

The Role of Pakistan in the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan

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Introduction

The name Afghanistan means the land of the Afghans. The origins of the name Afghan remain unclear. Its use dates from the 18th century, when Pashtun tribes began to carve out a region of Central Asia as their sovereign base. As the British Empire expanded, it tried to place the Pashtuns under their rule. Throughout the 19th century, British Indian Military units tried to control the recalcitrant Afghan tribes who may or may not have preferred rule by other Afghans, but certainly opposed that of the British. The frontier Pashtun tribes continue to bedevil Afghan-Pakistan relations even today since the Pakistanis have inherited the British mantle in this region.

The Land and its People

The Pashtuns form the most important and the most numerous ethnic group in Afghanistan. The twin terms Pashtun and Pakhtun refer to the two separate confederations of tribes, the Abdali or Durrani tribes based in the Kandahar-Herat region and the Ghilzai based in the Nangarhar-Paktia region, who together with the eastern tribes in Pakistan speak the Pashtun dialect. The tribes that belong to neither confederacy, the Afridi, Khattak, Orakzai, Waziri, Mahsud were designated as the hill tribes by the British though increasingly they came under the term Pashtun for the sake of convenience.

The characteristics of Pashtun form the stuff of tales from Rudyard Kipling to George Macdonald Fraser. The 17th century Pashtun poet and warrior Kushal Khan Khattak depicts the acme of Pashtun manhood as brave, love smitten, honourable and heroic. The Pashtuns are overwhelmingly Sunni of the Hanafi School of law. They are known for their Pashtun code or Pashtunwali, the tribal code of honour, which includes Melmastia, or hospitality, Nanawati, the notion that hospitality can never be denied to a fugitive and badal, the right of revenge. Pashtun honour is maintained by constant feuding, revolving around Zar (gold), Zan (woman) and Zamin (land).

The Tadjiks speak Afghan, Persian or Dari and live in northern, northwestern and western Afghanistan. Related to the Tadjiks are the Farsiwan, also Sunni, the Quizilbash and the Hazara, both Shia. Besides these there are Turkic people, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Kazakhs, all Sunni. In the West bordering Iran are the Heratis who are Shia.

It can be clearly seen from the demographic composition of Afghanistan, that its population is heterogeneous. However over the years the Pashtuns have consecrated to themselves that they are the rulers of Afghanistan. This has not gone down well with the people other than the Pashtuns. The crux of the problem in Afghanistan is that for generations the leadership of the Pashtuns had not been challenged by the other groups- the Tadjiks, Uzbeks, the Quizilbash, Turkmen, Farsiwan and the Heratis. Also, the division between the Sunni and the Shia was not as unmanageable as is the situation today.

The crux of the problem has been because of the divide between the Western world and the Islamic world that has automatically exacerbated with the extremist Islamic groups becoming well defined like the Jammāt Ulema Islam, the Ahle Hadis, and the Wahabi sect from Saudi Arabia. These groups have not taken kindly to the more moderate Shia, or the Jammāt-e-Islami practised by the Tadjiks, Uzbeks. To take a specific example, the Hazaras are Shias, yet the Hazara women represent their community in their defence leadership. This stand is not acceptable to the Pashtun Jamaat-e-Ulema-i-Islam.

The Mujahideen and the Holy War

Actually the whole issue got stratified with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Nearly three million Pashtuns fled to Pakistan as refugees from the Godless Soviets. The Interior Minister of Pakistan happened to be a patron of the Jammāt-e-Ulema-i-Islam or Deobandi sect. He immediately began to set up Madrassas of the JUI. All the children of the three million Afghan refugees mainly Pashtun were accommodated in the JUI Madrassas set up then. Thus whole generations of Talibs-students of the JUI Seminaries were schooled in the Deobandi sect of hard Islam. When the Soviets were defeated, and retreated to the Soviet Union, the Pashtun had been well converted to the Deobandi philosophy. The first casualty of this development was the divide that manifested between the Pashtuns on the one hand and the other groups of Afghanistan – the Tadjiks, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras, Quizilbash and the Heratis. This divide got very badly exacerbated by the horrifying massacres that the Pashtun committed on the Tadjiks, Hazaras, Heratis and the Uzbeks over the years.

