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Swat Valley: The Strategic Cap-Stone

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Abstract

The strategically located Swat Valley in Pakistan's far North West is surrounded by Chitral, Gilgit, Kohistan, Shangla, Buner, Malakand and lower and upper Dir. The Islamist presence in all these areas was either tactical or operational, but in case of Swat Valley, it was strategic. The valley of Swat itself is surrounded by Hindukush in the West and North West and Karakuram Range in the East and North East. Across the Hindukush is the American occupied Afghanistan and Central Asia whereas beyond Karakuram in the North East is China and further down East is the Indian occupied Kashmir. And flanked by Karakuram Highway (KKH) in the East which is connected with the valley by a road going through Khwazakhela, Alpori, Shangla and Besham, the valley of Swat is super-strategic. Moreover, with Deosai plains at 14000 feet in the Karakuram Ranges as one, the valley of Swat is yet another cockpit to the surrounding regions and afar. It can also be a logistic hub for a Military Base at Deosai. What else is required to be a Strategic Cap-Stone of the New Great Game? No wonder, Swat attracts American geo-strategic interests.

Keywords: Swat Valley, New Great Game, Islamic Fundamentalism, Geo-Strategy

Introduction

The problems of Swat Valley and that of its natives are one more expression of Pakistan's cognitive dissonance. The troubles of the valley also have roots in the socio-economic and political deprivation. It is micro of Pakistan's macro reductionism. For the citizens of Pakistan face same disharmony and discord on the daily basis. The general life style in Pakistan provides ample evidence, particularly at the receiving end. In case of Swat, the politicians of the valley, the political parties, the governments, the so called civil society and the NGOs failed to respond to the sufferings of the populace in general, and in case of those at the

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periphery, in particular. The role of traditional elders has been appalling to the tragedy for they became silent spectators. Swat time and again proved to be the case of too little and too late by the governments, until the die was cast. And notwithstanding the taste for this or that, the elected representatives of Swat fled to the comforts of federal capital during the crisis. What's more the people of Swat suffer under rich landlords who give them no rights.[1]

The initial violence in Swat claimed hundreds of lives, mostly security personnel, and drove nearly half a million residents from their homes.[2] After the collapse of Nizam-i-Adal deal on 5th May 2009, the ensuing fighting displaced additional over 2.0 million people from Swat and its surroundings. The wheel of history took a full turn. The empire builders of the past – the Yousafzais – became destitute, needy and were set on the breadline. Once a vacationer paradise, the destruction in Swat symbolized the discredited elite and the vanished writ of the state. Other than administrative break-down, the psychological despair was obvious. The chaos took over the valley of Swat and its adjoining areas. And the tribulations that earlier were socio-economic, political and of law and order, became geo-strategic and geo-political.

The problems of Swat are not new for the first insurrection for Sharia Law took place back in 1977. The new are the elements of geo-strategy and geo-politics due to American occupation of Afghanistan and the New Great Game centered on Central Asia. Swat became a challenge in American perception for it was the strategic option opted by the Islamists. The preparations went on for quite some time. The hardcore primarily were from Waziristan. The operational grasp of the Islamists in Swat extended from Qambar in the south to Kalam in the north with camps in remote mountain valleys including the Peochar Mountains. Over time, the heavy artillery located at Barikot, Chakdara and elsewhere including gunships did not prove decisive in operational terms. In warfare, there has never been a substitute for fighting on the objective. It remains important even today in this age and time of neo-Clausewitzianism.

Moreover, the rules of just war were violated, thus bringing to the fore the Pakistani sickness. Brutalized, for they saw their own women and children being killed in indiscriminate attacks by the security forces, the Islamists too entered a phase where the principles of just war no longer had any meaning.[3] Moreover, an initiation of an operation may be in one's power, but the consequences are not. The operational setbacks, the internally displaced and the civilians killed in the three phases of operation Rah-i-Haq manifested the reality, let alone in Rah-i-Rast.

