

# The Gathering Storm

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### Introduction

The threats to Indian security have intensified with the rise of Taliban. We have faced attacks for decades from Jaish-e-Muhamad or Lashkar-e-Toiba and other Pak inspired jihadists. Now the new threat lends another dimension and urgency. The number of Jihadi groups has proliferated but when Kashmir and India are the target, all converge with alacrity. As early as February 1999 when Pakistan was planning the Kargil incursion, President Rabbani of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (with Mullah Omar supporting), was asked to provide 20-30,000 volunteers for Kashmiri jihad. He startled the Pakistanis by offering 500,000. This may be classic Afghan hyperbole or Pakistani boastfulness but the anti-India bias and the magnitude of the threat are revealing.

### The Taliban Phenomenon

The commando type raid at Mumbai on 26 Nov 2008 shook the entire Indian Nation. Then, ISI brought Guwahati to a halt in the North East and a handful of terrorists forced deployment of 1500 army personnel for an eight day gun battle in the dense forests in Poonch, Kashmir. This goes back a long time. The Pak army has used the Jihadists as an ingenious and cost-effective means of bogging down the Indian army in Kashmir since 1990. As Steve Coll put it in Ghost Wars, “Every Pakistani General, believed in the jihadists by 1999, not necessarily from Islamic conviction, but because the Jihadists had proved themselves over many years as the one force able to frighten, flummox, and bog down the Hindu-dominated Indian army. About a dozen Indian divisions had been tied up in Kashmir since the late 1990s to suppress a few thousand well-trained, paradise-seeking guerrillas”<sup>2</sup>. Since then, the Jihadists and their present incarnation, Taliban have exhibited awesome capability against NATO forces in Afghanistan and attacks on American supply convoys, and in recent times, a daring assault on Pakistan police academy in Lahore. Recently, they established control over a large chunk of Pak territory in Swat which necessitated major operations by Pak army causing heavy civilian casualties and a flood of refugees.

What is this Taliban phenomenon and how have they become such a scourge? The answer lies in their battle-hardiness, well armed state and above all, religious fanaticism. They have also been nurtured by Pak ISI most of the time. Almost exclusively made up of Sunni Pashtuns, their leaders are the last word in bigotry and a convoluted world view. According to Lieutenant General Ziauddin of ISI, “They live in the Fourteenth Century”<sup>3</sup>. The rank and file is made up of orphans from madrassas who have no roots, families or memories. All they know is fighting for the cause of Islam and they have been fighting continuously for a decade. They are not afraid to die, indeed martyrdom is sought as a mark of merit. They are the latter day Christian crusading knights or the janissaries of the Ottoman Empire. They have perfected the tactics of raid and pillage, and fighting in small groups with little or no system of logistics or cumbersome supply lines and they have learnt to avoid pitched battles of the conventional type.

As a movement, the Taliban represent a new model for a purist Islamic revolution and extremism. As a fighting machine they are a refinement on guerrilla warfare. They are fired by Islamic zeal and are highly motivated to establish “True Muslim” rule over the entire Muslim world and to subjugate infidel states. Also, given the state of their weaponry, they must be about the best armed terrorists in history. And, they have tasted victory. Their earlier incarnation, Mujahideen, successfully ousted the mighty Soviet Union from Afghanistan. Later, as Taliban they ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. In recent times, they forced a truce in Swat on Pak government in exchange for establishment of Islamic Sharia. Their ultimate aim is to Talibanise the whole of Pakistan and Afghanistan, possibly also India.

### The Threats to India

If Taliban prevail over entire Pakistan, which cannot be entirely discounted, it would bring them practically at our door-step and breathing down the LOC in Kashmir. Alternately, reeling under their pressure in Pakistan, the ISI may well try to divert Taliban hordes to invade Kashmir like Pashtun Lashkars’ raiding Kashmir in 1947. Again, they will be a handy weapon for another and more serious Kargil or an upgraded “Gibraltar”. In the event of a major war, they will constitute formidable accretion to Pak military. During tensions post Mumbai attack on 26/11 (Nov 26, 2008), Baitullah Mehsud, of Pak Taliban, thundered “if Pakistan is attacked, we will send 1000 suicide bombers to India”. In any case, there is bound to be a surge in infiltrations and terrorist attacks in Kashmir and India.

In addition, ISI working with CIA, created, trained, and equipped thousands of radical Muslims from around the world to come to Pakistan and fight alongside Afghan Mujahideen. Further, ISI helped launch guerrilla attacks by CIA and Britain’s M16 into Soviet Socialist Republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to prey on Russian lines. Since then, between 1982 and 1992, some 35,000 radicals from 43 Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East have been trained. Further, tens of thousands more foreign Muslim adventurers came to study in the hundreds of new madrassas that Zia established along the Afghan border. Eventually, more than 100,000 Muslim radicals have imbibed the Jihadist philosophy. This policy was continued by Director ISI, Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, the most fervent Islamic ideologue after the death of President Zia. A typical group of trainees would comprise Philipino Moros, Uzbeks from Soviet Central Asia, Arabs from Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and Uighurs from Xinjiang in China.<sup>4</sup> This is a vast army of Jihadists keen to do Pakistan’s bidding, which gives an idea of the far-flung tentacles of ISI and trouble-making potential of

Pakistan, and hence dimensions to the threats to India.

