

# Pakistan: In search of strategic death

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The Inuit of the Arctic had a clever technique for hunting wolves. They would plant a bloody knife in the snow. Lured by the smell of blood, the wolves would approach the knife and lick the blade, cutting their tongues. Without realizing that they were drinking their own blood, wolves would continue licking until they had bled to death.

Back in 1980s, Pakistan military adopted a doctrine of strategic depth. This doctrine is proving hunter's knife for Pakistan. The doctrine implies that Pakistan needs Afghanistan as backyard beyond India's reach. The Afghan-India nexus dominating military's mind is evident from a recent interaction General Kayani had with media recently. On February 1, he told foreign correspondents: ""We want Afghanistan to be our strategic depth". In two days time, he was telling Pakistani journalists: "I am India-centric."

It is in search of strategic depth that Pakistan military, post-September 11, has been hunting with the American-hound and running with Taliban-hare. Definitely not an easy position. That country's military establishment has not given up Jihadi assets is evident from media reports.

Woe unto missing Saudi billionaire! He disturbed the order Pakistan military had established in the region. No matter with what horrible consequences for the masses.

When the 'communist' era came to an end in Afghanistan, mutually combating Mujahideen pillaged Kabul in their bid to outdo each other for the control of government. Gulbadin Hikmatyar was Pakistan's favourite horse in this race. When he proved futile, Pakistan saddled Taliban.

Back in 1997, objective conditions favoured Pakistan-sponsored Taliban's seizure of Kabul. It remains Pakistan military's sole victory at an external front. A disinterested USA welcomed Taliban's arrival in Kabul. To quote *New York Times*, the "State Department was touting the Taliban as the group that might finally bring stability". A US diplomat, Jon Holtzman, was advised to visit Kabul. Trip was, however, cancelled after media kerfuffle about women rights. Still \$125 million were granted in aid (largest foreign aid). The State Department maintained secret correspondence with Taliban regime. At the time, media were replete with rumours regarding US-backing for Taliban. Unlike the anti-US image Taliban have cultivated in recent years, they were also pretty cozy with infidel Uncle Sam. The US rationale for Taliban support was not merely an over-publicised gas pipeline project that Unocal wanted to pursue. Clinton Administration, it was rumoured, had Iran in mind while welcoming Taliban. Whether these rumours were true or not, Taliban's second major sponsor, Riyadh, definitely wanted to contain Iran through staunchly anti-Shia Taliban. Thus, all three infamous As that matter in Pakistan i.e. Army, America and Allah (represented here by Riyadh) were united in seeking, by default, cherished strategic depth. Equally important was the turmoil in Russia and Central Asian Republics (CARs). Following the Soviet dissolution, new regimes in Russia and CARs were struggling to consolidate. Most importantly, Afghans were desperate for peace after years of brutal infighting among Mujahideen gangs. Hoping against hope, at least a section of Afghans pinned their hopes in Taliban even if it meant sacrificing civil liberties.

Fifteen years on, odds are stubbornly going against Taliban. The USA is not merely on the other side of the fence, it in fact is guarding (no matter how unsuccessfully) the fence. Saudi royals, one of

them personally humiliated by Mullah Omar on the question of Osama's expulsion, would find it imprudent to annoy Washington by patronising Taliban. Regimes in CARs and Russia, dealing with confessional militancy, would not sit idle in the face of Taliban take over of Kabul. Pakistan's all-weather friend China, facing Uighur uprising, has publicly expressed her disapproval of Taliban. Most importantly, big majority of Afghans, particularly non-Pakhtuns constituting almost 55 percent of the population, having lived Taliban nightmare are not ready to experience it one more time. Though Pakistan's pro-Taliban media have pretty successfully painted Taliban as popular peace-harbingers (in 1990s) and popular liberation force (2001 onwards) yet Afghan perception of Taliban is different. Opinion polls find Taliban's popularity below ten percent. Hence, Taliban march on Kabul, by proxy providing strategic depth to Pakistan, may not be resisted by the USA, Iran, India, China, CARs and Russia but by most Afghans.

However, despite lacking a mass social base, Taliban have the advantage of an unceasing supply of fanatics ready to explode on Afghan streets en route paradise. This factor has shattered early US hopes of a steady occupation in a strategically important country neighbouring Iran, gas-rich Central Asia while China is at stone's throw. Meantime, not merely Obama administration has staked its political future on Afghanistan, Afghan war is a good war (essential to nip the evil of terror in Afghan bud) hence a good tool to keep NATO united. The NATO fell apart in case of Iraq. Afghanistan provided Washington the opportunity to discipline European satraps. Hence, to tranquillise the Taliban uproar, Washington has resorted to a multi-pronged policy. An Iraq-style surge (over 30, thousand more troops to Kabul). An aggressive drone-Pakistan-policy to force Islamabad (read Pakistan military) into giving up dual policy on Taliban. Also, by droning Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan,---particularly targetting leadership---US wishes to weaken Taliban. Fallujah-style military offensive in Marhaj (Helmend province) to flush Taliban out is an attempt to demoralise Taliban. All this is aimed at bringing a weak Taliban (and Pakistani patrons) to a negotiating table. Caught between the hammer of "war on terror" and anvil of "strategic depth", Pakistan instead of reaching strategic depth, will embrace a strategic death.

Everytime Pakistan military hunts Taliban, there is a boomrang suicidal attack. According to a think tank, in 2009: "If the casualties in terrorist attacks, operational attacks by the security forces and their clashes with the militants, inter-tribal clashes and the cross-border attacks of the US and Nato forces in Fata are counted, the overall casualties amount to 12,632 people dead and 12,815 injured."

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\* From Znet, Sulehria's ZSpace page:

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