

US WAR ON TERRORISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract:

A reading of history gives one the impression that characteristically the gamut of history is divided into different phases, of short and long duration. Each of the numerous phases of history typically starts with the happening of some events of extra ordinary importance, whose profound implications dominate the world stage throughout the phase. The contemporary phase of the history is, beyond doubt, dominated by the phenomenal war on terrorism. The US-led war on terrorism which started in 2001 has been the characteristic feature of the first decade of the new century. Its impact has been as pervasive as common for all the nations of the world and for designs of their interaction with one another. South Asia, on account of a number of factors, has been at the centre stage in this global fight. As a consequence, it has left overwhelmingly impact on the different states in this region. This impact has been not only on the regional dynamics, not only on the bilateral relations of the South Asian states, but also, most significantly, on their domestic politics as well. This paper will make an effort to have a brief assessment of such an impact on all the three levels.

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Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. The world has experienced it, in different faces and different demonstration, since ancient times. Particularly, the twentieth century, which is certainly the most blood-ridden century in human history, saw a persistent increase and evolution in the terrorist activities. However, it had never enjoyed the status of being the foremost challenge for the international community. This transformation of the status of terrorism is obviously the outcome of the attacks of 9/11 on the twin-towers of World Trade Center and Pentagon- the chief symbols of American economic and military supremacy. Wounded at the time of its zenith as the sole super power of the world, America understandably decided to strike back and to launch a global campaign against terrorism.

It was a very unpleasant decision. What this American resolve to initiate a world wide war could have implied for the dynamics of international relations could be well-judged by what President Bush said in his address to the joint session of the US Congress on September 20, 2001.

“Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, and drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe havens to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

It shall be more than clear from this policy statement of the American President that what America was going to start was not to be a limited military action; rather America would take the war to the doorstep of every nation in every region. Thus, every nation and every society had to bear its share of the impact of this global war. Stephen P. Cohen has said, no part of the world has more affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 than South Asia.¹

Today, if we look back at the five years history of the war on terrorism, it becomes clear that South Asia had to endure the strain of the consequences of the war. Perhaps it has been the centre of enormity in this unusual war. There were a number of factors which made South Asia a central point in the US war. First and prime, the alleged suspects of these attacks were traced back to the mountainous wilderness of Afghanistan. The propinquity with a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan brought the war on terror to the doorstep of South Asia. As we know Pakistan shares border with Afghanistan and was among the countries which had a formal diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. Secondly, and more importantly, perhaps, there was no other state in the world that knew the radical regime of Taliban better than Pakistan. The ample treasure of reliable intelligence, the ability to launch air strikes from adjoining Pakistani airbases, and the Cold War confidence in its pledge made Pakistan, and therefore South Asia, a sort of field headquarters for American military campaign. It may be said that General Pervez Musharraf calculated that if Pakistan did not cooperate with USA his nation at the very least would be marginalized and isolated by the US and the international community, at worst Pakistan itself could be targeted because of its support and relationship with Taliban

Thirdly, a deep study of the American foreign policy thinking in the last decade will reveal that Americans began to develop a feeling of threat from the Islamic revivalism, after the end of Cold War. South Asia happens to be home to quite a number of active Islamic revivalist movements. Accordingly, the presence of militant organizations in South Asia was an open invitation for the American war on terror.

Fourthly, the danger of nuclear terrorism also was a factor for the revival of American interest in South Asia. In the last decade, a major and drastic challenge to international security has been the rise of the non-state actors and the stem possibility that the nuclear weapons may fall to their hands. The presence of strong radical elements in a nuclear South Asia made this threat highly plausible.

