

## Anguish in Abbottabad, Pains of Pakistan and American Anger

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### Abstract

*The incidents in May 2011, surrounding the death of Osama bin Laden in the quiet Pakistani frontier town of Abbottabad, have shaken the world. The resultant dust has yet to fully settle. The episode has brought anguish to that district, exacerbated the pains of Pakistan and caused much anger in Washington. This paper suggests that the anguish be addressed, pains controlled and anger managed, for greater regional and global peace and stability. It explores whether, as in an unfolding Greek drama, other actors (or factors) can possibly appear on stage to alter the directions of the events of the play. It briefly analyses the many ramifications of the episode for relationships between Pakistan, the United States (US), Afghanistan and India. It underscores the lesson in all this to avoid creating ‘Frankensteins’ to address momentary problems, monstrous creations which may not be able to be controlled and which may make situations go horribly awry.*

### Introduction

Recent violent events in the otherwise serene surroundings of a quiet Pakistani hill town, located in the settled parts of its old north-west frontiers (now called Khaybar Pakhtunkhwa) named after a lesser known English official during the British Raj, have shaken the world. Not so long ago, few foreigners had heard of this quaint but scenically attractive habitation. Today there are few that have not. It houses the Kakul Military Academy, the Pakistani equivalent of West Point, though the country’s once anglophile army officers would prefer a

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comparison with Sandhurst. The town also houses an old renowned school, Burn Hall, an English institution, where once the children of the nation's elite were sent to imbibe western learning and culture. Burn Hall was once seen as Pakistan's Harrow, Eton and Rugby, all rolled into one seat of instruction.

Any American unless in the hot pursuit of a terror master-mind could be forgiven for mistaking this placid and languid setting for Washington Irving's village of Sleepy Hollow, a peaceful place until a 'headless horseman' rode through it, unleashing his terror. Abbottabad was an unlikely retirement home for the world's most wanted man, who may have chosen it for that very reason. It was the incongruity of these serene surroundings with his tumultuous past that might have encouraged bin Laden to choose this place as his final address, and given his background, lead a life of terrifying normalcy. Though, now with him in eternal rest below the sea, we shall never know.

### **The Anguish**

The serenity of that town was shattered one May night, whose still air was rent with the sound of shoots and explosions, following the intrusion of US troops in four helicopters fulfilling President Obama's orders. In a series of incredibly rapid and intensely precise manoeuvres, the US navy seals killed the wanted terrorist, took away his body, left behind other corpses and a number of injured for the Pakistani authorities to take care of, although at this same time, baffling enough, Pakistani forces were nowhere in sight. This was all the more incredulous, due to the military academy, mentioned earlier, was less than a kilometre away. Where Pakistani cadets were training hard to be 'officers and gentlemen' charged with the defence of the sovereignty of the motherland. The Pakistan Air Force, who see themselves as *shaheen* or mighty eagles protecting the 'nation's sacred airspace', appeared to be blissfully oblivious of a foreign military conducting an unauthorized and noisy operation deep inside the country. An operation, which including transport time, lasted over two and half hours.

Unsurprisingly, the Pakistani nation fell immediately into a deep state of shock. There was great anguish in Abbottabad, and of course, great consternation in the rest of the country. These reactions were all made with good reason. The people felt woefully let down by their army, by which the Pakistani nation had always placed great store. First, how was it that bin Laden was able to live in a secure fashion, though in an austere and Spartan lifestyle, unlike what was contained in the early reports in the western media, in such close proximity of key military installations for over half a decade? It was not so much that bin Laden had led a sheltered life there for so long, but the question of how was it that the authorities were

unaware of this fact, in a system in which spies are never in short supply. More seriously, even if elements in the Government were aware, though in their present distraught mood most Pakistanis are unwilling to give the relevant authorities a slight credit of collusion, how was it that the Pakistani Armed Forces were unable to prevent the American incursion, or at least offer a modicum of resistance? Some utterly bewildered citizens of Abbottabad, psychologically strained by the non-performance of the object of their admiration, the army, refused to believe the man in question was bin Laden at all. They have argued, with more wishful aspiration than logic, that it was actually a Pashtu retiree called Akbar Khan, who was unsuspectingly having his tea when the Americans entered and shot him.

Not that anyone confused bin Laden with Florence Nightingale, but the Pakistanis saw the whole affair as a national affront. Of course, in the fog of war truth is often the victim and changing explanations and reinterpretations did not enhance credibility of all that was stated, but the one certainty was that bin Laden was history. There were some reports that Pakistani jets did scramble, but immediately rethought their reaction, appreciating the irony and possible unsavoury results of an aerial 'shooting-war' with the US, a 'current' ally. For the first time in many years the army, largely immune to criticism in the professional and military spheres, has been put on the dock. On 13 May 2011, the top generals were grilled for hours in the Pakistan parliament, running through a gauntlet of accountability that is quite rare. Indeed, Talat Masood, an analyst who is a retired general himself, remarked that this could be the true 'beginning of democracy'.

## **The Pains**

If what Talat Masood has said is true, then it is uncertain if the civilian government would or could take advantage, seizing the moment to assume control. For a variety of reasons this seems unlikely. For one thing, the civilians have not earned any more praises themselves, and there are already vociferous public calls for them to resign. Another point is that they need the support of the army to survive, to keep domestic militants on leash, and to take the retaliatory measures 'in full force', as Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani announced in parliament on 9 May 2011.

