

Af-Pak Region: Post Osama bin Laden Brigadier MS Chowdhury, VSM (Retd)*

Introduction

When a main player exits the centre stage of history to ascend to Valhalla it invariably results in a variety of theories, views, analyses, speculations and predictions, and so it was post bin Laden's demise. Will the event give a fillip to terrorists or demoralise them, even if temporarily? Will it hasten peace and stability in the Af-Pak Region? Has a major battle been won in the "War of Civilizations"? Or in Churchillian phraseology is it the 'end of the beginning' or perhaps even 'the beginning of the end'? These are the aspects that will be pondered over in the days ahead.

In this article it is intended to review the back-drop, look at Laden and other personalities involved and essay answers to the many issues raised in the wake of his death. Basically we need to consider whether his death has dealt a major blow to the organisation or will it provide motivation to the cellular network across the globe by creating a legend.

Background

It would be useful to revisit the events leading upto the current morass. In order to be able to carry out a predictive assessment it is necessary to build-up the scenario brick by brick. To this extent the background would need to be covered in some detail.

Al Qaeda was founded by Osama bin Laden about 1989. This movement functions a network comprising a multinational stateless army and a radical Sunni Muslim movement calling for global Jihad. Some members have taken a pledge of loyalty to Laden. There are also groups linked to Al Qaeda who have not done so. Training camps are mainly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Sudan. The ideologues of the movement dream of creating a new Islamic caliphate. They also instigate sectarian violence between Muslims – targeting Shias, Sufis, liberal Muslims and non Sunni Muslims – whom they regard as heretics.¹

Laden was the Emir (commander) and Senior Operations Chief. He was advised by a Shura (Council). His deputy was Zawahiri. The organisation functioned through various committees. It is assessed that roughly 300 Al Qaeda commanders are located in 40 countries and can command insurgent forces as required. These commanders are autonomous and many of them chalk out their own agenda.

Post Soviet withdrawal there was anarchy in Afghanistan. The void there provided a good breeding ground for the growth of the Taliban which mainly consisted of uprooted or orphaned youth educated in the Af-Pak madrassas. By 1996 it was able to form the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (which was recognised only by Pakistan, UAE and Saudi Arabia). At this time Al Qaeda flourished under the Taliban rule. After 'Operation Enduring Freedom', survivors of Al Qaeda and Taliban fled to the countryside and Pakistan. By 2009 it is believed that the two groups had severed ties completely and not many Al Qaeda survivors remained in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda has been propagating International Jihad on a global scale to drive out non Muslims from Muslim lands. They also called for solidarity with Muslim causes round the world; more notably, Bosnia, Kashmir, Iraq and Palestine. They were, in addition, active in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula.

Bin Laden believed that there was a Crusader-Hindu-Zionist conspiracy against Islam. As a counter he began training militants for Jihad in Kashmir. By 2001 a Kashmiri militant group, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) became part of the Al Qaeda Coalition. There are also ties between Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Al Qaeda continues to operate from bases in PoK with the support of Pakistan. Kashmiri militants are trained in the same camps as the Al Qaeda and the Taliban. In an open letter to the American people, bin Laden had written that he was fighting America because of its support to India on the Kashmir issue.

Al Qaeda has created a global network of affiliates making it a decentralised regional structure. It has its constituent nationalities and ethnic groups, each with its own charter and geographic responsibilities. It is believed to have autonomous underground cells in some 100 countries and is linked to a large number of Muslim terrorist organisations across the world.

Operation Geronimo - Many Unanswered Questions

The death of bin Laden has given rise to much speculation and many questions to which clear answers are not available. There are many links about which there is no clarity or information. Without a clear picture/answers, making an assessment of the future acquires added complexity. In due course of time we may get some of the answers. Till then prediction of the future would be hamstrung to that extent. The issues which beg answers are: Did the US act unilaterally; did the Pakistani Army double cross the elected government; did ISI mislead the government and even the Army; was Laden betrayed by his deputy or perhaps his wife; was he ratted on by his trusted courier; was he sacrificed in a deal between the US and the co-founder of the Taliban, Ghani; is Mullah Omar alive; was there a secret Bush-Musharraf deal; was there a mole among his confidants; did Pakistan betray him; was he killed prior to the actual raid; or was he taken alive; was he shot or did he blow himself up? Besides, several other queries require authentic responses. There is much sceptism about the raid.

