

Afghanistan: confusing cursors

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_: The top general from UK visiting the Helmand province of Afghanistan last week claimed that his troops would stay another five years, even though the military operation would “trail off” in 2011.

Feeling happy about the provision of additional resources to his troops “for the first time”, he tended to be rather optimistic. While warning the coalition troops against failure, he saw “very optimistic signs” that “the tables have turned” on Taliban. He emphasised that the enemy’s victory would have “...intoxicating effect on those militants who oppose democracy and our freedoms.”

The general also visualised a long-term cooperation with Afghanistan for long years. Such a statement may be music to the protagonists of the status quo. No wonder, President Hamid Karzai had indicated earlier that the Afghan state could not shoulder its basic responsibility even till the next 15 years, whereby he expected the current arrangement to go on. Having persuaded his ‘mentors’ in the US about his indispensability, despite the wailing by the UN and other international organisations about his shoddy re-election, he now feels confident enough to be able to survive in power for quite long.

However, the general’s star-gazing was soon to get a terrible jolt by what happened in Kabul on Friday. An attack in the Shahr-e-Naw, central Kabul district, killed 17 persons, including 10 Indians. Mark Magnier of Los Angeles Times considered that it “...underscored the shifting tactics of Taliban insurgents and their keen understanding of geopolitical implications.” The foreign troops, as well as the ‘palace’, were extremely embarrassed while the crisis evoked a worldwide reaction. Furthermore, John Harrison of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore opined: “They are trying to up the pressure and send a message that you guys aren’t defeating us,” concluding, “...and they are showing they can penetrate the city and stand awhile.”

The again following their agenda vis-à-vis the Marjah stalemate, a ‘newly planted mine’ by Taliban hit a vehicle on last Sunday killing 11 locals in Nawzad District in North Helmand. Such sad incidents tend to rip apart the credibility of the foreign forces in relation to the provision of ‘security’ to the Afghans.

Monday-week saw the killing of six NATO troops, besides a deadly attack on a foreign convoy in Kandahar. It is rather enigmatic for an English general to be talking poetry about the prevailing mess despite the terrible tribulations faced by the British Empire, particularly in Helmand in the last century. I wonder if he had read Rudyard Kipling seriously or the history of the ‘Great Game’.

He should also learn from the writings of Olaf Caroe, a great authority on AfPak and the last British governor of the Frontier province. Experience and erudition enlightened him to conclude: “Unlike other wars, Afghan wars become serious only when they are over.”

A similar pearl of wisdom was cast by the Deputy of Gromyko, the then Soviet foreign minister. The former had invoked caution in Afghanistan as per its history. As the boss had fumed: “Are you comparing our internationalist forces to those of the British imperialists?” The deputy promptly said: “No Sir, but the mountains are the same.” Therefore, that much is important for every general to know who gets involved with this peculiar area by way of geography, history and spirit of the people.

As the US adopted its new strategy developed by the generals, surge of troops was considered to be the mantra to hit out of trouble. The foreign troops were to treat the security of the Afghans as a priority, as against the policy followed during the neo-con era. In addition, economic development to provide employment to the local people was also visualised. To ease serious pressures, the ‘good Taliban’ were to be welcomed as, what Karzai termed as, “estranged brothers.” All such planning was based on the US experiences in Iraq where the ‘surge’ gave the US a breather to claim success. But

what goes on in Iraq now appears to be nobody's business. However, it is most unrealistic to compare the two situations.

Of course the Iraqis did also put up a brave fight against: despite the Saddam factor: the invasion on the fraud of Weapons of Mass Destruction which now is seen to stand for the pilferage of Iraqi oil. It worked in Iraq as the foreign forces exploited the Shia-Sunni divide to earn some relief. Unfortunately, now it is haunting the Iraqis terribly.

Conversely, Afghanistan is very different. After nine years, the US has a worst quagmire than Vietnam proved to be. Its basic allies, the northern warlords, are also pissed off due to the mishandling permitted by the US, despite the fact that they made billions of dollars in the drug business thanks to the tolerance of the powers-that-be. As against that the Taliban, hunted and haunted by horrific bombings by the greatest air power, have managed to carry on their jihad against the occupation. Their massive effort has been greatly helped by, ignorance or a could-not-care-less approach by the foreign troops. Accordingly, the forces disregarded local traditions which are considered sacrosanct by the Afghans. The most important of such howlers were the killings resulting from indiscriminate bombing of 'suspect' targets which always ended in civilian deaths. Under local faith, a murder has to be avenged unless the offender sues for amity as per the hoary mechanism. This helped the Taliban as the foreign troops never heeded any protests even from Karzai. It was only recently that the US officers started approaching the aggrieved to put paper over the cracks.

It is true that an Afghan during his life does not forget the murderer and revenge killings' timeline is fluid. A famous Pashto proverb emphasises: "When your brother, son has been murdered who has tied your hands."

After two weeks of operation, Admiral Michael Mullen claims that Marjah is "cleared"; it is to be "held" and then "built". A report says: "Marine officers carried briefcases full of currency, and they instantly paid for collateral damage to homes and businesses" in Marjah. But the Taliban tramp on a different course. Lacking war resources miserably, they now proclaim it to be war against the 'occupation' which has a massive appeal now after nine years of the status quo.

History points out that the tradition of fighting with faith and patience has, so far, been difficult to vanquish. In addition, Secretary Robert Gates considers the ambivalence of EU/NATO vis-à-vis defence/AfPak as 'dangerous'.

Nevertheless, Pakistan remains in political doldrums while it keeps offering sacrifices to help the US. A real catch-22 situation for all!

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