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Another Opportunity in Afghanistan

Contrary to popular opinion, Mullah Baradar's capture by the CIA acting in concert with the Pakistanis is not a game-changer. At best, it presents the Taliban with a minor inconvenience. Baradar was the deputy defence minister during Taliban rule in Afghanistan and was quoted as claiming just a few months ago that "in every nook and corner of the country a spirit for jihad is raging." He will be replaced by others unless Afghanistan is fixed.

The Marja offensive launched last week is a new opportunity to learn from past mistakes. Air strikes are the easy part -- we've been here before in other theatres of war, only to find that the bus has been driven into the ditch soon after.

It would be folly to celebrate reports about the Taliban fleeing Marja; they are past masters at this peculiarly Afghan game of cat and mouse. Operation Moshtarak will be a war of attrition.

President Obama requested \$33 billion in supplemental funding for the DOD's overseas contingency operations in Afghanistan/Pakistan recently. American taxpayers are now on the hook for \$152.6 billion for 2010 under this head. This includes money for the 33,000 additional troops and for unmanned drones and other capability enhancement projects.

Funnelling taxpayer money away from the homeland is only justifiable if Afghanistan ceases to be a breeding ground for terrorists. This requires nation-building on steroids; to move a country that escaped the industrial revolution into an era of governance built on the telecom and internet revolutions is no mean task. The sheer scale of the effort requires a broader coalition of allies which must include India, Japan and China.

America cannot build a nation while fighting a war and military success is a prerequisite. The current fad for euphemistically converting lower level fighters into friends of the West -- otherwise known as buying off the Taliban -- is mistaken. Taliban fighters will never become friends of the West. They might be rented temporarily, but their loyalties can never be bought.

This is because their decision to fight America is not based on rational economic calculations but on irrational ideological hatred. It is naïve to assume that they will switch sides for a few dollars. To the contrary, these bribes will be used to fund terrorist acts against us when conditions are more favourable to the Taliban. In addition, Karzai's corrupt government will siphon off these funds for their own ends.

The shibboleth of reconciliation must be consigned to the bin and hard task of eliminating the Taliban must be the priority. Here's how.

Where are the Taliban's fighters getting their weapons from? This question holds the key to victory.

It is common knowledge that Darra Adamkhel, south of the gun market town of Sakhakot (near Peshawar), is home to a large gun industry manufacturing over 1000 guns a day. M-4 rifles complete with night vision equipment, silencer and torch, Kalashnikovs -- for \$1500 -- rocket launchers and mines are all part of the inventory. Why is this town not being hit by drones?

Unless the gun markets of Pakistan are shut down and the Taliban is choked of weapons and ammunition, victory cannot be attained. The first step has to be an expansion of the drone program to hit gun markets inside Pakistan.

Coevally, Pakistan must be made to realize that it has strong incentives to shut these cottage industries down. There is considerable evidence that weapons from the NWFP are finding their way into cities like Karachi and fuelling a cycle of ceaseless violence. It cannot be a coincidence that Pakistan has witnessed three-digit increases in suicide attacks over the last year. Yet, their leaders persist with the strategy of increasing the flow of weapons into non-military hands. A case in point is the recent move to arm villagers with 30,000 rifles supposedly to fight the Taliban. One can only wonder as to how many of these will be used against innocent civilians and western targets. This cannot continue. Pakistan must be held to account if it is to receive aid. It must immediately sign on to the Arms Trade Treaty and prioritise de-weaponization.

Second, how does the Taliban fund its activities? Drugs. The US must destroy opium cultivation -- in areas like Helmand -- as a war priority. This will choke the Taliban and inhibit its fighting ability. If even a fraction of the resources expended on the war on drugs in countries like Colombia is made available in Afghanistan, results will be discernible.

Next, Karzai's government, which is rightly seen to be illegitimate and incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations of all of Afghanistan, must not be the fulcrum of the political solution. This imperative stems from Afghanistan's divisive ethnic politics. Concentrating exclusively on Karzai and Kabul and tailoring centralized solutions ignores this basic reality and glosses over the fact that pan-Afghan identity is largely a myth.

This nationalist myth must be busted for a permanent solution. The US must have the nous for the radical option of partition or at least the second best alternative of decentralized functional regional autonomy. The north and west of the country must be hived off and given functional autonomy with locally recruited police and military units. They must set up fully functioning governments insulated from Kabul's reach.

This will succeed for multiple reasons. Firstly, it will free up large parts of Afghanistan for development without the burden of competing priorities. In addition to raising the quality of life, it will create beacons of hope for Pashtuns and other alienated groups. Secondly, it will concentrate resources for development in areas with the maximum likelihood of success instead of the current policy of spreading it thinly. Development will also generate a fresh set of leaders at the grassroots level to replace the current discredited lot. Thirdly, decentralization will facilitate greater

accountability and oversight -- especially important when government institutions have been plagued by allegations of pervasive corruption.

Bribing the Taliban is a gross insult to the 520 military men and women who gave their lives in Afghanistan last year. How can we trust even those Taliban elements who claim to have renounced their ways? Giving these killers uniforms and weapons and making them part of the police and army is a terrible risk.

The Taliban's foot soldiers will merely fatten on these bribes and return in another avatar to attack Western targets. If there is true renunciation on the part of the Taliban, they must lay down their weapons and face trial for their actions. Reconciliation and reintegration can only be offered after they are held accountable and have served long prison sentences. This is a minimum requirement in any rule of law society.

If the Taliban are to be rewarded with bribes for murder, why should the average Afghan obey the law? Surely, there are equally flimsy justifications for every crime?

Operation Moshtarak can succeed if we work together with other allies in the region to kill the Taliban. Anything less is an insult to our troops.

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