

Af-Pak: Playing the fundamentalists' game

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The Af-Pak summit in Washington and a mounting crisis

Handshakes, smiling photographs and brave, encouraging words were the order of the day on May 6 at what was billed as a trilateral summit organised in Washington by President Barack Obama with the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari. Having announced a new Afghanistan strategy calling for a doubling of US troops in the country, the Obama administration nevertheless insisted that the leaders of the two mutually suspicious nations appear together for the summit. In the minds of US policymakers, Pakistan has assumed increasing importance as a key factor in crafting a workable strategy for Afghanistan while commanding attention as a crisis in its own right. Accordingly, NATO governments have established sections to deal jointly with the two countries, which, following the US lead, they have dubbed "Af-Pak".

Unfortunately, these initially upbeat diplomatic events transpired against a keening chorus of grim news from the region. The Pakistani army was pummelling the districts of Buner and Dir in the region southeast of Swat, where a two-month old deal with the Taliban to end the fighting was disintegrating. A Pakistani offensive against an estimated 4-5,000 militants in the Swat Valley had already displaced some 200,000 people by May 10, and according to the UN, some 300,000 were in the process of fleeing "in extremely perilous circumstances". The refugees this month may eventually double the ranks of the half a million or so displaced over the past two years due to fighting in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). As the conflict escalates, it threatens to provoke one of the world's largest and most serious displacement crises.

At the same time, in western Farah province in Afghanistan, US air strikes pounded three villages into rubble, killing and wounding a hundred and forty civilians, the majority of them children. According to local accounts, it was a case again of US and Afghan National Army (ANA) ground forces calling in air support while battling insurgents who had moved into an area near villages. Over a two-hour period bombs struck mud-brick houses in the villages of Gerani, Gangabad and Koujaha, and killed civilians who had taken refuge from the fighting; others were killed and wounded attempting to flee. The deaths last week surpassed the terrible toll of last August, when US air strikes in Azizabad, south of Herat, resulted in over 90 civilian

deaths, including an estimated 60 children, and the May 2009 air strike. They will assuredly magnify the difficulties of achieving the central aim of winning over an Afghan population either sympathetic to, or tolerant of, anti-government insurgents.

The momentary confluence of these “fresh” diplomatic approaches between and among the three countries, the inherent contradictions of current US policy, and the unyielding facts on the ground provided a disturbing snapshot of the depth and complexity of the crisis in South Asia, and the extraordinary dilemma facing Western interests in the region.

The complicated latticework of local ethnic and tribal relations in Afghanistan is matched by a matrix of conflicting regional interests - from East Asia to the Middle East - and catalysed to one degree or other by the intervention of 26 NATO countries and 15 others. The multi-layered, local/tribal, national, regional and international chess game in Afghanistan has now expanded two-fold to join a multi-tiered chess game in Pakistan. As in Afghanistan, the first challenge in any Pakistan strategy is the need for a more successful approach than that which the US has implemented since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Inattention, a personalist faith in a single leader, lack of accountability, and a wilful refusal to understand and incorporate the concerns of complex political and institutional structures can no longer characterise US-Pakistan policy. Yet, any strategy relying heavily, as the new Obama plan does, on a greater foreign military presence risks alienating the very people that Kabul, Islamabad and the West must capture to win the battle for civilian hearts and minds at the centre of any guerrilla war.

Moreover, a number of structural paradoxes impede an easy solution to the violence and instability in the two countries. The Af-Pak nexus constitutes one of the most complex international emergencies in the history of modern conflict. Teasing out the intersecting structural and circumstantial dynamics, and providing a useful perspective on the prospects for a resolution of the crisis, remain daunting tasks.

