



US and the Af-Pak Strategy Pakistan's Interests & Likely Responses

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In his recent speech, Obama highlighted what is likely to be his administration's Af-Pak strategy. Obama declares certain assessments, prescriptions and strategies on Pakistan as part of his Af-Pak strategy.

The American presence in Afghanistan is likely to be long term and would result in significant changes in the region. It happened during the 1980s and the 1990s, when the American-Pakistani efforts succeeded in removing the Soviet troops, leaving a deep scar in Afghanistan, and creating new forces in the region. The US and Pakistan have come together again to seek their interests in Afghanistan. Are the objectives and strategies likely to be the same? Will they work together against a common threat, as they did during the 1980s? Much will depend on how Pakistan will respond to these assessments and strategies.

From an Indian perspective, it is essential to understand the contours of Obama's approach and strategy, but also speculate on its likely outcome. What is likely to be the nature of Obama's engagement in Afghanistan? How long is this likely to last? What will be the nature of Pakistan's cooperation? What are Pakistan's objectives and strategies in this Af-Pak strategy? How is Pakistan likely to reach to Obama's carrots and sticks approach? More importantly, what scars will this engagement leave on Afghanistan and the region when the war comes to an end?

AL QAEDA 'AS A CANCER, KILLING PAKISTAN FROM WITHIN': IS THIS BELIEF SHARED?

Obama believes that terrorists within Pakistan are not enemies of America and Afghanistan alone, but a "grave and urgent danger to the people of Pakistan." After linking al Qaeda with numerous

violent activities, including the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and underlining it as a threat to the stability of Pakistan, Obama concludes with absolute certainty: "Make no mistake: al Qaeda and its extremist allies are a cancer that risks killing Pakistan from within." There will be a major difference of views between the US and Pakistan on this question.

How many in Pakistan – both within the State and the civil society, really believe in this assertion? A significant section in the State and society in Pakistan do not agree that al Qaeda even exists any where in the world. They believe that the al Qaeda is a myth created by the US/CIA to achieve their objectives.

Another section, which can again be found both within the Pakistani State and society, agree that al Qaeda exists, but questions Pakistan's efforts against it. For them, primarily buoyed by anti-American sentiments, al Qaeda is not the enemy, but the US is. For them, attacks by the al Qaeda in Pakistan are a reaction to Islamabad's support (or acting as a stooge) for Washington. Their rationale is, stop going after the al Qaeda, and the violence spearheaded by the militants will decline and disappear. In short, this section considers the War against Terrorism is an American War and not their problem. A cursory look at the numerous opinions and editorials expressed in Pakistan's media under the question "Whose war is this?" will reveal their differences and alternative perceptions on the War on Terrorism.

A third section, which could again be found within the State and society in Pakistan believes that the Taliban and al Qaeda is an asset providing strategic depth to achieve their objectives in Afghanistan. This section considers the US presence in Afghanistan as likely to be short term and fears that Washington will quit the region after its primary

objectives are achieved, namely capturing or decimating the al Qaeda leadership. In that event what will be Pakistan's leverage left in Afghanistan?

This is a genuine fear, which is widespread in Pakistan, based on what had happened after the exit of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. After working closely with the ISI and supporting a huge mujahideen force there, besides sowing the seeds of al Qaeda which emerged later, the US left Afghanistan by 1990. Pakistan had to face growing instability in its western border during the early 1990s, which (wrongly) led them to create the Taliban to achieve their interests in Kabul. Those who complain about Pakistan's negative involvement in Afghanistan should realize that Kabul has also worked against Islamabad in the past. There is deep rooted fear in the strategic community and decision makers in Pakistan that an unfriendly Kabul does not serve Islamabad's interests or ensure Pakistan's stability, especially along the Durand line. Coupled with this fear, is the belief that Afghanistan constitutes Pakistan's strategic depth.

Given the above differences, it is unlikely that the US and Pakistan will have the same perspectives of al Qaeda and Taliban. Hence, the strategies are also likely to be different.

II

IS AL QAEDA A BIGGER THREAT THAN TALIBAN?

The above fears, of dealing with an unstable Afghanistan, once the US leaves – partly genuine, partly exaggerated and partly self induced, will play a major role in Pakistan's response to Obama's Af-Pak strategy. This fear and interest in Afghanistan, will play especially in Pakistan going after the Taliban.

Under pressure from Washington, Islamabad may initiate action against the al Qaeda, but will do so against the Taliban. In fact, Pakistan's engagement in the War on Terrorism was based

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on a dual strategy: fighting al Qaeda when pressurized, but engaging the Taliban differently.

