

NMF Article **Jul 18, 2010**



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Tipping point

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A majority of analysts in US, India, Pakistan and Western Europe are of the view that US is not in a position to win the counter-insurgency campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan and it is a question of time when US will exit from Afghanistan. Pakistani Army has propagated that its support is absolutely vital for the US forces to sustain themselves in Afghanistan. Most of the policy makers and media personnel in India accept this as established wisdom. Underlying this perception is an assumption that Afghanistan is the battleground and the Taliban is the enemy to be defeated. The reality is as President Obama has made it clear many times the enemy is al Qaeda and its associated organizations and the battleground is where they have their safe havens. The safe havens are in Pakistan. Al Qaeda and its associated organizations cannot continue to function without the patronage of the Pakistani Army and its Inter-Services Intelligence. Even as US and Pakistan profess to collaborate in this war, latter's hope is that US will tire out and leave Afghanistan leaving it to be dominated by Pakistan and the US hope is that battered by some of the terrorist organizations earlier nurtured by the Pakistani Army and the ISI, the Army will come to its senses and collaborate in eliminating all the terrorist organizations nesting in Pakistan

Each side is hoping its strategic logic will prevail. While US strategy even as it aims at the destruction of the terrorist groups wishes well by the Pakistani people and State, the Pakistani army strategy on the other hand, aims at using terrorism as state policy to milk aid from the US and pose a continuous threat to western democratic and secular values. When US delivered its ultimatum to Pakistan in September 2001 either to be with them or against them the US policy makers wrongly thought there were only two alternatives open to Pakistan. They felt that Pakistan chose the right alternative of siding with US. In fact Pakistan Army pretended to side with US while working to strengthen the

extremist terrorist forces. It has taken eight years for US military intelligence and diplomatic bureaucracy to realize that Pakistan Army is the core of the problem and not a part of the solution. Presently we see President Obama characterising Pakistan as a cancerous state and US Intelligence admitting that Pakistan Army would not proceed against any terrorist organization other than Pakistani Taliban. Increasingly well briefed US media accounts dwell on Pakistani Army's efforts to promote a settlement between the Kabul government and Taliban and attempts to frustrate US objectives in Af-Pak area.

In this atmosphere of gloom for those who want to eradicate terrorism and prevail over the Pakistani Army's strategy, comes as a breath of fresh air the strategy proposed by Ambassador Robert Blackwill, former Deputy National Security Adviser and now a fellow in the RAND Corporation. His strategy is to avoid fighting the enemy on the ground where he has an advantage and fight him on one's own chosen ground where the conditions would favour oneself. He therefore advises US not to fight the Taliban on the ground in the Pashtun Afghanistan but to fight them from the air with unmanned and manned aircraft with facilities concentrated in non-Pashtun anti-Taliban areas of Afghanistan. Sixty percent of Afghanistan's population is non-Pashtun comprising of Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks. This will call for thinning the US and NATO forces in the present deployment pattern and finally leaving the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and concentrating them in non-Pashtun areas where there is no animosity against them. This strategy will reduce casualties for US and NATO allies, reduce dependence on Pakistan for supply convoys Unlike in the period before 2001 today Talibanised Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand line have combat-hardened forces not as much dependent on Pakistan Army as they were then. Already the Pakistani Taliban which Pakistan Army claimed to have put down is reasserting itself in South Waziristan and other areas. At the same time Pakistan will have to decide whether they will permit the Drones to operate from Pakistani territory to earn the sorely needed Kerry-Lugar aid. If they do there will be the Pashtun Taliban animosity against them with possibility of that expressed through terrorist attacks on Punjabi cities. If the US and NATO forces vacate the Pashtun areas and stay put in the non-Pashtun areas of Afghanistan the Afghan Taliban of Sirajuddin Haqqani and the Quetta Shura who are using the Pakistani territory as safe haven will be expected by the Pakistani Army to leave the area in North Waziristan and other FATA areas and go back to Afghanistan. But Pashtuns especially the two Taliban are no respecters of the Durand line. They have been in this area as lords and masters for nearly three decades. If US forces withdraw from Pashtun areas the Taliban will proclaim that they were able to defeat and drive out both Super-powers - USSR and USA. In such triumphalist mood they are hardly likely to respect the Durand line and allow Pakistan Army to take control over the

tribal areas. The Pashtun nationalism is likely to be ignited with serious consequences for the unity and integrity of Pakistan.

Till now the US strategy has been designed to disrupt, dismantle and defeat the terrorist organizations without in anyway impairing the unity and integrity of Pakistan. But Pakistan Army has been playing tricks on the US resulting in US and NATO casualties in Afghanistan. The Blackwill strategy is the result of frustration of influential sections of US strategic community which urges the Obama Administration to give up trying to save Pakistani unity and integrity in the light of Pakistan Army's double-dealing strategy. At this stage it is a proposal by a reputed strategist and RAND corporation fellow and a clear warning to Pakistan Army to mend its ways. If it does not, then in the next review Obama is in a position to adopt Blackwill strategy. If and when he does he will be in a position to claim he was not giving up but pursuing the Just war against unholy religious extremism. He will fulfill his promise to draw down his forces in Afghanistan. He will continue through aerial and drone attacks and Special Forces operations continue the campaign to disrupt, dismantle and defeat the extremist terrorist organizations. Pakistan Army may not only not get Afghanistan as strategic depth but may run the risk of Pashtunistan breakaway. That in turn may trigger off other secessionist demands from other oppressed Pakistani minorities. The Army leadership has perhaps a few months to introspect and conclude that the ISI strategy of holding the world to ransom through terrorism as a state policy under a nuclear deterrent umbrella has its limitations and is bound to have severe backlash effect and it is in the interest of Pakistani state and people, for Pakistan Army to cooperate honestly in US strategy to disrupt, dismantle and defeat the extremist terrorist organizations starting with the Afghan Taliban groups in North Waziristan.

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(This article appeared first in Hindi in Dainik Jagran on July 18, 2010)