Paradox 1: The pitfalls of the surge in Afghanistan

Against increasingly gloomy reports of the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, President Obama has prioritised the war there over that in Iraq for the first time in eight years. His tri-partite plan for Afghanistan includes: a military surge of 17,000 US combat troops and 4,000 trainers, complemented by 5,000 more NATO troops; increased resources for governance, economic and social development for both Afghanistan and Pakistan; an acceptance of negotiations with moderate Taliban leaders; and a call for regional diplomacy among Afghanistan’s neighbours - especially the West’s ambivalent ally, Pakistan.

The cornerstone of the Obama plan, however, is the military surge which aims to double US forces, currently at 32,000, by the year’s end. The argument is that inflicting military damage on the Taliban will make them more receptive to negotiations, which in turn will pave the way for an exit strategy. But if the recent past is prologue to what comes next in Afghanistan, this proposition appears to be founded on shaky grounds and wishful thinking. The doubling of troops from 2005-2008 was accompanied by an exponential increase in violence and civilian casualties and the multiplication and geographical expansion of the Taliban. How this year’s troop increase will produce a different result is not clear.

The latest tragic loss of innocent lives in Afghanistan further undermines the argument that a surge of troops will have the side benefit of helping to reduce such casualties. More boots on the ground, it is argued, would allow Western forces to rely less on air power, with its high risk of “collateral damage”. Of the more than 950 civilian deaths attributable last year to the Afghanistan army and its Western allies, over two-third of the casualties were caused by (mainly US) air strikes. In fact, however, over 350 civilians deaths last year were caused by NATO-ANA ground operations. Indeed, a significant percentage of civilian deaths and casualties result from

employing excessive, imprecise force. Karzai declared in Washington that ground operations often assault the Afghan populace in multiple ways: “We have.....complained bitterly about civilian casualties, about the ways these operations are conducted — air raids, home searches, suddenly bursting into people’s homes and blowing up their doors and all of that.” Moreover, the habit of quickly calling in air support when ground forces encounter hostilities is now ingrained in the conflict. Because of wavering public support at home ¹, there is a pre-eminent desire to keep NATO casualties to a minimum. More troops, inevitably, mean more, not fewer, unwanted casualties.

Thus, the first paradox of the Af-Pak dilemma: that more military force will likely produce fewer benefits for NATO, converting even more of the population into enemy combatants or sympathisers, and leading ultimately to a credibility-shattering withdrawal from the area. The appalling loss of civilian life due to US air strikes is an important factor (along with lack of local security and corruption) undermining the legitimacy of the central government, as well as diminishing support for Western military missions in Afghanistan. Civilian deaths attributed to NATO/ANA military operations hand the Taliban one of its most effective propaganda themes and rally support to its oft-stated precondition for any negotiations: that all foreign forces leave Afghanistan. Yet, like his Pakistani counterpart, Karzai is trapped between needing the US to sustain his government and suffering the consequences of its blunders. Unsurprisingly, he hedged his criticism of the allies’ role in the disaster, stopping short of asking that U.S. air strikes be suspended or reduced in intensity.

Paradox 2: The pitfalls of US military strategy in Pakistan

Likewise, the dilemma in Pakistan lies in US cross-border attacks carried out by pilotless “Predator” drones against suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda militants in the country’s untamed borderlands.

The US is emphatic about the need to resolve the border infiltration of jihadists into Afghanistan from Pakistan. According to former ISAF Commander US General David. D. McKiernan, whose replacement by Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal was announced on May 11, clearing up ungoverned lands rife with insurgents in Pakistan is pivotal to improving security in Afghanistan. “We have a cross-border firing incident out of Pakistan almost daily, and unfortunately those aren’t diminishing”, he adds. “There are militant sanctuaries in Pakistan, and they operate at will.” It is now evident that the Pakistani Taliban (a minor, shadowy clandestine movement five years ago) have now entrenched themselves in the border area. Battling a Pakistani army, often reluctant to engage them over the past two years, the militants have wrung concessions from the government over large swathes of territory in North and South Waziristan, where they have established fundamentalist Islamic mini-states.

