The Neo-Taliban: The Shape of Things to Come…

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One of the enduring features of Western strategic thinking over the past half-century has been to immediately write off one's less powerful enemy, if the latter has been militarily overpowered. As the history of contemporary warfare suggests, very often this approach is couched on the realist thinking that a vanquished enemy is incapable of making a comeback. Thus it is not worthwhile to worry about its future re-consolidation and reappearance. Since a vast number of military encounters waged by the West – in various parts of the world – has succeeded in routing erstwhile enemy governments or regimes for good, it has had very little to worry about their post-war resurgence.

But this particular strategic thinking runs aground when it comes to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Here is a former ragtag enemy – convincingly routed in an internationally orchestrated military campaign- which refuses to go away. If anything, the allied military campaign in Afghanistan that first led to the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001 and has since attempted to eliminate the latter's influence has failed miserably. Such dire and negative prognosis is, of course, based on several key truisms that condition the conflict in Afghanistan.

In the following few pages I am going to ask (a) why the Taliban has succeeded in staying as a thorn in the peace process in Afghanistan?; and (b) what long-term assessment can we make on the Taliban's future role in the country's overall political and military process? Such an analysis is likely to allow provide lessons for the allied war machine in the country.

Now let me turn to the first question: the apparent invincibility of the Taliban. Here I am going to look at its ideological appeal, strategic culture, and logistical support which have been paramount in terms of its staying on power. The rise of the neo-Taliban and the surge of violence in Afghanistan cannot be studied in isolation. As always, Afghanistan's current political process is very much linked to the outside world.

When the American-led international forces removed the Taliban regime they hoped they have eliminated its power, influence and its very presence. This was a classic error of judgment. The Taliban were very much a product of Afghan society. Although criticised as ruthless and conservative they nonetheless represented many of the society's values and mores. Their success in the past was to a great deal possible owing to the society's subscription of their ideals. Thus while their military influence was curtailed following the American-led invasion they remained very much a part of the society, albeit under the surface.

The Challenge

The Taliban came mostly from the Pashtun tribes. This tribe straddled two countries. They are a majority in Afghanistan and have a substantial base in the north-western regions of neighbouring Pakistan. When they were defeated in Afghanistan and the society was forced to abandon them in the face of western reorientation programme, the hardcore militant among them escaped to the autonomous tribal regions of Pakistan and the moderates simply assumed the new identity and assimilated themselves into the society – sometimes by simply getting rid of their flowing beards and robes.

In the first five years of their removal from power and isolation, they slowly regrouped and consolidated their strength in the border regions of Pakistan. Given the complex military relations between Pakistan and the United States and

inability of the Pakistan government to make military inroads into its autonomous regions in the northwest, the Taliban succeeded in regrouping and reinforcing. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, thanks to the corruption, the lack of any improvement in the quality of life for the masses, and the ineffectiveness of the government, Afghans grew disillusioned. Given that the society was somewhat sympathetic to the cause of the Taliban in the past, the latter could make a slow comeback in the mainstream discourse on the future of Afghanistan.

In the tribal regions of Pakistan, the Taliban had a much faster resurgence. Unlike in Afghanistan the society here had always practiced strict Islamic codes. And the Taliban was not saying something new which they did not observe or follow. Although ousted from power politics across the border in Afghanistan, the Taliban in many ways stayed alive and influential in this region. And with the corresponding rise in US attacks on various targets in this region grew the influence of the Taliban. It is thus worth concentrating on the recent legalisation of the Shari'a court in the region and its approval by the Pakistan government, for it may explain the would-be scenario in the neighbouring Afghanistan.

The hard-line "morality code" enforced under the Islamic Shari'a law in parts of Afghanistan and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan has its basis in the popular approval of such practice.

According to a recent report there are around 71 Taliban courts operating in the NWFP region of Pakistan.[i] Although its critics argue that the judgments of these parallel courts on a whole litany of issues ranging from finance, land disputes, smuggling and narcotics are "arbitrary" and often handed down by "ill-educated self-proclaimed judges" with little or no legal and religious knowledge, such interventions have nonetheless gained popular approval. In order to understand why a significant portion of Afghans and various tribal groups in NWFP put up with such aggression we ought to look at the cultural practices of these people.

