

Pakistan's Bleak Future: *The curse of Afghanistan*

By Prem Shankar Jha

Abstract: The United States' involvement of Pakistan in the Afghan war has proved destabilising for Pakistan, due to the demographic composition of its population as well as its army. As this war pursues, it continues to threaten the regime and to remove its legitimacy. The only solution now could be that Pakistan withdraws from the Afghan conflict, on the basis of an agreement among the Afghan parties thus hinting at the end of NATO involvement.

On March 28, the New York Times reported that a few days earlier, even before Pakistan's new prime minister, Yousef Raza Gilani, had been sworn in, two senior officials of the US State department, Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher, had arrived in Islamabad, with the aim of reassuring themselves that the new government was committed to continuing the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. This not-so-subtle arm twisting was deeply resented in Pakistan. Dawn, its most influential and respected daily, called the visit an exhibition of "indecent haste"¹.

The Bush administration had felt the need to reassure itself because Pakistan's political parties had been calling for a dialogue with the militants to restore peace in the tribal frontier regions adjoining Afghanistan. The latter had made it clear that no such dialogue was possible if it did not include a withdrawal of Pakistan from the Afghan war.

Prem Shankar Jha, former Information Advisor to Prime Minister V.S. Singh and editor-in-chief of the Hindustan Times, is journalist and the author of numerous books, including The Twilight of the Nation State: Globalisation, Chaos and War (London, Pluto Press, 2006). This paper is the original version of the article published in French in Politique étrangère, 2/2008 ("La malédiction afghane du Pakistan").

¹ *International Herald Tribune*, March 28, 2008.

Negroponte and Boucher got the assurance they were seeking: Gilani assured them of Pakistan's continuing "resolve to tackle terrorism". But the assurance was not really needed because, in the previous three months, the US had quietly foreclosed any option that Pakistan's new government might have had, of pulling itself out of the Afghan war.

The decision to do so had been taken three month earlier. On Sunday January 6, three veteran reporters of the *New York Times* had reported that "the US vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and other senior officials had met in Washington to debate whether or not to expand the authority of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) and the military to conduct far more aggressive covert operations in the tribal areas of Pakistan²". Their use of the term "expand" was not accidental, for nine months earlier, in March 2007, Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, chief operations officer for the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, had told the Senate Armed Forces committee that his forces routinely fired on and pursued Taliban into Pakistan³.

Gen. Lute's statement had evoked an angry response from Pakistan to the effect that it had given "no authorization for hot pursuit of terrorists into our territory." President Musharraf warned the US in a CBS interview that sending its forces into the tribal territories of Pakistan would be a grave mistake⁴. But the US did not heed these warnings. In January predator drones launched three missile attacks on targets inside Pakistan's tribal belt, and killed 45 "Arabs, Afghans and foreign fighters." This kindled another wave of anger in Pakistan. The Lahore-based liberal daily, *The News*, predicted accurately that this would only increased militancy in the tribal areas. The Taliban responded by unleashing a spate of suicide bombings – 17 in ten weeks – that killed 274 people.

The die has therefore been cast. While Gilani continues to call for a "comprehensive approach," including "political means and economic help" to the tribal regions, the war in Pakistan's tribal belt has grown more intense. This is a war that is dividing the Pakistani people and the Pakistani army. It is one, therefore, that Pakistan cannot win. The US' overt military intervention in Pakistan may therefore turn out to be the crowning folly, in a string of follies, that will complete the undoing of the Pakistani State, and turn mot of it into another nursery for international terrorism.

² Steven Lee Myers, David Sanger and Eric Schmitt: "US considers new Covert Push in Pakistan." *New York Times*, 6 January, 2008.

³ Munir Ahmad writing in Associated Press. Published in *Newark Star-Ledger*, New Jersey, March 4, 2007

⁴: He also said in a subsequent interview to the *Straits Times*, Singapore, January 11, 2008, that the US would "regret entering Pakistan." STRATFOR Jan. 13, 2008.

