



Centro Studi Internazionali

Pashtunwali for peace

di Luca La Bella

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After over a decade spent fighting in Afghanistan, the West should commend the Pakistani military establishment on a masterful strategy, namely their continuing support for the Pashtun insurgency in the country. The fact that they have steadfastly refused to change approach over the past 10 years, despite huge US enticements and enormous punishment insofar as their image is concerned, internationally and crucially at home, is a testament to their commitment and their gamble against insurmountable odds. And it looks as though their bet is paying off...

By affording a modicum of endlessly deniable protection and support to the Afghan Taliban (the so called Quetta Shura Taliban) the Pakistani military establishment in fact holds a trump-card that makes it essential to any political accommodation with the insurgency, and thus in essence to any negotiating table on the future Afghan political dispensation, when Karzai and NATO leave in 2014.

After over a decade of accusations and revelations which essentially succeeded in making Pakistan the universally recognised epicentre of jihadi activity, Rawalpindi still holds this card so close to its chest that we can only keep guessing at the extent of complicity or complacency with radical militants like

the Haqqanis that populate the treacherous territories along the Durand line. Certainly, it is possible for us to imagine, perhaps in hindsight, that holding fast to its position in the face of monumental blowback within Pakistan at large, with TTP operations spread wide, even beyond the Punjabi heartland, and a veritable loss of control over former subordinate or allied militant movements (all while under intense US scrutiny), must have been excruciating. It is arguable, in fact, that betting on the same old horse (the Taliban) has brought the Pakistani state (the very *raison d'être* of the Pakistani army and not the other way round as some would say) on the verge of becoming unmanageable, with a tanking economy dependent on foreign hand-outs, a full-blown radicalisation of society, increasing insecurity in public places and a protracted insurgency spreading from FATA to the settled districts of the Northwest. In this respect, though, the long-announced US exit from the Afghan theatre in 2014 can be construed as a guarantee that things will go back to normal once the West is gone. Indeed, it can be said that as the high water mark of Western involvement (financial but especially military) in Afghanistan has already passed, so too it is true that as NATO leaves, pressure on Pakistan, political,

diplomatic and military, to do what it takes to be an ally of the West is on the wane. Despite the fact that Washington and its allies will remain in Afghanistan in some military capacity post 2014, it is nonetheless true that the decision will be influenced by security conditions, and they will be in turn affected by whether or not by the end of 2014 some form of compromise with the insurgents is on the cards, and this brings us back full-circle to the Pakistani military establishment. Now, whether the latter will be able to actually demonstrate to Pakistanis that the root cause of violence in the country is found over the border in the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil, is another matter. The combination of deep distrust of men in uniform among a broad spectrum of Pakistanis, ranging from the liberal to the radical, and the al-Qaeda linked Pashtun-based insurgency brewing in the Northwest may be the proverbial bite too big to chew for Rawalpindi.

On the other hand, surely the fact that the military establishment's crucial ties to Washington will be able to retreat to the anonymity and secrecy of days bygone will help it regain some standing in the eyes of the nationalists and the Islamic conservatives that now see them as agents of the "Great Satan". And maybe, in the long run, the existence of a jihadi problem in

Pakistan may call for continued US involvement and, in turn, help the Pakistani Generals justify their continued security ties with Washington – if there will still be any to speak of. That is because, yes, through their dogged, unabashed and duplicitous strategy they have gained a toe in, a say, a seat at the negotiating table, but it is by no means certain their agenda will carry the day. In a sense, the Pakistani military establishment should feel vindicated in that the present political dispensation was forged in Bonn in 2001 and was agreed over their heads (still spinning after the infamous "we'll bomb you into the Stone Age" line); they didn't get a word in. Nor did the southern Pashtun, the same constituency the Taliban overwhelming come from.