The Operation Rah-i-Haq

The July 2007 uprising in Swat Valley was led by Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan and was rooted in the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. The 40 Taliban leaders from Pakistan's six Tribal Agencies, six Frontier Regions of FATA and the NWFP districts of Swat, Kohistan, Buner, Dir, Malakand, Kulachi, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Tank and D.I. Khan met in mid December 2007 at a secret location in South Waziristan and appointed Baitullah Mehsud as their Central Amir. The objective was to unite against NATO forces in Afghanistan and to fight a 'defensive Jihad' against Pakistani Forces. In Swat, this led to the operation Rah-i-Haq but fighting over the years spread to most of the Malakand Division.

Pakistan after Afghanistan and Iraq became the new centre of gravity. The besieged oligarchs knew it. The convulsions were threatening. The dynamics had set in motion a train of events that proved beyond control. Americans too in Afghanistan were facing a sharp increase in the insurgency and the hands-on and hard-line U.S. strategy was unfolding, but to no avail. It became important for Islamabad to articulate a decisive political stance of its own in 'its war on terror' to extricate itself from the clutches of obsequious and confused subservience to deceitful and discredited 'long war',[4] later termed as Overseas Contingency Operations.

The revolt made Swat an Islamist strategic launching pad and the provincial government lost control. The state through the three phases of operation Rah-i-Haq in November 2007, July 2008 and January 2009 and the subsequent peace deals failed to regain the initiative. The 21st May 2008 peace agreement collapsed in July 2008. Islamists blamed the intelligence agencies and fighting resumed with a greater vengeance. The renewed combat was more intense than when it started in 2007. Around 35,000 troops were operational in Swat including the prestigious 17 Division from Kharian Cantonment. By February 2009, the figure of 10,000 Islamists fighting against the security forces was being referred to. The Islamists despite casualties continued replacement and regrouping and kept fighting back. The failure of neo-Clausewitzianism too became obvious e.g., the Islamists in Peochar Mountains were heavily bombed, yet they remained there. The gold standard is that unless it is bayonet to bayonet, victory remains elusive in conventional operations, let alone the crushing of a trans-national ideological insurgency.

The Operation Rah-i-Haq revolved around securing mountain tops, ridges and the indiscriminate use of artillery and gunships in which civilians bore the brunt while having little impact on the Islamists e.g., around 60 Islamists on 3rd February 2009 encircled a police station next

to Shamozai Bridge. It was manned by 30 soldiers of Frontier Corps and police. The two blocking positions blocked the soldiers manning the bridge from coming to the rescue of surrounded soldiers. The exchange of fire and the siege went on for 36 hours. The calls for reinforcements from the Base Camp at Kabal went unheeded. The heavy artillery fire from Chakdara killed only one Islamist while injuring two others. The soldiers surrendered after running out of ammunition. The Islamists blew-up the police station. Attired in camouflage and with an accent of the Southern Districts of the North West Frontier, the area commander of the Islamists visited his foot soldiers after the battle.

By March 2009, fresh troops were pouring into Swat for the Islamists had fought against Pakistan Army to a standstill. Maulana Fazlulah warned over the arrival of additional troops. The Islamists too received their reinforcements. On 20th March 2009, while addressing the Friday Congregation at Shamozai Mosque, Shah Duran vowed to take fight outside the valley. Interestingly, Fazlulah was encircled in Peochar in July 2008, but then troops were called back.

Earlier on 16th February 2009, the provincial government in the North West announced to enforce Nizam-i-Adl in Malakand Division and Kohistan District of Hazara Division. It confirmed Islamist ascendancy. The federal government linked enforcement of Nizam-i-Adl with the restoration of peace. The Chief of Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM) reached an agreement to enforce Nizam-i-Adl. It was placed before the parliament on 13th April 2009. The parliament passed the bill unanimously and the president signed the regulation the same day. Americans voiced their apprehensions. A peace rally was taken out in Swat Valley on 16th April 2009. However, the philosophic differences emerged in addition to the appointment of Qazis. The deal collapsed and the fighting resumed. The scope of fighting this time was not restricted to Swat only but included surrounding districts as well. The use of force became a Geiger counter. It is a sense developed over centuries. The army announced Operation Rah-i-Rast to tackle the situation militarily.

