

Fallout of the Wana operation

By Khalid Aziz

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TO assess the implications of the Wana operation, the situation in the north has to be viewed through the spectrum of international and regional developments, and in the perspective of religious and ethnic factors.

Pakistani forces began to enter the tribal areas over the last one year. The justification for the move was to secure effective control up to the Durand Line. The objective was to deny a safe haven to Al Qaeda and Taliban elements. If any were found, they were to be arrested or their capacity to resist destroyed.

The need for this action was the result of persuasion by the US. It was alleged that after running away from the US forces in Afghanistan, many of the combatants had sought refuge in Pakistan's tribal areas, and that unless they were eradicated, peace and security could not be ensured either in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Initially, slow compliance with US requests created suspicion that we were faltering in our anti-terrorist commitments. Our past associations with the Taliban became a major embarrassment.

The level of violence in the Pakhtun belt of Afghanistan and Fata has increased during the last five months. US electoral compulsions demand that Osama bin Laden be captured or killed before the November elections. As a result, US forces have begun "robust" operations on the other side of the Durand Line.

After the army's move into tribal areas, intelligence showed that amongst those taking refuge in Wana, Birmal and Shawal, were many foreigners of Central Asian descent. They had fought in Afghanistan and some had settled permanently. They had also begun to raise families by marrying into the tribes, which had given them shelter. According to tribal tradition, those who marry within a tribe become functional members of that tribe; a social factor further aggravating an already delicate situation.

The following recent occurrences are relevant for forming an idea of the happenings in tribal areas. There are relatively higher casualties of the armed forces in Waziristan and sabotage activity has registered an increase after the start of operations in the Wana-Wazir and Mahsud area. Matters have escalated with the use of aircraft against the Waziris.

The number of ambushes in Waziristan have increased. There has also been an escalation of the number of attacks on army personnel in other agencies. The urban areas of the NWFP are being targeted by rockets and missiles, and reports of increasing discontent amongst the operating forces continue to circulate.

tr have resurfaced in K... Large-scale killing in Iraq and in lesser numbers in Afghanistan is daily news.

Muslims are bearing the brunt of prejudice against them in the US. Pakistanis have been specially targeted as a BBC documentary recently showed. Only one conclusion can be drawn. Muslims the world over are in the throes of a concerted campaign against them. They are being targeted because of their beliefs. The US, which has been a beacon of freedom for the rest of the world, is now being termed as a repressive society.

Given the predominantly pro-Muslim sympathies of the majority of Pakistanis, their feelings of support for fellow Muslims is understandable. This point has to be factored in before any strategy is implemented in response to events. If this is not done, then state policies would reflect only the will of a small elite. As it is,

The use of arms in tribal area should be reduced and replaced with political handling. If the funds spent on military operations were instead used for political handling, more would have been achieved at less cost. The strength of the army should be reduced in the tribal areas, gradually. This is a reversion to the 1923 Waziristan Policy.

our foreign policy is out of sync with national feelings.

The situation in Afghanistan is descending into a frightening ethnic nightmare. The Northern Alliance and the US forces are active in the Pakhtun belt, which have become the killing fields. These areas are adjacent to the tribal areas of Pakistan. Both the belts were radicalized during the war against the Russians. Subsequently, when the Taliban came to power, they exterminated the opposition, which was mostly composed of the non-Pakhtuns: the Hazaras, Tajiks and Turkomen. The Taliban were a pro-Pakhtun movement and excluded other non-Afghan tribes.

Because of the association of the Taliban with ethnic Pakhtuns, the bonds of a larger Pakhtun identity encompassing all the Pathans living in Afghanistan and Pakistan has emerged; an aspect which is now assuming concrete shape and one that demands careful handling by Pakistan.

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will achieve the defined objectives. There is little realization that such considerations fail in the face of a determined opposition led by the Pakhtun tradition of uniting against "outsiders" and a mastery over the terrain.

Given the nature of the terrain in Fata, it is only a matter of time before the calculus shifts from the dominance of weapons to the terrain. Coupled with local support and fighting capabilities, the tribal action in Wana, is creating a formidable foe. It is very possible that the affected tribesmen, imbued with superior terrain knowledge and religious fervour, will retaliate. Their target will include down-country urban areas, government functionaries and installations. They will also swell Osama bin Laden's army.

