

Courting Disaster: Pakistan's Role in the War on Terror

By Tehmina Ahmed

The role played by the Pakistan government in the U.S.-led campaign to overthrow the Taliban regime is one of the most abrupt policy turnarounds in the recent history of the region. Even before the Taliban were accused of harbouring Osama bin Laden, the man accused of masterminding the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, the regime had few backers outside Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, was pleading its case on the world stage.

The first country—one of only three in the world—to recognise the Taliban regime, Pakistan had been an ardent supporter of the new star on the Afghan horizon, asserting that the Taliban were a force that had managed to bring law and order to war-racked Afghanistan. Pakistan had been accused of not just backing the Taliban, but of creating the whole phenomenon, working through a number of channels to do so.

Post-September 11, Pakistan's 'bloodless coup' initiator, President General Pervez Musharraf, found himself in a tight spot. He had displaced a popularly elected, albeit corrupt and incompetent Prime Minister. The country's economy was in shambles, there was increasing tension with India on the borders. Pakistan was in the doghouse in the international arena, with the western powers increasingly looking toward India, a fast-growing power with markets to match. So much so that Bill Clinton, the first American president to visit the subcontinent in decades, spent five days building up his country's relationship with India. His Islamabad stopover, on the other hand, was limited to a few hours, with a televised appearance reading the riot act and demanding that the country return to a democratic order.



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But all that changed when a launching pad was required for the U.S. and its allies to strike against the recalcitrant regime that refused to yield the suspected offenders in the Twin Towers attack, Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. Pakistan was now in a position to name its price for going along.

At first, the Musharraf government moved cautiously. The climate of opinion in the country could only be engineered gradually. There were limited pledges of support to the U.S. as it set about its offensive, once the Taliban had chosen to ignore the mandatory warnings. The government announced it would extend only logistical and intelligence support to the coalition in the campaign, as well as overflight rights. There would be no forces on the ground and no bases would be granted.

The country's decision to support the U.S. campaign was justified on a number of grounds: there was an assumption that if Pakistan did not oblige, its already fragile economy would collapse once the U.S. pressured the multilateral lending agencies. Pakistan's arch foe, India, had also offered its cooperation. There was speculation that India might not only steal a march on Pakistan, but was also likely to join forces with the U.S. to strike against it—and 'take out' its nuclear assets. As an Islamic republic, Pakistan might be lumped with the Taliban regime and meet the fate to befall those in Afghanistan who dared to stand up to the U.S. And on the other hand, there were benefits to be obtained for cooperation with the

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U.S. in its hour of need. Pervez Musharraf took the plunge and announced his intentions to back the coalition in a nationwide television address.

The first strikes against Afghanistan were carried out from aircraft carriers anchored in the Persian Gulf. But by the time the Taliban decided to flee Kabul, the scene had changed considerably. Five bases in Pakistan had been granted to the coalition, the first two being Jacobabad in Sindh and Dalbandin in Balochistan. To these were added Kharan, Pasni and Pishin.

Soon there were combat aircraft from the coalition landing and taking off from these airports, which were placed under tight security. The outlying areas, in most cases, had been evacuated. Pakistan's official spokesmen, however, continued to deny the presence of combat troops on Paki-

stani soil. Finally, there was a reluctant admission that bases had been granted, but only for contingency purposes and that troops were there only to perform 'search and rescue missions.'

Pakistan had once again thrown in its lot, for better or for worse, with the United States. A peevish India, a country that had also offered its services, only to have them overlooked in favour of the logistical advantages offered by Pakistan, watched from the sidelines. In return for its cooperation, the Musharraf government had been promised a rescue package, a reprieve from the near certainty of economic ruin. The country's finance minister, Shaukat Aziz, triumphantly announced a series of loan resched- ules. Once critical multilateral lending agencies had turned benign.

While some of these measures were already in the pipeline, others were new. And, more pledges of economic concessions and relief measures were to follow. The sanctions in place since the nuclear tests in Chagai in May 1998 were lifted, as were the sanctions imposed as a result of the military coup. An assortment of dignitaries were waiting their turn to visit a country that had become an unalloyed pariah to express their appreciation for the role that Pakistan was playing in the 'war against terror.'

One of the corollaries of the cooperation between the military government and the coalition was the fading away of the word 'democracy' from the discourse of the western powers. It seemed that a pliant dicta-

tor was in a better position to serve the purpose at hand than an elected Prime Minister with a constituency to answer to. The uncritical support for Musharraf seemed certain to set back, if not derail, a return to the democratic process.

