

Pakistan's Afghan Policy

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By Mushahid Hussain

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Mushahid Hussain, an Islamabad-based Syndicated Columnist. Hussain outlines Pakistan's current geopolitical position in the context of America's current campaign to counter terrorism. He also presents three political realities Pakistan must account for in its future foreign policy regarding Afghanistan. Finally, Hussain cautions the West against the dangers of confusing a "war against terrorism" with a "clash of civilizations" meant to "conquer the Islamic world."

II. Essay By Mushahid Hussain

"Pakistan's Afghan Policy"

Pakistan and the United States seem keen on preventing any perception of possible cleavage in their anti-terrorism coalition, given their competing interests over Afghanistan. The key areas of divergence revolve around what role the Northern Alliance should serve in the anti- Osama campaign, and equally important, if the Taliban regime were to unravel in the process, what sort of new political dispensation would replace it?

Ironies abound for the United States and Pakistan as they try to cover their tracks and recover from the consequences of policies they pushed and promoted in the past.

Take the case of the press conference on September 25 of Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar who obliquely warned Washington, "We must not make the blunder of trying to foist a government on the people of Afghanistan. We fear that any such decision on the part of foreign powers to give assistance to one side or the other in Afghanistan is a recipe for great disaster for the people of Afghanistan."

But is that not what Pakistan has tried to do for the last 25 years in Afghanistan, starting with

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto providing a sanctuary in 1974 to Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, and then training their men to destabilise the Daoud regime in Kabul, in a tit-for-tat exercise since Kabul was then a haven for Pakistani dissidents? That we didn't meet with success is a separate issue. However, after dumping these two long-time "friends" 20 years later, did we not proudly proclaim that the Taliban were "our boys" following their first victory in Kandahar in November 1994?

The Clinton administration concurred with Pakistan's policy because it saw Afghanistan as a pressure point on Iran, changing its view only after Osama bin Laden landed in Afghanistan in 1996. Afghanistan apart, the Bush administration was reluctant to even remove nuclear-related sanctions against Pakistan concurrently with India. Now it has promptly waived sanctions imposed under American law regarding democracy because, President Bush cites it as being in US "national security interests," which is fine since sanctions as punitive policy is wrong. But it does show that all these sanctions that the United States had imposed on Pakistan had nothing to do with principles either of nuclear or missile proliferation or of promoting democracy, but were in reality inextricably linked to politics and policies based on American interests. This is a good lesson to our policy-makers as well as in the real world: interests are paramount and that is how we should learn to operate.

Even on terrorism, the American approach is instructive. It is now clear that all 19 terrorists who blew themselves up along with the planes, passengers and thousands of innocent citizens were Arabs, who had no connection with Afghanistan and probably never visited that country. But why is it that there is a conspiracy of silence? Neither the United States nor Israel nor the American media have tried to establish even a remote connection of that act of terrorism with the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Palestine issue. Even the date of the crime, September 11, 2001, tallies with September 12, 1970, when Palestinian hijackers, including Leila Khaled, hijacked four planes and then blew these up, introducing hijacking as a weapon in the Palestinian arsenal.

Why is the accusing finger pointed only at Afghanistan? Because any reference to Palestine would invariably invite uncomfortable questions regarding unstinted American support for Israel and Israeli policies towards Palestinians.

It is rather late in the day for Pakistan to voice its fears regarding Afghanistan's future regime. President Bush publicly sought "the cooperation of citizens within Afghanistan who may be tired of having the Taliban in place," although he added a caveat "we're not into nation building, we're focused on justice."

However, the problem is that Pakistan's concerns on this count are not shared by even its friends in the region. Turkey, for instance, has publicly proclaimed its support for the Northern Alliance. Iran, which rejects any role in support of the United States but supports anti-terrorism under the United Nations umbrella by saying "we are neither with the Americans nor with the terrorists," would not shed any tears for the Taliban's demise nor would China, whose intelligence and anti-terrorism experts held a meeting in Washington on September 25 for sharing information regarding Afghanistan with their American counterparts, the first such intelligence cooperation between the two countries since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.

A peep into the American game plan for Afghanistan was provided in an article in The New York Times on September 29, "In Afghanistan, the United States military faces two of the most difficult tasks it has ever confronted. It must track down an enemy leader and his fellow terrorists on their home turf. And it must try to remove the foreign regime that shelters him."

Pakistan needs to understand three realities in the present situation. First, the United Nations Security Council's unanimous resolution mandating use of force against terrorism can put Pakistan's

Kashmir policy at risk, since at least one Kashmiri jihadi organisation has already been banned by the US for alleged links with Osama. An imaginative approach and deft diplomacy would be required to preserve important segments of Pakistan's stand on Kashmir, since its legitimacy is derived from UN resolutions.

Second, we should no longer continue to delude ourselves. The hard fact is that Pakistan's Afghan policy lies buried in the debris of the World Trade Center

Third, after the candid comments of Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi on September 26 regarding the "superiority of Western civilization over the Islamic civilization" and his optimism that that the West will "conquer" Islam just as it "conquered Communism," there should be little doubt regarding the intended targets in the current campaign against terrorism. This is mainly confined to Muslims, since terrorism of the Tamils, IRA and the Basque is excluded, and there are those in the West straining at the leash for a "clash of civilizations." Pakistan and the Muslim countries should heed the Italian leader's remarks as a wake-up call.

The United States, which is leading this coalition, needs to listen to saner and sober elements rather than be swayed by those who would like to convert a war against terrorism into a nation-destroying exercise which only further widens the chasm between the US and the Muslim World. President Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the world's biggest Muslim state who was the first to meet President Bush after the carnage of September 11, urging him to "pay attention to the feelings of the Islamic world as well as not mixing up terrorism with Islam."

Writing in The Los Angeles Times on September 30, Chalmers Johnson, called his thoughtful piece "Blowback" referring to the unintended negative consequences of foreign policy. He wrote, "President Bush has formed the largest air armada since World War II and brought it into position to bomb Afghanistan. He has deployed at least 630 US military aircraft, three times as many as were deployed in the Gulf War. If this armada is used against the hapless and impoverished people of Afghanistan, there is no doubt that it will produce a general crisis throughout the Islamic World." And he concludes with advice that deserves to be heeded by policy-makers in Washington, "We must recognize that the terrorism of September 11 was not directed against America but against American foreign policy. We should listen to the grievances of the Islamic peoples (and) ...if the United States only response to terrorism is more terrorism, it will have discredited itself."

Regrettably, in a crisis involving Muslims, the Organization of Islamic Conference is a virtual white elephant, a non-factor and all it has done is to call an "emergency" meeting of Foreign Ministers on October 9, almost a month after the event. This will be one of the umpteenth "emergency" meetings convened by Arab and Muslim leaders after the Intifadah began on September 28, 2000, but the results of all these meetings remain a well-guarded secret! It is thus no accident that Western leaders can now boast of "conquering Islam" or openly talk of the Muslim world with a contempt that is unfortunately well-deserved given the abysmal track record of Muslim countries and leaders and their abject failure to promote and protect the interests of Islam.

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