**The Wolf and the Lamb -VIII**

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President Pervez Musharraf had joined the US’ invasion of Afghanistan under duress. But his successors, beholden to the Condoleezza-Rice-brokered National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) of 5 October 2007, converted the fait accompli into a personal opportunity. Humbled by the way “she (had) toiled for many sleepless nights to bring Musharraf and Benazir together”, they reassured Washington of Islamabad’s continued servility and, thence, insured their respective stints at the helm – at a phenomenal cost to the country.

The uprising in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) against the state of Pakistan and the birth of the Therik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was a natural concomitant of the US “War on Terror”, thrust on Pakistan. “Smoked out” by the US’ carpet-bombing, a large number of Afghan, Arab and Central Asian militants fled from Afghanistan into the neighbouring tribal areas of Pakistan. This left the so-called Frontline State against Terrorism with no choice but to go after them.

In July 2002, Pakistani troops, for the first time since independence in 1947, entered FATA, albeit after long negotiations with various tribes. But once the military operation was launched in South Waziristan, several Waziri sub-tribes took it as an “attempt to subjugate them” and refused to hand over foreign militants to the army. This turned “the security campaign against suspected Al-Qaeda militants … into an undeclared war between the Pakistani military and the rebel tribesmen”.

By 2004, various tribal groups had effectively established their authority in FATA. They would concurrently engage in military attacks and negotiate with Islamabad. In the process, they killed around 200 pro-Pakistan tribal elders in the region. The introduction of drone strikes the same year added fuel to fire. The October 2006 drone strike on a madrassah in Bajaur, run by Sufi Muhammad’s Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), proved to be the last nail.

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Within a year, the TNSM and the stray terrorist groups turned to Swat. Vowing to impose their version of Shariah laws that included the death penalty for barbers, music shop owners, and thieves, and banned female literacy, they seized control of the region in just two weeks – from 25 October to 7 November 2007. The Pakistan Armed Forces launched Operation Rah-e-Haq on 15 November to regain control of the valley, forcing the rebels to unite under one banner.

The TTP was thus formed in December 2007, under the leadership of Baitullah Mahsud. The declared aim of the “franchise of Al-Qaida” was “to overthrow the government of Pakistan by waging a terrorist campaign against the … armed forces and the state”. Initially, it comprised 13 war-hardened Pashtun, Islamist, and militant groups, based along the Pak-Afghan border. But, then it went on to enlist outlaws from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) – Swat, Malakand, Tank, Buner, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, D.I. Khan, Kohistan – and even South Punjab. Structurally, it was a loose network of various groups. Their influence was commensurate with their size and confined to their respective areas. Within a year, their unconfirmed numbers soared to 30,000-35,000.

On 25 August 2008, Pakistan banned the TTP, froze all its bank accounts and assets, barred it from media appearances, and announced that bounties would be placed on the heads of its leadership. Pakistan military launched an offensive, killing or forcing the TTP operatives to flee to Afghanistan, where they were warmly welcomed as ‘guests’ by both Afghanistan and India.

Operation Rah-e-Haq continued till the signing of the ceasefire agreement with TNSM on 16 February 2009. In the short-lived agreement, the two sides agreed to the imposition of the Shariah laws in Swat, with certain conditions.

The agreement was vehemently criticized in the West. This catalyzed differences between the government and the TNSM on the interpretation of the agreement. By late April 2009, the Pakistan military and the TTP rebels stood face to face once again. The military launched Operation Rah-e-Rast the following month and flushed out the militants within three months. Normalcy was restored by the end of August when 1.6 million of 2.2 million internally displaced persons returned home.

In August 2009, Baitullah Mahsud was killed in a drone strike. Under the leadership of his successor, Hakimullah Mahsud, the TTP intensified its suicide campaign throughout the country. On 1 September 2010, the US designated the TTP as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO); declared Hakimullah Mehsud as a global terrorist; announced a cash reward for information on him; and droned him to death on 1 November 2013.

By 2014, the TTP was fully established with North Waziristan as its base. It had “seriously disrupted the national life in all its dimensions, stunting its economic growth and causing enormous loss of life and property”. It had also “paralyzed life within FATA and … perpetually terrorized the entire peace-loving and patriotic local population”. Emboldened by this, other militant groups – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Al-Qaeda, Jundallah and the Haqqani Network – had also jumped into the fray openly.

The 8th June 2014 attack on Jinnah International Airport, Karachi, for which the TTP and the IMU claimed responsibility, proved to be the last straw on the back of Pakistan’s Armed Forces. On 15 June, they launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, involving up to 30,000 soldiers. In the “Summer-Fall operation”, they “fractured” terrorist networks and “(flushed) out … foreign and local militants hiding in North Waziristan”. In the process, about 930,000 people, belonging to over 80,000 families, were internally displaced. Nonetheless, “as a consequence, the overall security situation improved and terrorist attacks in Pakistan dropped to a six-year low since 2008.”

But the massacre on 16 December 2014 of 132 innocent children of Army Public School (APS), Peshawar, within six months of the “success” of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, and resurgence in terrorist incidents throughout the country, showed that Pakistan had been pushed into an unending war of the US, necessitating one military operation after the other.

Operation Radd-ul-Fassad was thus launched on 22 February 2017, with the active support of Rangers, and Pakistan Police. In the country-wide operation, aimed at “consolidating gains of Operation Zarb-e-Azb”, the security agencies “conducted more than 371,000 intelligence-based operations (IBOs), including 50 major operations, and recovered 72,227 weapons and 5 million rounds of ammunition, dismantling the terrorist support base, their facilitators and financiers in (KPK’s) tribal districts and Baluchistan.” The aim of the operation was achieved to a great extent. But, while the battle was won, the war went on.

During July – November 2020, TTP leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, succeeded in persuading different splinter groups – the Amjad Farouqi group, one faction of the LeJ, the Musa Shaheed Karwan group, Mehsud factions of the TTP, Mohmand Taliban, Bajaur Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and Hizb-ul-Ahrar – to merge with the TTP. This gave a new lease of life to the terrorist outfit to fight against Pakistan.

Ironically, while Pakistan was fighting the US’ war and killing its citizens, the US was luring India into a strategic partnership and smiling at the Indo-Afghan back-stabbing of Pakistan. To be continued

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