The Afghan imbroglio and its aftermath raised a sense of *deja vu*. Afghanistan and the territories included in the newly created state of Pakistan were closely linked even before the British began to play their version of the 'Great Game' in the region. The Afghans had seen a number of invaders come and go, and had stubbornly resisted the imposition of any sort of hegemony. In the Cold War era, the region was drawn into another great game, the struggle between the U.S. and the USSR. But the country again successfully routed a foreign power with the overthrow of a Soviet-backed communist regime.

The resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was bolstered not just by men and materials, but by the propagation of a religious ideology. The men who first fought the war against the communists, called *mujahideen*, also had a holy war to fight. Many of them were not only trained in *madressas* or seminaries across the border, but were also given tactical and logistical support by agencies operating within Pakistan.

The 1980s saw another military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, consolidating his power and reaping a rich harvest for aligning the country with the imperatives of U.S. foreign policy. The repercussions of this adventurism

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were grave. The General forged ahead with his token Islamisation, targeting women and the minorities in Pakistan, while effecting only cosmetic changes in the system. In the meantime, the aid money coming in to the country disappeared through a corrupt and inefficient system as quickly as it came. There were no real gains in infrastructure development or economic growth.

At the time, however, even for the U.S., the Islamicists were the good, not the bad, guys who would rid Afghanistan of the plague of communism. The contest played out between the Soviet Union and its opponents allocated a key role to Pakistan in the training and support of the *mujahideen*—those engaged in *jihad* or holy war to free their land of foreign occupation.

The *mujahideen* did liberate Afghanistan, only to engage in a fratricidal struggle for power between themselves. The liberators soon became violent warlords, fighting for territory and riven by ethnic strife.

There was another brand of liberator on the horizon—another force that would rise to conquer its own land. The word *Talib* means student. Selected *mujahideen* commanders, including Mullah Omar, students in the seminaries in rural Afghanistan and those who would jump into the fray from across the border in Pakistan had a guiding force and a helping hand in the intelligence agencies in Pakistan that were looking to shape an ally to adopt and pursue their own objectives.

The Taliban, first heard of in 1994, soon became a force to be reckoned with. From their base in Kandahar, they moved to challenge the warlords who ruled other parts of the country. By 1995, they had formed a government that was recognised by Pakistan. Most governments were loath to deal with the Taliban regime as it proceeded to set into place one of the most reactionary and backward dispensations of recent times. An exception was Pakistan, with whom relations were exceedingly cordial. Even years later, only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates would also recognise the Taliban.

The regime's relationship with the United States was further strained after the 1998 cruise missile attacks on Afghanistan in reprisal for attacks on U.S. interests elsewhere. The world

www.mideastinsight.org/03_02/musharraf_bio.html



Gen. Pervez Musharraf now at war with former Taliban allies

was appalled, meanwhile, by the treatment accorded to women under the Taliban and by their retrogressive policies, which came to a head with the destruction of the invaluable Buddhas in Bamian, west of Kabul.

The two Buddha statues carved from living rock, together with numerous ancient human-made caves in the cliffs north of the town, had made Bamian a major archaeological site.

Despite Pakistan's earlier support to the Taliban in search of the military's elusive concept of 'strategic depth,' pragmatism won the day and the Musharraf government allied itself, post September 11, with the coalition. The reluctant support in the early days of the U.S.-led campaign against terror melted to almost unconditional cooperation. There was no

time to reflect on what might be the price for the promised rewards.

President Musharraf had expressed the view that the campaign would be "short and targeted." As it became clear that the Taliban would not be trounced in a matter of days, the tactics and strategy of the offensive changed. Heavier and more indiscriminate bombing and civilian casualties became routine. An acerbic President Bush told the international media that he didn't know where Musharraf got the notion of a short campaign, and that the bombing would continue until the objectives of the alliance were met.

An embarrassed Musharraf changed his tune, saying "You can't leave objectives halfway." For the domestic audience, the President made the right noises about the necessity of halting the bombing in the holy month of Ramadan, but even this reservation was dropped as the U.S. and its allies pressed on.

At the inception, the U.S. was determined to minimise its own casualties by staying at a safe distance while the Taliban were carpet-bombed into submission. When it became obvious that "boots on the ground" would have to be added to the mix, British troops took the lead and special operations missions undertook hit-and-run missions. The plan was to strengthen the internal opposition to the Taliban, which was rallying under the banner of the Northern Alliance. The ragtag troops of the Northern Alliance were mustered, supplied with uniforms, arms and ammunition.

They, too, chose initially to watch from the sidelines while the massive bombing softened up the enemy.

