

Strategic Mayhem: From America's Drone Attacks to an All Out US-NATO War on Pakistan?

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The US and Pakistan have an intrinsic clash of strategic interests in the South-Central Asian Region (SCAR). They have managed to remain reluctant and unwilling allies thus far in the global war on terror, but now face the moment of truth.

The issue of the Haqqani Network (HN) has assumed decisive proportions in the wake of the Taliban attack on the US Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul recently. The US blamed Pakistan for waging a proxy war against it and the HN and the ISI for direct involvement in this attack. They seek vengeance and just retribution. Pakistan's assertions to the contrary have predictably been rejected. Some analysts conclude that the US-Pakistan embroilment is escalating exponentially – from a veritably Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) to a Low Intensity War (LIW) and now potentially to a full-fledged one.

Operationally, the US has a number of options/combinations to tackle this situation. It could increase the frequency, ferocity, reach and spread of its deadly drone attacks. It could also carry out hot pursuit operations chasing down the supposed HN militants into Pakistan or try to snatch its top leader (like one of the senior Haqqanis) a la Osama bin Laden. It could also re-energise the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to increase violent attacks from Kunar and Nooristan into Dir and Bajaur. It could also carry out blistering strategic bombings – cruise and ballistic missile strikes on the HN hideouts/installations – collateral damage be damned!

However, the worst case scenario would be if the US/NATO/ISAF/Afghan forces were to cross the Durand Line. Pakistan will contest this incursion with matching ferocity, violence, willpower and determination. It is further likely to squeeze and block USA's critical logistics supplies and completely stop all intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism/military cooperation with it. Once both belligerents join the battle in earnest, ironically, a point of no return will be reached, a critical threshold will be breached and a decades-old relationship would come to a sorry and unpleasant end. The biggest irony would be that in this strategic equation, despite its losses in men and material, Pakistan would be erroneously perceived to be on the HN's side; though it would solely be defending its own territorial integrity and sovereignty! And such a perception would have dire strategic implications for it.

Were the US and Pakistan forces to get embroiled with each other it would lead to a strategic mayhem. Would the other nations in the US-led coalition also attack Pakistan? Whether they dither or attack, would there be dire implications for their relations with the US, Pakistan and in their respective internal domestic politics? In case the engagement prolongs, then the US would need to draw additional troops from within Afghanistan inviting

violent Al-Qaeda and Taliban attacks on those weakened positions. That will cause the withdrawal of US forces to be delayed beyond 2014. Could all this be a ploy for such a desired end state?

Could all this be deliberate? Were this adventure to misfire, (likely) Obama's re-election bid will be irretrievably botched! Could this yet be a hidden agenda of some elements/factions within the US body politic/establishment?

The operational dividends of such a US adventure will be meagre. It might capture a few leaders (assuming they would still be around even after all these public ultimatums) and destroy some of their training and administrative infrastructure. They might also dissipate them to obviate their operations as a cohesive group, albeit temporarily, but would still not be able to exterminate them completely. The group may have already dispersed to concentrate again once the threat has receded.

The downside of such a strategic folly would be that Pakistan as an ally would be alienated and lost forever. The terrorists would get further radicalised, attracting more recruits to their cause! Pakistan would face the brunt of the militant backlash countrywide. The country's economy will nosedive further and FATA would get more radicalised. The government will face existential challenges. The HN reprisals would be swift, ferocious, widespread and unforgiving; setting the AfPak region afire! A peaceful resolution of the Afghan conundrum will thus become more unattainable.

Pakistan and the US have difficult choices to make now. They can choose to defy and attack one another and end up committing mutual harakiri. Nothing would please the militants more, except to see the two ostensible allies take on one another rather than them. Alternatively, they could cool things down, carry out a rational assessment and come out with a win-win solution.

A joint US-Pak military option – perhaps, a classic hammer and anvil operation – can be ruled out. The saner choice would be for the US and Pakistan to create the desired strategic environment, offer the right inducements and encourage the HN to come to the negotiating table and help reach an acceptable-to-all solution. It gives the US (and its allies) a face-saving exit that they so desperately yearn for, saves Pakistan the trouble of carrying out further operations in the FATA, obviates the need for any cross-border operations by the US and its allies and, most importantly, helps find a peaceful solution to the Afghan imbroglio.

Leon Panetta's many follies as CIA chief have led to this impasse and breakdown in the Pak-US ties. He continues in the same vein at the Pentagon. Better counsel should have prevailed. Such a misadventure will potentially sound the death knell for his President's re-election bid, threaten the Gilani-Zardari government and inextricably and needlessly embroil the US-Pak forces on the battlefield. It is a patently lose-lose situation. It will only hasten the final split, ending this painfully unilateral under-achieving non-relationship with a bang!

If sanity does not return to this region soon, such a misadventure will tragically and most eminently become "the mother of all strategic follies".

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