It was for these, besides other reasons, that South Asia was so pervasively involved in the American war on terror. As the United States prepared to launch its global war, it put a tough choice before the states of the region “Either you are with us or against us”. It was not only a decisive message but also an indication of the future course of Pak-USA relations. India, stimulated by the hope of strategic gains offered its all-out support, in every possible way. Pakistan, given its historic ties with the elements in Afghanistan was caught in a predicament, for some time, whether to join the war or not. Nevertheless, when Pakistan was presented the famous list of seven demands, it did not take much but a call from Colin Powell, for Pakistan to take the bold decision of joining the American war, unconditionally. Pakistan became an indispensable ally after 9/11 when President Pervez Musharraf broke with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to join in the US- led war against terrorism.²

On January 12, 2002 President Pervez Mushraff said, " we have decided to join international; coalition against terrorism. We took this decision on principles and in our national interest. He further said Pakistan will not allow its territory to be used for any terrorist activity any where in the world."³ It may be stated that whatever President Pervez Mushaffraf has done to help the US in its war against terrorism was to avert the grave consequences of saying 'no' to the US. Pakistan's support was vital for the US because it not only wanted to use the territory of a country which shares the border with Afghanistan but also to avert the support which was being given to the Taliban government by Pakistan. The proactive role of US in South Asia posed challenges for Pakistan .Pakistan wanted to safeguard its strategic assets, the Kashmir cause and economic recovery. However there is a sense of dissatisfaction and a belief that the US and its allies did not live up to the promises and pledges made to Pakistan for its support in the war against terrorism.⁴

It may be argued that as far as South Asia is concerned, the post 9/11 development worsened the security environment of the region. The South Asian countries decided to join the US led war against terrorism because of their own interests.⁵ India was prompt in offering its support in the hope that such a configuration of the situation in South Asia. Pakistan decided to join because of predictable economic incentives, the need to save its strategic assets and salvaging its Kashmir policy from total destruction.

President Pervez Mushraff acceptance facilitated America's military needs of the moment and led to yet a commitment of aid to Pakistan, has earned the country the title "key ally".⁶ But it is imperative to note that America has seen the wisdom of building up India as counterbalance to China.

We may agree with Moisi Dominique that thirteen years ago, Samuel Huntington argued that a “clash of civilizations” was about to dominate world politics, with culture along with national interests and political ideology, becoming a geo-political fault line today the world faces what might be called a “clash of emotion” as well. The western world displays a culture of fear, the Arab and Muslim worlds are trapped in a culture of humiliation and much of Asia displays a culture of hope.⁷ Now almost 5 years have passed and the profound effect of the war is gradually unfolding.

As we have mentioned in the beginning, the impact of the war on the South Asian region has been particularly at three levels---regional level, at the level of bilateral relations among regional states and at the domestic level. At the regional level, the important impact has been the resurgence of South Asia as the region of highest priority for America. While during the closing decade of Cold War, since 1979, South Asia remained the highest point in American foreign policy thinking, it lost its prominence with the Cold War. While the first Clinton Administration wanted to establish a rapport with India, but South Asia did not figure heavily in American interests. However, the start of the global war on terror has rediscovered South Asia for America. With the presence of two nuclear power friends, and an Al-Qaeda-strewn Afghanistan, South Asia assumed a strategic status in American eyes. The rebirth of South Asia prominence was not limited to America, rather for whole the world. There was a long chain of Heads of States, and highest officials visiting the region every alternative day were evidence of long term strategic interests of the US in the region. The main objective of the US during the stand off were (1) that the prevailing tension between India and Pakistan should not escalate into a nuclear exchange (2) that the deteriorating situation should not affect

Pakistan's support to the US war against terrorism in Afghanistan. According to Vanni Cappelli, the Bush administration presented President Pervez Musharraf with an ultimatum abandon support of Taliban and commit to the American –led war on terror or face the consequences of being considered an enemy of the US.⁸ Moins Ahmer says that, "there is no overwhelming strategic framework for South Asia and being against "terrorism" doesn't provide one" neglecting both the regions enduring historical relations and our most pressing current security challenges.⁹ Resolution of the Kashmir issue was important for us to maintain good relations with Pakistan and India. It is imperative to note that the US later played a proactive role in the normalization of deteriorating Pakistan –India relations. It became the centre of global attention in the global media and the central battle- ground where the global war was either to be lost or won.

