January 3, 2008, CIA is facing a probe allegedly destroying tapes showing harsh methods used to interrogate two al-Qaeda suspects in early 2002 at its special prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Tapes, produced in 2002, and destroyed in 2005, are symbolic of the extreme measures used, but with little headway in information that would lead to the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden and Taliban chief Mollah Mohammed Omar – who are still at large.

Ironically, it is their tapes that are in circulation, sending cold shivers across the world and compelling security strategists and analysts alike to change their assessments. Whether or not the US admits it, the Bush Administration, now entering its last leg of the second term, is suffering from Afghan fatigue, even as its plans in Iraq go awry and its confrontation with Iran over the latter's nuclear programme remains a crisis that it can neither end, nor take it further.

The US and its Western allies of the NATO are stuck in Afghanistan, engaged in defending the regime of President Hamid Karzai – and themselves. Willy-nilly, they have got into the task of nation-building, but find the momentum lost by the need to hold on to their gains – political, economic and military, while the Taliban have shown a resurgence in 2007, as never before since being ousted from Kabul in 2001.

A Herculean task

The US/NATO prepared for the "Spring Offensive" in Afghanistan hoping to contain the Taliban resurgence. But now into the winter of 2007-2008, it is obvious that the Taliban have eluded a confrontation, choosing to fight on their own terms. The Taliban have continued to make gains in terms of territory and political support in vast areas of Afghanistan, winning some, losing some, as part of their rural guerilla tactics, in which they are adept, using to the maximum their advantage of being on their own terrain.

As German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has put in a globally circulated article, "things aren't going well in Afghanistan." Sometime at the turn of 2001/2002, the Bush administration concluded that the stabilisation and reconstruction of Afghanistan was no longer its top priority and decided to bet instead on military-led regime change in Iraq. "Afghanistan can thus rightly be seen as the first victim of the administration's misguided strategy," Fischer has lamented.

But, as he himself puts it, the Bush administration is not the sole culprit for the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. It was Nato's job to ensure the country's stability and security, and thus Nato's weak general secretary and the European allies, especially Germany and France, share the responsibility for the worsening situation.

Yet, despite all the difficulties, the situation in Afghanistan, unlike that in Iraq, is not hopeless. There was a good reason for going to war in Afghanistan in the first place, because the attacks of Sept 11, 2001, originated there. Once undertaken, the West's intervention ended an almost uninterrupted civil war, and is viewed with approval by a majority of the population. Unlike in Iraq, the intervention did not fundamentally rupture the inner structure of the Afghan state or threaten its cohesion. But the fact is that Afghanistan did not have much of these left after a quarter century of conflict.

If the West pursued realistic aims, and did so with perseverance, its main goal — a stable central government that can drive back the Taliban, hold the country together and, with the help of the international community, ensure the country's development — is achievable.

Fischer has listed four preconditions of the West's success:

- Establishment of Afghan security forces strong enough to drive back the Taliban, limit drug cultivation, and create domestic stability;
- Willingness on the part of Nato to remain militarily engaged without any national reservations, with Germany and France giving up the conditions of their involvement;
- A significant increase in development aid, especially for the so far neglected southern part of the country;
- Renewal of the regional consensus reached in Bonn in 2001, under which the reconstruction of the Afghan state was to be supported by all the parties concerned.

But these preconditions have not been met as the process set in motion by the Bonn Conference of December 2001 enters seventh, uneasy, year. This is because the major Bonn participants have not genuinely put their heads together and stayed above their own, often conflicting, national interests. And this has happened even as many of those who have participated in the military campaign in Afghanistan as part of the NATO have been fatigued and frightened by losses in terms of men and material on the deceptive Afghan terrain. For many of them, the Afghan campaign has become a drag, difficult to convince their parliamentary and public opinions at home.

It is also significant that except Bush, whose term will end in a year's time, most of the original players in Bonn are out of office, even allowing for the changes inherent in any democratic set up. Britain's Tony Blair, for instance, who supported every move of Bush in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, is out of the office.

The dilemma of the West

However, while the leaderships have changed, the individual interests and predilections of the European players have not. For instance, the British interest and initiative in Afghanistan has waxed and waned. Through 2006, parliamentarians and media voiced their utter disappointment at the country's presence in Afghanistan. But the year 2007 appears to have marked a resurgence in the British perceptions and assessment of their role. This is indicated in the reported statement of its ambassador in Kabul Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles: "We are here to stay for a generation."