In a tradition-bound lawless hinterland, such stern codes of conduct often have a positive role (for those bound by it). While Shari'a law severely restricts and undermines individual freedom, it nonetheless it establishes a clear framework of interaction among various groups and communities in an otherwise anarchical world. Little wonder such practices have been replicated by many other militant groups who do not belong to the Taliban. Lashkar-e-Islam – another hard-line Islamic militant group operating in the region – also regularly engages in handing out its own strict version of justice.

The current international approach to curb the influence of the Taliban is geared towards establishing an informal power-sharing arrangement with various local tribal council or *shura* in some of the "critical districts". Although admirable, such a devolutionary power-sharing arrangement is likely to fail before it takes off the ground. First, given Afghanistan's complex tribal structure and their inbuilt hierarchy and factionalism it would be impossible to form such *shuras*. Second, with an ineffective and ineffectual government in Kabul for past eight years, it is unlikely that the citizenry in these districts would buy into such arrangements. Third, with ever decreasing cut in aid, it is not clear how such bodies will be kept afloat.

The neo-Taliban thrives on such drawbacks in its adversary's policy planning. It has the potential to turn the situation in its own favour. For a start, thanks to its strict egalitarian thinking it is not fully hemmed in by tribal divisions and factionalism. Second, its reach in the "critical districts" is far more effective than that of the government or its agencies. Third, it does not need any money to establish and implement its own vision. Put simply, while the Kabul government and its international ally are constantly suffering from a lack of cohesiveness when it comes to dealing with their own governing partners, the neo-Taliban would appear to possess just what its adversary is lacking.

In the messy tribal politics of Afghanistan the Taliban provided some semblance of peace and stability during its years in power. It is that particular achievement which has endeared the neo-Taliban to a particular constituency of Afghans; especially when they find themselves under an ineffective and corrupt regime.

If the Western powers were not so drunk with their military victory over the Taliban and had some hindsight they would not have had their heel stuck in the quagmire of Afghan politics in which they find themselves – eight years after they first went in.

Courting the Taliban

The question 'where do we go from here?' weighs heavily when we re-evaluate the West's presence in Afghanistan. This calls for some intense soul searching and taking some uncomfortable decisions. For, the failure to pay attention to the peculiarity of Afghan politics can only lead to an unending war there. Strategic thinkers and the military personnel made the supreme mistake of dismissing the Taliban following their swift military victory. What they did not appreciate is that the terrain might be more suited for their adversary's way of life than an external one imposed by outsiders.

If we are happy with a far more repressive regime in Saudi Arabia that follows some of the same inhuman practices and has the same Shari'a law that the neo-Taliban advocates, then what is wrong with us going to bed with the this current adversary? Had we had courted the Taliban after its military defeat and made them a part of the new power structure and governance (just as we did in Iraq) we would not be in a situation that we are in. It is their complete absence and eviction from the country's political process that has forced them to wage an attack on the authorities with a vengeance. And they will continue to do so until the battle fatigue sets in on the West and the government in Kabul slides into further impotency.

In the past, moderate voices that tried to establish a sort of rapprochement between the government and the Taliban were summarily condemned and forced out of the decision making process. Not so long ago the government of President Karzai banned two EU officials from working in the country as the former found the latter to be engaged in informal peace talks with one particular faction of the former Taliban regime. While to some, this approach of talking to the state's enemies might appear to be anti-national, given the Taliban's rising influence across the country one could hardly dismiss such an approach outright.

The existing literature on state building where states have become victims of unscrupulous regimes provides two recommendations. In the first instance, there should be a clear and consistent attempt to remove the regime concerned. However, the new regime should also make way for giving voice to some of the moderate elements from the previous regime. For their complete removal from overall governance will potentially exclude a significant constituency from the political process. Such a framework will only create enemies of the government in future.

It is this mistake of excluding and closing down all lines of communication on the part of the government and to some extent by the western community which is responsible for the new terrorist surge in the country. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. However, had there been some attempt by the government or the international community to court the Taliban with the aim of bringing them back to the folds of civil society and governance structure, one would not be in a situation facing the surge of the neo-Taliban. Perhaps it is time we brought back those mediators who were brave and foresighted enough to reach out to the Taliban.

