

What Nato failed to understand

Afghanistan: the neo-Taliban campaign

The attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on 20 September, killing some 60 people, was compared to 9/11 in Pakistan and could be a turning point in the conflict in this region. President Bush has authorised ground operations against Taliban bases in Pakistan, which has now become the main theatre in the 'war on terror'. Meanwhile, the neo-Taliban, operating an al-Qaida franchise there and in Afghanistan, have controlled the escalation of guerrilla resistance in a sophisticated military strategy based on the conduct of the Vietnam war.

by Syed Saleem Shahzad

Pakistan's crackdown on organisations operating in Indian-administered Kashmir in 2003 provoked an exodus from the militant camps in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. These fighters gradually migrated to the tribal areas of North and South Waziristan near the Afghan border. In the 1990s they were trained in the latest guerrilla warfare techniques by the "Indian" cell of Pakistan's intelligence service ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). They were joined by a few officers who had resigned from the Pakistani army after President Pervez Musharraf changed tack and decided to support US policy because of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

This migration was a milestone in the process of transforming the strategy of the Afghan tribes from guerrilla warfare into a sophisticated military doctrine inspired by the three-step system used by Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap in the war against the United States' military. They staged a major offensive in spring this year, followed by isolated attacks targeting security posts and personnel, and finally an expansion of the insurgency to urban centres and the capital, Kabul.

Strategic restructuring was accompanied by the emergence of a new alliance of Arab and central Asian militants, and the Pakistani organisation Tehrik-i-Taliban, led by Baitullah Mehsud (accused of instigating the attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on 20 September which killed 60 people) and Maulana Ilyas Kashmiri, a veteran of fighting in Kashmir. Together, they drew up a military strategy for the entire Pakistan/Afghanistan region with an eye to expanding it into India.

After 9/11 all Islamist groups in South Asia had problems, because Washington was increasing pressure on governments in the region. Militants began to concentrate their efforts on fighting the western occupation of Afghanistan. Several years were needed for this situation to evolve, but militants began to talk about a "Battle of the End of

Time”, an allusion to a *hadith* (1) of the Prophet announcing a war in Khorasan (the area today covered by Afghanistan, the Pakistani tribal areas and parts of Iran). As part of this vision, volunteers would move towards the Middle East to support the struggle of the Mahdi, the messiah, in Palestine.

This prompted volunteers from across the Muslim world, particularly Turkey and central Asia, to gather in Pakistani tribal areas to participate in the struggle in Afghanistan, seen as a prelude to liberating Palestine – the triumph of Islam and justice on Earth.

Arrivals on the border

Since 2001, events in South Asia have contributed to preparing the ground for the Taliban’s 2008 spring offensive. Unintentionally, diverse figures made their way to the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. Their strategy transformed a low intensity insurgency into an unparalleled war. First came Maulana Ilyas Kashmiri, chief of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. A hero of the armed struggle in Kashmir, he spent two years in an Indian jail. He was arrested by the Pakistani security forces in January 2004 for suspected links to suicide bombers who rammed their vehicles into Musharraf’s convoy on 25 December 2003.

He was released after 30 days and cleared of all suspicion. But he was profoundly affected by the experience and abandoned his struggle for Kashmir’s liberation. He moved to North Waziristan with his family. His switch from the Kashmiri struggle to the Afghan resistance was an authentic religious instruction to those in the camps in Kashmir to move to Afghanistan’s armed struggle against Nato. Hundreds of Pakistani jihadists established a small training camp in the Razmak region.

Abdul Jabbar, commander in chief of the banned organisation Jaish-i-Muhammad, fighting the Indian troops in Indian Kashmir, was another who was arrested repeatedly after 9/11. Eventually he too settled in a training camp intending to fight in Afghanistan.