The world reaction has been predictable. There was elation from one camp and sharp anger from the other. Pakistan, playing the injured party, responded angrily. But it was evident that they were caught between a rock and a very hard place!

After Laden Who?

Given the loose autonomous nature of the organisation the selection of a successor will be a long drawn and complex affair. To find Laden's attributes, notably commitment, courage, personal wealth, charisma and above all acceptability, would be difficult indeed. Perhaps time and events would throw up a successor or perhaps an affiliate which shares Al Qaeda's sharp Sunni Muslim puritical fundamentalist views may provide the leader. This organisation could be Hezbollah, a radical Iran backed Lebanese militia, which has been closely cooperating with Al Qaeda, or it could be the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda which is best known and considered to be the most effective. But it needs to be emphasised again that the issue of succession is bound to be a complex one. The likelihood of Al Qaeda breaking up into autonomous radicalised regional groupings across Middle East, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and Central Asia without any central leadership is high. Even worse than that would be the sprouting of small virulent area based groupings which follow the concept which BBC calls "one man, one bomb".

The Muslim World

The response to the raid was one of anger not dismay even from Muslim countries purporting to be not supportive of Al Qaeda. Tremors were felt across Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and West Asia and North Africa (WANA) regions. Various groups talked of: "a bloodier Jihadist movement", "the death of the Sheikh will only increase our persistence" and "the ember of Jihad is brighter". In general those fighting against terrorism were warned to be ready to face serious retaliatory consequences. The Mehran attack was the beginning of the "revenge of the martyrdom of Laden" and as per the organisation, "a proof that we are still united and powerful." 2

The Arab world with its plethora of clans, sects, ethnicities, religions and economic interests will be affected in disparate ways. From the recent happenings in the Arab World, it was clear that citizens wanted change, transition from autocratic rule to democracy, accountability, human rights and participative governance. However, it must be noted that the radical element is there in each country and given an opportunity this element could balloon out. A civil war or an extended period of uncertainty would provide the ideal soil for this.³ To underscore this aspect a wide-spread urban-rural survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan concluded that 67 per cent of the people of Pakistan wanted further Islamisation of its society while only 13 per cent did not.

Pakistan

Pakistan obviously has become the eye of the storm. Though hard put to deny complicity, the leadership has not lost its aggressiveness. Their credibility is at stake. The fault lines are now more sharply in focus. The image of its Army stands dented. There are doubts between the people and the Army, Army and the Government, ISI and the Army, the US and Pakistan and between militant organisations and Pakistan. Pakistani Army has warned the US of unspecified reprisals in case of another raid and protested against the drone attacks.

Pakistan will remain a key player for both the US and China. Despite her complicity the US cannot cut aid to Pakistan, as this will cause more unrest and increased recruits for terrorism. It will ultimately handover Gwadar port to China and there will be increased bond between the two countries. Terrorist attacks in Pakistan will increase and the military would further tighten its grip over the country. Threat to its nuclear weapons would increase and the spectre of balkanisation loom larger. There would be increasing speculation about an independent Pashtunistan, an independent Baluchistan and a further shrunk Pakistan (Punjab and Sindh); or worse an unending conflict and civil war. None of this would bode well for India and the world.

Nawaz Sharif has shown great courage in rejecting the internal military probe.⁴ He has also pointed out that India is not Pakistan's enemy No 1. This is a good opportunity to reassert civilian control over the delinquent Army. Terrorism cannot be defeated without rebalancing Pakistan's civil-military relations, deradicalisation and downsizing its military.⁵ There is also a small chance of a split within the Pakistani Army between the radicalised element and the moderate group. Happy as this thought is, it would lead to a chaotic situation. Both Geronimo and Mehran suggest that the establishment has been compromised. In an interview Mr Shaharyar Khan, the former Foreign Minister of Pakistan said, "In the early death of Jinnah his secular ideals were forgotten. It led to long periods of military and feudal mafia rule. Now the terrorists have overwhelmed us. But realisation has begun to dawn on people and a correction will develop".⁶ Let the world pray that it does so. This is a golden chance for Pakistan to abnegate its path of violence.

Now that the military faces a double whammy (failure on Laden and the raid) perhaps, the time has come to rein in the military; and given the rumblings against the military, re-establish civil authority. Four attacks against the military in Karachi seem to have brought in "no lessons learnt".

