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A Thought worth Pondering

Inam ul Haq*

Terrorists are on the rampage. Suicide bombings have become a common phenomena. Federal as well as Provincial Governments are taking all possible security steps. Intelligence agencies are round the clock at work although one may have reservations about their performance (or lack of it) for being unable to gather precise timely intelligence and failing to penetrate the militant outfits. Large number of terrorists are rounded up or killed every day. Yet the frequency and intensity of bomb blasts is on the rise. All possible measures to stem the rising tide of terrorism are being thought about. However, these measures and proposed solutions are largely conventional in nature, and as such do not seem to root out the menace. The fundamental question that comes to everyone's mind is whether we are following the right course. If the incidents of terrorist acts are to be taken as a yardstick of our response, then the answer is clearly an emphatic 'No' which leads us to the conclusion that we have to find out and implement 'out of the box' solutions to the growing menace of terrorism. In order to be able to determine a durable and effective response, there is a need to find out the root causes of terrorism. Various theories can be put forward in this regard.

Theory No. 1: The militant outfits, foreign as well as home grown, were allowed to gain foothold in FATA as well as in NWFP and certain parts of Punjab. The motives could be many; the dictators trying to prove their indispensability to America and the West to perpetuate

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their rule, as well as the Politico-religious parties wanting to increase their influence and vote bank.

Theory No. 2: Poverty, deprivation and lack of job opportunities in the affected areas allowed enough space to the foreign powers and narco-traders to attract militancy through generous financing.

Theory No. 3: The notion of increasing / gaining strategic depth through interference in Afghanistan was given a falsely exaggerated importance, notwithstanding the fact that the same objective could have been achieved by being absolutely neutral in the Afghan infighting, and helping the war torn nation through reconstruction / rehabilitation.

Theory No.4: There is a perception, far and wide, that we are fighting the US war of (the word 'of' has been deliberately used to convey the kind of existing perception) terrorism. Perceptions are always stronger than realities and are, therefore, extremely hard to go away. How can the people (the militants) be convinced that they are in no way, directly or indirectly, damaging the US interests. They do not seem to understand (nor they ever will) that they are causing immense damage to their own country. They are convinced that our Government is only facilitating the US interests in the region. No matter how erroneous this thinking might be, the fact of the matter is that they think so and shall continue to hold this perception till such time the Americans remain present in the region. What then is the answer? Hard, as it might be to swallow, the only plausible hope lies in dissociating ourselves from the American war on terrorism, and organise peaceful protest rallies asking the Americans to pull out of Afghanistan. All operations stopped, and general amnesty announced with political initiative including dialogue following up immediately.

Theory No.5: The militants are pursuing an ideology in a bid to enforce their brand of Islam. Those familiar with the customs, traditions and way of life of tribals would not fully subscribe to this theory. They undoubtedly live a certain way of life which is simple and austere and based on the age old customs, traditions and honour code. The tribal codes do care for Islamic values; but they do not necessarily follow a radically different religious approach. Their brand of Islam is restricted to prayers only which most of them offer 5 times a day. The women folk in FATA do not wear veils and freely roam around, and even shake hands with relatives. However, the honour code is stringent enough to ensure that there is no adultery, no teasing and no indecent passes or sexual advances. This is the extent of their religious approach or mindset. Hence, the theory that they are fighting for an ideology to enforce their brand of Islam is untrue.

Theory No.6: The militants are pursuing a foreign agenda of destabilization of Pakistan to declare it a failed state so that they can take a unilateral action of seizing control of our nuclear assets. This theory could be partly right to the extent that our nuclear status hasn't gone well with America and that they would like to create conditions to seriously undermine our nuclear capability. However, any suggestion casting doubts over the patriotism of people involved in terrorist activities would be stretching our suspicions a bit too far. It may be understood that while they may be unwittingly pursuing an anti state agenda, they are too patriotic to do so wittingly. The examples of tribal lashkars going en masse towards the eastern borders to fight Indian forces in 1948, 65 and 71 wars bear ample testimony to their strong commitment to the defence of Pakistan. The statement given by late Bait Ullah Mahsud in the post Mumbai blasts war hype that TTP would fight alongside the Pak Armed

Forces to thwart Indian aggression should leave no doubts about their patriotic credentials and commitments. They can at best be faulted and condemned for their hardheaded approach and challenging the writ of the Government, and going too far in expressing their dissent.