The West has been strangely oblivious to the connection between the crisis in Pakistan and the Afghan war. When President Musharraf extolled Pakistan's stability during a speech at IFRI in Paris last January, none of his listeners raised this issue. This could be because the international media have not made, or at least dwelt upon, the connection. From March 2007, when Musharraf tried to replace the chief justice of the Pakistan Supreme court and plunged the country into a constitutional crisis, virtually every analysis of Pakistan's problems has heaped the blame squarely on Musharraf. The litany was always the same: desperate to stay in power, and rendered increasingly insecure by the approach of the elections, he had begun to violate the spirit, and then the letter, of the constitution. The anger this aroused in the public destroyed the tacit alliance he had built between the democratic elements in Pakistani society and the national security establishment that he headed. This increased his insecurity and drove him to the next violation.

Benazir Bhutto's assassination completed his delegitimisation. Literally no one believed that she hit her head and died. And almost everyone believed that Musharraf, or rogue elements in the Inter Services Intelligence, had had some hand in her death. This completed the rupture between the democratic parties and the security establishment, and suddenly turned Musharraf into a liability in the "war against terror". The International Crisis Group put it bluntly: "If Pakistan is to be stable in the wake of Benazir Bhutto's murder, President Pervez Musharraf must resign, and a quick transition follow to a democratically elected civilian government".

This interpretation of the cause of Pakistan's political crisis is plausible. But it fails to pose, let alone answer, two all-important questions: why did Musharraf lose his popularity to start with, and that too so quickly? Musharraf had become increasingly arrogant and increasingly isolated from public sentiment. Beginning with the killing of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti in August 2006, he had also made one mistake another. But it is altogether too easy to ascribe all this to a mere attack of nerves and a lust for power.

The answer to both questions lies in Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war, and this is a war into which the US dragged Pakistan by forcing Musharraf to choose between joining the attack on the Taliban and seeing the destruction of his country's vital security installations. The US did so in the full knowledge that Pashtoons, from whom the Taliban emerged, made up more than a tenth of Pakistan's population, and more than a fifth of its army and officer corps. But it expected to score an easy victory, capture or kill Osama bin Laden, and make a quick exit. It succeeded in doing the first but not the second. That is where Pakistan's crisis, and the slide in Musharraf's popularity began.

The Afghan curse

It is instructive to look back and ask ourselves one counter-factual question: what would Pakistan's condition have been if the Afghan war had ended within a few months, a genuine peace been established, elections held, a representative government installed, aid had poured in, and the US forces had pulled out. The answer is that Musharraf would have been hailed as the saviour of his country for having turned the crisis caused by the US ultimatum into an opportunity to sever the Pakistani state's dangerous connection with the Taliban, get rid of Pakistan's crushing burden of foreign debt, and set it back on the road to modern, Islamic nationhood.

For a while it had seemed that he was going to succeed. Pakistan's people, elite and commoner alike, heaved a sigh of relief at being rid of the Taliban. Business boomed and the growth rate rebounded after a decade of stagnation. In 2002 and 2003 there was a palpable feeling of elation and hope in the country. It seemed as if Pakistan was finally on the road to sustainable nationhood.

But the war in Afghanistan did not end, Bin Laden Mullah Omar and Zawahiri continued to evade capture, and the US did not pull out. Pakistan could still have been saved if, even as late as the middle of 2002, the US had given up the quest for vengeance and replaced it with a political objective – that of consolidating the hold of moderate, democratic forces once again, upon Afghanistan. This would have required it to cease proactive military operations, throw a cordon around the Tora Bora mountains, use force only to prevent the Taliban and remnants of Al Qaeda from breaking out, and concentrate its resources and technical expertise on getting Afghanistan back on its feet. This strategy would have marginalised the Taliban in Afghan society and denied it the stream of fresh recruits and, more important, the ever-renewed anger, upon which it fed. Success would more or less have been guaranteed if the United States had not alienated the entire Sunni Muslim world by launching its pointless and ultimately self-defeating invasion of Iraq, and if it had followed Pakistan's advice and bought out the opium crop of the Afghans instead of simply setting fire to their fields.