At the end of the summit week, while Zardari was still in Washington, a U.S. missile strike killed nine people including three civilians near the Afghan border. While these air raids kill several of the enemy, as in Afghanistan they alienate the population and weaken the Zardari government politically. The operations, clearly violating the country’s sovereignty and publicly supported by Obama from the time of his presidential campaign, are also seen by many Pakistanis as evidence of Islamabad’s submissiveness to Washington’s war and its perceived hegemonic designs for regional dominance. Yet Zardari is caught between needing US money and appearing to countenance and abet an unpopular US war in Afghanistan and its spill-over into Pakistan. The US is both benefactor and albatross for the civilian government in Islamabad. Not surprisingly, Zardari did not raise in Washington the issue of cross-border attacks, and contented himself with suggesting that Obama let Pakistan purchase pilotless U.S. drones to do the job themselves. Left unstated was the government’s underlying fear that Washington might eventually send special forces to carry out attacks on Pakistani soil.

¹ Even with staunch ally Canada, “Nearly 90% of Canadians want troops pulled from Afghanistan: poll”, The Canadian Press, May 8, 2009

Paradox 3: Strategic incongruence in Pakistan

If the US bombing of civilians in Farah last week underlined the paradox of more military investment, the situation in Swat illustrates the other major paradox in the Af-Pak conundrum: the key to settling the crisis in Afghanistan is a state whose army is working with the enemy it is being funded by the US to fight and defeat.

Since Pakistan's inception in 1947, the army and its close partner the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has defined the nation's national security primarily in terms of the threat from India. Nuclear weapons are thus indispensable. Pakistani forces should be amassed in the east along the Indian border, rather than on the western border with Afghanistan. And a collaborative relationship with Afghan Taliban and Islamic terrorists is deemed essential by significant factions of the army and ISI so as to check Indian ambitions in both Kashmir and Afghanistan. Support for Afghan militants has certainly been the case since Pakistan became the main sanctuary and source of logistical support for the mujahideen in their battle to expel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.

The Swat offensive

The existential question hovering over the current Pakistani army campaign in Swat is whether it represents a fundamental break with past national security assumptions, and if so, do the army and the ISI now have the will and the capacity to deal forthrightly with the militant Islamic threat? As soon as the February deal was struck granting control over Swat to Islamic extremists in exchange for an end to the fighting, sceptics speculated that it constituted an appeasement policy that would only whet the militants' attitude for more power and territory. Critics feared that Swat would serve as a refuge from US drone attacks for the Waziristan Taliban, a sanctuary for Afghan insurgents, a magnet for international jihadists and, as we have seen in the past month, a springboard for expanding the radicals' territorial control inside Pakistan. Most of the fears have proven to be justified. Indeed, the militants moved quickly to bypass the writ of the state, instituting Sharia religious law and establishing a virtually autonomous province. The militants' expansion into Buner late in April confirmed the most dire predictions.

In fact, what began as local Islamic extremism looking for political space in the western borderlands of Pakistan has been energised by the robust expansion of the Afghan Taliban in their war against NATO. It rapidly evolved into a broad politico-military struggle for political dominance in Pakistan; now the state itself has become the prize. When the militants in Swat, far from laying down their arms and disavowing violence, spread unchecked into Buner, less than an hour and a half's drive from the capital, a panicked US reacted. Envisioning the fall of a nuclear-armed state to fiercely anti-Western Islamic militants with solid international terrorist links, who warn ominously of attacking inside US and Europe, Washington intensely pressured the Pakistani army to confront the militants' advance. When the army did so, US officials, including Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, seemed relieved, pronouncing it "a real wake-up call" for the military. The Taliban, indeed, appeared to have overstepped a tacit boundary, testing the tolerance of the army, and by extension the credibility of the Pakistani state. Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, stated that such a challenge to the existence of the Pakistani state would not be tolerated. The question that goes begging is why this action by insurgents has awakened the army now, while the events of the past three years in Pakistan left them sleeping. Have the basic elements in determining the army's past attitude toward Islamic militancy shifted in any appreciable way?

