

Careful When Draining the Swamp!



re the House Armed Services Committee on 8 September 2008, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen stressed the need for such a cooperation scheme: "We can hunt down and kill extremists as they cross over the border from Pakistan, ... but until we work more closely

It is virtually a given that every guerrilla movement worth its salt would need to establish and maintain a sanctuary across a porous contiguous border. This sanctuary will be of pivotal importance to receive weapons and other forms of external support from friendly countries (if any wishing to engage in such activities), to provide a convenient venue to regroup, train and recruit personnel, to create a safe rear base for own forces to seek refuge into when the pursuit gets too hot, and to be used as a launching pad for future attacks. In practical terms, it is close to irrelevant as to whether the sanctuary is created through the open or tacit approval by the country in whose territory it is located, or rather it is extracted by intimidating both local and central authorities.

Given the above, it is also virtually a given that those who are fighting against the guerrillas will pretty soon grow impatient of such diplomatic niceties as internationally recognised borders, that would remain wide open for the guerrillas to criss-cross at wish but would create a formidable, indeed insurmountable obstacle to own troops. Hence, a strong rationale will come to be identified for any legalistic respect towards international rules and conventions to be brushed aside, and the local commanders be given authority to enter the sanctuary areas to track the enemy down. Here, however, it makes quite a substantial difference as to whether this enlargement of the conflict can be presented as succouring a friendly government, whose territory is partly occupied by hostile foreign guerrillas (this approach may on occasions require a previous coup, in order to install a new sympathetic government that would then call for help), or rather is ruthlessly implemented as an unilateral act of force that thus comes dangerously close to violating the territorial integrity of a foreign country. And when the country involved happens to be an ally, things get *really* complicated.

The increasing frustration of those in uniform who are tasked with leading and carrying out a counter-insurgency conflict, and who are forced to see their enemies becoming invulnerable and beyond reach as soon as they are on the other side of a line drawn on old maps by some obscure XIX century politicians, is only too easy to understand. But even so, enlarging a counter-insurgency conflict across contiguous borders into another sovereign country, while arguably necessary in order to, so to say completely drain the swamp, is a decision that should only be taken after extremely careful consideration, for the risks for it to backfire are extremely high. The historic example of the terrible results of the "Nixon doctrine" in enlarging the Vietnam War to Cambodia and Laos does provide an exceedingly sobering reminder in this regard.

The United States has now clearly and indeed openly decided to expand the ongoing counter-insurgency conflict in Afghanistan over to the so-called FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in Pakistan. While much could be said to justify and condone this decision in purely military terms, and while the situation whereby the FATA had come to effectively represent the Taliban's backstage area was admittedly intolerable, the political implications of such a move are extremely complex and dangerous – the more so, in that Pakistan is not a "rogue state" but rather a "major non-NATO ally", as well as a key actor in the "global war against terror". One would certainly wish to hope that the Bush administration is firmly in control of all the possible ramifications here.

As a matter of fact, even an unrepentant "Bushbuster" would have to admit that the US administration does have precious little options here. Needless to say, the best possible way out from the US' point of view would be for the Pakistani government itself to firmly reassert full control over the FATA, and move to suppress the Taliban there or at least chase them back into Afghanistan. But the previous military regime of Gen. Musharraf proved unable or unwilling to do so, and the chances for the new civil government to succeed in such a challenging endeavour are virtually nil. The second best option would be for Islamabad to admit its impotence, and formally ask for a US military intervention to "liberate" the FATA. Even this, however, is most certainly not to take place, while a Cambodian-style US-backed coup to install a more cooperative government is out of the question.

The final and highly unpleasant result is that President Bush has authorised military actions inside Pakistan, that at least formally have been carried out without the approval and knowledge of the Pakistani authorities and thus have no legal justification whatsoever and would effectively constitute an act of war.

Irrespective as to whether Islamabad did actually give a tacit assent, or the US action was rather intended to establish a fait accompli and sort of extract a post-facto approval, it would now be absolutely imperative for some form of diplomatic formula to be concocted as soon as possible, that would retrospectively justify what has already happened and most importantly provide a framework for the future. Failing to do so, and leaving US forces free to operate inside the FATA against the stated will of Islamabad, far from helping to win the conflict in Afghanistan would effectively destabilise Pakistan and bring it into a conflict with the USA, thus leading straight into a much more serious regional disaster.

Now at least some people in Washington appears to be fully aware of this, which in a sense is the good news. In his testimony befo-

with the Pakistani government to eliminate the safe havens from which they operate, the enemy will only keep coming". The true problem is Pakistan itself and its internal contradictions. It is exceedingly difficult to see how the current, or indeed any conceivable Pakistani government could sign an official agreement to "work more closely with Washington" in this regard – and survive that Islamic fundamentalist revolt or/and military coup that would unavoidably and immediately follow such a move.

The unilateral US attacks inside Pakistan are profoundly embarrassing for the government and the military, which reacted – indeed, had to react – with predictable anger. In the aftermath of the US Special Forces raid on September 3rd, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, flatly denied the existence of any agreement or understanding whereby coalition forces would be allowed to conduct operations inside Pakistan, and declared: "The sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country will be defended at all cost." Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani also vowed to defend the country's borders, adding: "I have the same opinion as that of the Army Chief and there is no disparity between our viewpoints."

One would wish, desperately wish to believe that these statements are but political gesturing, strictly intended for internal consumption only as well as a warning to the newly-appointed President, Asif Ali Zardari not to go over the edge with too pro-US a policy. One might even wish to speculate that the Pakistani civil and military leadership would in fact be absolutely delighted by the US relieving them of an eminently intractable problem – if only they could conceal this attitude behind a convenient fig leaf. But even such exceedingly optimistic assumptions are virtually irrelevant, because alas no such large fig leaf appears to be at hand.

Contrary of what can unfortunately be said of some past decisions by President Bush as regards the use of force, this one is indeed understandable and justifiable in purely military terms. But unless extreme care is exercised as regards the next steps, its political and strategic implications risk further contributing towards making this administration's legacy to the next one a very bitter relay indeed.

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