The Taliban is not the only "enemy within" in Afghanistan. The chronic and often blatant corruption and ineffectiveness of President Hamid Karzai's administration, which has failed miserably in terms of governance and delivery of public goods and services are some of the prime reasons why disappointed, disgruntled and demoralised Afghans have steadily started supporting the insurgency orchestrated by the neo-Taliban.[ii] As one of the conservative newsmagazines put it, "the US policy in Afghanistan resting on the idea of bolstering Hamid Karzai's government, has been one bullet away from disaster."[iii]

With the general elections only a few months away and President Hamid Karzai's growing unpopularity and shrinking legitimacy, it is essential that the United States (as the key external intervener in the Afghan conflict) finds a new and credible approach to making sure that things stay stable before they get better. A return to a neo-Taliban-led regime with no ties attached to the outside world would definitely spell doom for the United States and its western allies. Given its growing strength within the country and across the border in the North West Frontier Provinces in Pakistan it would not be far fetched to entertain the idea that one day the world's nemesis will be one day back in power.

The new Obama administration in Washington appears to be reassessing its Afghan adventure. It is slowly responding to the critics that a gung ho approach to the problem may not be a solution. Its new thinking is based on

two new approaches based very much within the framework of carrot and sticks. It wants to send a clear message to the insurgents and the Taliban that it is not giving into their insurgency. Therefore, it has committed to send another 17,000 troops to the country. This, the administration hopes, will bolster the security situation there and send a clear message. At the same time, however, it has not ruled out some form of negotiation with the neo-Taliban.

Washington appears willing and interested in entering into some kind of negotiation with its enemies on the ground. And President Obama has made no secret of this intention. It is early to speculate on the details of such discussions. But one should not be surprised if there are already behind the scene negotiations well underway on this rapprochement.

Conclusion

In late February I shared a conference podium with Nasrullah Stanekzai, a professor of Law in Kabul University and a long-time observer and participant in Afghan politics. Among our tasks was to discuss the future of Afghanistan. The consensus we reached was that Afghanistan is not a post-conflict country as the West would like us to believe. It is a country in the midst of war. "How else", retorted my fellow academic "would you explain the presence of nearly 82,000 foreign troops and regular military operations throughout the length and breadth of the country?" Add to that the number of civilian casualties last year alone. According to the United Nations, in 2008 there were around 2,118 civilian deaths in the country. This figure was 39 % higher than in 2007 and the highest yearly toll since fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

If anything, this "boots on the ground" approach has proved to be largely counterproductive. Large swathes of the country that were once rescued from the clutches of the Taliban have back in their control. Projects such as the eradication of poppy cultivation have all but failed. After seven years of false starts, the enthusiasm of various NGOs and INGOs is fast dissipating. Among the donors who genuinely wished to rescue the failed state by pumping billions of dollars, the mood is that of resignation. If one were to explore the concept of "donor fatigue" in the literature on development, Afghanistan would stand out as a glaring example.

For the long-term observers of Afghan politics the current situation represents a "staring into the abyss" scenario. In spite of sacrificing thousands of lives and pouring billions of dollars, the economic, political and security situation has hardly gotten any better. Put simply western involvement in Afghanistan has been one step forward and three steps back. While painting such pessimistic picture one is, of course, forced to entertain the question as to what went wrong? Nothing really! Some societies, such as that of Afghanistan have a peculiar dynamics of their own. One cannot externally impose a solution or force an outcome on them. Before we expect them to pick up the ways and ideals of the world around them it is "we" who must learn that such societies have to first unlearn their ways and habits according to their own free will and a time of their choosing. And this cannot be expedited like bailing out a failed bank or fast delivered like a DHL package.

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[i] Khattak, Daud (2009) 'Taliban's deadly 'justice' cows Pakistan', *The Sunday Times*, 18 January, p. 28.

[ii] 'Afghanistan: No Time to go wobbly', The Economist, 18 October 2008, pp. 16-7.

[iii] 'America and Afghanistan: Changing the Guard in Kabul?', *The Economist*, 14 February 2009.

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