Secondly, the war on terror has had a lasting impact on the regional stability. There are opposite views in this regard. One viewpoint is that the war on terror has improved the regional stability. The source of regional instability mainly has been the irregularly rising tension between the nuclear archrivals---India and Pakistan. The war on terror and the American military presence is a factor of stability for the region. This has been fully proved during the 2002 militancy standoff. Following the December 13 attacks on its parliament, India had pushed the war hysteria up. There was an unprecedented mobilization of armed forces on a large scale. The armed forces stood eyeball to eyeball for several days, on both sides of the borders. Even nuclear threats were exchanged. An outbreak of war was believed to be certain. Then the American military presence entered as a stabilizing factor. America perceived that a war between India and Pakistan will certainly subvert, and disrupt its campaign against terror. Its war on terror could only be

saved by avoiding the outbreak of a regional conflict. So America initiated a whole-hearted effort to defuse the situation. The tension came down. Those who believe that it was American diplomatic activism which prevented an outbreak of war and nuclear holocaust believe that the US war on terror is a factor for regional peace and stability.

On the opposite, a viewpoint upholds that the US war on terror has made the region highly unstable. There are many aspects of this instability. Firstly, the Taliban had been successful to restore a kind of stability in Afghanistan for the first time after a very long period of unrest. America, by dripping to pieces the Taliban regime, once again pushed Afghanistan into a new phase of insurgency and civil war. This unstable and troubled situation will not remain confined within the Afghan borders; rather will soon spread into the neighboring states. We can see for ourselves that the unrest and turbulence in Afghanistan has leaked out into Pakistan.

The second aspect of war created instability in the region is related to the Indian effort to manipulate the situation in its favor with full vigor. India equated the self-determination movement in Kashmir with terrorist and accused Pakistan of support and cross border terrorism. Lal Krishna Advani warned that Bush doctrine could be used against Pakistan.¹⁰ The situation provided an opportunity for India to justify its previous allegation against Pakistan before the world community. India planned to capitalize on the emerging world wide focus against terrorism, which gave New Delhi an opportunity to portray Pakistan a state sponsoring Jihad and terrorism.¹¹ It may be said that in this way after 9/11 Pakistan India relations took a new turn when New Delhi offered full support to the US war against terrorism and tried its best to establish a linkage between Pakistan support to the Muslim struggle in Jammu and Kashmir and struggling elements in Afghanistan but India failed to stop Pakistan from joining the US –led coalition against terrorism. India's purpose was to discredit the Kashmiris freedom movement and declare Pakistan as a terrorist state. Consequently Pakistan initiated measure to launch a crackdown on terrorist elements especially those having connection with Al-Qaeda and

Taliban. It indicated a change in government's approach on supporting Kashmiris freedom struggle. It is imperative to note such measure did not result in de-escalation in tension between Pakistan and India.

It may be stated that even though Pakistan is, currently the frontline state in the US war on terror, it is America who is essentially reaping benefits from the situation, conditions in Indo-Pak hostility, to materialize its own selfish design vis-à-vis the south Asia region. The Indo-US nuclear deal is a proof of the fact that US has given a military edge to India making Pakistan more apprehensive than ever as to what real motives of US friendship with Pakistan. Convinced of American support, India tried to manipulate the American doctrine of pre-emption to pressurize Pakistan. India had been accusing Pakistan of waging cross border terrorism in Kashmir. It gambled to justify a possible attack on Pakistan by borrowing the preemptive doctrine and bringing the Kashmir insurgency into the realm of US definition of terrorism. The Indian effort to built pressure on Pakistan on the unjustified pretext of doctrine of pre-emption threatened to destabilize the region.

The third aspect in which the war on terror generated regional instability is even more important and sensitive. The chief source of regional instability is the hostility between India and Pakistan. On the western border, Pakistan always likes to feel secure through the presence of a friendly regime in Afghanistan. The war on terror has brought the Northern Alliances to the power in Kabul. The Afghan government is extremely antagonistic to Pakistan. This has made the western border of Pakistan highly troubled, thus adding to the regional instability.