However, at least for now, the government is protected by the fact of a weakened army, but much will depend on the resultant fallout from these happenings. Gillani delivered his speech in English, and not Urdu as one is wont to do in Pakistan, aiming the contents equally at Washington as at his people. He called the much maligned powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency 'a national asset' and describing the American action as a 'flawed military campaign'. He did assert with some justification that Al-Qaeda has killed many more

Pakistanis than Americans and that Pakistan would never be in cahoots with them. On 13 May 2011, in a sad illustration of this point, the Pakistani Taliban led by Hakimullah Masood made the first post bin Laden 'revenge strikes' in Charsadda and Khaybar Pakhtoonkhwa, killing more than 80 Pakistani paramilitary cadets. The pains of Pakistan keep ever mounting.

## **The Anger**

There is an explicable anger in America. This is mostly aimed at the Pakistani authorities for the supposed sheltering of bin Laden. Alternately, there has also been remarkable 'anger management' in Washington. In line with the behaviour of what has to be the world's most responsible state-power. The Obama administration is well aware that Pakistan is complex, divided, and often at war with and against itself. Washington understands Pakistan's indispensability on multiple levels. First, it is essential to have Pakistan's broad support in the area of counterterrorism. Second, Pakistan is critical to a solution of the Afghanistan issue. Third, Pakistan is a nuclear weapon country and this capability must never be allowed to fall into unwanted hands. Fourth, a disgruntled Pakistan can enter into a nuclear cooperation with Iran that could utterly destabilize the region for all times to come.

A fifth and final reason is that Washington may, if it has not already done, consider avoiding a future confrontation with Pakistan. Another major adversarial incident with Pakistan may suddenly become the last straw on the camel's back. Passions may heighten to great lengths clouding reason. In another conflict situation the decision-making, command and control of Pakistan may be rendered chaotic and some may wish unleash Armageddon. The American support of US\$3 billion annually may suddenly become an irrelevant non-criterion. The Pakistani President may not confine his reaction to writing an op-ed in a US newspaper, as President Zardari has done. This doomsday scenario is highly unlikely, but in nuclear strategies zero chance of conflict is always the best option.

## **The Options**

The Pakistani side almost immediately began to scout around for options. On 8 May 2011, President Asif Ali Zardari travelled to Moscow for a four-day visit, his first ever to Russia. While the trip may have been planned earlier, due to the fact it takes place in the aftermath of the bin Laden saga, it assumes a special significance.

Another trump card, China, is being played simultaneously. Immediately after the American raid, China spoke up extolling Pakistan's anti-terrorism credentials, stating that Pakistan was

in the 'forefront' of the struggle. Prime Minister Gillani will now visit China, whom he has recently described as Pakistan's 'best, most trusted friend'. Meanwhile, US Senator John Kerry, while in Afghanistan, has called upon Pakistan to show itself as a 'real friend'. As of now, it seems Pakistan is not listening and looking elsewhere for friends.

### **The Ramifications**

The saga in Abbottabad has several ramifications for the politics of the region and the world. The first is the onus of Pakistan's relations. Senator Kerry, seen as a friend to Pakistan, has already visited Islamabad to try smoothing out some ruffled feathers. It is unclear to what extent he has succeeded. He may have his work cut out for him in Washington, trying to persuade the Congress continue its support for the Pakistani army as in the past. Should this support (totalling nearly US\$3 billion) be withdrawn, US-Pakistan relations will hit a new nadir.

Second, in Pakistan there is chances spate of violence, which has indeed begun. It seems, as is exemplified in the Charsadda bombing, the 'vengeance' is being subcontracted out to the Pakistani Taliban by the Al-Qaeda. The pressure on the government will be enormous, and one result could be a combined endeavour by the civil and military authorities to address the problem.

The third would be regarding Afghanistan. The Pakistanis may even tolerate some American impunity, if at the end there is an installed government in Kabul that is friendly towards Islamabad. This would probably mean a government that is connected to the Haqqani group or the so-called 'Quetta Shura'. China, which is investing heavily in Afghanistan now, would probably back such an installation. If such a change could be pulled off then there could be some resultant satisfaction in Islamabad, Washington and Beijing. Though, here the problem would be India, which will be chary. In fact, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent trip to Kabul was an effort to wean Kabul away from such an eventuality. As it is often the case in global politics, sadly, just because there is a problem, does not mean there is a solution.

### **Conclusion**

The drama that began of the first days of May will not end anytime soon. Like in a Greek tragedy, will there be a *deus ex machina* or 'god out of a machine' that suddenly arrives on the scene and alters the outcome of an event? There Given the two and a half hour response time of the Pakistani army in this case, how can perceptions not be degraded or expectations

of a quick response, should such a case of a nuclear threat, be given value? What if India quickly seizes territory as per their so-called 'cold start' strategy as a negotiating tactic? In that case, would the Pakistani army initiate a nuclear war with horrendous consequences, just because they have miserably failed to provide conventional defence? So are the armed forces an irrelevant White Elephant that consumes an awful amount of resources without return? If the real enemy is in the West, then why fight India at all – the real Islamic fundamentalist may not believe in sovereign states they consider secular or in any case temporal, and would see no reason to fight a war with India to annex Kashmir to Pakistan, a state that they also consider an enemy? Washington must enter all these possibilities into its calculations. Battle wins may not always deliver war victories. Obama seems to be well aware of this axiom. So far he appears to have his head on his shoulders and heart in the right place, both quite dexterously aligned.

The episode of bin Laden brings a story to mind. In the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley was living with her husband on the banks of the lovely Lake Geneva, incidentally in a city that one could compare in natural beauty to today's Abbottabad. There it is said, on a stormy night as nature unleashed her furies on those otherwise gentle environs, she sat and crafted a short novel called 'Frankenstein', the tale of a creation which was ultimately unable to be controlled by the creator. He went horribly awry and became a monster, not unlike what the US did with Al-Qaeda and Osama. Mary Shelley had delivered the world a message, which we all will do well to heed, in politics as in life.

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