

Operation Geronimo - An Analysis Lieutenant General PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)*

Introduction

Operation Geronimo conducted deep inside Pakistan on 02 May 2011 by US Navy Seals will go down as a remarkable operation in annals of the US Special Forces (USSF) history notwithstanding speculations of a US-Pak understanding to sacrifice bin Laden, facilitating the US withdrawal from Af-Pak and boosting President Obama's ratings for re-election. A viewpoint circulating the web even posits Osama having died six months back, his body preserved in Tarbela and Seals taking 40 minutes at Osama's safe-house because a Pakistani helicopter had to fly in Osama's body from Tarbela. The whole truth may never come out considering close US Special Forces (USSF)-SSG ties, long standing CIA-ISI relations albeit with mutual suspicion, the recent Raymond Davis affair, divergent Pakistan and US claims post Geronimo and even façade of resignation by Shuja Pasha (DG ISI) knowing fully well it would not be accepted by Prime Minister Gilani, survivability of Pak politicians being courtesy blessings of ISI-Military. Remember feeble effort of President Zardari to bring the ISI under the Ministry of Interior, words he was made to swallow within 24 hours? David Ignatius wrote in Time magazine dated 23 May 2011, "When I asked top CIA and military officials what the intelligence showed about ISI activities, they would become visibly angry. They would say ... see the double dealing ... how US intelligence is passed on to Haqqani network". In all probability, the USA could not trust ISI on this one despite the fact that the US-Pakistan mutual dependency in terms of strategic and security values will remain critical at least till the US presence in Afghanistan, unless a major event like 9/11 recurs. It is for this reason that despite giving \$20 billion to Pakistan for counter terrorism since 9/11, the US has hardly received sincere and appropriate response for something which is seriously being questioned by the US citizenry.

Osama bin Laden

Post 9/11, when USA declared war on Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden was priority one target. CIA operatives and USSF launched a global hunt for this most wanted terrorist. Information and intelligence were both elusive with Pakistan having been forced into the GWOT rather than submit to the alternative of being "bombed into stone age". In 1998, the US launched a cruise missile attack against an Al Qaeda camp, having tracked bin Laden through his satellite phone. It could be providence or a tip off that Osama switched off his phone in the nick of time, moved away and was saved by the skin of his teeth, the corollary being that two of the unexploded cruise missiles were spirited away to China courtesy ISI and the Chinese having mastered reverse engineering, produced their own cruise missile in no time. Over the years, there were a couple of sightings of bin Laden but he managed to evade capture / death. In February 2011, Al Qaeda declared they had thwarted an assassination attempt on Osama a month ago by US forces using a device that could send signals to satellites to locate and guide air strikes. "The Al-Qaida leadership is proud of its technical wing which used its expertise to discover a 5 mm chip fixed in a Universal Serial Bus (USB) that was meant to reach our leader for an interview", the statement said. According to them, a man who called himself David Noshkay, posing as a US journalist wanted to interview bin Laden and having been refused had sent a USB with his questions, requesting the interview to be recorded on camera and saved on the USB.

Abbottabad Compound

When Benazir Bhutto said in 2007 that Osama was in Musharraf's backyard, she was not lying. Post Geronimo, an ISI spokesman told BBC's Owen Bennett-Jones in Islamabad that the said compound in Abbottabad was raided in 2003 and the compound was not on ISI radar thereafter. Significantly, satellite imagery / aerial photographs with CIA, US DoD and GeoEye show this area empty with no construction in 2003. So, what was the ISI raiding in 2003? Only the boundary wall came up in 2004 and construction of the mansion began in 2005 perhaps under the watchful eye of the ISI / Musharraf himself (see photographs below).¹ Houses in close proximity of the boundary wall (missing in the 2004 photograph below) may well have been constructed to house Al Qaeda / Taliban cadres.

