

Perspective - Musings

Fighting the Taliban: The US and Pakistan's failed strategies

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An unmanned US Predator drone flies over Kandahar Air Field, southern Afghanistan, in 2010 | AP

On May 23, 2016, President Barack Obama announced that the head of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Mansour Akhtar, was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Akhtar, it is believed, resisted negotiations with the Afghan government and its allies. The strike was notable for several reasons. First, the United States military executed it and not the CIA. Second, it was the first drone strike outside the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and their peripheries in Pakistan. Third, it likely did not involve coordination with the ISI or the Pakistan Army. The move signaled ever-growing American frustration with

PAKISTAN'S TACTICS OF EXTRACTING RENTS FROM WASHINGTON WHILE PROVING ITSELF UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO BRING THE AFGHAN TALIBAN TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE.

From the perspectives of the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, there is no incentive to do so for several reasons. First, why negotiate when the Taliban are winning with Pakistan's generous and unstinting support? Second, the international community will eventually leave Afghanistan and the Taliban can once again ensconce themselves to ostensibly do Pakistan's bidding. Third, even if the Taliban cannot regain their past glory, they and their allies, such as the Haqqani network, will at least keep the Indians at bay.

Both Pakistan and the United States employ failed strategies. For the American part, it launched a war it could never win because it was dependent upon the one country that opposed its key interests – Pakistan. The United States continues fighting the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan, when its key vulnerabilities are in Pakistan. At the same time, it built an unwieldy and unsustainable state in Afghanistan whose leadership continued to be corrupt and unresponsive to Afghan needs. Worse, it incentivised Pakistan to continue aiding and abetting America's enemies through the Coalition Support Funds. If Pakistan had actually delivered, the cash flows would stop.

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In the absence of a strategy, the United States opts to take out the Taliban leadership in hopes of bringing the rest of them to the table. Yet there is no evidence that such leadership decapitation degrades the organisation or makes it more amenable to negotiation. In fact, it likely encourages greater infighting and defections to the Islamic State. As with previous drone strikes, the ISI will coordinate the ensuing leadership selection process and little else will change for the positive.

Pakistan's men in uniform may believe they have won. However, Pakistan stands to lose more than it gains for several reasons. During their heyday, the Taliban never delivered a resolution on the Durand

Line, encouraged Pakhtun nationalism, harboured Pakistani criminals, and brought additional international opprobrium to Pakistan for its support of Islamist militias in Afghanistan and India. There would be no Pakistani Taliban had Pakistan not nurtured the Afghan Taliban and the numerous other Deobandi militant groups that comprise the backbone of the Pakistani Taliban.

The Afghans, too, have come to loathe Pakistan for its incessant interference that dates back to the earliest years of the Pakistani state. Pakistan's stale and murderous policies have delivered even Ashraf Ghani, who extended an olive branch to Rawalpindi, over to the Indians.

The Americans will leave Afghanistan. More Afghans will die. But over the long term, Pakistanis will continue paying the price for the follies of their men in uniform who think strategic depth in Afghanistan is more important than security at home.

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