The Battle for Kabul and the Rise of the Taliban

The Mujahideen captured Kabul in 1992. Kabul did not fall to the well-armed Pashtun parties in Peshawar, but to the better organised and well-armed and more united Tadjik forces of Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military Commander Ahmed Shah Masood and to the Uzbek leaders from the north under Rashid Dostum. This was a devastating blow to the Pashtuns, because for the first time in 300 years they had lost control of Kabul. An internal civil war began immediately as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar attempted to rally the Pashtuns and laid siege to Kabul shelling the city mercilessly.

Afghanistan was in a virtual state of disintegration by the end of 1994. The country was divided into warlord fiefdoms who had fought, switched sides and fought again in a bewildering array of alliances, betrayals and bloodshed. The predominantly Tadjik government of Burhanuddin Rabbani controlled Kabul, its environs and the northeast of the country. Three provinces of the country centering on Herat were controlled by Ishmael Khan. In the East, on the Pakistan border three Pashtun provinces were under the control of a Shura or council of Mujahideen commanders based in Jalalabad. In the North, Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord held sway over six provinces. In central Afghanistan, the Hazaras controlled Bamiyan. Southern Afghanistan and Kandahar were divided among dozens of ex-Mujahideen warlords and bandits who plundered the population at will. The warlords sold off everything as scrap to Pakistan traders to make money – factories, machinery and even road rollers. The warlords abused the population at

will kidnapping young boys and girls for their sexual pleasure.

The war, wrote Samuel Huntington left behind an unusual combination of Islamist organisations intent on promoting Islam against all non Islamic forces. It also left behind a legacy of expert and experienced fighters, training camps and logistical facilities, elaborate trans Islamic networks, a substantial amount of military equipment, including several hundred Stinger Missiles and most important a heady sense of power and self confidence over what had been achieved and a driving desire to move on to other victories.¹

When the fight against the Soviets began, a Jordanian Abdullah Azam came to Afghanistan and organised the hundreds of Islamic fighters who had assembled to fight the Godless Soviets. Saudi funds flowed to Azam and then an ultra rich Arab, son of a very rich contractor in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden joined hands with Abdullah Azam. After organising the hundreds of Islamic fighters coming to fight the Soviets, bin Laden befriended Mullah Omar who had been made the leader of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and the Frontier Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan by the Pakistan Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Osama bin Laden then moved to Kandahar to help Mullah Omar.

Meanwhile, the United States had invaded Iraq, under the mistaken conclusion that the President of Iraq, Saddam Hussain had a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. This was simply a very foolish and immature decision. It rallied all the forces that were opposed to the United States. Osama bin Laden who had invested his vast enormous bank balance in financing the insurgent groups to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan now turned his attention to the United States. The movement that started soon developed into a plan to attack the United States in their territory. A group called the Al Qaeda was formed with terrorist fighters from several groups who were fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan forming a nucleus. The plan to train a group of terrorists to carry out suicide attacks on a landmark target in the United States was hatched. A group was formed from terrorists operating in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Middle East. The plan was for four selected teams to learn flying from Flying Schools in the United States and then fly hijacked airliners and crash them into selected skyscrapers in the United States.

The George Bush administration took office in the beginning of 2001. General Musharraf who was the President of Pakistan found that it was easier to deal with President George Bush, than President Clinton. Whereas Clinton resisted the wool being pulled over his eyes, the Bush administration simply closed their eyes themselves!² The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued 216 internal threat warnings about the possibility of an attack by Al Qaeda between January and September 2001, while the National Security Agency reported thirty three intercepts indicating possible Al Qaeda attacks. Richard Clark wrote to Condoleesa Rice, the Secretary of State on 28 June 2001 saying that warnings of an imminent attack had reached a crescendo.³ Years later Condoleesa Rice admitted her failure when she stated – “America’s Al Qaeda policy wasn’t working, because our Afghanistan policy wasn’t working, and our Afghanistan policy was not working because our Pakistan policy was not working.” Al Qaeda was both a client of and a patron of the Taliban, which in turn was supported by Pakistan.⁴