The fact that a mansion on a plot measuring 2508 square metres came up within 700 metres of Pakistan Military Academy (PMA), Kakul, adjacent to a cantonment housing three regimental centres including the Frontier Force Regiment and housed bin Laden for perhaps six long years without knowledge of the ISI and Pakistan Military is hardly acceptable. Though without internet and telephone connections, USBs containing e-mails for Osama were regularly brought to the house and replies taken back in similar fashion. Osama was either getting medical treatment **at** PMA Kakul or had doctors visiting him. The likes of Hamid Gul and ISI contacts too would have been visitors. The design of the mansion itself is typical of a 'safe house' designed by ISI to provide maximum security, considering the various security walls denying outsider observation, privacy wall on the third floor living of Osama, limited opaque windows and large killing zones on the western and eastern ends to trap intruders.

Intelligence

An operation like Geronimo cannot be undertaken purely on TECHINT even though Leon Panetta, Director CIA claimed the US was not sure whether Osama was present. If the US was not 200 per cent sure about Osama's presence, the raid would never have gone in especially after the failed hostage rescue of 1980 in Iran and the 1993 disastrous operation in Somalia. Amidst stories of Osama having been betrayed by Ayman al Zawahiri (Al Qaeda Number 2) and Amal (Osama's Yemeni wife), the US must have ensured synergising of 'all sources' overlapping and overwhelming intelligence - human, signal, open sources, imagery, technical, geospatial and technical. CIA already had some 3000 strong Counter Terrorism Pursuit Teams (CTPTs) deployed in Af-Pak region crucial for HUMINT and vital to guide 'Predator' strikes on Al Qaeda and Taliban. The US must have deployed intelligence operatives and Special Forces deep inside Pakistan without taking ISI into confidence. Raymond Davis himself was a CIA operative. The main lead came up over a year ago when a 'trusted courier' of Osama was tracked down in Peshawar. While bits of intelligence from thousands of interrogations from prisoners and captives collected, eavesdropping on telephone calls and e-mails of the 'trusted courier' with contacts 'inside Pakistan' coupled with constant satellite surveillance of the Abbottabad mansion provided hard intelligence for conceiving Operation Geronimo, vital piece of intelligence being when the 'trusted courier' was

spotted driving himself into Osama's Abbotabad compound. One cannot say the mansion was not kept under surveillance from ground. If indeed there was a mole inside the house, then there had to be an outside contact who himself visited the mansion or communicated through a delivery boy though such arrangements are fraught with danger. In such a covert operation little can be left to chance. Excellent coverage of the target area provided a 3D model of the mansion, enabling building of a life sized replica of the target area.

Planning, Rehearsal and Execution

Any operational plan has a number of options and sensitive operation like Geronimo requires that these be weighed very carefully. The options in this case were three; a joint raid in conjunction with ISI / SSG with actual target given to Pakistan last minute, an overwhelming air strike by B-2 bombers and a heliborne raid by the USSF. The first option was more theoretical considering doubts of ISI sincerity. A bombing run by B-2 bombers could obliterate even the post operation proof of Osama's death, especially since the assessed requirement for effective bombing was 32 x 2000 pound bombs. Therefore, the third option of a heliborne raid by USSF was considered the best and adopted.

US Navy Seal Team Six chosen for the operation had the advantage of training extensively on life sized model of the target in a training facility back home in the US. As in all Special Forces operations, the Seal Team was quarantined and not told during the rehearsals what the actual target was and whether they were training for a live operation and when such an operation would go in, if at all. This is standard procedure and the actual target must have been told to them either after arriving at the transit base at Jalalbad in Afghanistan or even after having taken off from Jalalabad for Osama's mansion.

The raiding party consisted of 79 Seals in four helicopters, catering for possible firefight and 100 per cent back up. The route taken was hugging the hills and over the Tarbela river, approaching the target from the north. The night was moonless and the raiders arrived at the target just past midnight on 02 May 2011, in pitch black darkness.