Theory No7: The militants are being financed by India, Israel and the Afghan drug barons perhaps with the consent and blessings of America. The acquisition of latest technology and uninterrupted supply of weapons, rockets, ammunition and explosives can not be sustained without the involvement of foreign powers. Simply put, the militants need support to continue their resistance, and assistance from any source is welcomed regardless of the fact that they are being used as proxies by the foreign agencies to pursue their evil agenda. It is in this context that the militants take the blame squarely for inadvertently promoting the interests of foreign powers. Blind and hard headed as they are in their vengeance, there is no way or possibility that they will ever come to realize the grave consequences of their needless resistance which is bound to weaken Pakistan and endanger its very existence. What then is the way out? A dialogue with the militants. One might argue that peace agreements have been brokered in the past, which not only failed but also allowed the militants to buy time to regroup and replenish themselves to fight another battle. On the face of it, this argument may sound convincing but it may be appreciated that all such past agreements were made by the Government from a position of weakness. The Army this time has launched an intense operation and the militant forces have been routed and disorganised, their only nuisance (which of course is grave enough to cause serious concern) is residing in suicide bombings. A further intense operation for few weeks shall place Government in a position of strength, which must be followed by dialogue and political

steps. If Pakistani nation favours dialogue with India after over 60 years of intense animosity, there is no reason why they should not favour negotiations with our own people. A general amnesty alongwith a socio-economic and political package could do the magic.

Recommendations

In light of the above, following measures may be seriously considered for implementation:

- An 'All Parties Conference' including the intellectuals, columnists and media persons may be convened to review the situation and find solutions.
- Recommendations of the 'All Parties Conference' may be thoroughly debated in the Parliament for detailed input and expeditious implementation.
- Agenda of the meetings may be kept open. However, as a guideline, response to following suggestions may be determined:
    - Dissociating Pakistan from the war on terror; while simultaneously expressing its firm resolve that we shall not allow our soil to be used as a sanctuary for operations in Afghanistan, but only to the extent of preventing free cross border movements. General amnesty to all including the high profile militant commanders (since they are the ones who wield tremendous influence / hold over their outfits), with conditions such as surrendering of heavy weapons, dislodging of foreign militants by TTP from FATA, and disallowing the use of Pakistan's soil for cross border terrorist activities and taking up responsibility to help Government agencies in restoring peace in FATA.

- Induction of top militant commanders into political main stream such as giving them co-opted representation in the Upper and Lower Houses as well as NWFP Assembly.
- Stepping up diplomatic efforts and holding peaceful protest rallies in Pakistan to pursuade America to pull out its forces from Afghanistan and temporarily replacing them with UN forces comprising contingents from muslim countries till restoration of peace in Afghanistan, and holding free, fair and transparent elections by providing level playing field to all including Taliban.
- Organising muslim Ummah against the needless war on terror asking them to raise their voice at all forums and send emissaries to US, Europe, Russia and China demanding of US to pull out of Afghanistan forthwith without any conditions. Suggestion such as the Americans installing a broad based government before withdrawal is erroneous since any such arrangement would be viewed by Taliban as a pliable regime serving the US interests; hence unlikely to be accepted. The only viable and sustainable course for America is to leave the Afghans at their own to decide their destiny. The Americans can, however, restore their increasingly declining popularity graph by engaging the newly installed government (as a result of free, fair and transparent elections conducted by the UN forces)

politically and repairing the colossal damage through generous economic assistance.

- The agenda may also include steps to assure Afghans that Pakistan shall no longer interfere in Afghan politics by being absolutely neutral and shall not extend overt or covert support to any group, party or faction. Meanwhile, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia may also be persuaded to stop supporting the rival groups, and extend only economic assistance to Afghanistan regardless of which ever, and whatever, government comes into power. It is this approach of non-partisanship that will help encourage the Afghans to find a way out of the imbroglio.
- Once some semblance of peace has been restored in FATA, a hefty socio-economic and political package should be announced and implemented with immediate effect. False promises may not work any more.