Finally came the officers who had once been officially assigned by the Pakistan army to train Kashmiri militants in the late 1990s. A few resigned from the army and joined the militant camps in North Waziristan. Movement from the Kashmiri camps to Waziristan gained momentum in 2005, and by mid-2007 the internally displaced jihadists from Kashmir had a significant network in North Waziristan.

Support from abroad

The new training camps quickly received support from foreign militants (particularly Chechens, Uzbeks and Turkmen) and local tribal warlords. Arab ideologues also found them attractive as most of the new jihadists were not only practising Muslims but also had strong opinions on Islam, the Islamic revolution and the reestablishment of the

caliphate (2).

Study groups on ideological matters, moderated by ideologues such as Sheikh Essa, Abu Waleed Ansari and Abu Yahya al-Libbi (3), were formed. Soon commanders also began to attend these groups and a group emerged which included Baitullah Mehsud, Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of Jaladudin Haqqani, a leader of the mujahideen during the struggle against the Soviets), Arab al-Qaida ideologues and veteran Kashmiri militants. In less than two years a powerful Pakistani branch of the al-Qaida franchise had been born, revolutionising the strategy of the Afghan resistance led by the Taliban.

This disparate mix instilled al-Qaida's ideology in the veterans of the Kashmiri liberation movement and passed on the expertise of the Pakistani army to the Taliban. From 2007, the Afghan theatre of war was controlled by the neo-Taliban.

Between 2006 and 2007 this new breed of well-trained but radical Taliban fighters rapidly spread across the tribal belt. North and South Waziristan were the traditional bastions of the militants but their numbers also soared (18,000 at the end of 2007) in tribal regions, such as Mohmand, where the Taliban had been relatively unknown until 2006. In the adjacent tribal area of Bajaur they numbered more than 25,000.

Nato commanders in Afghanistan appeared to have misjudged the neo-Taliban. On 14 January the Taliban militants demonstrated their new abilities. Militants belonging to the Haqqani network stormed the Senera Hotel in Kabul. Just as Kashmiri militants infiltrated the security system in Indian Kashmir before operations, Afghan militants dressed in police uniforms and acted in collusion with the local security officials. They also killed a few westerners. The same pattern was repeated throughout the year, particularly during the attempted attack on President Hamid Karzai on 27 April.

The audacious prison break in Kandahar in June, when the Taliban released more than 400 of their comrades, was another example of the Taliban's new training in urban guerrilla warfare, thanks to their Kashmiri teachers and former members of the Pakistani army.

The real strategy

But these were only secondary operations. The real strategy was applied elsewhere in the Afghan province of Nangarhar and the Pakistani tribal area of Khyber, which are part of the transit route for 80% of Nato supplies. In February, Nato convoys were targeted in well-organised attacks, so successful and effective that Nato was compelled to sign a deal with Russia on 4 April on land transit for non-military freight through Russian territory. But such a route risked putting the budget of the western forces under serious strain.

According to an anonymous senior member of the Taliban, “cutting off Nato’s supply line from Pakistan is an important element in our strategy. If it is correctly implemented in 2008, Nato will have to leave Afghanistan in 2009, although we might need an extra year.” This strategy took the Taliban far from its traditional bases to the port city of Karachi and the supply lines connecting it with Kandahar and Kabul. On 9 May the Pakistani manager of the container fleet that takes oil supplies from Karachi to Kabul was kidnapped and his fate is still unknown. In August, about 30 Taliban members attacked a weapons convoy as it was leaving Karachi, which proves the quality of the group’s intelligence. A western security expert explained that some military bases in southern Afghanistan were almost running on empty and “stopping all movement and offensive operations because of fuel shortages” (4).