24 Seals descended on the compound. Five occupants of the mansion were killed with no casualties to the raiders. One of them was Osama Bin Laden who was found in his living room on the third floor. He reportedly resisted and was shot in the head. 40 minutes taken for the raid included time required to search the sprawling mansion, collecting the intelligence treasures of electronic equipment, laptops, hard drives, tapes, USBs, uploading pictures of Osama for confirmation of identity and destroying electronic and sensitive parts of the MH-60M Black Hawk that had stalled. Though Osama's body was identified by one of his wives, his photograph was uploaded to analysts back in the US. The CIA confirmed Osama had been killed by feeding the photograph to a facial recognition programme and by matching DNA with Osama's sister who had died two years earlier. President Obama and his national security team watched the entire operation live via satellite - an example of battlefield transparency flashed by news channels around the world.

Analysis

Geronimo was undoubtedly a flawless operation, meeting all the requirements of a successful Special Forces mission - intelligence, planning, rehearsals, stealth, surprise, speed of execution, optimising technology, no collateral damage and no casualty to own side. It was a fine example of employment of Special Forces effort at low and precisely calculated levels to achieve strategic effects, major fallouts being:

- (a) Focussing world attention on Pakistan being home to terrorist leaders especially of Al Qaeda and Taliban.
- (b) Messaging Pakistan that there was a limit beyond which the US would not tolerate ISI's duplicity in GWOT despite dependence on land route via Pakistan to sustain US/ ISAF forces in Afghanistan.
- (c) Heightening internal debate in Pakistan on capability of ISI in protecting the country and complicity in sheltering terrorist leaders - help generate public opinion to strengthen democracy.
- (d) Delivering another blow to a weakened Al Qaeda.

Aftermath - Pakistan

Post Geronimo, musings within Pakistan are on following lines - If we did not know Osama was in Pakistan, then we are a 'failed state' and if we knew Osama was in Pakistan then we are a 'rogue state'. Shahid Saeed tweeted, "I am, for not a single moment, arguing we should have shot down the Americans. I for one believe they did the right thing. For all we know, it was the nightmare we have, that some sympathetic group in our very forces protected the most wanted man on Earth". In immediate aftermath of the raid, an ISI spokesman told BBC that ISI had shared all information of the compound with the CIA since 2009. Whether true or not, it surely evoked repercussion from Al Qaeda-Taliban resulting in the 22-23 May attack on PNS Mehran in Karachi causing much damage including the destruction of two PC3 Orions. Security experts now question the safety of missiles and nukes of Pakistan. This notwithstanding, for Pakistan to change its jihadi strategy is not going to be easy with the ISI-Military combine having infiltrated into every sector of Pakistani governance.

Post Geronimo, Pasha warned India that any Abbottabad-like attack would invite befitting response from Pakistan, targets inside India having been identified, reconnoitered and rehearsed. Pasha was obviously referring to ground work done by terrorists like David Headley and Tahawwur Rana. MK Dhar, former Joint Director IB, writes in his book 'Open Secrets', "Way back in 1992-93.....the process of 'transplanting armed modules' in the heartland of India had started taking cognisable shape. Some of these cells were identified in Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Kota/Ajmer region of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. The Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) had already started deputing 'volunteers' to Pakistan for training along with the mujahideen, Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres". So where is the problem in identifying, reconnoitering and rehearsing targets in India?