The Operation Rah-i-Rast

On 4th April 2009, Islamists broke-out in three different directions from Swat. The objective in the west was lower Dir whereas in the East it was Shangla, but moving into Buner was a real hostile move. The Islamists established headquarters; occupied strategic mountain tops, dug trenches and bunkers and started patrolling in the streets of Buner. Later Islamists pushed further down south and established posts on Buner's border with Swabi, Mardan and Malakand. The strategic offensive policy of the

Islamists, particularly the Buner incursion, threatened the U.S. Commandoes at Tarbela. The subsequent deployment of Rangers at Tarbela was meaningful. And the elements of al-Qaeda's 055 Brigade were in Mingora by 1st May 2009.

Earlier Pakistan Army had moved additional infantry divisions from its eastern front with India for the Operation Rah-i-Rast. This brought the total strength to 5 infantry divisions plus the elements of Frontier Corps and Special Services Group (SSG) in the valley and its surroundings against the 5,000 hardcore insurgents and others. The area of operation was 3798 square Kilometers. The additional divisions were moved into the battle zone from the east using Besham-Shangla-Alpori-Khwazakhela Axis and from the south via Chakdara-Qambar-Mingora Axis. And to enter Buner, troops used Rustam-Ambela-Daggar Axis. The SSG troops were parachuted into Peochar Mountains on 12th May 2009; however, the method had a cost.

The operational plan of army aimed at drawing away the Islamists from the valley. For this an advance and encounter battle was initiated in Buner on 28th March 2009 whereas the first clash in Dir took place at Hayasari on 3rd May 2009 in which 200 soldiers were killed. On 14th May 2009, again a squadron of tanks was destroyed in Dir next to the Lal Qila in Kumbar Bazar. In Buner too, both sides had their casualties e.g., 6 suicide bombers attacking in 15 minutes. Around 2000 Islamists in Dir and 3000 in Buner fought a defensive battle. And the operation in Swat started unfolding on 8th May 2009 following the killing of 80 soldiers a day earlier. The Islamists after the conventional battle remained in an eye ball to eye ball contact north of Mingora. Fresh offensive were launched in Gokand Buner on 14th July, in Mangalaur Swat and Maidan Dir on 20th August and in Malam Jabba Swat on 23rd September 2009. However, the al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers remained on the move.

The operation Rah-i-Rast started with a massive air-campaign. The pace of operations faced great attrition e.g., the killing fields of Mannyar and Ambela Pass. The IEDs inflicted severe losses on the troops e.g., at Matta. The critical mass of Islamists melted away into mountains to fight another day e.g., after the day long battle at College Square Matta on 18th May 2009, but at times they fought to the last man e.g., at Baini Baba Ziarat. The Islamists techniques were battle-hardened and their improvisation a force multiplier. The organizational capacity was in demonstration by protecting the core leadership. Whereas the price paid by both sides west of Mingora astride River Swat was horrendous, the real undoing of Islamists involves foreign policy shifts, despite razing to ground village after village e.g., Sultanwas in Buner.

And the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported extra judicial killings and mass graves. Moreover, the United States first demanding an operation, and then monitoring it was interesting.

By February 2009, the 22 suicide bombings in Swat had killed 160. Later the suicide attacks during the Phase III of operation Rah-i-Haq on the entrances of GHQ and Hamza Camp of ISI in Rawalpindi left 35 dead and dozens injured. All through Rah-i-Rast too, Islamists retaliated e.g., the suicide bombing in Lahore on 27th May 2009 targeting the ISI and Police nerve centers left 25 dead and 300 injured. In mid 2009, explosive laden vehicles were seized opposite an intelligence unit and the FATA Secretariat in Peshawar. And the suicide attacks on Pearl Continental Hotel Peshawar, on troops in Shangla in October 2009, in Kabal on 1st December 2009 and in Mingora on troops in February and July 2010 were meaningful.

Pakistani strategic errors became a nightmare. Strategic errors incur costs and rectification requires strategic actions. Whenever the choice is critical, the reason is strategic error. The displaced personified Pakistan's strategic errors. The victory was declared to be in sight in Swat on 4th June 2009, however, in mid July 2009, Military Intelligence admitted that 40% of 5,000 hardcore Islamists remain in the valley. The army chief admitted to 550 killed and 1500 injured soldiers, but the number was higher. The strategic imbalance against India emerged and the shifting of troops from east to west risked relationship with China. And apart from the raising of cantonments at Mingora and Dir; the playing of fidelity and the New Great Game continued.

