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View: Defeating the Taliban-al Qaeda duo —*Ishtiaq Ahmed*



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President Barack Obama's much-awaited speech of December 1, 2009 outlining his decision to send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan has had a mixed reaction both in the US and in Pakistan. Obama has received more support from the Republicans than from the Democrats. Some Democrats have even gone in the opposite direction and advocated an early exit, leaving it to the Afghans to deal with such a situation. The problem is, of course, that last time when the US hastily packed up and left after the Red Army had been expelled from Afghanistan, the Taliban came to power.

A former adviser on the Middle East during the Kennedy Administration, William R. Polk wrote 'An Open Letter to President Obama' dated November 30, 2009 in the US-based magazine, *The Nation*. He asserts that not until the US and NATO troops leave Afghanistan can things return to 'normality'. The corrupt and inept Karzai government will collapse because that is the fate that awaits all collaborators. Once back in power, the Taliban will sooner or later change their ways whereas occupation will only strengthen their resolve to fight and attract more and more Afghans to their cause. He gives examples of similar experiences from modern history, but lays special emphasis on Vietnam: who could believe some years ago that it would open up and become a dynamic economic entity casting away the straightjacket of a command economy?

He supports Obama's approach to the India-Pakistan relationship, emphasising that the two adversaries should be encouraged to resolve the Kashmir dispute as quickly as possible. Massive human rights violations have taken place on a huge scale in Kashmir because of the excessive use of force by India and half a million soldiers stationed there. He describes the Kashmir dispute as the South Asian Palestine problem. Yet it would be unrealistic to expect India to let go of Kashmir, argues Mr Polk. Therefore, dialogue between India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris alone can result in a peaceful and durable resolution of that dispute.

On the whole, the article is an apt critique of past US interventions in the Third World. Mr Polk lauds Obama's famous speech in Cairo in which he assured the Muslim world that the US was not engaged in a crusade against Islam.

There are, however, a number of fallacies in Mr Polk's thesis, which need to be examined. The first refers to the discussion of Pashtunwali, the code of honour that the Pashtuns adhere to in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He subscribes to the romantic viewpoint that in protecting al Qaeda leaders the Taliban were acting in accordance with lofty principles of hospitality and guest safety. This assertion needs to be put into perspective.

I frequently receive despatches from Pashtuns who plead that the Taliban have grossly distorted Pashtunwali, so that it has become an arbitrary code of conduct that only serves Taliban interests and primitive ideology. They tell me that the attacks on the Sikh and other religious minorities in the tribal areas were a flagrant contravention of the spirit of hospitality and protection that true Pashtunwali represents.

One can add that while in power before 9/11, the Taliban enforced social rules and legal codes that constitute an unending catalogue of crimes committed against humanity, especially women. Again in Swat, Malakand and other parts of the NWFP where the Taliban established their Islamic emirates,

their main hate target were girls schools and women in general. In all such cases, actions were taken without any foreign invasion being involved.

Leaving aside fantastic pseudo-legalistic arguments that are marshalled for and against the American retaliation that resulted in the current presence, or occupation, by thousands of foreign troops in Afghanistan — whichever description appeals to the protagonists in the debate — the fact remains that had al Qaeda not ordered the 9/11 outrage, the US-NATO attack on Afghanistan would not have occurred and the Taliban may well have been in power even now. There is some evidence to the effect that precisely in 2001, but before 9/11, the US had entered into an understanding with the Taliban, which would have meant greater cooperation on exploiting oil and natural gas in Central Asia.

I am in no position to judge the merits of Pashtunwali either in its pure form or its allegedly perverted Taliban interpretation. However, it is clear to me that under no circumstance can a culture code be used as an argument to protect mass murderers. Therefore, the Taliban returning to power and enforcing their version of Pashtunwali is a risk that can plunge this region into great chaos and anarchy once again.

For Pakistan, a US-NATO exit without the establishment of a stable, moderate and effective government in Afghanistan could mean it having to face the brunt of Taliban-al Qaeda fury, because from May 2009 onwards it has been engaged in a bloody head-on confrontation with the Taliban-al Qaeda nexus. Such fears were candidly expressed by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in an interview given in 'Hardtalk' to Zeinab Badawi of the BBC on November 29, 2009. He made a spirited case for coordinated action by the US and Pakistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda.

It would entail greater sharing of intelligence, joint military operations and other related activities. It was clear from his pleas that although Pakistan had been consulted on the question of a US troop surge in Afghanistan, it was not taken on board with regard to the overall plan and concomitant strategy and tactics. In other words, his standpoint was that a surge of US and NATO troops was good only if it meant that Pakistan was included in the grand strategy to defeat the terrorists.

On another point too Mr Polk is seriously in error. To compare the Taliban with the Vietnamese is wholly unjustified. Even if one holds communism in contempt, the Vietnamese interpretation of it was infinitely more benign than the Taliban ideology. The Vietnamese wanted to improve the lives of their people and worked towards such objective, even when a terrible war had been imposed upon them.

The closest parallel to the Taliban ideology on the Left was the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot. While the former subscribed to a worldview that harked to a mythical golden age from the distant past, the latter wanted to create a brand new society of the future from which all traces of Western or foreign culture had been purged. The outcomes of their totalitarian onslaughts on their hapless people were identical, though Pol Pot and his ilk were able to inflict greater suffering because of better organisation.

It is, therefore, important that under no circumstance should the Taliban-al Qaeda forces be allowed to return to power. It is more likely that if the leadership of these two groups is apprehended or destroyed, these two movements will collapse. Hundreds of thousands of Pashtuns need to be liberated from the stranglehold of a primitive worldview and ideology.

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