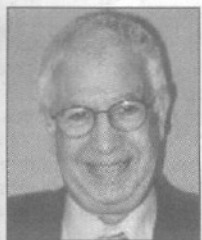


Five steps to defeat the Taliban

Militancy



By Amir Taheri

The West must change course and treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as one struggle

IN the foothills of the Hindu Kush, every season is regarded as auspicious for something. Winter is for taking a new concubine. Spring, however, is reserved for fighting. This is why as Afghans look forward to their new year, Now Ruz, on March 20, they are also preparing for an upsurge in a war that started with the overthrow of the Taliban seven years ago.

Last spring the Taliban and its Al Qaeda allies suffered serious defeats at the hands of NATO, especially British, troops. The jihadis lost two of the four provinces they controlled, including Helmand, the jewel in their crown. This spring they are determined to defend their two remaining provinces while taking the war into the rest of Afghanistan with suicide attacks.

With Afghanistan about to heat up, Pakistan is also certain to face a dramati-

ic increase in terrorist attacks. As far as the jihadi movement is concerned, the global struggle against the "infidel" and its local allies does not stop at the Khyber Pass.

The talk in Islamist circles is that Al Qaeda neglected Afghanistan and Pakistan by focusing on Iraq, where it never had a chance of ultimate victory if only because the Shia and Kurds, who together account for 80 per cent of the population, reject the jihadi ideology.

For the jihadis, Pakistan and

to show the flag in Kabul. The Americans and Canadians did some fighting close to the border with Pakistan, supposedly hunting down the ever-elusive Osama bin Laden, but never chasing armed fugitives into Pakistani safe havens.

Remarkably, NATO seldom took the initiative in flushing the Taliban and Al Qaeda out of their strongholds. For seven years the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been marked by much posturing on all sides. The jihadis never threw in all they had into these battle-

Persuaded that the US and its NATO allies were not strategically committed to the region, presidents Karzai and Musharraf tried to hedge their bets by allowing some space for the jihadis while flirting with the Khomeinist regime in Tehran

Afghanistan are two battlefronts in the same war. The United States, NATO and their local allies, however, still behave as if the two neighbouring battlefronts were on different planets.

Until last spring NATO spent much of its energies chasing wild geese in Kabul. The Italians were tapped to create a new police force. The Germans got the task of creating an Afghan judiciary. The British were asked to eradicate opium poppies. The French, well they agreed just

fields because they hoped for victory in Iraq that would force the "infidel" out of the lands of Islam under the pressure of public opinion.

Pervez Musharraf, the President of Pakistan, did commit himself to just enough anti-terrorism to make him look indispensable and keep US dollars pouring in, but took care not to burn bridges to the jihadis. Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President, made the right noises but did not commit his new army, created cour-

tesy of NATO, to a full fight against the Taliban. Rather, he kept channels open to the radical groups in the name of Pashtun ethnic solidarity. The jihadis fighting in Pakistan knew that they would not be molested once they escaped into Afghanistan. Those fighting in Afghanistan knew that, once in Pakistan, they would be safe. Presidents Karzai and Musharraf gave the impres-



sion that they hated each other more than they did the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

There were three reasons why no one wanted to fully commit to the Afghan and Pakistani battlefronts. For the Bush Administration, Iraq was always the priority. American ambivalence about these two fronts of the global War on Terror allowed NATO mem-

liban and Al Qaeda

bers to opt for posturing, not full-scale engagement.

The failure of the so-called "international community" to develop a coherent strategy in Afghanistan was another reason. NATO, the UN, the EU and various groupings of aid donors never co-ordinated their disparate efforts into a coherent policy. In some cases, these various players bid against one another, spending more resources on internal rivalries, and, at times, even undoing each other's good work than on pulling in the same direc-

is also seen as in doubt. "We cannot read Gordon Brown", a senior Afghan official told me recently.

For all that, the jihadis can and must be defeated in both theatres. Some urgent steps need to be taken.

President Musharraf must resist the temptation to cheat at the February 18 general election. With all parties taking part, a democratically elected government in Pakistan is possible. That would deal a serious psychological blow to the jihadis on the eve of their spring offensive.

units that think they are there to run soup kitchens could be replaced by the Salvation Army.

The various international operations should be put under one leadership, preferably NATO rather than the UN. The message must go out that the emphasis is shifting to winning the war.

The training of Afghan and Pakistani anti-terrorist units must be

Musharraf must resist the temptation to cheat at the Feb 18 election. That would deal a serious psychological blow to the jihadis on the eve of their spring offensive. Karzai should take the Afghan-Pakistani security Jirgah more seriously

tion to help to win the war.

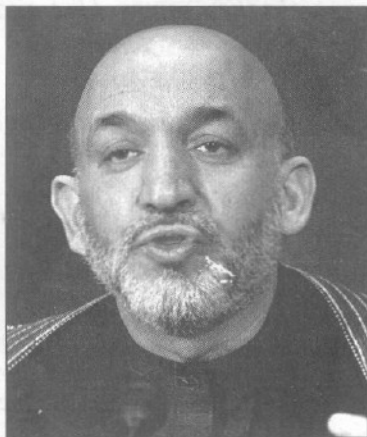
Finally, persuaded that the US and its NATO allies were not strategically committed to the region, presidents Karzai and Musharraf tried to hedge their bets by allowing some space for the jihadis while flirting with the Khomeinist regime in Tehran. Both leaders believe that US commitment to the War on Terror is genuine only as long as George Bush is President. Since Tony Blair's departure, Britain's commitment

President Karzai should take the Afghan-Pakistani security Jirgah (assembly) more seriously. It has so far held two meetings. But it must meet on a weekly basis, if necessary. "Safe havens" for terrorists must be closed in both countries.

NATO must fix a date for its members to commit the needed forces, complete with reservists, at least through 2009. It must do less politicking and more fighting by going after the terrorists rather than waiting until attacked. NATO

stepped up. So far, six units, some 12,000 men, have been trained and deployed. This is not good enough.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are not exotic faraway lands that the Western democracies can leave and forget about whenever they so wish. They are battlefields in a global war that recognises no frontiers. COURTESY THE TIMES



The rule of lawyers?