**The Wolf and the Lamb (Part X)**

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In 2001, President Pervez Musharraf told President Bush that Pakistan was with the US. But it didn’t take him long to realise that the US was not with Pakistan; having intimidated Pakistan into submission, it was going all-out for India. Negotiations on the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement were started in 2005. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) was conceived in 2007. The Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Afghan spies in the National Directorate of Security (NDS) were given free hand to mid-wife birth of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – they delivered in 2007. And, as if that was not enough, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was unleashed to start rubbing Pakistan’s nose in the dust from 2008. It was against this background that the US alleged and Pakistan denied that it was hobnobbing with the Haqqani Network.

The Haqqani Network was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani (1939-2018), a Zadran Pashtun from Paktia in 1970. He commanded the Network till 1992. During the 1980s, he was hailed by the US as the “goodness personified.”President Reagan called him a “freedom fighter.” The Network was one of the most CIA-funded anti-Soviet Jehadi groups. Inspired by Osama bin Laden, Haqqani pledged its allegiance to the Taliban in 1995. The Network maintained close ties with Al-Qaeda, anti-India Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Estimates of its numbers vary. According to a 2009 New York Times report, they were “about 4,000 to 12,000.” Two years later, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) placed its strength “roughly at 10,000-15,000.”Later that year, Sirajuddin Haqqani said the “figure of 10,000 fighters,” as quoted in some media reports, was “actually less than the actual number.” In all probability, the CTC’s figures are credible.

The Haqqani network pioneered the use of suicide attacks in Afghanistan. It is believed to be responsible for about 10 per cent of attacks on the Coalition forces and about 15 per cent of casualties. According to the Wall Street Journal, it was dreaded as the Taliban’s “most radical and violent branch.” The US military commanders considered it to be “the most resilient enemy, the most lethal network,” and “one of the biggest threats to the U.S-led NATO forces and the Afghan government.”

A US Ambassador called it “the worst of the worst, a group of killers, pure and simple.” In 2010, the US announced a cash award of $5 million for information; leading to the capture of its leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani. The money on his head was subsequently fixed at $10 million.

The ANA, trained and equipped to the nail by the world’s mightiest military outfits, was hounded out by just 75,000 rag-tag fighters.

It was generally believed that the Haqqanis were a “semi-autonomous” offshoot of the Taliban. Their “operations (were) conducted by small, semi-autonomous units, organized according to tribal and sub-tribal affiliations often at the direction of and with the logistical support of Haqqani commanders”. But the Taliban and the Haqqanis insisted that the latter were an integral part, not a separate “network”, independent or semi-independent of the former.

The US alleged that “the network (maintained) ties with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and Pakistan’s army had been reluctant to move against them …” The New York Times reported that Pakistan regarded the Network as “an important force for protecting its interests in Afghanistan in the event of American withdrawal from there and, therefore, (was) unwilling to move against them”. Pakistan denied these allegations but the denial was not accepted and the Network’s “links to Pakistan (remained) a sour point in Pakistan-United States relations”.

In September 2011, the Obama Administration demanded of Pakistan to do more “to cut ties with the Haqqani network and help eliminate its leaders”, adding that the US would “act unilaterally if Pakistan (did) not comply.” Pakistan rejected the allegations as “pressure tactics … to shift the war theatre”, and “conveyed to the US that Pakistan (could) not go beyond what it (had) already done”. The US retracted and, within a month, asked Pakistan to assist it in starting negotiations with the Taliban, which were held in the UAE, but proved to be a non-starter. In 2012, the US designated the Haqqani Network as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO).

In a major offensive, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in North Waziristan in June 2014, Pakistan flushed out all foreign and local militants, including the Haqqani Network. On 5 November 2014, Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, a senior commander of the US/NATO forces in Afghanistan, appreciated Pakistan’s action. He exclaimed that the Haqqani Network had been “fractured” and become ineffective. In 2015, Pakistan banned the Network in pursuance of its National Action Plan.

The Trump Administration had, as per the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee proceedings, “recognised there was no military solution to the conflict (in Afghanistan) and there had to be a political solution.” It wanted to get out of Afghanistan honourably and needed Pakistan to save its face by bringing the Taliban to the Doha Peace talks. But in a usual show of brinkmanship, it kept blowing hot and cold on Pakistan. On 21 August 2017, President Trump accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to terrorists. He alleged that “Pakistan (had) sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people”. Hitting where it hurt Pakistan, he “urged India for its role in the war”.

Again, on 1 January 2018, Trump criticized Pakistan, saying that “they have given us nothing but lies and deceit”. He announced “cancelling a $300 million disbursement (of the Coalition Support Fund – CSF) to Pakistan, citing the country’s failure to take strong actions against Afghan Taliban militants and their safe havens in Pakistan”.

However, allegations of Pakistan’s “assumed (covert) support to the Taliban during the war” were nailed in the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October 2021. The Secretary of State conceded that “most of the pro-Taliban decisions Pakistan made were taken under American pressure”, adding that the “Trump administration asked the Pakistani government to release three top Taliban commanders including Mulla Baradar, as part of (the Doha Peace) process”, which was “centred on US withdrawal from Afghanistan”. The Secretary vouched for “Islamabad’s positive contribution at the US request”.

Earlier, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, had acknowledged on 14 September 2020 that “the success achieved in the Afghan peace process would not have been possible without Islamabad’s sincere and unconditional support”. It was widely hailed that “the imminent peace deal (was) the result of a 14-month long painstaking negotiation process – brokered and facilitated by Pakistan – between the US and the Taliban”.

The US’ allegations and Pakistan’s denials of providing safe havens to the Haqqani Network were intriguing indeed. The US demanded of Pakistan to “cut ties with the Haqqani network and help eliminate its leaders” and, in the same breath, goaded it to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan denied any link with the Haqqanis/Taliban and, at the same time, was able to persuade them to talk to the US and influence their decisions. And the US, as we have seen, demonised and eulogised Pakistan concurrently.

Likewise, the CIA was able to trace and kill Osama Bin Laden in one of the safest hideouts. It could also drone to death “hundreds of high-level leaders of the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and other organizations, with 70 Taliban leaders killed in one ten-day period of May 2017 alone.” Notable amongst them were Baitullah Mehsud, the founder of the TTP, Hakimullah Mehsud, his successor, Fazlullah, the TTP leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, the Emir of ISIS-K, and Akhtar Mansour, leader of the Afghan Taliban. Surprisingly, however, ISAF forces, assisted by Five Eyes, Mossad, RAW, and NDS, could not reach Jalaluddin Haqqani, who died a natural death in 2018. His son and successor, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is still carrying a $10 million worth head on his own shoulders. And the US continues to blame Pakistan for this.

Again, almost 130,000 ISAF troops, operating from about 400 military bases throughout Afghanistan, assisted by 300,000-strong Afghan National Army (ANA), garrisoned in yet another 300 bases in the length and breadth of the country, failed to extend the writ of Ashraf Ghani’s government beyond Kabul. Allegedly, even some NATO/ ISAF members had to buy security from warlords in their respective areas. The ANA, trained and equipped to the nail by the world’s mightiest military outfits, was hounded out by just 75,000 rag-tag fighters, despite the air cover provided by the Super Power. Ironically, the entire dis/credit for this humiliation was dumped on Pakistan.

This sums up Pak-US relations and brings us to where we started: the US has traditionally bullied and played “the Wolf and the Lamb” with Pakistan, and Pakistan has always acquiesced. The question arises, why?

(To be continued)

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