Obama also seems to be adopting this dual strategy bug on Taliban and al Qaeda. His speech comes down heavily on the al Qaeda, but is comparatively guarded regarding the Taliban. Does Obama believe that the al Qaeda is a bigger threat to the US than the Taliban? What does this mean, for the future of American engagement, once al Qaeda is neutralized?

III

THE SEARCH FOR A MODERATE TALIBAN IS THERE A COMPROMISING PERIPHERY?

Obama makes an interesting observation about the Taliban; he concludes that “there is an uncompromising core of the Taliban”, which he considers “must be met with force, and must be defeated.” Does this mean there is a periphery within the Taliban willing to compromise? This difference between an uncompromising core and a compromising periphery needs more analysis. The entire concept of “moderate” or “friendly” Taliban emerges from this perspective. True, as Obama says, there are “those who have taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price.”

Will this strategy of working with a moderate Taliban yield desired results in Afghanistan? Before answering this vital question, it is essential to find out whether Pakistan also believe that there is a moderate Taliban, which it could work with? Does Pakistan also believe there is an “uncompromising core” which must be met with force and defeated? And more importantly, do the US and Pakistan identify the same elements as being the “uncompromising core”?

Pakistan's own experience within its own territory, ever since the War on Terrorism intensified, clearly shows that it has made a clear distinction in terms of fighting the Taliban. While Islamabad took steps against the al Qaeda leadership, it was willing to work with the Taliban. Numerous top leaders of the al Qaeda were arrested in Pakistan and handed over to the US. With the Taliban, especially those loosely defined as “Pakistani Taliban”, who later joined the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamabad signed agreements/pacts. From 2003, it signed numerous deals with various tribal groups in Bajaur, Mohammand, North and South Waziristan. The latest is with the Swat Taliban, which is currently in controversy after the video footage of a Taliban flogging a girl reached the local media.

Two important questions need to be addressed

here: Have the deals that Pakistan reached with a 'compromising' Taliban resulted in peace in the FATA or in Swat? Will the US be able to replicate the same in Afghanistan?

Islamabad would like the rest of Pakistan and the world to believe, that these deals have been a success, but the results prove otherwise. Two attacks in Lahore in March 2009 alone, masterminded by Baituallah Mehsud, leader of the TTP, prove that these deals have failed. In fact, these deals made the situations worse for the following reasons:

First, such periodic agreements allowed the local Taliban to reorganize and renew their operations. Invariably, every deal resulted in the release of important leaders, handing over of weapons and removing check posts. Second, such periodic deals affected the ongoing efforts to clear the militants. No counter militancy operations can proceed with a strategy – one step forward and two steps backward. As many who have taken part in the Indian counter militancy operations inform, this is a long drawn out protracted war and there can never be any short cuts. Any negotiations by the State should always be from a position of strength.

Third, these periodic deals have undermined the writ of the State. Today Baituallah and Fazlullah call the shots in their areas. Many journalists and aid workers in Pakistan have to seek their permission to enter the tribal areas. Effectively, they have become a state within the state. Fourth, these deals have also undermined the secular tribal leadership, led by the tribal elders. Most of the day to day problems in these tribal areas, from time immemorial, had been addressed by the tribal jirgas; now the Taliban has made them defunct.

Fifth, all these measures are slowly transforming the culture of the Pashtuns and their cherished Pashtunwali (tribal code) into what the Taliban wants--an Islamic order following its interpretations of Shariah. Finally, these deals have provided space for the TTP to establish itself in the tribal regions, but also use it as a base to launch terror attacks in the rest of Pakistan. Some of the worst terrorist attacks in recent months in Peshawar, Islamabad and Lahore have their origins in Waziristan.

Clearly, deals with Taliban have not worked in Pakistan's interests. Such deals have provided short term gains, but long term pains. It created an illusory peace, only to be replaced with the lethal

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reality of increasing Talibanisation. Providing them more space is unlikely to make them part of any civilized society; instead it will only increase the misery of the people, especially women. If there are any doubts, ask the women in Swat.

True, many who are now part of the Taliban, did not constitute the original core; will they compromise to serve the American interests? But, none of them are either champions of human rights or known for their civilized treatment of the civilian population. Most of them are drug and war lords, corrupt erstwhile Mujahideen, or notorious homosexuals who have abused boys. If Obama really hopes that the US "will continue to support the basic human rights of all Afghans – including women and girls," then he should seriously review his concept that there is a moderate Taliban.

