

India and the New World Order: Impact of Global War on Terror

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Introduction

The Cold War officially came to an end in 1991 though it had started sputtering down in the last years of Carters' presidency. So for close on three decades, the United States had things pretty much their own way through presidential watch of Reagan, HW Bush, Clinton; and for eight years Bush was and behaved very much like a 'master of the universe'. In comparison or as a result of the US high handedness, President Obama has inherited a host of problems. American supremacy or single super power status is challenged on various fronts. Russia, which lay prostrate for nearly two decades after the collapse of its empire is resurging, flush with petro dollars and resolute leadership of Putin. China with phenomenal growth of its economy and expanding sphere of influence in Asia and Africa, claims status of a super power. India, a regional player, is emerging as a nascent world power because of its nuclear power status, large population and growing economy. Japanese and other eastern economies are looking up. World economic and political balance is shifting to the east. In particular, the three most pressing challenges confronting President Obama are: Economic Meltdown; Terrorism; and perhaps most menacing of all, fear of Pak nuclear arsenal falling in the hands of radical islamists. These challenges also face all other countries, but most of all India, because of its geographical proximity to Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre and a long history of Pak enmity.

On the military front, the USA is over extended. The US misadventure in Iraq has still not concluded and Afghanistan is proving to be a potential Vietnam. Despite an impressive line up of forces comprising contingents from western allies, the ground situation is bad and demands more troops. To cap it all, forces of radical Islam are spreading their tentacles across the world from Chechnya in the west to Philipines and Indonesia in the east. Indeed, Radical Islam is fast acquiring dimensions of a military 'front'. India, apart from its share of economic downturn, hears the drum beat of militant Islam the most. India has witnessed its full impact transmitted through Pakistan, ranging from insurgencies to infiltrations to aerial high-jacking to series of bomb blasts in its cities. The long drawn insurgency in Kashmir continues unabated with frequent infiltrations by Mujahideen/Taliban/Al-Qaida from Pakistan. Indian embassy in Kabul was attacked and in recent times a major commando type assault took place in Mumbai.

Birth of Islamic Fundamentalism

The root of Islamic ire is usually traced to Muslim frustration arising out of their perceived injustice in Palestine exacerbated by brash exercise of Israeli military might. This recurs as justification by Bin Laden for terror attacks culminating in the infamous carnage of September 11, 2001 in the USA. Invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan further enraged the Muslims. The intervention in Afghanistan was started by a Mujahideen insurgency through Pakistan in the final years of Carter administration when the USA gave military and financial aid to President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan to fund an anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan. Later, its scope was vastly enlarged to full guerrilla warfare by Pakistani Taliban for ousting Russians (CIA Programme Cyclone). Al-Qaida morphed out of the Mujahideen/Taliban.

The USA's Global War on Terror

The origin of Taliban (literally "students") lay in the children educated in the rapidly expanding network of Islamic schools (Madrassas) along Pak-Afghan border, later throughout Pakistan. Taliban were armed with modern weapons including shoulder-fired anti-air Stinger missiles, and re-inforced by Pak military. At the same time, a growing number of foreign Arab mujahideen (also called Afghan Arabs) joined the jihad against the Marxist regime. Later, Al-Qaida was established under Laden and Abdullah Azzam. Consequent upon Russian withdrawal, Taliban succeeded in capturing various parts of Afghanistan including Kabul and proclaimed a Taliban government in September 1996, with the help and support from Al-Qaida under Bin laden. It was recognised only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE. The USA did not recognise it, but otherwise left Taliban to its own devices till 2001. After the 9/11 attacks, the USA under Bush embarked on a programme of heavy handed reprisals in mainland America, invaded Iraq, brought Libya to its knees and launched offensive operations in Afghanistan where Al-Qaida, the perpetrators of 9/11 carnage were located, so as to prevent recurrence of such attacks on the mainland USA. However, Bush enlarged the scope of a punitive action to a grand design of "global war on terror" and a war to "liberate and democratise Afghanistan". To that end, Pakistan was coerced to turn on Taliban (their own creation) and to help root out the supporting Al-Qaida. In sum, the USA threw out Russians from Afghanistan with the help of Taliban but it is now fighting to throw out Taliban from Afghanistan - a classic case of an insurgency which went wrong (or succeeded too well). The US operations succeeded in dislodging Bin Laden and bulk of Al-Qaida from Afghanistan but they shifted base to the mountainous vastness of Waziristan in Pakistan from where it continued stoking anti-American insurgency in Afghanistan.