The British Ambassador to Afghanistan sums up the way much of the West looks at its commitment in Afghanistan that, despite wavering and lack of cohesion, remains strong. Sir Sherard, going by his CV, is a perceptive man who knows the region well. He arrived as Ambassador to Afghanistan on May 15, 2007. Most recently, Sir Sherard served as British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2007. Before that he spent 20 months as British Ambassador to Israel — the first Arabic-speaker to have been appointed there — and nearly two and a half years as Principal Private Secretary to the then British Foreign Secretary, the late Robin Cook. As part of his preparations for his posting to Kabul, Sherard has been studying Pashto.

His observation on Afghanistan is a far cry from the British withdrawal from Basra, Iraq, as also from Canada and some others whose presence in Afghanistan as part of the NATO/ISAF forces has been significant.

The US Congress in December 2007 passed the 31 billion dollars in funding for Afghanistan. The package is known as the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008.

The funding of the effort in Afghanistan also indicates the US's anxiety to continue with the operations that many of its lawmakers now admit, were distracted by the operations in Iraq.

To quote Fischer again: "While the war in Iraq has been based on wishful thinking, the war in Afghanistan was necessary and unavoidable. It would be political folly if, because of a lack of commitment and political foresight, the West were to squander its successes in Afghanistan. Europe would have to pay an unacceptably high price, and Nato's future would likely be jeopardised."

The war in Afghanistan was never just an Afghan civil war; rather, for decades the country has been a stage of regional conflicts and hegemonic struggles. So, while the rebirth of the Taliban is in part due to the neglected reconstruction of the Pashto southern and eastern part of the country, it also has external causes.

Pakistan's Role

Most notable cause is that for more than two years now, Pakistan has been moving away from “the Bonn consensus”, betting on the rebirth of the Taliban and giving it massive support. It has continued on this path even as Bush never tired of patting the now-retired General Pervez Musharraf, who retains Pakistan’s presidentship as a civilian, as “a valiant fighter” in the global war against terrorism.

Pakistan’s actions are explained mainly by its strategic readjustment in light of US weakness in Iraq and the region as a whole, and by the post-Taliban consolidation of relationships between India and Afghanistan. Very obviously, Pakistan views the Karzai government in Kabul as unfriendly to Islamabad and a threat to its interests.

Indeed, without Taliban sanctuaries on the Pakistani side of the Afghan border, and without Pakistani financial backing and that of the Pakistani intelligence service ISI, the rebirth of the Taliban’s armed insurgency against the central Afghan government would have been impossible. But, by aiding the Taliban, Pakistan is playing with fire, because there is now also Pakistani Taliban who poses a threat to Pakistan. Musharraf’s Pakistan got away with it because the US policy towards Islamabad has been dangerously short sighted. It is reminiscent of the mistakes the US made in Iran prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Nevertheless, howsoever flawed, the US at least has a Pakistan policy, which is more than can be said about Nato and Europe. In fact, it is all but incomprehensible that while the future of Nato is being decided in the Hindu Kush mountains, Pakistan, the key to the success of the mission in Afghanistan, is not given any role in Nato’s plans.

This has not been possible, not because of any oversight or any exclusive, whites-only approach of the West. The Pakistani actions have been consistently guided by its own national interests. It has promoted the Taliban, while capturing and handing over a few whenever the US/NATO pressures increased. This is classic hunting with the hound and running with the hare.

Benazir Factor

Any hope of a change in Pakistan’s policy/role on Afghanistan and the NATO role therein has been dashed by the sudden exit of Benazir Bhutto. This statement must carry an inevitable rider. One would have to go by her postures and utterances in the prolonged run-up to the Pakistani elections, when she was wooed by the US and virtually dovetailed into an alliance with Musharraf.

But any analyst would have to keep in mind her role in the mid-1990s when during her brief premiership, she had midwived the Taliban movement. She had subsequently explained it as something that began as a modest measure guided by Pakistan’s quest for access to Central Asian oil and gas, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline being high on the agenda.

Significantly and tragically, Karzai was the last foreign dignitary Benazir met hours before she was assassinated in Rawalpindi on December 27. Much hope had been laid in store because of her postures much of 2007. It is now only of academic interest how far if at all Benazir would have altered the Pakistani approach to Afghanistan and thence, to the global war on terror, had she survived and become the Prime Minister of a government sworn in by, and surviving at the mercy of, none else but Musharraf.

