



War on Terrorism in South Asia Af-Pak and Beyond

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After 9/11, the US administration launched Operation Enduring Freedom and with it, its seemingly indefinite 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) in Afghanistan.

In 2009, the WoT entered its eighth year and so far has shown no signs of abatement. Where does this WoT stand today? What are the recent developments? What are major issues?

WAR ON TERRORISM: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

President Barack Obama, in an interview in February 2009, admitted that the US had lost focus of its goals in Afghanistan and therefore, needed to "set clear policy objectives before coming up with a plan to bring American troops home." Subsequently, his administration unveiled the new Af-Pak strategy with a renewed focus on Pakistan in a bid to reverse the present equation between the insurgents and international forces and to take control of the faltering WoT.

The Af-Pak Strategy

The new strategy was unveiled on 27 March 2009, amid growing concerns about a strong and resurgent Taliban and a faltering war on terror. According to the London-based think tank, International Council on Security and Development, at present, the Taliban holds a permanent presence in 72 per cent of Afghanistan, up from 54 per cent until a year ago.

A major reason for the Taliban's growing strength has been its ability to escape across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border into the safety of the latter's tribal regions and target the US and NATO forces from these areas. Obama has described

the border region as the 'most dangerous place in the world'; his new strategy identifies as the core goal of the United States – the 'dismantling, disruption, and defeat of al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and prevent(ing) their return to either country in the future'.

The strategy admits a failure on the part of the US of having diverted vital resources from Afghanistan to the war in Iraq. To counter this, the US administration proposes to deploy an additional 17,000 troops to bolster counter-insurgency operations especially in the south and east of Afghanistan where the Taliban are the strongest. An additional 4000 troops are set to be sent to Afghanistan to train Afghanistan's Army and Police force in order that they may be able to gradually take on the responsibility for Afghanistan's security. The US aims to build up the strength of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to 134000 and that of its police force to 82000 by 2011.

The Af-Pak strategy makes a strong case for providing military assistance to Pakistan to help its government 'root out' terrorists now settled along the tribal belt of the state along its western borders. However, the strategy is quick to add that such assistance will not be unconditional and will be contingent on Pakistan demonstrating its willingness and commitment to take action against terrorists thriving and operating from within its territorial boundaries. In addition, it calls for providing financial assistance to Pakistan to build up its basic infrastructure and public service capabilities – measures the US believes will enable a strengthening of Pakistan's democratic institutions and in turn, prevent more people, especially the youth, from turning to the Taliban and other extremist groups. Such an 'isolation of al Qaeda from the Pakistani people', it is hoped will help stem the growing anti-American sentiment in the region and the increasing alienation of the people from the Pakistani state.

Finally, the strategy is significant in that it envisions a role for regional stakeholders such as India, China, Russia, the Gulf, Iran and the Central Asian Republics in devising solutions to usher in peace, security and development into the war-torn state by "supporting the upcoming Afghan elections, training Afghan security forces and (providing) a greater civilian commitment to the Afghan people".

Earlier in January 2009, the US appointed the former UN Ambassador, Richard Holbrooke as its special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan to draw up and discuss the implementation of a 'comprehensive strategy' to neutralize militancy and extremism in South Asia through a broader 'regional engagement'. In an interview to Online News Hour following the tour, Holbrooke described his visit as part of a 'new, intense, engaged diplomacy' aimed at looking at the challenge of Afghanistan and Pakistan within a larger regional context and moving towards an involvement of other countries to 'stabilize (an) incredibly volatile region'.