Now, the USA is embroiled in a full scale counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan against Taliban/Al-Qaida, in what is possibly the worst battle ground in the world , with formidable Hindu Kush mountains, inadequate network of roads and communications and a fiercely hostile and historically ungovernable people. If conventional war in these conditions is difficult, the counter-insurgency operations are a nightmare. The insurgents have ready sanctuaries in Pakistan, a worst case scenario for fighting an insurgency. No wonder, Russia wilted under this

pressure, and no wonder the USA is feeling the heat now, despite their armed superiority, enormous financial resources and an array of contingents from 47 countries. To make matters worse, the USA and its allies are operating at the end of a highly vulnerable and tenuous line of supply, which is being frequently disrupted, and which the Pakistanis are unable or unwilling to secure. Alternative routes of supply are being investigated through Russia or Central Asian Republics, but they will be no less tortuous or vulnerable besides being much more expensive. Afghanistan assumes importance on two counts: it is a global 'export house' of jihadis; and it is the world's biggest supplier of opium. So, by logic these two issues, that is, jihadis and poppy cultivation should form the main focus of attention for the US led forces. Everything else, such as social restructuring of Afghan society, propagation of democracy and emancipation of women should be secondary. Problem of jihadis is twofold: sanctuaries, training camps and support structure inside Pakistan; and Taliban operating inside Afghanistan. Of the two, aid and abetment from Pakistan is more critical. If this is stopped, insurgency in Afghanistan will probably wither on the branch. In fact, it will be true to say that the focus of 'infection' lies in Pakistan - Afghanistan being only the symptom. As for narcotics, it is not difficult to destroy poppy crop, main source of revenue for insurgents, by aerial targeting or by defoliant spray, but it will shatter country's economy which in turn will need massive financial aid. However, in the long run, it may prove more cost effective to deploy money than to deploy 'boots on the ground'. To an extent, the same may hold true for fighting the jihadis in Afghanistan, that is, determined field operations backed by bribery and tactics of blood money to war lords against each other and against terrorist leaders, ie, tactics of "surge-and-bribe" used by the US General Petraeus in Iraq, suitably modified for Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Factor

An uncharitable reality is that, Pakistan has exploited the factor of Russian threat and turmoil in Afghanistan for obtaining armaments and financial aid from the USA for decades. Earlier, capitalising on Indian dogma of neutrality and its tilt towards Russia, Pakistan forged a defence pact with the USA in 1954 and also became a member of SEATO. Later in February 1955, it managed to join the Baghdad Pact for mutual cooperation with Iraq, Turkey, Iran, the UK and later the USA. Pakistan postulated that it wanted to ally with the western powers "to assist in defending the middle east oil resources" but did not have the requisite strength for this task because it had also to protect itself against a communist threat and threat from India. Subsequently, Pakistan found itself in an advantageous position again with the USA in the eighties when the erstwhile USSR intervened in Afghanistan. The last celebrated manoeuvre was in 2001, when Pakistan did an about-turn to face its own creation, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In fact, this decision is very unpopular with the Pakistan Army and its officers and is chiefly responsible for its indifferent performance. Be that as it may, fact of the matter is that a proactive foreign policy and various alignments by Pakistan have earned it enormous sums of money and a vast arsenal of armaments over a period of time, which have stoked its belligerence and emboldened it to undertake numerous misadventures against India.

Through the long and eventful history of the US-Pak relations, Pakistan has also learnt to manipulate the system of lobbys and professional lobby firms in the USA. Pak generals have been extremely successful in creating "cronyism" with Pentagon and influential congressmen. This politico-military expediency and manoeuvrability has enabled Pakistan to build a powerful military machine quite out of proportion to its intrinsic resources or legitimate needs which has traditionally been the main threat to security of India. Skeptics may decry Pak tactics of opportunism, but all said and told, Pak foreign policy is a case study for sheer audacity, panache, personal relationships and 'seat of the pants' diplomacy. As a result, a small young country has become a nuclear power and has parleyed itself into a world player.

As with the USA, so with China, Yahya Khan of Pakistan brokered Nixon's secret trip to Beijing on February 21, 1972, which helped it to forge strong bonds of friendship with China, gaining arms including nuclear weapons. Today, Pakistan must be the only country in the world which is getting massive aid from both the USA and China. To the USA, it possibly waves the China and India cards: to China it perhaps waves the USA and India cards (India being the fall guy in both configurations). In broader perspective, foreign policy objectives and actions of Pakistan have shown singular focus and flexibility. Ever since its birth in 1947, Pak leaders have felt that they got only a "moth-eaten" Pakistan, which would be in danger against a bigger and stronger India. Hence, theirs has been an abiding quest to acquire arms and financial aid from all quarters by any and every means. In addition, they have been motivated by hatred for a secular India, and a burning ambition to annex Kashmir.

