

... Recently in the Real World



have begun liberating their villages from the Taliban.

US pressure to target the Taliban as they regrouped in Pakistan pitched the sections of the Pakistani military following US dictates against those patronising the Taliban in the tribal areas.

The Taliban, being blocked westward, will most likely spread eastward. Already, districts neighbouring the tribal areas, particularly the scenic valleys of Swat, have become a venue for pitched battles between the Taliban and the Pakistani military.

However, neither successful Talibanisation nor the presence of Taliban hide-outs should serve as an excuse for an invasion of Pakistan. It will further plunge this region into chaos.

But how to best fight Talibanisation? Can it be fought against by the masses? Does NATO's presence in the region only delay the Taliban's defeat?

By hitting militants in Pakistan, one could say the US hopes to inhibit their activities by subjecting them to an atmosphere of constant threat. NATO must find new approaches – and create new institutions – to deal with the long-term threats posed by violent extremism, especially in this region.

"Afghanistan is the test, on the grandest scale, of what we are trying to achieve when it comes to integrating the military and civilian, the public and private, the national and international," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace. And with that 'nuff said!

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What we saw this past month was the "Collapse Clock" moving forward. The relationship between Washington and Wall Street has changed fundamentally and as a result, the road ahead is dark and unknown. The ripples of this crisis have long reached Europe. At the same time as the "fog of war" clears over the Caucasus and the UN is setting up peace missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 11 November 2008 marks the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War. And on that anniversary we're still at war. Britain's most senior military commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, told the British media about the US/NATO "occupation" of Afghanistan that *"We are not going to win this war"*. He stated the current strategy was *"doomed to failure"*. His views were supported by the United Nations envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide, who stated: *"We all know that we cannot win it militarily. It has to be won through political means."*

While negotiations are sought, the US is seeking to increase the levels of troops. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has urged other NATO countries to increase troop numbers, with military commanders reportedly seeking a further 12,000 soldiers on top of the 70,000 currently in Afghanistan. Despite polls showing that 61% of Germans want troops to leave Afghanistan, the German government has agreed to send an extra 1,000 soldiers.

US presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama have both called for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan, as has the Australian government. According to an 6 October ABC News report, Australian defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon is seeking to use *"next month's NATO meeting in Canada to lobby for a greater troop commitment."* Fitzgibbon

complained that: *"One can't help but feel the distraction of the financial meltdown in the US and the cost of that meltdown could have implications for future US commitments."* Meanwhile, the ongoing war is increasingly unpopular among citizens of countries participating.

In France, 62% favour an immediate withdrawal of troops. In Canada, 59% opposed an extension of Canadian involvement, while 51% of US people think the war *"has not been successful"*. In Australia, 56% want the 1000 Australian soldiers currently in Afghanistan to leave, according to a poll by Field Works Market Research.

The massive military operation launched against the Taliban by the Pakistani Army since 2003 has driven many people out of their homes. The Taliban's successful attempt to capture and turn Pakistan's tribal areas into "Talibanistan" has inflicted misery – including beheadings, amputations and harsh dress codes – on the residents, also leading to displacement.

However it was the US offensive that reduced the tribal areas to a battlefield for multi-pronged war, with Shias fighting Sunnis and the Taliban pitched against the Pakistani military.

The Taliban's strategy is to Talibanise at gunpoint – politically and administratively – the tribal areas. Talibanised Sharia has been instituted and Taliban militias have replaced the state apparatus (the police, civil administration and courts) with their own courts. They have established tolls to levy road taxes on transport, which is a major source of income. Maliks who might pose a challenge to Taliban authority have been eliminated or silenced.

The Shia tribes are alarmed at the Taliban occupation of the tribal areas, remembering the reported massacre in Afghanistan of some 5000 Shias by the Taliban when in power in the late 1990s. They have decided to resist tooth and nail. However, the Shia resistance became an impetus for others. The tribes have now formed their own militia and



US Army soldiers stand by after setting fire to a Taliban shelter along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. (Photo: US Army / Spc. Matthew Leary)