

Losing Afghanistan: Firepower Doesn't Always Win Wars

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In a statement made available through the country's Foreign Office, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khursheed Mahmood Kasuri chastised the "international community" for the "abandonment" of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989. In his estimation, it was this attitude that created the conditions which eventually culminated in the rise of the Taliban, the hosts of al-Qaeda.

The statement was reportedly made at the G-8 Foreign Ministers' recent conference in Potsdam, Germany, according to Pakistan's Daily Times. Kasuri was, expectedly, packaging his critique within a context specific to Pakistan's own concerns: namely the 2.4 million Afghani refugees - according to UNHCR figures - and who have crossed the border into Pakistan seeking shelter and relative safety. Moreover, Pakistan, under consistent censure for allegedly failing to hunt down Taliban and al-Qaeda militants operating around its Western border, deployed 90,000 soldiers into those regions; border skirmishes, sporadic gun battles but increasingly sustained bombardment campaigns of tribal areas - suspected of being safe haven for al-Qaeda militants - have left thousands dead and wounded since the American war on Afghanistan in October 2001.

The tension created by Pakistan's somewhat proxy role in reining in US foes is complicating the government's mission in asserting itself as an independent entity whose main concern is the welfare of its own people. But tension in Pakistan, which runs through tribal and political lines, is hardly comparable to the simmering situation in Afghanistan itself, where anger directed at the Kabul government and its Coalition benefactors is boiling to the point that another violent upsurge is imminent.

Hamid Karzai, crown president of Afghanistan in charade elections to rule over a disjointed country and discontented population is still incapable of exercising his power beyond the municipal borders of the capital; but even that level of control is gradually more difficult to maintain as a spate of suicide bombers is promising to turn Kabul into another Baghdad. But since his ascent to power in October 2004, Karzai has little to show for, save endless pledges of financial support he solicited, 40 billion USD to be exact, out of which little arrived, and the money that was made available is hardly improving people's lives - corruption in Afghanistan is, unsurprisingly, rife. Billions have been spent in Afghanistan nonetheless, by NATO/US forces on military equipment, whose firepower effectiveness is anything but debatable among Afghani civilians.

The BBC's Alastair Leithead reported on May 31, "Afghans' Anger over US Bombing" merely details one of many such incidents in which scores of innocent civilians are killed; such

reports are ever more rare since they are simply not newsworthy – the worth of a news story from Afghanistan is measured by whether Coalition forces incurred casualties or not. The recent killings in the village of Shindand in the Zerkoh Valley, Western Afghanistan was harrowing by any standards. 57 were reportedly killed by American bombardment; half of the dead were women and children, according to Leithead; the bombardment also destroyed 100 homes, humble dwellings that are unlikely to be rebuilt soon.

“The bombardments were going on day and night. Those who tried to get out somewhere safe were being bombed. They didn’t care if it was women, children or old men,” said one of the survivors. But who would believe Mohammad Zarif Achakzai, who fled his mud house with his family under the relentless bombardment? Brig Gen Joseph Votel has simply dismissed the reports of civilian casualties. “We have no reports that confirm to us that non-combatants were injured or killed out in Shindand,” he said. And that is that.

Shindand is not under Taliban control, at least not yet. Much of the country, mostly in the south but increasingly elsewhere is falling under the control of Taliban extremists. The Taliban offers job security to the men and an opportunity for revenge and even martyrdom; in many parts of Afghanistan, such offers are exceedingly appealing.

Fearless British journalist Chris Sands of the Independent, one of very few journalists reporting from Taliban controlled areas, tells me that it’s only a matter of time before Afghanistan turns into an Iraq-like inferno. Indeed, Taliban’s regrouping efforts have been astonishingly successful as of late. Taliban militants have managed to ambush and kill 16 government police officers just hours after killing seven Coalition soldiers – including five Americans – by shooting down their chopper over the Helmand province on May 30. These confirmed numbers are often balanced out with unconfirmed government report of many Taliban’s militants killed by government forces; it’s often the case that these reports overlook the much higher number of civilian casualties.

Foreign powers are clearly failing in Afghanistan; they neither won hearts and minds nor contributed to the stability and rebuilding of the country in any meaningful way – 60 percent of the country’s economy is now dependent on narcotics exports. In fact, Afghanistan represents a perfect case of the proverbial “cut and run” that President George Bush avows not to commit in Iraq. Needless to say, the only assignment that the US and its allies seem seriously committed to is that of maintaining its military regime, predicated on the utter reliance of firepower regardless of the outcome.

Afghanistan’s two foreign military missions: Nato’s International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), with its 37,000 troops and the US-led Coalition: Operation Enduring Freedom are affectively losing their pseudo control over the country. Taliban is gaining strength and is regenerating, not because of their remarkable theological alternative to democracy, but precisely because all of the rosy promises made late 2001 and early 2002 yielded a most repressive regime, marred with corruption, insecurity, warlords, and incessant Coalition attacks on civilian localities throughout the country. When Afghans turn back into supporting the Taliban, one can only imagine how desperate they’ve become.

Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Kasuri is obviously right, though his intentions might be self-serving; “abandonment” is a befitting term to describe the so-called international community’s attitude towards Afghanistan; that abandonment brought the Taliban to power following the chaos resulting from the ousting of the Soviets and their puppet regime in 1989 – subsequent civil war in Afghanistan then killed more than 50,000 people in Kabul

alone - is shaping a bizarrely similar scenario that is giving rise to the same loathed grouping; The Taliban could soon find itself in a strong bargaining position, that even the Americans themselves cannot ignore; the Taliban's "Spring Offensive" might've been delayed, but the balance is clearly tipping in favor of the Taliban, in a war that promises more of the same sorrows.

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