But a window of hope had briefly opened when Karzai and Bhutto met. Karzai's chief spokesman Hodayun Hamidzada told AFP news agency after the assassination that Bhutto had understood the difficulties neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan faced amid a wave of unrest in both countries, including a spike in suicide attacks. "She said if she was re-elected she would work closely with the international community and the government of Afghanistan to address their common threats of terrorism and extremism," Hamidzada said.

Like many others across the world, Kabul had high hopes from Bhutto giving voice to the moderate Muslim opinion in Pakistan, whereas Karzai's relations with Musharraf were testy – full of bonhomie, bluff and bluster that both understood well. Seen as one of the very few alternatives in Pakistan, Benazir was committed to fighting extremists and to controlling the fundamentalist religious schools that spawn militants. She also wanted to raise awareness of the consequences of extremism – perhaps the very reason why she was assassinated. This was despite the fact that the Taliban were nurtured and took up arms in chaotic southern Afghanistan and swept to power with funding and support from Pakistan's military during Bhutto's second term as premier, between 1993 and 1996.

Author Steve Coll has recorded in his book on Afghanistan, "Ghost Wars," that Bhutto had admitted in a 2002 interview to supporting the movement, which Pakistan initially used to protect a trade route. "I became slowly, slowly sucked into it," Bhutto is quoted as saying. "It started out with a little fuel, then it became machinery."

The support grew and Pakistan went on to become one of only three countries that supported the Islamic regime as it gave sanctuary to al-Qaeda. So much so, serving and retired Pakistani military personnel fought alongside the Taliban as mercenaries and the ISI lent the key support to the Taliban's logistics and communications.

The surreptitious airlift from Konduz that the US facilitated to allow a face-saving to Musharraf was meant to pick up these key Pakistani personnel whose capture would have given a major propaganda handle to Kabul. Besides the Konduz that took care of scores, hundreds of fighters, Taliban, Pakistanis and mercenaries of various nationalities managed to escape to Pakistan's mountainous terrain. Top Taliban and even al-Qaeda leaders could not have survived the US-led assault on a landlocked nation but for the Pakistani help.

The situation has not changed seven years after this. The AFP quoted Afghan analyst Waheed Mujda as saying that Bhutto's death could trigger more unrest in Pakistan. "Obviously, Pakistan would try to shift the violence from their country to Afghanistan."

Pakistan Fights Its Own Tribesmen

In the summer of 2007, the Musharraf regime concluded a deal with the pro-Taliban Pushtun tribals in the areas bordering Afghanistan that stipulated that Pakistan Army posts and personnel would be withdrawn and that the local tribals should ask their 'guests' to "live peacefully" and not carry out operations into Afghanistan. A day after this deal was signed in September, Musharraf went to Kabul and tried to sell the deal to Karzai. His proposal was that Afghanistan reach a similar deal with tribals on its side and eventually, Pushtuns on both sides of the border could meet in a Grand Jirga to sort out the cross-border issues.

Karzai did not buy the idea and conveyed this to the US. The Bush Administration, that had earlier lent tacit approval to Musharraf's plans later revised its assessment and pushed Musharraf to curb the Pakistani tribals' support to the Taliban.

The situation turned explosive in the tribal areas, never really administered since the British era, when the Pakistan Army moved in. Refuting the charge that he was not "doing enough" to rein in the tribals, Musharraf told the Western media in the third quarter of 2007 that over 600 of his army personnel had died in the operations against the tribals. The number has reportedly gone up to 1000, causing desertions among the Pushtun and tribal soldiers of the army who resent fighting their own brethren.

By the end of 2007, Pakistan Army was deeply involved in operations all along the Pushtun belt. There were regular skirmishes leading to casualties on both sides. The Swat district, previously a popular tourist destination, has become a battlefield since late October when Musharraf sent government troops to rein in heavily armed followers of a radical Islamic cleric named Fazlullah.

Fazlullah incited an armed campaign to enforce Taliban-style Islamic law in the valley, taking over numerous villages and even some towns Pakistan Army officials claim to have killed more than 300 militants and cleared most of the area, but attacks on security forces continue, including numerous suicide bombings.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a newly formed umbrella organization comprising several groups of pro-Taliban fighters in Pakistan's tribal areas. It is headed by Baitullah Mehsud, a militant commander whose men were believed to have carried out attacks on Pakistani forces as well as cross-border raids against NATO-led international forces in Afghanistan.