When the drone attacks killed some civilians Pakistani press went overboard. But the killing of civilians by the terrorists was not an issue with them. It is the responsibility of the international community to see that the lunatic fringe does not become the mainstream as it happened in Germany. The world must now brace itself to see the road Pakistan takes from the tri-junction it finds itself at: Taliban take over, an implosion or return to military dictatorship. None of these is a happy augury for India. Finally, despite a bad marriage the US and Pakistan cannot do without each other. The US has addressed Pakistan's complaints with alacrity. To name some : The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act 2009, Pakistan Counter-insurgency Capability Fund and finally, the establishment of a Strategic Dialogue. Perhaps the time is ripe to increase civil aid to Pakistan at the cost of military largesse and to route it through the elected government rather than direct doles to the military. In any case the US cannot end this Faustian relationship.

The USA

With no small contribution from America the USSR was successfully dismantled but it gave a fillip to Wahabi fundamentalism. It also led to the emergence of six new Muslim Central Asian Republics. Terrorism increased along with narco arms production and smuggling. 9/11 happened which shook American self confidence almost to the same level as Pearl Harbour. But Pearl Harbour was far away while 9/11 was Homeland. It was a wake up call and helped to obfuscate the real strategic and economic aims that America has for its continued domination. Interestingly 9/11 was perpetrated by its own protégé turned nemesis. It would appear that the 'War of Civilisations' has begun to reach its

crescendo.

Distrust between the US and Pakistan and the US and China will increase, but bring India closer to the US. Attacks on American interests will escalate which may not only delay US pull out from Afghanistan but raise the probability of intervention in Iran or Syria or both. Another 9/11 event would result in curtailment of civil liberties, tightening of Homeland Security and increased policing. All this along with economic decline would cause widespread unrest.

It is not to America's credit that it has allowed Pakistan to treat it as a friend and adversary simultaneously. It is now possible that the American game in the region is over. It remains to be seen as to how the declining and over stretched superpower will handle its exit. The people are tired of this war. The Administration needs to be more proactive to contain the impending upheaval. As starters it needs to bring Taliban on board, cut Predator attacks and conclude – which side is Pakistan on? In any case, they need to desist from supplying long range maritime reconnaissance aircraft and other similar wherewithal to a duplicitous ally to fight militants. A little wonder that Pakistan is referred to as America's indispensable and dishonest partner.

There is resentment in the Muslim world against Muslims killing other Muslims apart from other issues. The US needs to build on this but show good intent and get Israel to settle the Palestine issue. However, what the US must not do is, threaten to violate the sovereignty of another country. This would merely play into the hands of radicalism. Notwithstanding this, it is America's primary responsibility to locate and hit Laden's support system which enabled him to enjoy uninterrupted Pakistani hospitality over an extended period of time.

The USA must also change its rules of engagement in the region, educate its wayward ally that it is not normal for the military/ISI to determine critical foreign policy issues and educate Pakistan on the fact that a stable and friendly Afghanistan that does not fear Pakistani hegemony is the best possible strategic depth for Pakistan.

China

China has played its cards well and it will remain a key player. Post Geronimo, Pasha's dash to Beijing as opposed to Washington, highlights this. Besides, China is an effected party as the proposed caliphate involves China as well, as it is to include Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and China's Xinjiang Uigur autonomous region.

China is aware that the US is repeating its destabilising strategy against China. It also knows that the US will be forced to vacate strategic space in Afghanistan and that space will be filled in by China. This equally applies to the rest of the embattled world. It is believed that Pakistan is to hand over Gwadar Port to China and that a Chinese naval base would be constructed there.⁷ This would be a coup of no small dimensions. Already a large presence of PLA is reported in the POK ostensibly to upgrade infrastructure projects. This would be in accordance with the larger strategic aim of Pakistan to involve China in its dispute with India regarding J&K.

Pasha's dash to Beijing followed by Gilani and then the Chinese statement, "Sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan must be respected – made great efforts to fight terrorism – an attack on Pakistan would be construed as an attack on China USA must work to improve relations with Pakistan,"⁸ must make scholars of international relations sit-up and take note. Pakistan already a protégé of China could well end up as its demi-colony, if the international community does not play its cards well.

