

# Replacing Taliban: mixing diplomacy with force

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MANY in India who were expecting to see a full blown American war in Afghanistan on CNN and BBC are disappointed. As the American focus remains on diplomacy, military operations have been held back and are unlikely to take place in the expected form.

States use force to achieve certain political outcomes. Force is not employed for its own sake. Occasionally, force is used to punish an adversary. That is what the U.S. did in August 1998 when it bombed terrorist camps in Afghanistan following the attacks on American embassies in East Africa.

This time around the stakes are much higher for America. Immediate carpet bombing of Afghanistan might have satisfied the thirst for retribution in America. But it would also have strengthened the perception that the American war against terror is a war against Islam and the Afghan people.

The use of force by the U.S., if and when it happens, will be calibrated to achieve specific political aims -- to capture Osama bin Laden

and snap the support from the Afghan state to his terror networks.

By all indications a limited use of force might be able to achieve these objectives if coupled with effective diplomacy. The U.S. aerial attacks and use of special forces will be aimed at destroying the Taliban's few military assets. They could facilitate the military advance of the Taliban's enemies inside Afghanistan. The U.S. would also want the operations to be quick and decisive, once initiated. Meanwhile, it is trying to stitch together an alternative political arrangement ready to take charge from the Taliban.

Delay in military action, however, does not mean American military force has not played a part so far.

The American moves to assemble a powerful force around Afghanistan have generated some political effects. When you have a very large force, like the Americans do, the very threat of its use has as much impact as its actual employment.

In anticipation of American attacks, the Afghan cities have emptied out. Many of the terrorist camps have been temporarily shut down. And most important, the

American threat of use of force has opened the prospects for restructuring the political order in Afghanistan.

If the Taliban were prepared for a serious negotiation with the U.S. on handing over Osama and shutting down the terrorist camps, Washington appeared fully prepared to deal with Kandahar. The latest Taliban offer to negotiate has come too late and does not appear to have much credibility.

As a result American diplomacy to replace the Taliban regime has gained momentum and is moving in tandem with the military plans. Monday's agreement between the exiled King Zahir Shah and the Northern Alliance is the single biggest step forward on the diplomatic front.

As part of the agreement, a 120-member Supreme Council for National Unity of Afghanistan will soon be set up by the King and the Northern Alliance. The Council, in turn, will convene a "Loya Jirga" -- or a traditional meeting of the tribal chiefs and elders -- that will define the future political arrangements.

For all practical purposes, the Supreme Council is likely to become the interim government replacing

the Taliban. For the Council to be credible, the U.S. will have to get significant elements of the Pashtun community in southern Afghanistan to join it. The political game in the next few days will be about facilitating major defections from the Taliban.

Media reports the threat of American use of force has created confusion in the ranks of the Taliban. The leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, has begun to talk of waging an extended guerrilla war against a possible "puppet government" in Kabul and its international supporters.

The immediate challenge for the U.S. lies less in devising a military plan. It rests in the extraordinary difficulty of nudging a credible and representative group of Afghan leaders under one umbrella and holding them together. Meanwhile, the fractious nature of Afghan politics and the fog of the impending war are likely to generate unexpected dynamics of their own.

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# War in Afghanistan

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A NEW Afghan war is about to commence shortly. A massive coalition of countries interested in eliminating terrorism has agreed to combine its resources to cleanse Afghanistan of its terrorist ideology. The fact is that terrorism is a response of the weaker adversary in a conflict where the other side holds overwhelming military and economic power. It is the response to an unequal military conflict and has been correctly termed asymmetric war. An asymmetric war can be continued without fronts, without military forces and by attacking the people instead of the military. Now that economic power drives all aspects of security, economic assets become targets in asymmetric wars. That was what the attacks of September 11 were all about. They struck at the people and the economy. The response is also an asymmetric buildup of military power. The conflict between massive military power and massive terror response is about to reach unprecedented levels.