Admittedly, the problem of Taliban/Al-Qaida can be said to have been started by the USA with the anti-soviet movement in Afghanistan with the help of President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, but the 'Islamic twist' was a Zia Special. Indeed, he went about setting up thousands of religious schools all over Pakistan to produce fanatics. He also Islamised the Pak Army and spread the gospel of militant Islam in Muslim nations across the world. This genie of radical Islam has spawned the terror storm that the world has been witnessing for the last two decades and in truth is now threatening to swallow Pakistan. These madrasas (Islamic seminaries) have been reported to have grown from 136 in 1947 to 30,000 by the year 2000 and could be in the region of 45,000 now. By Paks' own estimates, 8 -10 lac students attend these schools, with numbers increasing by the day. They preach a twisted world view and a harsh version of radical Islam, glorifying terrorism and jihad. A leading expert on nuclear proliferation on the US Commission on the subject, Harvard professor Graham Allison has stated that "When you map WMD and terrorism, all roads intersect in Pakistan". Funding of the insurgency also gave birth to the infamous ISI of Pakistan with access to vast funds and to become a 'state within a state'. The story is somewhat similar regarding birth of Pak nuclear arsenal. The USA, for some unknown reasons, looked the other way when Pakistan was avidly seeking nuclear weapons. Now the USA and more so India are confronted by self same nuclear capability of Pakistan and the whole world is terrified by dangers of the arsenal falling in the hands of jihadis.

Impact of Islamic terrorism has been particularly severe for India (and Kashmir). Although, the erstwhile state of

Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India in a legitimate manner, Pakistan has tried to capture it by force of arms on three occasions (1947, 1965, 1971) and being unsuccessful, resorted to instigating and aiding a virulent insurgency and terrorist attacks. Now playing on American concern with Afghanistan situation, Pakistan is sporting a theory that the root of unrest in this part of the world lies in the unsolved problem of Kashmir which is responsible for tension on the sub-continent. Therefore, Pakistan has to set aside forces for this threat, which affects Pak ability to give full support to the USA. This “Root” theory is without foundation because the root of the unrest does not lie in Kashmir, it lies in Pakistan. It is also pertinent that if Pakistan were to gain control of Kashmir, it will become another Waziristan providing welcome havens to Bin Laden and Al-Qaida. In essence, there is a striking symmetry between terrorism in Kashmir and Afghanistan. In both cases the “focus of infection” lies in Pakistan. Hence, there is clear congruence of interests between the USA and India in this region. There is similar identity of interests regarding the danger of Pak nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of jihadis. Indeed, India would lie squarely in cross-hairs of the jihadis and be the first target if they were to gain control of Pak nuclears. Pertinently, since 2001 there has not been a single instance of terrorism on the US soil and only a few incidents in the UK and Europe, whereas India and Kashmir have been subjected to a rash of almost daily depredations.

Conclusion

To conclude, the geo-political outlook for India is a mixed bag. On the downside: the lengthening shadow of China has extended to the whole of south Asia and the Indian sub-continent including the Indian Ocean. her influence in Nepal and Burma has increased substantially, her ‘alliance’ with Pakistan has manifested as being much deeper than thought hitherto as shown by new found evidence of China having tested Pak’s first nuclear bomb in 1999. Pakistan is more bellicose and aggressive consequent upon getting massive infusion of arms both from the USA and China including a significant nuclear capability alongwith missiles and delivery systems. At the same time, Pak hostility to India has intensified, as seen by the vicious raid on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, which assumes sinister proportions in view of the lengthening shadow of Taliban over Pakistan, which will bring Taliban virtually to India’s door-step.

The upside is that the USA seems to have had cause to re-evaluate Pakistan’s effectiveness and reliability as an ally against Taliban in Afghanistan and there is growing realisation of Pakistan being the chief exporter of terrorism to the world. Nevertheless, it seems that as far as Pakistan is concerned, the USA is resigned to have a reluctant ally than no ally on the principle of “something is better than nothing”. For India, situation in Kashmir and Bangladesh is showing some improvement after the recent elections. There has been noticeable upswing in Indo-US relations consequent upon the Nuclear Treaty and Indian restraint in the face of the Mumbai carnage. There are also signs that the new US administration is beginning to recognise the congruence of interests with India, particularly with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is a window of opportunity for India and kindles hopes that the decades old negative US perception of India will be replaced by a positive image of a peaceful and responsible nation and a vibrant democracy. India needs American support to counter balance the Sino-Pak nexus. Besides, the routes to the solution of India’s problems with Pakistan lie through Washington. On its part, India needs to put its house in order, project image of a cohesive polity and build up economic and military strength to merit credibility as an ally. It will also have to learn to think big and think beyond Pakistan. After all, India dare not ignore the unpalatable geo-political reality that it shares contiguous land borders (and air envelope above) with Pakistan, China and Bangladesh (the recent Chinese naval foray into Indian Ocean adding a maritime dimension). There is a strong alliance between Pakistan and China. In short, a chilling reality of multiple fronts which should command urgent attention of Indian leaders. India needs all the friends it can get.

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