The threat of Jihadists apart, India also faces problems due to vast accretions to conventional armed forces of Pakistan, going on for decades. After 9/11, Pakistan received billions of dollars worth of armaments and financial aid from USA. Currently, Pakistan, is mounting a diplomatic push in USA through Ambassador Haqqani<sup>5</sup>, to emphasise Pak Army needs of advanced weapon systems like Reaper/ Predator drones, helicopter gun-ships and advanced radars to fight the Taliban. The reality is that Taliban alike most other Jihadist groups, until recently, have been under control of ISI.<sup>6</sup> In any case, it is widely believed that “Pakistan Army, 620,000 strong and superbly armed, could easily crush the Taliban” if it decides to act. Indeed many pundits reckon that an Islamist take over in Pakistan would be possible only with the Army’s support<sup>7</sup>. This is borne out again by the recent successful operations in Swat by Pak army, though it is still doubtful, if it is finally the turning point in Army’s resolve to fight Taliban. It may be yet another temporary setback for the Islamists to be followed by new advances elsewhere.

Importantly, there are reports, confirmed by the US Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen in a senate hearing, that Pakistan is actively increasing its nuclear arsenal, also dubbed as “the fastest growing arsenal in the world” by Bruce Riedel who chaired Obama’s strategic Review for Af-Pak region.<sup>8</sup>

## **Counter Measures**

India must take defensive and offensive measures on the highest priority. We must secure the integrity of our borders: restricting cross-border movement to the minimum; a continuous grid of physical or electronic fencing; heightened ground and cyber vigilance, effective radar coverage of land and maritime borders and a revamped intelligence structure as well as battle readiness of a high order. The state of vigilance and readiness on the LOC in Kashmir and to a lesser extent borders in Rajasthan and Punjab is adequate but the vigilance and defensibility of the extensive borders with Bangladesh and China needs to be strengthened. The open border with Nepal is likely to be exploited for infiltration.

When a bigger danger is looming “without”, current problems “within” should be solved on priority. So, the internal security threats such as the Maoists, Naxals, Ulfas, Bodos and the like must be neutralised with determined effort.

The Taliban way of fighting represents a new face of war. Hence, the armed forces must adapt and restructure in order to fight with small, integrated, army-air, “Hunter Teams”. There will be need to induct, on priority, advanced weaponry including precision guided missiles, pilotless drones, advanced radars and airborne early warning systems. Our hunter teams or commando squads should have cross-country mobility in addition to helicopter transportation and gun-ship support.

The Taliban danger is as much a war of weapons as of ideology. So, India must gear to fight a war of “bullet-for-bullet” and “ideology-for-ideology”. India must strengthen forces of national integration by creative campaigns of public relations and psychological initiatives, and all efforts must be made to engender unity, communal harmony and “Indianhood”.

For years, Pak media has been actively brain-washing its populace, glorifying Pakistan and stressing the righteousness of their cause regarding Kashmir. In comparison, large sections of Indians remain ignorant of our achievements and tend to be apologetic about our right to consider Kashmir as an integral part of India. In a vast country like India, an informed public is an asset, and timely information is the best antidote to disinformation and negative propaganda by the enemy.

The same holds good for projecting our image abroad. Pakistan has shown remarkable ability in playing the media to promote their point of view. On any day, the American news media is full of laudatory articles about Pakistan. Important events in Pakistan and visits by their dignitaries are highlighted, preparing the ground and creating favourable image. During President Zardari’s recent visit to USA, there was a half page advertisement in the prestigious Wall Street Journal under banner headlines - “America and Pakistan”, “Victims of Terror - Partners in Peace”. In comparison, there is scant mention of India in the US media except in a negative way. For example, the remarkable story of Indian elections with 718 million people exercising adult franchise got but a brief mention.

In order to ensure proper inter-face between India’s defence policy and foreign policy, two sides of the same coin, there should be larger representation of IFS officers in the Ministry of Defence and a system of cross-deputation between the Defence Services and the IFS. India should also pursue a more muscular and robust foreign policy. We are a nuclear nation of one billion innovative and enterprising people (including 150 million Muslims) with third largest military in the world, second fastest growing economy and one of the largest middle class in the world. Our defence and civil procurement from the USA and Western countries, including potential equipments for nuclear power generation, runs into billions of dollars. In short, India is a “giver” rather than a “seeker” country. So, our concerns and voice should carry weight and we have a right to demand our rightful share of influence in our region and the world.