Apart from its impact on the regional environment, the war on terror has largely influenced the bilateral relations of the countries in the region. The bilateral relations between India Pakistan, in the last decade of the 20th century remained as tense as ever, except for the temporary relief of Lahore Declaration. The nuclear tests in May 1998, and then the kargil crisis in 1999 worsened the relations to the worst levels. However, after passing through the litmus test of the 2002 military standoff, the ice began to thaw. The peace process, starting after the friendship offer by Vajpayee on April 18, 2003 marks the dawn of a new era in the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. The composite dialogue has completed its three rounds. Although, it has not been able as yet to produce some meaningful progress on any of the major issues with India, nevertheless, the general normalization of relations and decrease in tension is no mean achievement in itself. It may be said that the success of composite dialogue could make both countries abandon wars and cherish peace. The long range of CBMs is accomplishing their objective of reducing the trust deficit. Resumption of road, rail and air links, exchange visits by the parliamentarians, media men, and students, the opening up of trade ties, and the growing people to people diplomacy will ultimately make the task of final resolution of all disputes including Kashmir, much easier to achieve. One can hardly deny that this peace process and the CBMs is not inclusively a product of the realization on part of India or Pakistan, rather the role of third party is of key importance. America, keeping in view the demands of its war on terror, has been decisive in the initiation and continuation of the present peace process.

On the third level, the war on terrorism has had its effects on the domestic political dynamics of the South Asian states. The impact has been most evident and vital at the domestic level. It has been either a direct result of the American military activities, or indirect fallout of the policies adopted by the United States in the region. Perhaps no other country of the world, except America, has been as deeply affected by the war on terror as Pakistan.

Pakistan's geographical location, its nearness with Afghanistan, its close relations with the Taliban regime, its deep knowledge of the rugged terrain of Afghanistan, and its history of Cold War alliance made Pakistan obviously the most important strategic asset for the United States. As Pakistan was chosen to once again fight an American war, it had to make a number of difficult choices, which changed the course of its history. Pakistan had to take a U-turn on its Afghan policy by accepting the new regime, both parties relations could not become cordial just on pretence.¹² Pakistan was forced to leave its longstanding search for the strategic depth in Afghanistan. It made forceful efforts to convince the Taliban to act in accordance with the demands of international community, but as the Taliban were insolvent, Pakistan had to withdraw its hand from all kinds of support to the regime. With this major shift in its Afghan policy, Pakistan lost whatever influence it had in Afghanistan, Karzai's government was of the opinion in 2006 that it was a kind of hidden invasion propped up by outside interference Intended to tarnish the national identity and historical of Afghanistan.¹³

For decades it was policy of Pakistan to support and sponsor the militant organizations in quest of its bleed-India policy. However, the US war on terror forced Pakistan to rethink its priorities, because America believed that these militant

organizations formed a pool of terrorists as well as a ready-made basis for its organizational facilities for the Al-Qaeda network. So, Pakistan at once attacked at the militant organizations. Some of the organizations like LAT, JEM, TNFJ, SSP, and TNSM were banned. Their bank accounts were frozen, and their offices were closed.

That Pakistan's participation in the war on terror has come at a heavy domestic price is clear from the later tussle between the government and the militants. The militant organizations were not ready to diaper so easily. They put up a firm resistance, and the government had to face a severe backlash. Law and order situation go worse. The banned organizations re-surfaced under new names. The frequency of terrorist activities multiplied. There was a sharp increase in the suicide attacks on the government officials and assets. The President himself narrowly get away two suicide attempts at his life.

This backlash has been most alarming in the North West of Pakistan. The North Western mountainous terrain, the ethnic ties between the Pashtoons on both sides of the border, and the tribal traditions combinely offered the region as an ideal safe haven for the Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters running from Afghanistan. The prevailing religious extremism and the large chain of madarssas spread all over the area welcomed the fugitives Mujahideen with open arms. As the pressure mounted up on Pakistan to trace and capture the fleeing terrorists, the government was faced with the difficult choice of launching a military operation in the tribal region.