But the confusion that reigned in Washington after it formally abandoned the doctrine of deterrence in favour of preemptive intervention to combat the new threat from "non-state enemies," effectively prevented it from adopting this strategy. To leave the Taliban in control of Afghan territory, it would have had to concede, tacitly, its right to exist. That was unthinkable because the Taliban had nurtured the terrorists who had inspired and planned the attack on the United States. So "destruction" of the Taliban became the United States' official objective, and the surest way to achieve this, it believed, was to kill its leaders and kill or capture as many as possible of its cadres.

What the Bush administration did not realise, and still does not seem to realise, is that while it takes only one state to declare war, it takes two to make peace. Indeed the very notions of war and peace, that we take for granted, are embedded in the Westphalian state system. Built into both concepts is the presumption that states are sovereign and will remain so even after they have engaged in war. The purpose of war is not to destroy the state on whom war is declared but to make it change its behaviour to accord with the desires of the victor. Once the United States had denied the Taliban even the right to exist, there was no authority left with whom it could make peace.

The resurgence of Jihad in Pakistan

The US' failure to capture or kill Bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and Ayman al Zawahiri sealed Pakistan's fate. The US deployed its entire arsenal of weapons in an increasingly frantic attempt to end war by any means. These included Fuel-Air Explosives that killed through incineration and suffocation, Daisy Cutters (designed to explode in a flat horizontal arc and kill every living thing within a quarter-mile radius), Predator drones, and Hellfire missiles. These weapons made no discrimination between civilians and combatants. As the civilian death count mounted, anger grew in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan, and the Taliban found an inexhaustible stream of new recruits. Destroying the Taliban became impossible. The war in Afghanistan therefore became a war without a goal, and without an end.

In 2002, police and security agencies in Pakistan picked disturbing signals that breakaway elements from at least five recently banned extremist religious groups were gearing up for a violent campaign to prevent the administration of Pervez Musharraf from shaping an image of a liberal and progressive Islamic state. The decision had been triggered by Musharraf's landmark address to the nation on January 12, 2002 in which he had pledged to free the nation from religious extremism by banning *Jaish e Muhammad*, *Lashkar e Taiba*, *Sipah e Sahaba*, *Tehrik e Jafria* and *Tanzim e Nifaz e Shariat e Muhammadi*. He had earlier banned *Harkatul Mujahideen* and *Lashkar e Jhangvi*. The breakaway elements who had pledged themselves to killing him and destabilizing Pakistan belonged to five of these organizations. "At the top level *Jaish*, *Lashkar*, *Harkat*, *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* may be distinct organisations but at the ground level their elements are now sharing their knowledge and expertise to destabilise the government," said a Punjab police official. "The trained militants of these five groups pose the biggest law and order challenge to us⁵".

⁵ Kamran Khan: "Policy shift triggers backlash from Islamists," *The News*, Lahore. March 19, 2002.

The perpetuation of the Afghan war gave them the just the opportunity, to grow in power and influence, that they had been looking for. As early as 2003, the Pew Research Group's opinion polls had shown that while anti-American sentiment was running high all around the world in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, it was highest in Pakistan, where 90 percent of the people were hostile to the US. Speaking before a group of Indian newspaper editors and 32 Indian Members of Parliament, at a conference of the South Asia Free Media association (SAFMA) in July 2003 in Islamabad, Maulana Fazlur-Rehman, the spiritual leader of the original Taliban, said: "all those being killed in Afghanistan are Pashtoons; most of them are old men, women and children, and among these I doubt if even one in ten has even heard of Al Qaeda"⁶.

Musharraf narrowly escaped two attacks on his life in December 2003. He responded with a fiery denunciation: "These very foreigners, who are living there, let me also say that the suicide attacks on me, the mastermind is certainly Al Qaeda, these people, whether you call them Al Qaeda or whatever, they are the mastermind..." In an admission that should have been particularly significant to Indians, he said that "Most of the bombings that have taken place in Pakistan - in Taxila, Murree and Karachi, have been masterminded by these people."... "We will not allow this damage to come to Pakistan."⁷ This was a sharp departure from the line that his government had taken till then, that the bombings had mostly been the work of Indian agents. The change of villain reflected the extent to which Musharraf, if not as yet the whole of the Pakistani establishment, had narrowed his focus down to fighting the Jihadi threat coming from the west.