Then on 11 September, two hijacked planes slammed into the twin Trade Towers in New York. The US Intelligence realised that it was the Al Qaeda, based in Afghanistan and aided indirectly by Pakistan that had perpetrated this terrifying attack on the United States. The next morning Richard Armitage Deputy Secretary of State of the United States summoned the Pakistan Ambassador and Lieutenant General Mehmood Ahmed, the Pakistan ISI Chief and delivered the strong message of the US President “Either you are with us or with the Terrorists.” The next morning the Pakistan President was asked to intercept all arms shipments from Pakistan to Afghanistan, ending of all logistics support to the Al Qaeda, and access to airports in Pakistan for US military aircraft for operations against Al Qaeda. General Musharraf after consulting his generals agreed. On the evening of 7 October 2001 the US attack on the Taliban commenced as 50 Cruise missiles and dozens of laser guided bombs hit thirty one targets around all the major cities of Afghanistan. The bombing continued for four weeks. This naturally weakened the Taliban positions and the first breakthrough came when Dostum’s Uzbeks led cavalry charges against fixed Taliban positions and routed them. Some eight thousand Talibs retreated in their pickups. Several thousand Talibs were killed as they retreated and the US Air force targeted the retreating Taliban. Three days after the fall of Mazar-e-Sharief, the Northern Alliance captured the whole of Northern, Western, and Central Afghanistan.

The Pakistan President General Musharraf requested the US President to dissuade the Northern Alliance from taking Kabul. It was too late to stall this move. On the night of 12 November 2001, the Northern Alliance drove into Kabul as the Taliban retreated. Hundreds of Taliban fighters were killed as they retreated, but the Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders managed to escape. In Kunduz several Taliban leaders and Frontier Corps personnel of Pakistan were trapped. General Musharraf telephoned the US President and got permission to send some Pakistan Air Force planes to Kunduz. UN observers at the Kunduz airfield reported that several Pakistan Air Force planes landed at Kunduz and evacuated the Taliban leaders and Frontier Corps personnel.⁵

Between eight thousand to twelve thousand Taliban were killed in this retreat from the North. A meeting was convened in Bonn to decide on a new Government for Afghanistan. The new Government was sworn in. The United Nations mandated an International Security Force to take over Kabul. Fifteen hundred British troops formed the core of the International Security Force designated. In the rest of the country, the warlords remained in power.

The Objectives of the Pakistan Government for Afghanistan

Pakistan had three aims for Afghanistan. They did not want Indian hegemony in the region. They wanted a pro Pakistan Government in Afghanistan. They wanted to promote the Kashmir cause. All three interests rested on unquestioned support from the Islamic fundamentalist parties and their extremist wings. At the time of 9/11, there were more than forty extremist groups in Pakistan, all of whom were controlled by the ISI. Some of these groups like the Jaish-e-Muhammad were set up by the ISI. Before 9/11, some of these groups had also forged links with the Al Qaeda. The ISI gave sanctuary to the Taliban in Baluchistan. In fact the Quetta Shura, the HQs of Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban was located in Quetta. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the JEI sponsored Hizb-e-Islami was allowed to set up a base at the Shamshatoo camp near Peshawar. Jalalludin Haqqani, the Taliban leader was given sanctuary in North Waziristan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was settled in South Waziristan. Over time the United States and

NATO were able to collect intelligence of the ISI running training camps for the Taliban North of Quetta. In 2003 and 2004, US soldiers from their bases on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and US drones in the sky watched Pakistan trucks delivering Taliban fighters to the border to infiltrate into Afghanistan and then recover them a few days later when they returned. For four years, Mullah Omar and his commanders were able to operate freely in southern Afghanistan and Baluchistan without being monitored by the US intelligence. The US military did not have a look down satellite to cover southern Afghanistan!⁶

The Taliban did not slip across the border into the FATA provinces and Baluchistan secretly in ones and twos. They drove across the border in pickups, buses, on camels and horses. ISI officials along with guards of the Frontier Constabulary welcomed them at Chaman, the border crossing into Baluchistan. The Taliban had been nurtured by the Pakistan Army since long and for Pakistan they represented the future of Afghanistan!