The US and Nato underestimated this strategy and the ideological and strategic alliances which had led to the emergence of the neo-Taliban. However, the western coalition did note a resurgence in the al-Qaida camps situated in the Pakistani tribal areas. In January 2007 US officials had demanded that Pakistan’s leaders not only pursue the Taliban militarily but also destroy their logistics bases, including the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad where 7,000 men and women studied. Its administration had publicly announced its allegiance to al-Qaida and the Taliban; Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Muhammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law) operating in Swat Valley and the adjoining tribal areas of North West Frontier Province; and the Pakistani Taliban in Bajuar, South and North Waziristan, and Zhob and Shaman in the south western Pakistani province of Baluchistan (5).

During visits to Pakistan (at least seven from January to June 2007), US government representatives insisted that Islamabad take steps to rally popular support for the war on terror and facilitate operations against the Taliban. Musharraf agreed to abandon his responsibilities as head of the army and become a civilian head of state. The US also pressed him to work with Pakistan’s liberal and secular parties and encouraged him to form a coalition government after the election planned for January (and delayed by the assassination of the former prime minister Benazir Bhutto). Under this new system, Pakistan’s armed forces were finally able to conduct effective operations against the radical militants.

Within the framework of this new agreement, the US and the UK brokered a deal to reconcile Bhutto and Musharraf. Similar arrangements were made with small nationalist parties such as the Awami National Party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, as well as the religiously conservative Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazlur Rahman party. By June 2007 the stage was set for a major showdown against the Taliban. This political and military strategy aimed to thwart the

offensive expected in spring 2008.

Assault on the Red Mosque

The first stage of the counter-attack was the assault on 10 July 2007 against the Red Mosque with heavy losses on both sides. It was supposed to be followed by a joint venture by Pakistani and US troops from a base in Peshawar against camps established in the tribal areas. A detailed plan of US coordination with the Pakistani security forces, published by the US media, anticipated sending about 100 US instructors to work with a group selected from the 85,000 members of the Pakistani paramilitary force who would be the vanguard of the offensive.

But after the assault on the Red Mosque, the militants quickly turned their weapons on Musharraf and concentrated their efforts on the Pakistani army. Between July 2007 and this January, waves of violence seriously affected social, political and economic life in the country.

The attack on Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi on 18 October 2007 was the first shot from the neo-Taliban against US designs. Bhutto narrowly escaped harm in an attack which killed more than 200 and injured 500. She was the only political leader to support the Red Mosque operation and publicly endorse Pakistan's support for the war on terror.

Her assassination, on the orders of the command in Waziristan, shattered US plans in Pakistan. What followed is well known: the election was delayed and military operations against militants suspended. But the militants were following their plan. They now launched violent attacks. The result was chaos and the state lost control.

The conservative Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), led by former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, secured an unexpectedly high number of seats in parliament in the election on 18 February. It would be initially included in the government coalition. A week after the election General Mushtaq Beg was killed in a suicide attack on the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

Spring offensive

Having thwarted US plans for joint action with the Pakistani army, the neo-Taliban sought to play for time to finalise their spring offensive. They benefited from the participation of the Muslim League in government to start peace negotiations with the Pakistani security forces.

Nato misjudged the significance of this tactic and interpreted it as the end of Taliban operations against its forces. It was therefore surprised by the offensive that began this May. For the first time the number of western soldiers killed in Afghanistan in May/June (70) exceeded the

number in Iraq (52).

The suicide attack on the Indian mission in Kabul on 7 July, which killed 40, illustrates the shift in the Taliban's strategy: it now wanted to dissuade countries in the region, starting with India and Pakistan, from supporting the US war on terror. War ideologues in Waziristan also envisage a broader strategy: attacks on US interests in Europe.

Observers agree that Pakistan remains central to the Taliban and al-Qaida strategy. The neo-Taliban's immaculately planned victories in east Afghanistan has enabled it to devise the next stage. Since the number of Arabs in the tribal areas has dwindled because of migration to Iraq, deaths and arrests, a new core formed from other nationalities has taken over this task. Their stated goal is to remove the western coalition from Afghanistan and Iraq, and lay the foundations for the liberation of Palestine. And ensure new battles as part of their vision of the arrival of the Mahdi.