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Why Pakistanis see US as the bigger threat

By Muhammad Idrees Ahmad

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PESHAWAR - To the west of Peshawar on the Jamrud Road that leads to the historic Khyber Pass sits the Karkhano Market, a series of shopping plazas whose usual offering of contraband is now supplemented by standard issue United States military equipment, including combat fatigues, night vision goggles, body armor and army knives.

Beyond the market is a checkpoint that separates the city from the semi-autonomous tribal region of Khyber. In the past, if one lingered near the barrier long enough, one was usually approached by someone from the far side selling hashish, alcohol, guns, or even rocket-propelled grenade launchers. These days such a salesman could also be selling US semi-automatics, sniper rifles and hand guns. Those who buy do so less for the quality of the weapons - the AK-47 remains the weapon of choice here - than to acquire mementos of a dying empire.

The realization may be dawning slowly on some US allies, but here everyone is convinced that Western forces have lost the war. However, at a time when in Afghanistan the efficacy of force as a counterinsurgency tool is being increasingly questioned, there is a newfound affinity for it in Pakistan.

A survey conducted by the US-funded International Republican Institute (IRI) in July 2009, which excluded the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) - the regions directly affected by war - found 69% of respondents supported the military operation in Swat (NWFP) in May.

A different survey undertaken by the US polling firm Gallup around the same time, which covered all of Pakistan, found only 41% supporting the operation. The Gallup poll also found a higher number - 43% - favoring political resolution through dialogue.

The two polls also offer a useful perspective on how Pakistanis perceive the terrorist threat. If the country is unanimous on the need to confront militancy, it is equally undivided in its aversion for the US. Yet both threats are not seen as equal: the Gallup survey found 59% of

Pakistanis considered the US as the bigger threat, compared to 11% for the Taliban; and, according to the IRI poll, fewer saw the Taliban (13%) as the bigger challenge compared to spiraling inflation which is wrecking the economy (40%).

In 2001, when the United States launched its "war on terror", many among Pakistan's political elite and intelligentsia supported it, miscalculating the public mood, which was overwhelmingly hostile. This led to the protest vote which brought to power the religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in two of the frontier provinces. The MMA had been alone in openly opposing US intervention.

However, as Afghanistan fell, things went quiet and passions subsided. Pervez Musharraf, the military dictator, was able to present his decision to participate in the "war on terror" as a difficult but unavoidable choice. Internationally, his isolation ended, and as a reward the various sanctions imposed on Pakistan after the nuclear tests of 1998 were lifted.

The economy grew, and so did Musharraf's popularity. When, under intense US pressure in 2004, he sent the Pakistani military into the restive FATA region, people barely noticed. He managed to retain his support despite reports of atrocities, which, according to Human Rights Watch, included indiscriminate use of force, home demolitions, extrajudicial killings, torture and disappearances. Indeed, if he was blamed at all, it was for not going far enough.

Things changed when, on Musharraf's orders, soldiers stormed a mosque in Islamabad held by Taliban sympathizers in August 2007, which resulted in the deaths of many seminarians. The Taliban retaliated by taking the war to the heartland and terrorist attacks hit several major cities.

Musharraf was blamed, and with an emerging challenge from civil society in the form of a lawyers' movement and an insurgent media, his popularity went into terminal decline. Meanwhile, in the Malakand region, Swat and Dir emerged as new flashpoints. The threat from Taliban militants could no longer be ignored, but opinions differed as to how best to confront it. The majority supported a negotiated settlement.

The turning point came in May, when, after a peace deal between the government and militants had broken down, the military embarked on a major offensive in Malakand. Though the truce had temporarily brought calm to the region, both sides had failed to live up to their commitments.

Yet, in the aftermath the Taliban alone were blamed, and in the media a consensus developed against any further negotiations with the militants. The operation was hailed as a success despite the loss of countless lives and the displacement of up to three million people.

However, in the frontier itself, analysts remained less sanguine. Rahimullah Yusufzai, deemed the most knowledgeable commentator on frontier politics, considered it an "avoidable" war. Another leading analyst, Rustam Shah Mohmand, wondered if it was not a war against the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and the NWFP, since no similar actions were considered in other lawless regions.

Roedad Khan, a former federal secretary, described it as an "unnecessary war" which was "easy to prevent ... difficult to justify and harder to win". In the political mainstream, all major parties felt obliged to support the war for fear of being labelled unpatriotic. The

opposition came mainly from religious parties, and from cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice).

Opinions were reinforced in favor of a military solution when militants launched a wave of terrorist attacks in anticipation of the Pakistani army's new operation in FATA.

While the effects of the atrocities were there for all to see, the consequences of months of aerial bombing and artillery shelling that preceded the operation were less known.

A third of the total population of South Waziristan - site of the government's newly launched anti-Taliban offensive - has been displaced, and it has received little relief. When an Associated Press crew met the refugees, they expressed their anger at the government by chanting "Long live the Taliban".

Instead of winning hearts and minds, the Pakistani government is delivering them to the enemy.

Despite the best efforts of sections of the elite to take ownership of the war, the view persists that Pakistan is fighting an American war. That the military operation in South Waziristan follows an inducement of an annual US\$1.5 billion from the US government, and is supported by US drone surveillance, does little to disabuse skeptics of their notions.

Following the bombing of the International Islamic University in Islamabad last week, an al-Jazeera correspondent - a Scot - was accosted by an angry student who, mistaking him for an American, held him responsible for the attack.

Pakistanis are acutely aware that before 2002 there was no terrorist threat, and they remain equally convinced that the threat will vanish once US forces withdraw from the region. But before that happens, some fear, Pakistan will have compromised its long-term stability.