It was December 2001, a month after the Taliban's defeat in Mazar-e-Sharif, the Taliban commanders had gathered in a meeting hall to decide their course of action. Watching from the sidelines were several well known figures from the Pakistani Military and Intelligence Services. Among them was the late Major General Zahirul Islam Abbasi, an active supporter of the Taliban. Another figure present was the master trainer of jihadi fighters Colonel Imam. His real name was Brigadier Sultan Amir, a Pakistani Special Forces officer. He had overseen the training of thousands of Afghan Mujahideen and closely monitored the Taliban when it was first formed. Mullah Omar had been one of his first trainees. Also attending the meeting was Muhammad Haqqani, son of the Taliban commander Jalalludin Haqqani. For two decades Pakistan had used proxy forces, Afghan Mujahideen and the Taliban against Afghanistan and Kashmiri militants against India. General Abbasi and Colonel Imam were among the main players in executing this policy. The Peshawar meeting was as much a confirmation of long standing policy as it was the start of a new chapter of war in Afghanistan.⁷ People in Kandahar remember a Major Gul along with Colonel Imam. Soon after Mullah Omar secured a base in Kandahar, he attacked the border town of Spin Boldak. This time the Taliban clearly showed signs of Pakistani support-artillery fire in support from across the border. Among the attackers were also hundreds of Madrassa students from Pakistan. They left behind a trail of packing paper of brand new weapons.⁸

Two weeks later, Colonel Imam took out a convoy of trucks loaded with medicines passed through southern and western Afghanistan enroute to the Turkman border. The operation was stage managed by the ISI.⁹ Colonel Imam with another ISI officer Major Gul was deputed to lead the convoy of thirty five trucks. They took two Taliban commanders with them. Not far inside Afghanistan, the convoy was stopped by local militias. The Taliban battled the militias for two days and routed them killing their leader Mansour Achakzai and hung his body from a tank barrel in front of Kandahar airport. The Taliban had established their power in South Afghanistan.¹⁰

With control of Kandahar, Mullah Omar was dominating the southern and eastern Pashtun belt of Afghanistan. But as they proceeded further North resistance intensified. They lost hundreds of men in a bloody encounter with the Northern Alliance. They however succeeded in capturing Herat city. Colonel Imam was appointed the Pakistani consul in Herat and was open about his involvement in the military campaign. Colonel Imam remained close to Mullah Omar for the next seven years.¹¹

Pakistan's Suicide Bomb Factory

Afghan investigators discovered that the suicide bombers and the networks supplying them were emanating from Pakistan. Assadullah Khaled the Governor of Kandahar told Carlotta Gall, "I think that there is a factory for these bombers, most of the attackers are non Afghans, we have proof, we have prisoners, we have cassettes, and we have addresses." Over the months the evidence accumulated. These bombers that could be identified turned out to be mostly Pakistanis or Afghans living in Pakistan. They were being recruited through mosques and Madrassas and some through connections to banned Pakistani militant groups, such as Jaish-e- Muhammad and Harkat-ul- Mujahideen. We started to hear of memorial ceremonies being held for the martyred bombers back in Pakistan. It was evident that the organisation, recruiting, indoctrination and funding was being done by Pakistani militant groups.¹²

The trail took Carlotta Gall back to Quetta. She began to visit villages near the Afghan border. She found the black and white striped flag of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-i-Islam, the Deobandi religious party of Maulana Fazlur Rehman flying above the mosques and houses in every village. In Pishin village she found families whose sons had been drawn away to war without their knowledge and who were grappling with the news that their sons had blown themselves up in Afghanistan! Their loss was compounded by the fact that they had no bodies over which to grieve. No remains of suicide bombers were returned to their families. They were buried in unmarked graves. Most troubling of all, the relatives were scared, scared to talk about their son's deaths, scared to say who had recruited them!¹³ As she knocked on doors and asked questions she realised that their primary concern was the fear of the Pakistani Intelligence Service the ISI.

Conclusion

After thirteen years, a trillion dollars spent, 1, 20,000 foreign troops deployed at the height, and tens of thousands of lives lost, the fundamentals of Afghanistan's predicament remain the same, a weak State, prey to the ambitions of its neighbours and extremist Islamists. The United States and the NATO are departing with the job only half done. A comprehensive effort to turn things around only began in 2010. The fruits were only starting to show in 2013. Meanwhile the real enemy remains at large. The Taliban and Al Qaeda will certainly try to regain bases and territory in Afghanistan, upon the departure of western troops.

Endnotes

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 597, July-September 2014.