

In Afghanistan, Cease Fire Please

The Mujahideen's capture of the garrison town of Khost is, without doubt, a battlefield victory for the Afghan resistance. Yet, unless it produces a concerted effort towards a political solution of the Afghan war, it is likely to prove a pyrrhic 'victory'.

Khost has some strategic value because of its proximity to the supply lines between Kabul and Afghanistan's southwestern provinces. Yet, the significance of this battle is more psychological than military. Successive Mujahideen attempts to capture this Afghan government post near Pakistan's border had failed; and Kabul had been presenting its hold on Khost as an example of Mujahideen's weakness and its own strength. That claim has now been dissipated.

There is also a political gain for the resistance. After the capture of Khost, Mujahideen behaviour contrasted with their conduct in towns, like Kunar, which they had captured earlier. Prisoners were taken, not summarily murdered; no widespread looting has been reported; and the few civilians remaining in the area were not molested. President Sibghatullah Mujaddidi of the Afghan Interim Government promptly invited the International Red Cross to visit Khost, and gave it access to the wounded and the prisoners. As a result, a needed improvement in the international and, more importantly, Afghan image of the Mujahideen has occurred. These gains can produce two contrasting responses among Mujahideen leaders and its primary support - the Government of Pakistan. They may feel more confident of their fighting and co-ordinating capabilities; therefore, more inclined to maintain the quest for decisive victory. This would entail renewed military effort while paying lip-service to the need for a political settlement. On the other hand, they might judge that they can now start a peace process from a position of strength, and conclude also that if they fail seriously to seek a political settlement now, it would be too late later.

The Pakistan government's Afghan cell met in Islamabad on April 3; this was its first meeting in three months, which is an indication of the importance officials here attach to the fall of Khost. Both President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif were in attendance. The substance of their deliberations is not known. But statements which have so far emanated from Afghan and Pakistani leaders in Peshawar and Islamabad suggest a tendency to synthesise the two approaches. Although some sources have reported a decision in favour of emphasising the search for a political solution, in reality a version of Fight-Fight-Talk-Talk formula appears to be in the offing.

It is a well-known and tested formula: while diplomats get busy, the combatants try to strengthen their side's bargaining position. Unfortunately, in the context of Afghanistan it is unlikely to work. The politico-military reinforcement strategy works when there exists a unity of purpose, a centralised leadership, organisational discipline, and co-ordinated command. These factors are absent among the Mujahideen. More importantly, the logic of war is stronger in Afghanistan than the logic of peace. In a plan which combines the two, the logic of war shall prevail. And what little opportunity remains of Pakistanis and Afghans getting out of this disastrous war will be lost.

Powerful vested interests, which are rooted variously in personal ambitions, profit-taking, ideology, and strategy assumptions, support the logic of war. It is not fully appreciated that in Afghanistan's warrior culture, the guerrilla commanders constitute a new elite whose powers shall be threatened by war's termination. They are more likely to sabotage than reinforce the political half of the strategy. Continued military emphasis can serve as a means of sabotaging rather than reinforcing the political process. In this, they will have the sponsorship of financially and politically powerful elements in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and abroad.

The Afghan war has produced a lucrative international trade - in drugs, arms, and other contraband - which enriches the few at the expense of the majority of Pakistanis and Afghans. This influential mafia also regards an end to this conflict as harmful to its interests. Both the resistance and the "Jihad International Inc." experienced a certain decline in their power and profits in the last two years of reduced warfare. Accelerated military campaign can only reinvigorate them. It is bizarre that these communities of gun and gold have found friends among men of God.

Pakistan's and, to a lesser extent Middle East's, Islamic parties and governments have developed ideological and political stakes in Afghanistan. Theirs are party and ideological agendas. They are not engaged in defining and serving Pakistan's or Afghanistan's national interests. Yet, they command constituencies and allies both inside the Afghan resistance and the Pakistani officialdom. Typically, Jamaat-i-Islami's military camps Badr I and II have supplied volunteers for the recent battle; on April 4 its chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad visited Khost with the Hizb Islami leader Gulbaddin Hikmatyar. Their call for an assault on Kabul ran counter to Ambassador Jamshed Marker's representations at the United Nations.

These ideological parties are after total victory, not a political settlement. The victory they seek is a mirage. But like most ideological groupings they do not recognise illusions. Moreover, mere continuation of war serves their interests better than its end can. They are able to acquire weapons, train their cadres in irregular warfare, propagate among hapless refugees, and raise finances invoking jihad. Far from reinforcing the diplomatic effort they too are likely to sabotage it. Military escalation can only enhance their capacity to hold the national interest hostage to their ideological agenda.

The logic of war finds reinforcement in an unexpected quarter - senior echelons of Pakistan's army and, to a lesser extent bureaucracy. A few of these share the ideological proclivities of parties like the Pakistani Jamaat and the Afghan Hizb Islami of Hikmatyar. But most are compelled by what they sincerely think are reasons of national security. In General Ziaul Haq's government, it was widely believed that through the Afghan Mujahideen's victory, Pakistan would gain "strategic depth". I first encountered this view in 1988, during a meeting with the late General Akhtar Abdur Rahman Khan. I argued then, as I would now, that this is a skewed idea; we are after a shadow which would lead us into unrelieved darkness.

If strategic depth is what we want, it should be viewed from a political, not military, perspective. Militarily, we cannot command strategic depth in Afghanistan unless we ourselves conquer and rule over it. Clients may promise it, but they cannot deliver for the simple reason that even if they take power they won't live forever. History and geography decide these things, not mortal individuals. In fact, the search for decisive military victory would bring the Afghan people more grief, and Pakistan more refugees, guns, drugs, and insecurity. The Pakistan government and the Afghan resistance succeeded brilliantly, during 1987-1990, in snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Now there is no victory in sight. But the same forces which prevented Pakistan from grasping the opportunities to reach a political settlement favourable to this country's long-term interests are still at work. If a political settlement is to be reached, these ought to be neutralised or, at least, their role and influence should be reduced. The idea of a military option has to be discredited before a political settlement can become a viable option. For this reason alone, the achievement of a UN supervised cease-fire should be the first target of diplomacy, the foundation stone of the peace process in Afghanistan.

It may be an oft-broken cease-fire. Never mind! For its purpose will be to weaken the dialectic of warfare, and discredit the very idea of a military option. For, there is no military solution possible in Afghanistan. The Mujahideen are more divided now than

before. Even the Jamiat Islami, which alone had a unified command, is now split; two weeks ago, fire-fights erupted in northern Afghanistan between the forces of Ahmed Shah Massoud and Jamiat leader Burhanuddin Rabbani. The resistance's primary financial sponsor, the United States, has taken its profits and withdrawn the major share of its investment in the Jihad. The Saudis and Kuwaitis can only follow suit.

More importantly, the ideologies at war - Marxism and Fundamentalism - are alien to Afghan culture. Afghanistan is a diverse and pluralistic society; centralising, unitary agendas cannot appeal to it. It is a country surrounded by other, bigger neighbours, who would not let one another shape its foreign and defence policies. We seem to forget the lessons we helped teach the Soviets.

EQBAL AHMAD [Dawn: 7th April 1991]