In 2002, the five breakaway groups, who were later to form the Tehreek-e-Taliban, were a fringe group in a Jihadi movement that was itself a minor player in Pakistani politics. But the continued, remorseless, bombing of the Tora Bora and other Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan changed all that. It sent the Taliban to their kinsfolk in the neighbouring Pashtoon areas of Pakistan's FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in search of sanctuary. When, under US pressure, Musharraf sent in his army to flush them out he pitted the Pakistani state against the honour code of the Pashtoon tribes. Pakistan lost. In the ensuing months the Taliban fought the Pakistan army to a standstill, and established control over an expanding area of FATA – the federally Administered Tribal Areas. In these areas it drove out the administration, and killed more than 150 of the "maliks" – traditional elders – of the tribes, replacing them with younger, angry men of their choosing. How different these new warriors were from the original Taliban was revealed by Maulana Fazlur Rehman to

⁶ Rahman made this speech in the presence of the author who was a participant in the Conference.

⁷ "Musharraf vows to rout terror: No issue of Muslims or non-Muslims," *Dawn*: 28 March 2004.

Nicholas Schmidle, a Pakistan-based scholar in September 2007, “even we are now afraid of the young men fighting” Rahman confessed. “The Taliban see him [Rahman] as a hurdle to their ambitions”, a close associate of his elaborated⁸.

The prolonged, and increasingly purposeless war in Afghanistan did not only arouse the anger of the Pashtoon tribesmen. It also created a wave of sympathy for them in Pakistan that turned the Tehreek-e-Taliban into popular heroes. According to knowledgeable Pakistani journalists these firebrand clerics, now more and more loosely referred to as simply the “Maulvis”, have private armies that add up to a hundred thousand men under arms.

From 2003 till July 2007 Musharraf dithered, alternately sending the army to drive out the Taliban and then seeking an accommodation with them. This ended on July 11 last year with the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) shootout in Islamabad. Days later the Tehriq-e-Taliban declared war on the Pakistani State. During the rest of the year 2,760 people lost their lives in the civil war that now rages – four times as many as in the first half of the year – and the ratio of security forces killed to terrorists has gone up from 1 to 5 to 1 to 2.2.

By the end of 2007, insurgency had spread not only to the whole of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas but also to most of the North West Frontier Province, which is also populated mostly by Pashtoons. At least 1,190 persons, including 459 civilians, 538 militants and 193 Security Force personnel, were killed in the NWFP in 2007. Significantly, 27 of the 56 suicide attacks in Pakistan in 2007 also occurred in the region. With Baluchistan also in the grip of an insurgency, almost two thirds of Pakistan was partly or wholly outside the grip of the central government⁹.

Discord in the army

The Afghan war has not only fed fanatical, jihadi terrorism in Pakistan. Its other, even more devastating, effect has been to split the army. From as far back as 2004, some of the most eminent of Pakistan’s retired policy makers and generals, such as Shafqat Mehmood, Najmuddin Sheikh, and former chief of the ISI Asad Durrani, had been writing in the newspapers warning the government to get out of the Afghan quagmire because the army did not consider it to be “our war,” and was therefore increasingly unwilling to fight it. But the fissures came into the open in September last year when a handful of Taliban were able to capture a detachment of 214 Pakistani soldiers including a Major and a Lieutenant Colonel, without

⁸ N. Schmidle: “Islamist Old Guard Struggles With New.” *International Herald Tribune* January 5-6. Paris edition. Pg. 2.

⁹ *South Asia Intelligence Review* no. 6.26. E-newsletter of the South Asia Terrorism Portal. January 6 2008.

firing a shot. What has not come into the limelight is the increasing number of desertions that are taking place from the Pak army. Radio chatter picked up by Indian intelligence agencies suggest that as many as 150 soldiers deserted to the Taliban in a single week in October.