Perhaps, these elements constitute a lesser threat to the American interests and may even be willing to work with the US. Will this compromising periphery, which may be in the interests of the US, be an asset for any future administration in Kabul and the people of Afghanistan? If the same elements had earlier joined the Taliban, either under pressure or due to the lure of money, is there any guarantee that they will not repeat the same?

Besides, what is the signal Obama is giving the Taliban? Will the Taliban see this as weakness and signs of American fatigue? A section within the US has also been talking about an exit strategy. Ideally, Obama should be talking about an entry strategy, rather than an exit strategy, especially when the conflict is a protracted militancy. If the counter militant strategists have to fix a deadline as part of their exit strategy, it will only make the militants drag out the violence. When did any anti-militancy operations have a deadline, before it started, and succeed? The strategy should, instead, be directed at bleeding the Taliban, until it is either decimated or willing to give up violence. Anything short of this will not be in the interests of the US or the Afghans.

Finally, and more importantly, does Pakistan also

see the same elements that Obama sees as an uncompromising core and a compromising periphery? A section within Pakistan's intelligence agencies, according to credible American reports and testimonies in the US Congress, has been working with the Taliban. Which Taliban, is this section working with? The uncompromising core or the other elements? Nothing will be more disastrous than, a section in Pakistan working with the uncompromising core, while the rest of international community wooing the compromising periphery.

Moderate Taliban is a myth. As someone in one of the chat forums in Pakistan commented: TTP has warned recently of carrying two suicide attacks a week; perhaps, the moderate Taliban will carryout only one per week!

IV

STICKS AND CARROTS: WHAT IF NEITHER WORKS?

What is Obama's game plan for working with Pakistan? Obama identifies numerous issues. As he rightly notes the Pakistan "government's ability to destroy these safe-havens is tied to its own strength and security." Undoubtedly, a weak and unstable Pakistan will not be able to fight the militants effectively. So what are Obama's prescriptions? First, he wants to work with the IMF, the World Bank and other international partners, to ensure that Pakistan's economic crisis is overcome. According to the State Bank of Pakistan's first quarter report, there are positive signs and the situation is not hopeless. Pakistan will have to work with the US to improve its economy.

Second, Obama makes an important point to address Pakistan's security concerns. He calls for "constructive diplomacy with both India and Pakistan" to "lessen tensions between two nuclear-armed nations that too often teeter on the edge of escalation and confrontation." There have been similar statements by the Obama administration, that Pakistan's sensitivities along its eastern borders must be addressed if Washington has to ensure Islamabad's full cooperation in the War on terrorism. From an Indian perspective, a serious analysis is needed on how this strategy is likely to impact Indo-US and Indo-Pak relations, and terrorism being committed by Pakistanis on Indian soil.

Third, the strategy considers what the US could contribute directly to Pakistan to address the situation. Obama has requested the Congress to pass a bill authorizing \$1.5 billion for Pakistan every year over the next five years, to "build schools,

roads, and hospitals, and strengthen Pakistan's democracy." However, this economic, political and security assistance to Pakistan is not "a blank check". He expects that Pakistan will "demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders." Clearly, this is an open threat, but will it work? Many in the US consider that George Bush did not pressurize Pakistan enough, and in the process Washington was taken for a ride. To be fair to Bush, the military in Pakistan played its cooperation card smartly and created an impression that there was no other option to working with Pakistan, irrespective of its level of cooperation. Will Obama's "not a blank check" strategy/threat work? Much will depend on how seriously Obama conveys this threat in words and in action.

As part of the stick option, Obama also underlines that the US "will insist that action be taken – one way or another," when the US has intelligence about high-level terrorist targets. Does this mean, if there is actionable intelligence and if Pakistan is hesitant to take action, the US will carry out the attacks on its own? The US drone attacks in the FATA region must be interpreted against this backdrop. He is clearly hinting at the continuation of such attacks, with or without Pakistan's inputs. Drone attacks and their effectiveness must be addressed separately. They may be a military success, but have become a political liability, increasing anti-American sentiments. While the US has failed to underline the significance of the al Qaeda targets, a section within Pakistan has been highly successful in playing the public sentiments in highlighting the collateral damage in these drone attacks.

Obama should ensure, that at the end, neither the sticks nor carrots go waste. It is entirely possible, neither the drone attacks nor the economic aid, yield the desired results in Pakistan. Of course, what Obama has highlighted is only a road map; actors and strategies are likely to change, as Obama walks the walk. But, the fear is, what if he also make changes and dilute his primary objectives in Afghanistan? And leave Afghanistan to its fate, after the al Qaeda leadership is captured or decimated? That will be the real disaster. Not only for the US, but also for Pakistan and the entire region.



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