Swat Valley & the New Great Game

During the Great Game of 19th century, the interest of Great Powers was to keep Afghanistan neutral, but 150 years of Afghan history, when it served as a buffer state, has undergone a radical change. The occupied Afghanistan today is a corridor for the riches of Central Asia. This requires a foothold and that is the Pakistani dilemma. Afghanistan has also replaced Kashmir as the main arena of the still-unresolved struggle between Pakistan and India.[5] The game continues, but now, the number of players has exploded, those living on the chessboard have become involved, and the intensity of the violence and the threats it produces affects the entire globe.[6] How long the new Great Game is going to occupy the strategists of the early twenty-first century, and if it will be possible to end it as peacefully, is anyone's guess.[7] The strategic tensions are on the rise in the region.

Islamists have emerged as a key player of the New Great Game. Metaphorically, Islamists in South and Central Asia are surrounded by

five nuclear powers. Other than Afghanistan and FATA, the Islamist presence in Swat emerged in the early 1990s. Subsequently over the two decades and particularly after 9/11, the passage of time in Pakistan created a strategic impasse in which the valley of Swat emerged as a strategic cap- stone with China, Afghanistan and Kashmir in close proximity and Central Asia at a stone's throw. Moreover, with its twin tunnel networks crisscrossing Hindu Kush and Karakuram Ranges, the valley of Swat became an Islamist Strategic Base. The tunnels and ammunition dumps were targeted during operation Rah-i-Rast. With Swat Valley in a steely and sturdy grip or even under an insurgency, a geo-strategic player in the region with geo-political ambitions could impact not only foreign policy in South and Central Asia, but also the New Great Game. Indeed, the strategic gaze of al-Qaeda's Strategist-in-Chief was and is a class of its own in geo-strategy and geo-politics.

The understanding of insurgency in Pakistan also entails the dimension of space. Historically, Balochistan and the North West Frontier have been Pakistan's foreign policy spaces to bridge the gap between the resources and objectives. This led to the phenomenon of renting the state to the highest bidder. The implications were never understood by the Cardinals. For the rapid U.S. withdrawal after the Soviet war in Afghanistan left Pakistan in chaos.[8]

In this context, Pakistan's tribal areas are the most critical space e.g., its use against the Soviet Union or in the war against terror. After 9/11, the valley of Swat was added to this space by the dynamics unleashed by time. Americans over the decades have paid tens of billions of dollars in the rent or military aid e.g., the release of $470 million during Operation Rah-i-Rast. The TTP-al-Qaeda vs. Pakistan Army contest in the North West is for the domination of this space. Moreover, the July 2010 monsoon floods in Swat destroyed whatever infrastructure was left after the military operations. Besides hundreds more were killed in addition to the destroyed houses, shops, hotels, banks, crops, and orchards.

The insurgency in the AfPak region has been transformed into the New Great Game. The Islamists are independent players playing their own game. The New Great Game does not stop at Khyber Pass, as the catalysts for power and pipelines in Central Asia lie in Pakistan, the most populated power on the fringe of Central Asia.[9] The Great Game never ends; only the players change.[10] The growing hostility against the American presence in Central Asia might decide the new Great Game's outcome.[11] No government in the region around Afghanistan supports a long term U.S. or NATO presence there.[12] The strategic and security cooperation between the former Soviet republics, the increasing energy

links between Russia and Asia, and the emergence of Russo-Chinese bodies such as SCO suddenly seem to bear out the Neo-Eurasianist theories.[13] In mid 2009, the Chinese Ambassador in Pakistan raised concerns over U.S. influence and cautioned Pakistan over Uighur unrest in China. All are awaiting the birth of a new order of things.[14]

After 30 years of engagement, the U.S. and China still disagree about how the world should work.[15] Russians too are in concert and the strategic idea is to present Russia as an alternative in Central Asia. The multi-layered Sino-Russian dynamic is one of strategic convenience – an axis of convenience.[16] Pakistan is a doorway to Central Asia. The New Great Game has gone metaphysical and China global. Besides, Swat Valley is situated in a geo-strategic area.[17] Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, plus America, all have strategic interests in this part of Pakistan.[18] Shia-Sunni tensions stirred up in the border areas of Pakistan, such as, Gilgit, Baltistan and Parachinar on the one side, Quetta, Balochistan on the other, have added extremely appalling dimensions to the Great Game, unfolding itself in our midst. And Islamic fundamentalism has emerged as one of the greatest challenges to American authority in Eurasia.[19] Everyone is truly Shakespearian.