Denouncing the lopsided US approach towards the war on terror is easier said than done but nevertheless possible. However, it requires the political leaders to rise above their vested interests and have guts to stand up against US policy in the region. This is not to suggest open confrontation with America; instead the situation calls for wise and firm diplomacy to guard our own national interests. The policies where our mutual interests converge must be followed, but wherever there is a divergence of interests, our own national interests should be considered supreme. It may be understood that Pakistan has dragged itself in a bloody war with the militants perceivably to prevent them from posing any threat to the US mainland. Needless to mention that this threat is

absolutely phoney and has been fabricated to pursue their ulterior motives. The tragic incident of 9/11 has been overplayed. The United States is totally oblivious to our predicament ignoring the fact that while they had only one 9/11 (and not a single terrorist act thereafter) , we have it on almost daily basis.Ironically, there is no single example in history wherein a country fought for the security of another country at the cost of its own peril and survival. Pakistan is bleeding, yet America is (ungraciously / ungratefully and shamelessly) asking us to do more, still more and keep doing more and more till we are left with no more blood to shed. The sincerity (or more appropriately the insincerity) of America can be truly gauged from their decision to pull out all its check posts from Pak-Afghan border at the most inopportune time when Pakistan Army launched its operations in Waziristan. The accusation by Obama and US top officials that Al-Qaeda has fled away from Afghanistan into Pakistan is false and unfounded on two counts. First, why did the Americans remove check posts from the border; was it to facilitate Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban to leave Afghanistan? Secondly, why would Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda leave Afghanistan where the NATO forces are not launching any serious operations? The NATO forces are confined to only few pockets defended by strong multi-layered security perimeters. They are totally boxed in and are reluctant to launch operations except indiscriminate aerial strikes killing innocent civilians. On the contrary, Pakistan Army is conducting operations deep inside FATA. Afghan Taliban have frequently expressed their dislike for TTP's unmindful resistance against the state of Pakistan and have clearly distanced themselves away from them. Hence, the suggestion by US that they would leave their safe and secure sanctuaries in Afghanistan and expose themselves to the threat of elimination in Pakistance is clearly

non-saleable. The accusation is, therefore, outlandish and aimed at covering up the ineptitude and inaction of their own forces. How long can they live on false accusations against Pakistan? Certainly not indefinitely. No matter what the Americans say, they have invaded Afghanistan and are most unwanted intruders. They will have to think of exit sooner or later. The longer they take, the more inextricably they would get involved. It is going to be a long drawn protracted war with no gains and definitely colossal losses / damage to the region as well as American interests.

Pakistan's leadership has so far shown reluctance and even timidity in dissociating from the American war due to loss of covert US support in the formation of our governments or discontinuation of aid flow. They must shun all such fears and mobilize as well as prepare the nation to face economic hardships. Once convinced, this nation has the courage, patience and fortitude to wade through even rougher times to maintain its sovereignty. To reduce our dependence on American aid, our leaders must also weigh options of increasing the revenue, making drastic cuts on non developmental expenditures, reducing the fat size of cabinets and advisors to bare minimum and substantially curtailing needless foreign tours besides diversifying our relations with other countries. Our total inclination towards America has also annoyed our time tested friend China which is why it has not done enough (as expected) to bail out our ailing economy. Normal relations and no dictation from America would reassure China, that we shall stand by it on all issues; hence getting more assistance from it in times of economic crisis. Iran is another country, which can come to our rescue if it is sure that we shall not allow America to use us or our soil for undermining their sovereignty or nuclear assets. Efforts to improve relations with the

re-asserting Russia should also be made to convey a message to America that its existing policies are sure to vastly diminish its sphere of influence.

Time for our leaders to rise to the occasion, and understand that US shall support them for as long as they are relevant, and throw them away when they are no longer in a position to serve the American interests. A wake up call indeed and a thought worth pondering.

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