

What After Strategic Depth?

In his letter to Zarb-i-Momin, the Taliban publication, Mr. Azam Tariq, leader of Pakistan's violently sectarian Sipah-i-Sahaba party, is ecstatic over his ideological brothers' recent victories. His ecstasy is shared by Pakistan's national security managers, but for non-ideological reasons. The attainment of 'strategic depth' had been a prime object of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy since the days of General Ziaul Haq.

In recent years, the Taliban replaced Gulbadin Hikmatyar as the instrument of its attainment. Their latest victories, especially their capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, the nerve centre of northern Afghanistan, brings the Pakistani quest close to fulfilment if, that is, in addition to residing in some military minds such a thing as 'strategic depth' does exist in the real world.

It does not. In military thought, it is a non-concept unless one is referring to a hard-to-reach place where a defeated army might cocoon. Far from improving it, the Taliban's victory is likely to augment Pakistan's political and strategic predicament. The reasons are numerous, and compelling. Consider, for example, the following:

A fundamental requirement of national security is that a country enjoy good relations with its neighbours. If one is unfortunate enough to have a neighbour as an adversary, then its security interests are best served by maintaining excellent relations with the others around it. Pakistan has had the misfortune of being born in an adversarial relationship with India, a populous and resource-filled country. This enmity shows no sign of abating, and is now augmented by the nuclear arms race and proxy warfare. The growth in provincial and ethnic discontents renders Pakistan especially vulnerable now to covert warfare. In this critical period the country needs friends in the region. The regional environment has been favourable to consolidating old friendships and forging new ones. Instead, Islamabad is alienating both actual and potential friends.

Until recently, Pakistan has always had good relations with Iran and China. In this decade new states emerged in Central Asia augmenting the number of Pakistan's potential trading partners and strategic allies. Cold war's end also ended its hostility with Russia and held the promise of friendly regional alignment. Afghanistan was long an irritating but innocuous adversary with territorial claims on NWFP, Pakistan's largely Pashto speaking province.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan's support of the anti-Communist Mujahideen ended Islamabad's hostile relations with Kabul, and rendered its influence dominant over Afghanistan. Pakistan has misused this gain to its detriment. Its Afghanistan policy - the quest of a mirage misnamed 'strategic depth' - has deeply alienated trusty old allies while closing the door to new friendships. Its national security managers have in fact squandered historic opportunities and produced a new set of problems for Pakistan's security.

Teheran is openly hostile to Islamabad's support of the Taliban. "We had an agreement with Pakistan that the Afghan problem will not be resolved through war, said the judicious former President Hashemi Rafsanjani in his Friday khutaba last week. "This has happened now and we simply cannot accept it." Thereafter, hundreds of Iranians protested in front of the Pakistan embassy in Teheran against the "fanatical, mediaeval Taliban" who held eleven Iranian diplomats hostage and mercilessly bombed civilian quarters of Bamiyan, a predominantly Shi'a town. Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharazi, called Taliban's capture of Mazar-i-Sharif a "threat to the region". A resolution of the United Nations Security Council appeared to concur. Russia issued a warning. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan responded to Taliban advances by shoring up their defences.

Pakistan's foreign office responded with strongly worded declarations of innocence and neutrality in Afghanistan. Not one diplomat at the UN headquarters in New York regarded these claims as credible. This worldwide loss of credibility is hardly a foreign policy achievement. Also, denials are not a substitute for policy. The fact is that Iran, an important and traditionally friendly neighbour, is deeply alienated by what it regards as Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban. Russia, a major power, protests it. Recently independent states - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizia - that had once looked up to Islamabad for help and guidance now regard it with apprehension. Pakistan appears today morally and politically isolated, a condition it shares with the Taliban who present to the world a most distorted and uniquely repugnant visage of Islam. It is not possible yet to surmise the consequences of this isolation, but it is certain that it will greatly augment the sense of insecurity that for five decades has haunted Pakistan and contributed much to its misery and militarisation.

The cost of Islamabad's Afghan policy have been augmenting since 1980 when Mohammed Ziaul Haq proudly declared Pakistan a "front line state" in the cold war. Those costs - already unbearable in proliferation of guns, heroin, and armed fanatics - are likely now to multiply in myriad ways. The Taliban will certainly be assisted by Islamabad to consolidate their precarious conquests. Successful or not, this will be an expensive undertaking, an expense we are ill-prepared to bear. Taliban victories have not put an end to their challengers; they are there and do not lack sponsors. The prospect is for protracted proxy warfare. It may cost some billions to keep the Taliban in saddle, assuming that we avoid being sucked into a larger war with Iran or Russia or both.