The state forces initiated a full-fledge military campaign to drive out the Taliban scraps in mid-March 2004, when the armed forces came upon an Al-Qaeda shelter at Kaloosha near WANA, in South Waziristan. Since then, a high tension clash between the state forces and the foreign militants, along with their local supporters is going on. The

government had to concentrate as many as 80,000 troops in its effort to bring the troubled region under control. It was almost impossible terrain despite countless raids siege and search operations as well as large scale arrests the high value targets were still away from the iron hands. Thus the military operation failed to deliver required results at the expense of bloodshed by country men of their brothers. No Al-Qaeda figure of any note was caught, except their Pakistani supports.¹⁴ Few observer have pointed out that Kabul is not a free agent and that they would not have done all this without the approval of Americans.¹⁵ The terrorist put up a daunting resistance, claiming the lives of above 700 army men.

The indiscriminate shelling on the non-combatants by security forces, have also caused a large-scale displacement of tribesmen from the violence-hit areas. Hundreds of families are forced to live with relatives in the neighboring towns. The Government has alternatively tried various forceful and appeasing strategies. The turbulence originating in the restless west has penetrated into the far and wide of the country. Major Urban centers have been targeted by the irritated militants.

Pakistan feels itself unjustly targeted as the pressure from America continues to go up without reason for doing more. While Pakistan has started its military operation into the Northern areas at a very heavy domestic price, the Karzai Government in Kabul, and the aggressive elements in American think tanks continue to show lack of trust on Pakistan.

Besides the military clashes in the tribal agencies, the war on terror is making its impact on the more peaceful cities as well. There is a clear cut polarization in the society on the question of Pakistan's desirable role in the war. This polarization has further

deteriorated the perennial challenge of national integration and social cohesiveness in Pakistan. One school of thought believes that it is a battle that Pakistan is fighting for its own sake. The militant organizations have become Frankenstein, and turned against their creator. Therefore, such forces need to be controlled by the government. The opposite viewpoint upholds that the government is unjustified for lashing at these very organization which it established by itself. It is, for them, unethical on the part of government to unleash terror on the Jihadi organizations, by surrendering to the American pressure. This sharp divide has displayed itself emphatically in public protests and media opinion.

It needs to be emphasized that while Pakistan is genuinely committed to a war against all forms of terrorism, the United States is making the task difficult for the Government of Pakistan, with its unintended actions. The heartless adventures like the gruesome air strike on the village of Damodola on 13th January, 2006 is but only one of the many examples of the American actions which make it more difficult for the Pakistan government to justify their stance before the masses. Similarly, the way Karzai government continues to cast aspersions on Pakistan's role in restraining the militants further complicates the situation. It may be said that five years after 9/11, Pakistan's Islamist parties are growing stronger; the continuous violence in Kashmir has as far as Mumbai.

All along this, we must not forget the heavy economic cost that Pakistan is paying for the war on terror. The adverse situation generated by the war has discouraged the foreign investors and impeded the domestic economic activity due to political uncertainty. No doubt Pakistan has been taking substantial financial inflows from outside,

but this temporary aid and assistance cannot be a substitute for the genuine inflow of investment, and resulting industrialization of a backward economy.

One may argue that the political compromise on the constitutional engineering in Pakistan and the game being played with the democratic ideals is also a result of the war on terror. Had it not been but for his all out commitment to the American war on terror, who knows what, would be the American level of tolerance and support for the military regime of Pervez Musharraf. This is a compromise that the west in general and America in particular, are willing to make, for the sake of their war on terror.

In this way, the analysis at the various levels---regional, bilateral, and domestic--- makes it sufficiently clear that the war on terror has been a factor of utmost importance in the political, strategic and military dynamics of the South Asian region. It has left a lasting impact on the regional strategic environment, on the nature of relationships among the various states in the region, and on their domestic politics. What we must not forget is the fact that the war on terror is still not coming to an end. Therefore, its consequences and implications for the region of South Asia will continue to be gradually known for an indefinite period of time.

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