More than anything else, it is his awareness of these growing fissures and of the demoralisation in the Pakistani army, that has caused Musharraf to lose self-confidence, become impatient and look for quick solutions to his multiplying problems. To understand why it is necessary to look at this development through his eyes. For any army officer in Pakistan it is an article of faith that the armed forces are the steel frame upon which the State is built. In the past five years, even while Musharraf was trying to return Pakistan to a form of qualified democracy, his dependence upon that steel frame was continuing to grow. This was the reason for his determination to retain his uniform. But in the last two years the steel frame has itself developed cracks. That, and not simply a lust for power, is the root cause of his growing catalogue of mistakes.

A sliver of hope

In all these years the only stratagem that Musharraf has not tried is to make the US set a date for pulling out of Pakistan. This may be because he knew that it would never agree: by the admission of its own generals the US army is sending more than half of its war materials to Afghanistan through Pakistan. But this has put him squarely in the line of fire from all sides. While the populace has turned against him because of his readiness to cooperate with the Americans, the democratic and modern elements in Pakistan cannot forgive him for having destroyed the hope that he had himself kindled in them between 1999 and 2002, of steering Pakistan away from Talibanisation and creating a modern, thriving society.

Musharraf may have lost most of the legitimacy he once enjoyed. But it would be a mistake to think that he has no role left to play. On the contrary, whatever slim chance Pakistan still has of extricating itself from the Afghan quagmire hinges upon the role he can play as President of the nation. This is also the challenge that faces the Gilani government. As Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the head of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, made clear to the American Ambassador in Pakistan when she urged him in October 2007 to join a coalition government led by Benazir Bhutto after the election,¹⁰ Musharraf and Gilani will only be able to do so if they promise to extricate Pakistan from the Afghan war. This is also the only platform on which they will be able to bring the army and the democratic parties together and heal the rifts in the Pakistani State.

¹⁰ Schmidle: *op.cit.*[8]

If Pakistan needs to extricate itself from the Afghan war, then the world needs to make sure that this does not happen at the expense of conceding a resounding victory to Al Qaeda. Reconciling these conflicting objectives will not be easy: indeed the time for doing so may already have passed. But the only sliver of hope of lies in setting in motion a peace process that weans the moderate Pashtoons away from the Taliban and the older elements within the Taliban away from the new generation of zealots whom the Afghan war has propelled into power.

The first step towards peace would be for NATO to stop proactive military operations in Afghanistan. Indeed the intensification of these operations in 2007 is one of the more important reasons for the worsening of the civil war in Pakistan. The second is for NATO to set a time limit for withdrawing from Afghanistan, provided the Afghans are able to put the framework of a peace agreement in place. As for bringing the various Afghan parties to the conference table, it is difficult to see how this can be done without the active mediation of not only Pakistan but, more importantly, of India and Iran. In this the assistance of leaders like Maulana Fazlur-Rahman and other religious leaders will prove invaluable.

Starting a fresh peace process will be far from easy. The new generation of Taliban leaders believes that it is winning the civil war in Afghanistan. It has therefore contemptuously spurned Afghan President Hamid Karzai's invitations to negotiate a peace. It will almost certainly perceive a new peace offensive as a threat and do its utmost to prevent it from ever taking off. Thus the offer of peace could, paradoxically lead to the intensification of conflict. But if NATO India, Pakistan and Iran keep their offers to withdraw and to mediate on the table, in a short while Pashtoons in both countries will begin to regard the Taliban as obstacles to the establishment of peace and the restoration of sovereignty. This will reduce and, over time may even stop the trickle of recruits into their ranks.

Till as recently as a year ago, an initiative on the above lines would have stood a very good chance of success. But while the idea of turning to Iran to pull its chestnuts out of the fire was anathema to the US, Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence and hawkish elements in its foreign office too would not hear of involving India in the search for a solution. Today the most one can say is that it is worth trying, because the alternatives – the destruction of the modern Pakistani state or a precipitate withdrawal by NATO from Afghanistan and an Al Qaeda victory – are infinitely worse.