Afghanistan's reconstruction cost is conservatively estimated at some \$40 billion. We cannot muster such amounts even for ourselves, so who will keep the Taliban in business? The strategic dreamers of Islamabad dream of dollar laden Saudi princes, Emirate Sheikhs, and American oil tycoons laying transnational pipelines from Turkmenistan to Karachi. They are veterans of false and deadly dreams such as the great Kashmiri uprising in support of Operation Gibraltar in 1965, or the powerful reinforcements which the American Seventh Fleet was bringing to Pakistan's army in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

Pakistan is being trapped again in risky illusions, and again the people not the decision-makers will pay the price. Without the resources of a great power Pakistan has entered the game - both nuclear and non-nuclear - that great powers found difficult to sustain. So help us God!

The domestic costs of Pakistan's friendly proximity to the Taliban are incalculable and potentially catastrophic. Our embroilment: willy nilly, in the Ben Laden affair is a case in point. More importantly, the Taliban's is the most retrograde political movement in the history of Islam. The warlords who proscribe music and sports in Afghanistan, inflict harsh punishments upon men for trimming their beards, flog taxi drivers for carrying women passengers, prevent sick women from being treated by male physicians, banish girls from schools and women from the work-place are not returning Afghanistan to its traditional Islamic way of life as the western media reports sanctimoniously.

They are devoid of the ethics, aesthetics, humanism, and Sufi sensibilities of traditional Muslims, including Afghans of yesteryear. To call them "mediaeval" as did the protesters in Therean is to insult the age of Hafiz and Saadi, of Rabi'a Basri and Mansur al-Hallaj, of Amir Khusrau and Hazrat Nizamuddin. The Taliban are the expression of a modern disease, symptoms of a social cancer which shall destroy Muslim societies if its growth is not arrested and the disease is not eliminated. It is prone to spreading, and the Taliban will be the most deadly communicators of this cancer if they remain so organically linked to Pakistan. The Sipah-i-Sahaba leader's greetings to his Afghan co-believers is but one

signal of the menace ahead.

Policy-makers in Islamabad assume that a Taliban dominated government in Kabul will be permanently friendly towards Pakistan. The notion of 'strategic depth' is founded on this presumption. This too is an illusion. The chances are that if they remain in power, the Taliban shall turn on Pakistan, linking their brand of 'Islamism' with a revived movement for Pakhtunistan. I have met some of them and found ethnic nationalism lurking just below their 'Islamic' skin. It is silly to presume their debt to Pakistan as an impediment to their ambitions. Old loyalties rarely stand in the way of new temptations. Also, as the threat of local rivals recedes, their resentments against Pakistan's government shall rapidly augment, as Islamabad will not be in a position to meet their expectations of aid. The convergence of ethnic nationalism and religion can mobilise people decisively. However inadvertently, Islamabad is setting the stage for the emergence in the next decade of a powerful Pakhtunistan movement.

There may still be time to help avert the disasters that are likely to accrue from the Taliban's domination of Afghanistan. Our interest lies in the establishment of a common peace there, one as welcome to Afghanistan's other neighbours as to us. Our future is best served if power in Afghanistan is pluralistically shared by its ethnic groups, for that alone can inhibit the pursuit of ethnically based territorial ambition. If we must live with a theocracy next door, it is better to live with an enlightened rather than a barbaric version of it. Also, if Afghanistan is to regain life, it needs a government hospitable to international aid; the Taliban are not.

It is unlikely that the architects of Islamabad's Afghanistan policy shall pay heed to arguments such as these. Dissenting points of view have always been ignored in Pakistan with tragic consequences. After hesitating for a while on the side of wisdom, Ayub Khan ignored them in 1965. We were relatively young and gullible then, so they lost a costly war and declared victory. In 1971, Yahya Khan, Z.A. Bhutto and others dismissed the warnings of impending disaster as treachery, and lost half the country. Z.A. Bhutto rejected friendly early criticism of the failings of his government, suppressed the magazine in which they were published, and ruled on to be overthrown and executed by a usurper of his choice. He alone paid for his blunders personally; for those of the others only the land and the people continue to pay. Yet they do not hear and do not see even the obvious. No wonder they are looking for 'strategic depth'.

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