Afghanistan

It is here that the origins of the problem lie – and possibly the solution. Afghanistan is the strategic hub in Central Asia. It is a land bridge which links the Caspian Sea Basin to the Arabian Sea. That is why the hapless people of the country have borne the brunt of the 'Great Game' over centuries.

What will happen next? In the near term the level of strife and violence will increase. At the same time greater efforts would be made at negotiating. Talks are underway between the US and the Afghanistan Taliban.⁹ Here the presence of other factions would confound the issue like the Haqqani network based in North Waziristan tribal areas, though a Taliban affiliated group may prefer to act on its own. As a best case the US forces would withdraw as per schedule, retain a limited presence as a Karzai-Taliban Coalition begins to function. This coalition may or may not last. In the later case the Taliban would take over. If there is a decline in Pakistan, Pashtun areas would accrue to Afghanistan.

As a worst case, a prolonged period of unrest and civil war could follow with several nations pitching in. China would enter the fray both with soft and hard power and the possibility of a greater Pashtunistan would increase appreciably. Clearly China will be the regional hegemon. It was quick to come out in support of Pakistan, hailing its anti-terror strategies. Both China and Pakistan were lavish in their praises for each other. Pakistani leaders advocated to Karzai to embrace China as America had proved to be an unreliable ally. Karzai on his visit to China was given a stupendous reception in Beijing. Perhaps, it would have got him thinking.

Thanks to corruption and ineptness, the once hated Taliban are gaining despite the surge and the Predators. They are on the ascend in SWAT and FATA areas and moving outwards. Taliban has to be brought on board. It is a stark reality that Karzai – though himself a Pashtun cannot rule with the majority Pashtuns pushed out of power. In time, civil war in the country would intensify with rabid elements of the Taliban gaining over the conservative groups, and with China watching in glee. Many moderate voices in Pakistan are advising engagement with the majority Pashtuns. Mr Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, a former ambassador of Pakistan has pointed out, "If Pakistan tries to impose compliance on Afghanistan, it will be India rather than Pakistan that obtains the so called "strategic depth."

India

India will now need to act with finesse. This is not the time for bombast but sympathy for the people of Pakistan and

soft diplomacy to encourage higher degree of civilian control over an arrogant Army. Our diplomacy must be calibrated accordingly. India must refrain from chest thumping. This can only benefit the Pakistani Army to reinforce its threat perception from India. India today is disadvantaged in Afghanistan, despite a generous aid of \$ 1.5 billion and another \$ 500 million apart from other soft power projections. We are too firmly in Karzai camp and too heavily dependent on the US to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. However, it is only natural that the US would look after its own interests first.

We need to prepare for turbulent times which will follow. More support will be forthcoming for the militants, there will be more incidents within the country and as a diversion, infiltration into India will be stepped up. We need to be on a high alert, revamp our entire intelligence gathering and processing system and above all finally appoint a CDS and create a US type Homeland Security Department with overriding powers.

A nation that cannot even get its “most wanted” list right needs to tread with considerable caution. It needs also to act in unison and with dispatch. We must seem to be reaching out to the whole of the Afghan people and provide what Karzai called, “emotional strategic depth” to the Afghan people.¹¹ It is fortunate that our development projects have also come up in Pashtun areas and we have improved our standing with the Pashtuns. India has supported the reconciliation process in Afghanistan and its actions by no means indicate a strategic overreach.

Dr Manmohan Singh’s visit to Afghanistan shortly after Operation Geronimo was an unqualified success. It was a clear indication of a heightened strategic partnership. At the same time India must vigorously engage with Taliban while increasing its footprint in Afghanistan. Defence Minister’s cautionary at the Unified Commanders Conference, “ripples of Laden’s elimination will have wide ranging impact on India’s strategic neighbourhood”¹² needs to be noted carefully.

India-Pakistan vendetta should no longer be sacred. Al Qaeda wants to provoke a war between India and Pakistan; to decrease pressure in the West, to destabilise the region and possibly lay their hands on a nuclear device or even a dirty bomb. That is why India should not feed the paranoia in Pakistan.

Nuclear Aspects

Pakistan’s nuclear weapons have always been a source of concern. With heightened tensions post Laden, the unease has only deepened. The attack on Mehran just 24 kilometers from a nuclear weapons base has justified the anxiety. Pakistan militants have already struck thrice at its nuclear facilities.¹³ Many Pakistani nuclear weapons facilities are inside or in proximity of Pakistani Taliban dominated areas. Given the exacerbated tensions and the fact that the protector (Pakistani Army) is itself suspect, justifies any anxiety on this score. Perhaps, the biggest danger will come from incensed extremist officials supported by insider information. To be emphasised is the fact that Pakistan was on its highest alert status at the time of the raid and Mehran was a well guarded military installation.