The Taliban made the strategic error of claiming legitimacy for terrorism by giving it state support. It has placed itself in the invidious position of neither being able to hand over Osama bin Laden nor of disclaiming its role in international terrorism. Since it will not hand over Osama, it has become the target of war against terrorism. This combined with the Taliban's medieval manner of Islamic governance has turned almost all Islamic states against it. It represents the majority Pushtun population of Afghanistan, but has squandered that population's loyalty by its barbaric rule. That opens the possibility of targeting the Taliban as a separate entity from the Pushtun population.

The U.S. coalition against terrorism has deployed a massive military force. Much of it comprises air attack capabilities based both on land and at sea. The Fifth, Sixth and

Seventh Naval Fleets are assembled in addition to long range bombers, AWACs, stealth aircraft. Cruise missiles form part of this awesome military buildup. There are nearly 30,000 ground troops getting ready for the impending operations. The Taliban's military capability is entirely asymmetric in comparison. Its military hardware consists of a little over 500 assorted tanks with poor maintenance standards. There are about 1,000 artillery pieces, some multi-barrel rocket-launchers, a few combat aircraft and some helicopters. Much of the munitions, crew for tanks, instructors for artillery, and command and control facilities were Pakistan dependent. This hardware can be destroyed by the coalition air power within a week or two of the start of the operations.

The strategic objectives of the military operations being planned by the U.S. have not been spelt out. They are also unlikely to be listed to retain surprise and flexibility of options. It is, however, not difficult to make an estimate. The immediate purpose of the strikes in Afghanistan would be to assuage a justifiably angry and seriously shaken public in the U.S. That would require air strikes against known and anticipated locations where Osama may have taken shelter. The operations against Osama would continue until he is eliminated. Fired by his personal brand of martyrdom he would rather perish and be a hero than be captured and stand trial. The Osama saga will become folklore in the Islamic world. There are children named Osama by their parents, in adoration of a man they see as a martyr. We shall before long see, the dramatic pictures from the cameras mounted in combat aircraft showing laser guided munitions destroying Osama locations. War as a spectator sport will have everyone glued to the TV. Hopefully it will also satisfy the desire for justice being done to the man behind the horrendous events in New York and Washington.

The Bush administration has apparently had a major change of focus in foreign and security policy since the September 11 attacks. Terrorism offers not only a long term policy focus but also unlimited opportunities in advancing U.S. strategic interests. Control over Afghanistan would link the energy-rich Central Asian region to a proximate U.S. presence. The U.S. influence and military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asian states, not unlike that over the oil-rich Gulf states, would be a major strategic gain. The NATO's eastern limits are already on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. The U.S. has put in place an ongoing military arrangement with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is not lagging in its desire to regain influence in Afghanistan with U.S. assistance. A western military presence in a region extending from Turkey to Tajikistan would have a far-reaching strategic impact. The energy scenarios for the 21st century would be reconfigured substantially by such an arrangement. This is not to say that the arrangement would be undesirable. The region can be a major source of wealth and political stability by eliminating terrorism and replacing radical Islamic influences.

A regime change in Afghanistan is more likely to be the major strategic purpose of the U.S.-led military operations. It would not be a difficult objective to attain in military terms. The Taliban's military hardware will be destroyed within a fortnight once operations commence. Its command setup, communications hubs and ability to move forces would be neutralised soon. Taliban forces would be isolated into groups and forced to be on the move by the coalition's unrelenting air operations. It will get no replenishment of munitions and oil and its ability to offer a cohesive military response would be ended. That is where the Northern Alliance and the coalition's ground forces would join the battle. Every attempt would be made to capture and eliminate the Taliban leadership. A new political alliance would be put in place. In all this, the willing participation of the majority Pushtun population will be critical. It is unclear if a new political alliance will be able to obtain and sustain that participation. The Taliban leadership could escape to Pakistan, which would strain U.S.-Pakistan relations to breaking point.