II

MAJOR ISSUES IN WAR ON TERRORISM

In 2009, the focus of the WoT has come to rest firmly on Pakistan which is seen to have become a sanctuary for al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists – a concern reflected in the Af-Pak strategy. 2009 also witnessed a surfacing of the debate within the US administration with measures adopted thereof, to 'undo' the assault unleashed on the international human rights framework during George Bush's presidency. These have been detailed below:

Pakistan: The New Pivot in the WoT

Much of the heat of the WoT was turned on Pakistan after the US identified FATA and NWFP as a safe haven for al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents. According to the New York Times, President Bush is believed to have given 'confidential orders' in July 2008 allowing US air strikes and ground operations

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to be carried out against militant sanctuaries within Pakistan without the prior knowledge or approval of Islamabad. The first of such attempts by US troops to launch a ground attack in September 2008 was met with stiff resistance and reportedly thwarted by Pakistan paramilitary soldiers. A huge diplomatic furor erupted following the incident with the Army Chief, Gen. Kayani, describing the attempted US attack as an assault on Pakistan's territorial integrity and Prime Minister Gilani calling on the US to bring an immediate end to its drone attacks which he argued were 'fueling militarism' in the country's restive tribal border region.

Obama administration has not only decided to carry on using drone attacks against alleged insurgent sanctuaries in the tribal region of Pakistan, but is reportedly also planning to expand the reach of the WoT by striking deeper, into the province of Balochistan, to which, the Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives are believed to have fled, to escape air strikes in the tribal belt. Reports in the media regarding the impending attacks in Balochistan caused a great deal of alarm within the provincial assembly which unanimously passed a resolution on 21 March this year demanding that the federal government take immediate steps to prevent the drone attacks on the province.

These attacks not only caused massive civilian deaths, but are also in flagrant violation of Pakistan's territorial sovereignty. A news report in the *News*, stated that of the nearly sixty cross-border American drone attacks between January 2006 and April 2009, 'only 10' managed to hit their actual targets, leading to the death of 14 al-Qaeda leaders and "perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians" with about 150 civilians having been killed in the first quarter of 2009 alone. Despite the visible opposition to their use, drone strikes seem to be a favourite with the Americans as they claim that these attacks have delivered significant body blows to the al-Qaeda leadership. CIA Director Leon Panetta has described these airstrikes as "very precise and very limited in terms of collateral damage".

There is however, mounting concern not only within Pakistan, but also some quarters in the US, that such attacks are likely to prove counter-productive as these will continue to alienate an increasing number of people from the Pakistani state and result in more converts to the Taliban ideology.

The conflict in the North West Frontier Province

(NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), according to the UNHCR, has also led to an unprecedented refugee crisis, forcing approximately 450,000 people to flee their homes. Add to this those who have been displaced by the recent fighting between government forces and Taliban insurgents in Pakistan's Swat valley and the neighbouring districts of Dir and Buner, and the numbers come to a staggering 1.45 million. This is in addition to the nearly 550,000 people who fled to refugee camps last year owing to 'similar battles', the UNHCR adds. The ballooning crisis poses a colossal challenge to the conduct of the WoT. According to UN estimates, Pakistan urgently requires at least half a billion dollars as international contribution to aid those displaced by the fighting. The UN has warned that there is a colossal humanitarian crisis brewing in Pakistan's impoverished northwestern provinces with the current conflict likely to result in the 'largest refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide'.

Human Rights and the WoT

Obama, on assuming office stated that under his administration, "the United States (will) not torture (and) will abide by the Geneva Conventions (and) uphold (America's) highest values and ideals". To this end, in what seemed a major departure from the policies of his predecessor, Obama signed an executive order on 22 January 2009, directing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to close down the Guantánamo Bay detention camp in Cuba within a year.

Following this, in March 2009, the leaked report of an investigation by the ICRC into the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay surfaced prominently in the international media; the report reveals damning evidence of the brutal and systematic torture employed against the inmates by the US military and intelligence agents.

Further, the US Justice Department recently released Bush administration memos which unambiguously established that the CIA had consistently employed torture in its 'enhanced interrogation' of the detained war on terror suspects. Both the ICRC report and the 'torture memos' have also revealed that CIA medical personnel were present and even actively engaged in the torturing of the detainees. President Obama issued a statement accompanying the release of these memos stating that interrogation techniques outlined in the memos had 'undermined America's moral authority' and did not make the country safer and

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that while some 'national security information was classified', withholding these 'graphic' memos from public knowledge would deny an 'accurate accounting of the past'.