Conclusion

Pakistan Army opted for a mad-man solution, but failed to deliver the fatal blow that requires genius at the top, a high standard of training and espirit de corps. The Hindukush Mountains for the Islamists of Swat ensured the trail of supply and withdrawal up to Kunar and Nooristan in Afghanistan and Rasht and Farghana Valleys in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The aim of the operation was to cut-off Islamists crossing-over from Pakistan into Afghanistan, however, the line and the sanctuaries remain in the Hindukush Mountains. And the army led deradicalization efforts spread over years have failed and several Islamists from Swat have rejoined their groups.

The problems are complicated and the scenario is changing from day to day and not weeks or months. Both the domestic and external environment is unsuitable. Everything that matters is against the State. All the daggers are in it. The dissatisfaction is on a large scale. It has different shades and colors. It is difficult to draw a line. There is a generalized lawlessness in all spheres. The cynicism all around reflects despair. Have we ever seen such things earlier? It is a full blown, continuing and multiplying crisis. The unpredictable will emerge out of chaos.

The crises today are difficult and dangerous. These are most serious since 1971. The influences at work are more than one. The things

can go up to a point, but not after that. It is time for branch and root examination. Pakistan has too many moving parts, and hardly any stable one. It is always on the verge of unforeseeable events. The system is breaking down for all its intents and purposes. The passage of time has become decisive, yet to factor it out is a problem because the state of mind blots-it out naturally and not logically. It is an extraordinary attitude. It is like moving on a course that does not exist. There is not much thought as to how to proceed.

Time necessitates a shift of focus. The whole system of thought will have to be changed by integrating arts, morals and science as start point and not emotions. Yet, the present context revolves around the assumption that the spoken mind is the deed done, as if the verb expressed is the action accomplished. It leads one into believing. The burden of dissonance may or may not be lifted, but the story remains and continues. The historic childishness is literal as well as metaphorical. If the federation is rooted in geography, the constituent elements too are anchored as such.

The facts are not understood whereas one deals with a problem on the basis of facts surrounding that problem. The quality of mind is central, because wisdom is at work in body and universe. The decision should always be a sound one. Soundness means not only rational, but also an understanding balancing the drives. A sound decision is a maturity of judgement on an issue. The collective decision makes a distinction, because minds vibrate at different frequencies. The decisions should never be irretrievable. The irreversible decisions have costs. The situation is badly mixed up. The leadership has failed. The fundamentals remain unaddressed.

The signs were good, the atmosphere was good, and the hope was that the change is afoot, but it turned out to be as usual. Everything went in the air. A whole list of things has come up. Somehow no passage is without problems. The splits are double, at times triple and multiple. Nothing is settled until everything is settled. The human element of leadership is missing. It remains a suspect. There are no saner moments of brilliance. The inadequacies are deadly. The great escape made by the west was from deductive to inductive process of reasoning whereas failure of Pakistani mind is its obliviousness to induction. Who is the leader to manage contradictions? Who would look for remedy? Whenever big crises occur or are in the air, time demands sacrifice.

Theoretically a nation creates a state. State is product of a nation. In Pakistan's case, the nation is isolated from the state. The mind separates the two. Psychological denial does not solve the problem. It rather becomes a psychological contradiction. Pakistanis suffer from an

inadequacy to state their wisdom and there is always something to be said. Starting from Bengalis, the people of Pakistan have faced number of crises over the decades. Even in the post 1971 Pakistan, it is visible through the political, social and economic chaos. The problem stems from identity and a lack of ethico-metaphysically centered nation-hood. It is that of the creed. Pakistani mind, perception and identity need metaphysical anchorage. It is a structural error now. The passage of time accustoms one to contradictions at the cost of federation. The ordinary people of Pakistan will have to do extra-ordinary things. Some people have said that the Muslims of India were a nation in search of a state; today, Pakistan is a state in search of a nation. Will it emerge?

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