A major geopolitical change of the order envisaged above will require a substantial role for Pakistan. Its geographic, political and cultural linkages and its own

strategic considerations make Pakistan central to a future dispensation in Afghanistan. In short, control over Afghanistan necessitates control over Pakistan. The Central Asian states long under threat from a Taliban-led Afghanistan, can provide the instrument of a Northern Alliance. However, it is Pakistan which will bring the ballast necessary for long term stability in Afghanistan. This will require a major change in Pakistan, whose social, religious, economic and political systems have been permeated by the Afghan condition. That change will have to be brought about by the military-led Government. In the absence of credible political alternatives, a very long spell of military government will become inevitable if the strategic vision for Afghanistan and Central Asia has to become a reality. Pakistan's military high command has the potential to be split, on continuing a long campaign against its erstwhile proteges in Afghanistan. What that would do to the long term prospect of stability in Pakistan, and its zeal to continue a conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, is not difficult to imagine.

Afghanistan should not divert attention from the Middle East which is critical to international terrorism. Its wealth, its deep antipathy to what is perceived as persecution of Arabs, its terror technology sophistication and its close links in Europe and U.S., make it the fount for terrorist acts. That region needs to be addressed as urgently as Afghanistan, if terrorism is to be truly eliminated. Advancing strategic interests at the expense of the causes of terrorism, will be counterproductive to the new-found urge to put an end to it. Unless that is taken in hand, asymmetric wars will not end. In fact they would be fought with new tools. That is where Pakistan figures high in terrorism's risk profile. A divided polity, armed groups fired by religious fervour, availability of nuclear weapons, and military rulers divided among themselves all add up to a volatile combination of destabilising factors. Controlling and bringing around Pakistan to being a modern and liberal state - which it is eminently capable of being - will take a major effort and even more time. An unstable or unwilling Pakistan cannot be a recipe for a stable Afghanistan. It remains to be seen if the major powers have the stamina to stay the course. Afghanistan will sorely test the will of all states, big or small.

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# 'Lion of Panjsher' is dead

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SMOKE coming out of the burning structures in New York and Washington after the terrorist attacks not only hide many objects on the sky-lines of the two cities but also 'concealed' a very important incident happened inside Afghanistan -- the country the US is threatening to attack any moment in connection with the attacks. And the incident, that otherwise might have been the most important news world over, was death of Commander Ahmad Shah Masood, military leader of the Afghan opposition forces. The commander was popularly known as 'Lion of Panjsher' for his thorough resistance firstly against the Red Army and then the forces of the Taliban regime.

Commander Masood (49) was fatally wounded in a suicide attack by two Algerians, posing as journalists, while giving an interview at one of his bases in the Takhar province in the Northern Afghanistan on September 9. After days of speculations about his life, he was pronounced dead on September 15 by the Northern Alliance, a coalition of forces fighting against the puritan regime of Taliban.

It is being speculated that his killing had been ordered by the fugitive Osama bin Laden to oblige his harbourers, the Taliban, against whom he was the last bulwark in their struggle to conquer the whole Afghanistan.

Born in a Tajik family in the Panjsher valley in the Takhar province of ethnically Pakhtoon-dominated Afghanistan, Masood got his higher education in architecture in Kabul in the early seventies. It was during these days that he got associated with the Islamic movement in Afghanistan. As it is said that he was influenced from the thoughts of Engineer Abdur Rahman, an Afghan Islamic scholar. Like many other warlords of his country, he came to Pakistan to get military training and assistance during mid-seventies. It was the time when Bhutto government, after the disintegration of Pakistan, wanted to get rid of the 'Pakhtoonistan' problem. The problem comprised providing the military training, political assistance and propaganda facilities by Afghan government to the allegedly separatist elements in the Northwestern Pashto-speaking population of Pakistan for the creation of the so-called 'Pakhtoonistan' (the land of Pakhtoons).