Another question of great importance concerns the role of leadership. The point is whether any responsible leadership in Pakistan could have opted not to join the alliance against "terrorism". Given the role that Pakistan has played in Afghanistan, regime survival lay in cooperation with the US. An emotional response would have been catastrophic. The argument that is held against the government is that we sold ourselves cheap, although it should not be concluded that Pakistanis do not want to be rid of the obscurantism of the mullahs. They want to be a modern and a progressive nation.

But the million-dollar question is: how does one define a strategic course under such constraints? Yet it goes without saying that we must regain the initiative with the right mix of political handling and economic development. If the low intensity operation in Fata continues much longer, it will radicalize all those involved, including many in the populous hinterland.

The following has begun to happen. Anti-Pakistani forces in the tribal areas and in Afghanistan are now in some sort of an organized collaboration. Both are now organized for extensive operations. Casualties are likely to increase in tribal area operations and the fire will spread to our cities.

Easing the operational movement, except by air, will become increasingly difficult in Fata. In Afghanistan, the Afghan/US forces will face stiffer resistance in the days to come.

It is feared that tribal administrative controls will weaken further. Our experimentation with tribal administration, like the extinction of various administrative tiers, has done more harm than good. It requires an immediate reversal. This is a period for consolidation and not experimentation.

Based on the above analysis, it is recommended that the use of arms in this area be reduced and replaced with political handling. If the funds spent on military operations were instead used for

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The number of ambushes in Waziristan have increased. There has also been an escalation of the number of attacks on army personnel in other agencies. The urban areas of the NWFP are being targeted by rockets and missiles, and reports of increasing discontent amongst the operating forces continue to circulate. It is believed that some officers have been detained and are under investigation.

Border sharing intelligence with the US forces has increased. Outlying airfields elsewhere in the NWFP have temporarily come under the command of US forces, while they carry out operations. The Shakai Peace agreement has broken down. A drone missile has killed Nek Mohammad, the flamboyant leader of the Shakai Wazirs. Large pockets of discontented elements are organizing themselves under different guises. One such example is the Amir Bin Maruf movement in the Khyber Agency. In other agencies, the availability of abundant funds in the hands of anti-administration elements is on the increase. One may well ask from where these funds are coming.

Elsewhere in the Muslim world, the Saudis are bogged down by extremists in a violent confrontation. The Israelis have assassinated the crippled founder of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, and other Palestinian resistance leaders; about 200 Spaniards died in a commuter bombing in Madrid. Ethnic

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Many NWFP Pakhtuns, who had gone to assist their brethren in Afghanistan, have yet to bury those who lost their lives during the disintegration of Taliban rule at the start of US-led invasion. A large number are still languishing in Northern Alliance jails. Why the Pakistan government has permitted the continuing incarceration of its citizens even if they were misled, is a question that begs an answer.

The Afghan Pakhtun area is largely outside the central government's control. The rural areas of much of Afghanistan's Pathan provinces remain under the de-facto control of the Taliban who continue to collect duties and taxes. These are the areas accused of supporting Osama bin Laden, and that consequently must bear the brunt of retaliation by US forces. An indication of the Pakhtun hatred for the Afghan government may be gauged from the fact that many of the Pakhtun representatives to the Loya Jirga have either been killed or refuse to return to their province because of fear.

Tactically, one of the considerations that rule any military imagination, is the belief in the superiority of weapons. It is thought that superior weaponry

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Based on the above analysis, it is recommended that the use of arms in this area be reduced and replaced with political handling. If the funds spent on military operations were instead used for political handling, more would have been achieved at less cost. The strength of the army should be reduced in the tribal areas, gradually. Strong brigade level groups should be retained in tactical positions but their services should be restricted to assisting the scouts. This is a reversion of the 1923 Waziristan Policy. Evidently, there is a need to brush up the watch and ward policy, based on the use of good tribal intelligence.

The capabilities of the Frontier Corps should be enhanced. They should have the right of first call. Only when they face heavy odds should they ask for army support.

It is evident that since the Political Agent will be dealing with an armed opposition, he must operate through an elaborate intelligence network based on his tribes. The best informants are the locals. He must use the levers of tribal controls effectively. Though the institution of the jirga alone may not solve all the problems, yet reliance on it must not be ignored.

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