Suicide-bombers

The warfare in the tribal areas has given to a hitherto unknown phenomenon of suicide terrorism. Through the second half of 2007, there were suicide attacks in Pakistani cities, including Islamabad and the national capital's international airport. These were stepped up in the wake of military operations in Islamabad's Lal Masjid carried during June 1-13.

According to analyst B. Raman, the number of acts of suicide terrorism in Afghanistan increased from 17 in 2005 to 123 in 2006 and touched 140 by the end-2007. During the same period, the number of acts of suicide terrorism in Pakistan increased from two in 2005 to six in 2006 and has already touched 50 till now this year. The dramatic increase in suicide terrorism was a sequel to the Pakistan Army's commando action in Islamabad's Lal Masjid from July 10 to 13, 2007.

There has been an average of four acts of suicide terrorism per month in Pakistani territory as against 12 per month in Afghan territory. According to Afghan authorities, the majority of the acts of suicide terrorism in Afghanistan was co-ordinated from Pakistani territory. The suicide terrorists were recruited and trained in Pakistani territory. The tribal belt of Pakistan has thus become a major recruiting, motivating and training ground for suicide terrorists meant for operations in both countries.

Since December 14, 2007 alone, there have been three acts of suicide terrorism in Pakistani territory. In the latest of these incidents, which took place on December 17, 2007, nine members of a soccer team of the Pakistan Army were killed in the garrison town of Kohat in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

The Afghan link

The dramatic increase in suicide terrorism in this region has been accompanied by a decrease in the number of conventional-style attacks mounted by the Neo Taliban against Afghan and NATO forces and in the number of cross-border infiltrations from Pakistan into Afghanistan by conventional fighting groups as distinguished from individual suicide terrorists.

A dispatch of the Associated Press datelined December 17, 2007, from Bagram in Afghanistan quoted Brig.Gen.Joseph Votel of the US Army as saying that attacks along the Afghan-Pakistan border dropped more than 40 percent since July, 2007. He attributed this decrease to the onset of winter, the rise in terrorist attacks in Pakistan and an increase in communication and coordination among NATO, Afghan and Pakistani forces.

This decrease has been noticed since the killing of Mullah Dadullah, the Neo Taliban Commander, by the US forces in Afghan territory in May 2007.

The suicide terrorists on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have shown a capability for operating autonomously even in the absence of an iconic leader to motivate and guide them. But, the Neo Taliban's conventional fighting forces have not shown a similar capability. The killing of their commanders has an impact on their fighting prowess. While the killing of Dadullah has not had any impact on the wave of suicide terrorism, it has definitely affected the morale of the conventional fighting forces. Mansoor Dadullah, his successor, has not yet been able to build a similar image of himself among the conventional fighters.

The suicide bomber attacks in Pakistan prompted the US into putting together its two-pronged strategy to contain the mounting military and psychological successes of the al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The US is concerned over the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan and the setbacks its army has suffered in countering the successes of the jihadi groups. "The bottom line is there's no question that we Americans have a stake in Pakistan," US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte said shortly after President Pervez Musharraf imposed an emergency on Nov 3.

Consequently it is allocating around \$ 350 million over the next five years to augment the 85,000-strong paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) by raising at least eight additional battalions or around 8,000 personnel and upgrading its overall insurgency fighting skills through enhanced training, superior firepower and greater mobility. This phase of creating a specialised anti-insurgency force has already been operationalised with around \$52 million allocated last year and \$92 million more in 2007 to the FC stationed in the restive North West Frontier Province and Balochistan.

Conclusion

The moot point, however, is whether Pakistan would still deliver on the tribals' front and allow things to settle down in Afghanistan, enough to facilitate the much-awaited process of national reconstruction. Pakistan's track record so far says otherwise. The *New York Times* reported on December 24, 2007 that much of the \$ five billion that the Bush Administration spent in Pakistan since 2001 to bolster Islamabad's anti-terrorism efforts have got funneled into buying arms to confront, not the al-Qaeda, Taliban or the tribals, but India.

Given these facts, and ground reality, both Afghanistan and Pakistan are bound to remain on the boil for a long time to come. The US too, irrespective of whoever succeeds Bush by end-2008, would not be able to move away from its commitment to and stake in Afghanistan.