Despite his orders to shut Guantanamo Bay and 'ban' torture however, Obama categorically denied any plans to close down the Bagram Theater Internment Facility in Afghanistan, seeking instead to invest \$60 million to expand the detention facility to accommodate double its present capacity of about 600 inmates. This, skeptics point out is just one of the several similarities that the Obama administration shares with its preceding Bush administration, in that it endorses the continuation of the program of 'extraordinary rendition', indefinite detention of terror suspects without trial, and an openness to military commission trials.

III LOOKING AHEAD

As the WoT enters its eighth year, it is confronted with several challenges. Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense, is reported to have told the Senate Armed Services Committee in January this year that civilian casualties caused by US air strikes were 'doing [the US] enormous harm'. "If Afghans come to see us as part of their problem, not as part of their solution, then we are lost," he said. Mounting civilian casualties do not bode well for the future of the WoT. With anti-American sentiment already on the rise, civilian deaths will only deepen the antagonism.

The primary challenge for the US administration is to target Taliban, without causing concomitant civilian casualties. The extensive use of predator drones, points out Rogers is certain to result in massive civilian deaths or what is euphemistically referred to as 'collateral damage'. This, he argues, is because the Taliban and other extremist groups have become "deeply embedded in the communities of western Pakistan" and do not reside in clearly identifiable 'static training camps or barracks'. If that had been the case then the task of the US would have been made relatively easy. However, what the US is up against are not

isolated units, camps or colonies of Taliban extremists, but “much larger affective networks” within the local communities of northwestern Pakistan.

2009 is also likely to witness increased special-forces operations across either side of the Durand line, with an additional 17,000 troops committed to Afghanistan and greater air strikes against alleged terrorist enclaves in Pakistan, which in turn, will continue to produce further retaliatory attacks in Pakistan, as has been seen in the case of the recent suicide attacks in Islamabad and Chakwal.

Further, many US officials believe that simply sending in more troops to Afghanistan is likely to achieve little unless there are concomitant attempts to capture the Taliban leadership operating out of Pakistani territory, freeze the group’s funding sources and blockade the Taliban’s supply routes into Afghanistan.

The US-led WoT is on shaky ground as it enters its eighth year. The US has set itself a colossal task in widening the scope of the WoT by taking it into Pakistan’s territory, a state beset by a multitude of problems ranging from a rising Taliban insurgency, deepening economic crisis and a galloping humanitarian crisis of internal displacement. The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan has made greater regional diplomacy and a regional approach imperative. Although the Af-Pak strategy mentions a role for regional powers in restoring to Afghanistan some semblance of peace, stability and development; how this is proposed to be concretized will become clear only in due course.

IV CONCLUSIONS

In his final farewell speech from the White House on 15 January 2009, outgoing US President George Bush, defending his administration’s eight-year-long period of war mongering, said that the “war on terror,” the ideological pivot of his administration, must carry on. The main thrust of his speech was to defend his tenure as President and exhort the new administration to carry forward the ‘global war against terror’ that his government had launched in the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks in 2001.

The new US administration under Barack Obama however, has distanced itself from the use of the term ‘global war on terror’ or ‘long war’, cutting these out from the country’s military lexicon, choosing instead, to use the phrase “overseas

contingency operations”. While the new government may have decided to term the WoT differently, militarily, Obama’s policy for Afghanistan and Pakistan doesn’t make a clean break from that of his predecessor’s. In fact, America’s military engagement in the region only promises to become deeper and wider. How this engagement plays out therefore, remains to be seen. The course of the WoT in the year ahead will reveal if the new American strategy marks the beginning of a process of disengagement from the region or a further entrenchment of the US in South Asia.

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