An actual nuclear device would be difficult to handle and could only be used for blackmail. A far greater danger would be that of fissile material (which Pakistan is producing in large quantities) falling into the militant hands. This would be used to make a dirty bomb. What would be required is some spent nuclear fuel, X-ray machine, gamma ray camera (available in the health and industrial sector) and a small piece of fuel. All this can be stocked in a small box. Add dynamite to it and the dirty bomb is ready. Once set off there would be a small explosion followed by release of radioactivity which could affect a whole city. The impact in a densely populated city would be dramatic, leading to mass hysteria, breakdown in law and order, services being unable to cope and medical failures.¹⁴ And what would be the most suitable location for its use? India!

Yet another danger has arisen in the shape of Pakistan’s ability to make low yield short range plutonium weapons. These are intended to be used against India’s, so called ‘cold start doctrine’ (however, it seems that such a doctrine does not exist). And to be of value these weapons would need to be decentralised making their security that much more difficult.

Despite the assurances given by the officers of Pakistan Army’s Strategic Plans Division (SPD) that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are safe, unease looms large in the changed circumstances. After all there have been attacks on Pakistan’s nuclear installations in the past. Though as far as the Taliban are concerned they have no intention of attacking Pakistan’s nuclear assets. They intend to take over the country along with its nuclear assets. This has been emphasised by Ehsanullah Ehsan, the Taliban spokesman.¹⁵

The world draws comfort in the belief that should there be a threat to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, America would move in, à la Geronimo. This requires greater analysis. There are a large number of war heads (at one count 100 and growing) dispersed over a wide area, many of which are dominated by the Taliban. Militant infiltration into the military establishment is not on a small scale. No guarantees can be given even for the personnel of the SPD. Finally, as the situation deteriorates for America, the issue of the country’s will and the China factor would come in.

Conclusion

The situation today is similar to the one prevailing in 1936 when the world leaders watched helplessly as mankind hurtled towards a chasm. Additionally, now there are added complexities, not the least of which is the nuclear overhang and the non state players. In the prevailing turmoil it is impossible to say which country will be thrown off its axis.

Response to Laden’s death has seen increased violence - mainly in the host country. Whether this violence will sustain or subside will depend on the handling by the international community. The world must unite against any form of extremism. The angry retort, “many more Osamas will rise”, cannot be allowed to become a reality. That is why the ongoing US-Taliban dialogue must be strengthened and maximum other factions brought on board. Seen in its entirety, it is unlikely that Laden’s death will incite waves of Jihadis or lead to closer bonding of these groups.

Having won his pyrrhic victory which has made the prospect of re-election more likely, Obama has an ideal opportunity to display statesmanship of a high order. To start with, bring in Russia, China, India, Afghanistan and

Pakistan into the talks. The theme to play on, needs to be that Al Qaeda and its affiliates would not be allowed to continue their deadly gory game of destabilisation. The world must now genuinely fight a joint and coordinated battle against extremism and terrorism.

Finally, it is in the Af-Pak Region that the solution must be found. Turmoil in this area would affect the whole world – so it falls on the international community to work towards a resolution. It is clear that Pakistan is fragmented and tethering, and very much a victim (though of its own making). While maintaining its strategic posture in the East, Pak Army is engaged in counterinsurgency operations along its western border, FATA and even internally.

The key to all this is Pakistan's Praetorian Army in cahoots with a variety of militants. Its many failures and omissions have given an opportunity to break its hold on the country and the national institutions. Now the politicians must re-assert. The need for stability dictates that this country not be pushed to the brink. At this stage it would be prudent for India to try and avoid any tension building upon its western borders as that will give an excuse to Pakistan to go slow in its war on terror. The situation is rather fluid in Pakistan and India must gear up to handle whatever dispensation may be thrown up.

In order to ensure stability in the Af-Pak region the US needs to ensure that the Al Qaeda and other organisations do not take root there. This especially applies to J&K linked organisations looking for safe havens to subsequently operate against India. In this regard the US and Indian interests converge and they ought to work jointly.

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