But the commander never felt himself at ease with authorities of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the agency in charge of the Afghan affairs. Being an ethnic Tajik, surely he was not their blue-eyed boy as Pakistani military establishment had always concentrated on patronising the elements belonging to Afghanistan's Pashto-speaking belt. The belt, adjacent to Pakistani border, is strategically very important in eyes of Pakistan's defence establishment, whose favourite was Gulbadin Hikmat Yar of Hizb-e-Islami, an Islamist political activist and a fugitive for the then Afghan government regarding some political murders' cases. It was during these days that a never-ending opposition to each other developed between Masood and Hikmat Yar while struggling for establishment of influence in the rebel Afghan cadres.

Masood stayed in Pakistan for a short period. He returned to his country and started the struggle for gaining political influence in his native Panjsher Valley. In 1975, he made a failed attempt for an Islamic insurrection in the valley. However, he kept on increasing his influence in the area.

Afghanistan witnessed the 'Saur

Revolution' brought by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDDPA). The Soviet troops arrived in the country in 1979 to help the PDDPA's government of Marxist leanings against the Islamic rebellion. In the meanwhile, Masood had been succeeded in making the valley his political and military power bastion.

Like the other Afghan warlords and factions, he conducted guerrilla operations in the first years of the conflict against the Soviets and the government troops. Very rapidly he stood out by attacking the Red Army's supply convoys going through the Salang region. It should be understood that Masood always played his cards very shrewdly, wisely and carefully. His military moves always run parallel to the political ones, making him one of the key players in the Afghan Scenario. He remained focal point of the military and political power of the Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan, headed by Burhan-ud-Din Rabbani.

In 1983, he started many by succeeding in negotiating with the Soviets, a one-year cease-fire. This time-out allowed him to elaborate his strategy and military organisation. From 1985, he extended his fighting field to the North of the Panjsher Valley out of his solidarity network. This gave him influence in the Takhar and Kunduz provinces. By 1987, he succeeded bringing other commanders in the area under one umbrella, the Shoorae-Nazar, which he headed until his death.

Soviet troops pulled out of the country in 1989 and fall of the PDDPA government took place in 1992. It is believed that the generals of the Najeeb Ullah government opted for cooperating with Masood and invited him to capture Kabul due to many reasons. One of which being the 'political', rather than the strict 'religious', approach by Masood regarding the political matters.

He remained at the helm of affairs as the defence minister both in the Mujaddidi and the Rabbani cabinets. During the period his long time powerful foe Gulbadin Hikmat Yar, kept on posing threats to the Rabbani government in Kabul by stationing in the nearby Sarobi and rocketing the city on a frequent basis. Rabbani's government was a weak coalition government with ever-changing loyalties and infighting among the groups controlling different parts of the Kabul and Afghanistan. The government could not deliver stability to the war ravaged country and lawlessness remained order of the day all around. Human rights abuses were also alleged to have been committed by various factions including that of Masood. However, these were much lesser than those allegedly committed by the Taliban in the coming years. However, it is important to mention that the government did not try to transform Afghanistan into a fundamentalist state.

The things remained same until the emergence of the 'Taliban' movement, composed of the Afghan students belonging to orthodox Islamic madrasahs, situated mainly in Pakistan. This was a major shift in the Pakistan's Afghan policy who wanted to open a trade route linking it with the Central Asian region. The Pakhtoon religious

students changed every thing on the political and strategic scene of the country with the strategic backing of Pakistan and the financial backing of Saudi Arabia. Some also talked of the US hand in the change. The rapid military victories of the Taliban militia firstly stunned and then concerned many in and outside Afghanistan. Owing to the advance of the militia towards Kabul, both Masood and Hikmat Yar had to join hands, with the later becoming the Prime Minister. But the move could not prove fruitful and the Taliban entered Kabul in 1996 despite political, military and financial support to the Rabbani government by many countries of the region. Masood's forces retreated from Kabul but stood firm against the puritan militia in most parts of the north and north-eastern Afghanistan. And it was this period that he got the prominence inside and outside his country and which was probably more than that he already had. He united all the ethnic and religious groups opposed to the Taliban under one umbrella which ultimately came to be known as the Northern Alliance. Considered as a clever military strategist, he was appointed military chief of the alliance.