At the beginning of the U.S. campaign, the Pakistan government had asserted that any new dispensation in Afghanistan should make place for the 'moderate elements' among the Taliban to ensure a broad-based, representative government. At the time, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, then on a visit to Pakistan, acceded to this point of view. The U.S. and its allies even assured Pakistan that the Northern Alliance troops would not be allowed to enter Kabul until some *modus vivendi* was in place for the future government, which would be one, moreover, that was acceptable to the different parties to the conflict. But those were the early days.

The Northern Alliance shortly swept into Kabul.

The coalition campaign had wiped out the remaining infrastructure of a country already devastated by war. Roads, airports and a rudimentary communications system lay in ruins. Coalition aircraft, in increasingly wide-ranging raids, did not even spare a World Food Programme warehouse and an anti-mine organisation. The troublesome Al-Jazeera network, that had brought the other side of the war to screens dominated by the CNN and Fox News outlook, also came under attack.

While Afghanistan lay in ruins, General Pervez Musharraf was invited, at last, to make an official visit to Washington. The country that had

rated only a grudging stopover on Bill Clinton's visit now had its chief feted by its newfound friend. There was something of a *quid pro quo*. The Kashmir dispute, which Pakistan had relentlessly sought to bring to international attention, in contrast to India's insistence that this was a bilateral matter, merited mention in Washington, which released a statement that the dispute "be resolved according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people."

In the meantime, there was a domestic backlash to deal with in Pakistan, one that was deceptively mild for a start. The religious parties came together to form the Pak Afghan Defence Council, which set about protesting the policies of the Musharraf government. The council failed to rally large numbers of people to its cause and had to settle for relatively small marches where slogans were chanted and effigies burnt. The international media, hungry for material to feed the "fundamentalist" stereotype, made much of these processions, selecting suitably bearded figures to put on a ferocious act for their audiences. For his statements against Musharraf and the army, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the Amir or chief of the Jamaat-i-Islami, was locked up. The religious parties threatened a march to Islamabad, but later contented themselves with strike calls across the country. The Karakorum Highway in the north, the country's link to China, was blocked for a number of days by enraged tribesmen, but this crisis, too, was defused.

A more invidious dimension of the backlash was to become apparent

later, with incidents such as the kidnap and gruesome murder of the journalist Daniel Pearl, the unprecedented suicide bombing of a bus picking up French workers, and a vicious car bomb attack targeting the U.S. Consulate in Karachi.

There has been mounting pressure on Pakistan to rein in the militant elements in Kashmir, who are assumed to be operating with its support. The reading of many into the attack by militants on the Indian parliament in December 2001 and similar incidents, including the massacre of families of soldiers in an army camp in Jammu, is that disgruntled elements within the extremists are now out to destabilise the Musharraf government, even at the cost of starting a potentially disastrous conflict with India. The tension with India over the disputed state of Kashmir, moreover, has come to a head with battle-ready troops on both sides trading fire over the Line of Control that divides Indian-administered Kashmir from Azad Kashmir. The two nuclear-armed neighbours are close to the brink of war, and President Musharraf now finds himself walking a tightrope. He has pledged to 'crack down' on the militants, and a few militant outfits have indeed been banned in Pakistan, but others have just had some of their leaders and members rounded up in token raids and released without any charges.

Also a thorny issue is that of the *madressas* or the religious seminaries that mushroomed in the days of the Afghan resistance. Traditionally, these

institutions have provided religious education, as well as board and lodging, to children in need. Their role, however, expanded as they began to be used to fuel militancy in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The *madressas* now number into the thousands, and their students, into hundreds of thousands. Some *madressas* have students from other countries and others have documented links to armed outfits that feed sectarian violence. Post-September 11, the Musharraf government announced that it intends to overhaul and reform the *madressa* system, but has yet to come up with a concrete and workable plan.

The Afghan campaign gave the General enough confidence to hold a largely stage-managed referendum in April 2002 that would confer legitimacy on his rule and give him the mandate to continue as President of the country for another five years, despite clear constitutional provisions that the Presidency is decided by the elected assemblies. The political parties have no place in the present dispensation, but if the scheduled elections are held as scheduled in October 2002, the present contradictions in the system will be multiplied manifold. A 'constitutional package' recently unveiled by the regime mocks the democratic process. With its unrestrained "war on terrorism" and the punishment doled out to the Afghan people, the United States has once again opened an unwelcome chapter in the already troubled geopolitics of the region. ♪

Tehmina Ahmed is a senior editor of Newline, a monthly magazine published in Karachi, Pakistan.