Aftermath - India

Lack of reaction to the Geronimo raid by military garrisons located close by, is being construed by a cross section of our security experts as proof of ISI-Pakistan Military having been given advance information of the raid. This need not be the case. The sound of low flying helicopters on a pitch dark night is so misleading that it creates the mirage of an omni-directional attack. Earmarking a reaction team from a close by garrison implied more and more people knowing someone important was in the compound. Can you imagine the ISI risking this with troops turn over and requirement of rehearsals? One thing is certain that having eluded the US for a decade, complacency must have set in with the US hunting along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border while Osama enjoyed the comfort of his luxurious mansion in urban surroundings. This is perhaps the reason that the developers and occupants of the mansion never thought of developing escape tunnel (s) that could have helped evade capture and death, utilising them the moment helicopter noises were heard. Talking of reaction, how deep inside India was the Purulia drop? Did we scramble any aircraft? How many hours after the terrorist strike during 26/11 did we react and how do we rate the eventual clean up - taking 60 hours to clear a couple of terrorists?

As it happened after the attack on Parliament and 26/11, the Indian media went in a tizzy on whether our Special Forces could undertake a similar raid like the US Navy Seals. The answer is yes provided our boys could be landed in the same compound but could they have been landed there? Answer to the second question is 'no', in the absence of national will and our inability to revive the concept of HUMINT that was throttled during Prime Minister Gujral's time. Notwithstanding this, covert actions to take out the wanted terrorist are possible provided we have the will. There are many ways that covert and incognito operations can be conducted and it is all the easier when the targets move freely in Pakistan. Our Special Forces come into focus periodically when operations like Geronimo occur. There are calls for revisiting our Special Forces but the end result is only unwarranted expansion in complete disregard to global norms. The annual expansion rate in Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is 3.5 per cent albeit for 2012, a special sanction is being sought to hike it to 4.12 per cent due to increased commitments. This growth rate is despite USSF deployment in over 85 countries. In sharp contrast, our Army Special Forces expanded by 110 per cent during the period 2000 to 2003. This year, we have raised the eighth Special Forces unit, causing a manpower shortage of 80-90 personnel in all Special Forces units. Already, India's Special Forces are at par in numbers with SOCOM, considering 2/3rd strength of SOCOM is 'in support' role comprising civilians and military which are not Special Forces. We need to define a National Strategy for Employment of Special Forces and integrate and consolidate our Special Forces. Unless we want to continue suffering from Pakistan's '1000 cut policy', we must develop a deterrent to the irregular war thrust upon us. We need to build overt publicised capabilities and deniable covert capabilities with Special Forces in the lead. We should also have the will to selectively demonstrate this deterrence in order to establish its credibility. We should heed Chanakya who said, "Do not be very upright in your dealings for you would see by going to the forest that straight trees are cut down while crooked ones are left standing". Advantages of joint training / joint operations of our Special Forces with counterparts like the USSF require little elaboration and should be exploited.

There was considerable inquisitiveness about the 'stealth' helicopter used by the Seals. Indications suggest the MH-60M Black Hawk has greater radar and acoustic stealth. Delivering his posture statement on 03 March 2011, Admiral Olsen, Commander SOCOM had stated, "We are fielding the first of 72 planned MH-60M as part of our capitalization of MH-60 K/L platforms". Additionally, the flight route was obviously chosen intelligently through gaps in radar coverage hugging the hills, which would obviously be known to the US.

Conclusion

India should not be lulled by elimination of Osama Bin Laden. Having sponsored terrorism in India for over two decades, Pakistan is becoming more and more jingoistic, increasing her nuclear toys, tacit Chinese support to her jihadi policies and impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Her obsession of installing a Pakistan favoured regime in Afghanistan and kicking Indians out is unlikely to recede. The thousand cut policy of Pakistan is going to multiply much more with institutionalised radicalisation in Pakistan, especially in urban areas, which according to an opinion published in Daily Times of Karachi dated 11 May 2009 is " ...a monstrous experiment in brainwashing and on a par with, if not worse than, Nazi Germany's eugenics". Dr Marc Faber, author of Gloom, Boom and Doom writes, "India continues to be ambivalent about power, it has failed to develop a strategic agenda commensurate with its growing economic and military capabilities ... throughout history, India has failed to master the creation, deployment and use of its military instruments in support of its national objectives". India needs to gear up for much harsher times.

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