The army's recent record toward extremist violence has been, to put it charitably, less than heroic. For the past two years Pakistan has been engulfed in a spate of terrorist attacks. No major city in the country has avoided being the target of groups claiming a jihadist affiliation. From the summer of 2007 to late 2008, more than 1,500 people were killed in suicide and other attacks on civilians. In 2007 alone, terrorist attacks resulted in 3,448 casualties from 1,503 attacks, including the October suicide bombing which killed at least 136 people and wounded another 450 in Karachi. Former Pakistani premier and presidential candidate Benazir Bhutto

was assassinated in Rawalpindi. In 2008, suicide attacks set a record, killing nearly 900 people and injuring 2,072 others, and included the September bombing of the Islamabad Marriott, killing and injuring over 300. Moreover, throughout this period there were also frequent attacks in western Pakistan on NATO convoys bound with material for the war in Afghanistan.

The army offered at best a luke-warm response to US and NATO demands to crack down on local extremists — especially in the border areas, where Afghan Taliban used tribal affinities to establish a sanctuary in Pakistan. More often than not, the army chose to accommodate the militants rather than combat them.

Some observers note the striking irony that in playing the Pakistan card in Afghanistan, a failing state is being asked to stabilise a failed state. Yet the greater irony is that we are asking an army and its intelligence service to combat Islamic extremism when they perceive both the Afghan Taliban and their co-religionists in Pakistan as levers to check anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan — meaning chiefly India, which currently has 52 consulates in Afghanistan, more than in any other country.

Not unreasonably, the Pakistani national security establishment wants a friendly state on its western border. Despite the earnest declarations of an “awakened” Pakistani army, we should ask what exactly has changed to shift these historic attitudes? Is the current campaign in Swat merely an effort to appease Washington at a critical moment when billions of dollars of aid are at stake? It is not clear that the army has either the will or the means to punish the militants in Swat, or remove the threat they pose over the long term. The task will not be easy: the military had already failed to drive the Taliban out of Swat in the two years of fighting before the February truce.

Final observations

We will have a sense very soon of the chances of a turnabout favourable to Western interests; but the odds are long. Can Washington now calibrate its relationship and assistance to Pakistan in order to shift Pakistan’s priorities? First, conditioning aid on the army’s compliance with US strategic aims is fraught with political risk and arguably not feasible. Pakistan has a history, going back to the successful anti-Soviet campaign of the 1980s, of getting its way with Washington, adroitly playing a double game of superficial collaboration while diverting US aid to its own ends.

Has the geopolitical thinking of Pakistan’s national security establishment become impervious to circumstantial blandishments? Unlike many of Washington’s protégé militaries fighting during the Cold War, Pakistan is more politically and militarily independent. While aid is important, it is not a definitive arbiter of attitudes and behaviour. Pakistan is a nuclear-armed nation of 170 million, the majority suspicious if not hostile to the US. Its army and security apparatus still operate on a firmly embedded, half-century-old strategic vision, with its attendant assumptions about India and the usefulness of Islamic nationalism. In these circumstances, becoming a regional proxy for the US does not appear politically viable. The government may declare its solidarity with the US and the West as they did after September 11, but it is unlikely that even the US has the leverage to modify its bedrock attitudes toward Afghan and Pakistani militants.

Perhaps if US policy had been different from the start, the resurrection of the Afghan Taliban, after their overthrow in the invasion of 2001, could have been prevented. Perhaps if Washington had rigorously focused on jointly confronting the Taliban and Al Qaeda from the beginning seven years ago — strictly conditioning the aid on Pakistan’s cooperation, paying more attention to holding President Pervez Musharraf’s feet to the fire, and understanding and responding to the overall needs of the Pakistani society — then NATO would not be confronting today a binational “Af-Pak” Taliban threat in the region. But now, given the current constellation of factors, both internal and external, it may just be too late in the game to change the rules for Pakistan.

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