## **Obama Strategy for “Af-Pak Region” and Implications for India**

This area has been christened as “Af-Pak Region” possibly endorsing Pak quest for “strategic depth”. The Strategy is largely Pak centrist, with overarching preoccupation with security and survival of Pakistan, and emphasis on Pakistan’s vital role as an ally for operations in Afghanistan as also for promoting American interests with Iran and the Central Asian Republics. Admittedly, there is some logic to notions of Pak centrality in the region. Geographically, Pakistan is the key to operations in land-locked Afghanistan. It has contiguous borders

containing important land routes and port facility of Karachi. Pakistan is the birth place of Radical Islam and a country where hordes of Jihadists have been incubated, trained, equipped and exported worldwide. The process is still continuing – it being the epicentre of terrorism. Above all, it is a nuclear armed country. Thus, Pakistan is both the “problem” and the “solution”.

Pak aims and objectives for this region are not hard to discern. They would want a subservient or pliant regime in Afghanistan to ensure strategic depth for Pakistan, to achieve which their chosen weapon would in all probability still be the “good Taliban”. Reasons are not far to seek. Ethnically, Taliban are Pashtuns of FATA, and Pashtuns of Afghanistan, the latter constituting the majority in Afghanistan where they have ruled for 250 years. Besides, through its long standing links with Taliban, Pakistan can claim extensive experience of manipulating or controlling them. Pakistan will ensure total support to the US/NATO objectives of destruction of Al-Qaida and restoring normalcy in Afghanistan in exchange for continuing western arms and financial aid, of \$1.5 billion per year for five years or more, as proposed by the Kerry-Lugar aid bill, significantly titled, PEACE (Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement Act 2009) but it must be without any conditionalities or “benchmarks”. As for India, they are totally opposed to its presence in Afghanistan and they do not want to be pressed about Jihadi incursions into Kashmir or India (though the USA/Europe may publically decry such acts).

In spite of its successes in Swat, Pakistani army is loath to carry out operations against the doughty Taliban for it is their own creation and would amount to waging war on its own people, besides there would be the fall-out of humanitarian problems and dangers of civil war. Recent flood of refugees (possibly exaggerated) after operations in Swat, as also the spate of suicide bombings in Lahore and NWFP may be cited by Pakistan and its friends in proof. Pressure by the USA may force Pakistan to act forcefully against Taliban. Even so, despite the recent contretemps with Baitullah Mehsud and Mullah Fazlullah, the ISI, owing to decades of its close links with Taliban, and out of past experience and genuine conviction may well still consider Taliban high command, Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani as long-term ISI “strategic assets”. Hence, Pakistan may continue to persevere with the “Good Taliban” theory.

At the same time, the USA has been trying to promote Pakistan as the ideal ally for Afghanistan to its NATO allies. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff told a Senate panel, “I see NATO going increasingly towards a broader and more in-depth relationship with Pakistan”. There was also mention of the possibility of Pakistan joining the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). Clearly Pakistan is aspiring for the big league and its old politics of cronyism and bonds with the CIA and Pentagon, is back on track.

A sole domination of Afghanistan by Pakistan to the exclusion of India, strengthening of Taliban and further augmentation of Pak military machine, would be unfavourable developments for India. However, the USA seems to have decided to largely go along with Pak views: not out of any ill will towards India but out of determination to resolve the Afghanistan imbroglio and more importantly, to ensure security of Pak nuclear arsenal.

India has historic interests in Afghanistan, Middle East and in Central Asia. We have executed a number of very good infra-structure projects in Afghanistan. We are intensely concerned with developments in trans-border regions of Af-Pak where the breeding grounds of Taliban lie. India is closest and in the front line of Taliban threat. Equally, India has legitimate interests in Central Asian republics. So, it should be natural for it to be a full member of the SCO9 (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and have the freedom to build up on its (reported) nascent presence in Tajikistan.

## Conclusion

India is heading towards troubled times and times of grave danger. Taliban hordes may well be upon us before long, with a substantially enhanced Pakistan military. In any case, Kashmir is likely to come under heightened threat of terrorism, along with a spike in infiltrations across Nepal and Bangladesh borders. China remains as unfriendly as ever, whereas the USA is pre-occupied with its own agenda for AF-Pak region with pronounced leanings towards Pakistan.

There is a shift of balance of power under way in the Indian Sub-continent and West Asia, a subtle yet perceptible tilt, marginalising India and enhancing the position of our adversaries. India will need to reach deep within itself to marshal all its energies to fight for its rightful place in the region and the world. It may well prove to be a defining moment in our history. Either we rise and meet the challenges with courage and wisdom or accept the beginning of a long slide down.

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