As the world became more and more concerned over the way the Taliban were governing Afghanistan, Masood got the stature of a military as well as a political leader who, despite continued defeats, was offering a heroic military resistance to the Taliban besides keeping intact the otherwise fragile Northern Alliance comprising so many different political, religious and cultural entities.

After conquering almost 95% of Afghanistan, the Taliban tried their best to get hold of his last power bastion, his native Panjsher valley but each time they were repulsed by his forces.

Regional countries relied on him and he continued enjoying their support till his death. Months before his death, he went to France addressed the European Parliament urging the world community, especially the European countries, to help end foreign intervention in the internal affairs of his country. Masood, who could speak their language, had a long friendly association with French. During a press conference there, he talked of women rights and democracy in Afghanistan.....something not pursued tangibly during his own rule over the country. But if compared with the Taliban, liberal Afghan circles, living inside and outside the country, brand him a leader with moderate Islamic views who was quite acceptable to them amongst so many other factional leaders.

The question at the moment is that what would be the implications of his death at this crucial juncture, when Afghanistan is once again focus of world attention due to the notorious militancy attached to it? The answer to the question may not be clear at the moment but certain things can be predicted in this regard.

It is quite clear that killing of Commander Masood has badly affected the Northern Alliance not only militarily but in psychological terms also. He had been a very experienced military strategist and

the charisma that surrounded him is neither possessed by President Rabbani nor by his military successor General Fahim. Since the days of presence of the Red Army in the country, he had been an icon for resistance and his presence at the front-lines always provided courage to his soldiers. His consistent struggle against the Taliban made him the final hope for the anti militia forces as well as the ethnic and religious minorities of the country. Considered as a political figure also he had very strong and useful links in the outside world including his erstwhile foe Russia. Since very long, he had a strong cordial relationship with France. Former Pakistani interior minister and one of the mentors of the Taliban, Major Gen. (Retd.) Naseer Ullah Babar, once remarked that it was French press which had made Masood a legendary hero although he was not a competent military commander.

The Northern Alliance comprises Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and a comparatively smaller section of Pashtoon groups. Cultural, ethnic and religious differences with the Taliban have although knitted them in an alliance but differences of serious nature still remain within their ranks. Differences between Shi'a Hizb-e-Wahdat and Ittehad-e-Islami (Sayyaf) and between General Dostum and General Malik are quite well known. It appears that the prime personality capable of uniting all these factional leaders was that of Masood. The alliance may find difficulties in this respect in his absence especially in the case if the US attack Afghanistan and is able to topple the ruling regime.

Other results coming out of his death, as pointed out by prominent Pakistani journalist Ahmad Rashid while talking to the BBC, might be an increase in the resentment and displeasure in minds of Afghans for the Taliban, Usama bin Laden and Arab militants living in the country. According to Rashid, Afghans people never like the use of foreigners by any one for killing his fellow Afghan foes.

Masood's death have also strongly worried the regional countries, with Russia, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and India holding a top level meeting to evolve and discuss the future course of action, soon after reports of his death.

And of course, the things might had been very encouraging for the Taliban and their foreign patrons, if the incident of the WTC and the following American plans for attacking the militia and Osama had come into effect. At the moment, existence of the Taliban government itself is in danger. If alive and ready to cooperate, Masood would have proved to be a valuable asset for the US due to his knowledge of Taliban and militarily difficult topography of his country.

Amid scenes of intense grief, falling tears and calls for revenge by thousands of mourners, Masood's funeral and burial was held on September 16 at the village Jangalak in the heart of Panjsher valley which he defended against the Soviets and the Taliban for more than 20 years.

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