It remains to be seen how strong the Pakistani hand will be in trying to secure its interests vis-à-vis America and the Northern Alliance warlords, how successful it will be in pushing for a compromise that keeps the future political dispensation within the present institutional track or whether instead it will take place after a brutal civil war (with both sides swinging for the fences, destroying the country for the umpteenth time over). America and the West will not accept a repetition of the civil war-cum Taliban government, atrocity-for-atrocity, and if a strong

international US-led CT taskforce is left behind, it might even prove to be hairier to deal with than tens of thousands of NATO troops.

At any rate, next year (2013) will be crucial in determining what vision for the political future of Afghanistan will ultimately prevail, and the outcome will also be crucial for the future of US-Pakistan relations. Obviously, the Pakistani Generals would like to be able to realise their vision of a neutered Kabul ruled by a southern Pashtun, possibly Ghilzai, where Indian influence is in check, Pashtun vagaries on the Durand line quelled and foreign policy is drafted by Islamabad, all of course while remaining in the American circle of friends.

Compromise, though, is the essence of politics and even if it is true that often the military and the ISI seem all-powerful, they probably are so only at home. Abroad, they shouldn't be underestimated, but they are not omnipotent.

America and the West shouldn't despair, for the serial disenfranchisement of the Southern Pashtun reaffirms itself as the proverbial crux of the matter. It is possible to outflank the Pakistani military establishment by challenging it in its role as the paladin of the Pashtun – which it patently isn't, and it's

something that resonates almost universally from the begging children outside Kandahar's Grand Mosque to the powerful shura members in Peshawar or Quetta. The pivot of a hypothetical Western counterstrategy builds on the sense of effective entrapment the Taliban feel vis-à-vis their position within Pakistan and their dealings with the ISI. The full knowledge that "protection" comes with a price, namely carrying out Pakistan's bidding, particularly of the gruesome kind (insurgencies are after all a dirty business), maybe not to a mujahid, but is deeply dishonourable to a Pashtun "lion". Throughout this last decade and, perhaps more crucially, despite the years of hospitality offered to their erstwhile Arab friends of al-Qaeda and notwithstanding the shared hardships of the battlefield, not all the Taliban have been swayed by AQ's ideology of global jihad, and in the heartlands of the Pashtun belt, people will always see themselves first as Pashtun and then as Muslim.

Moreover, there are many commanders and influential Taliban who would view a political settlement very favourably, as an effective way to remove themselves from the clutches of the ISI, go back to their ancestral lands and re-integrate in Afghan political life. The spectre of an indefinite continuation of the strife and

bloodshed in a civil war against driven and powerful (much more than in the past) Northern warlords is enough to sway the “political commission” of the Quetta Shura that breaking with AQ and ejecting any iteration of its doctrine is the right thing to do. Because the QST is a political-cum-military organisation which is right in the middle of waging jihad against enemy infidels, though, the “normal” weight and influence of the “military commission” – which is doing all the fighting and dying – is greatly enhanced vis-à-vis the “political commission”, which essentially is hiding in Pakistan and has been out of a job since 2001. Mullah Omar, as the *Amir ul-Momineen* (commander of the faithful, an Islamic political and military title), is the point of intersection of the two commissions and the undisputed leader of the Afghan Taliban. On reconciliation and compromise with Kabul and the US, though, Omar is a fence-sitter, as he is unwilling to lend his weight to any faction lest he might lose control of the movement entirely. It is for this reason that many hopes were (and are still) pegged on the Pakistanis releasing Mullah Baradar, arrested in 2010 following his involvement in peace talks with Kabul that were not authorised by the ISI. Baradar doesn’t only hail from Karzai’s very own tribe,

the Popalzai, and may have been directly responsible for saving the future President when he was briefly captured in Uruzgan in 2001, but he was Omar’s deputy, a founding father of the movement and the leader of the military commission until his arrest. Baradar could serve as the perfect conduit for peace talks, a truly authoritative advocate for compromise. It is indeed no surprise that Rawalpindi is holding onto him and resisting for the moment Afghan and American pressure to release him.

For the West, engaging in direct talks with the Taliban may indeed go a long way towards a prospective reconciliation with the Pashtun. The provisions for peace-making (*nanawatei*) in the age-old code of the Pashtunwali could definitely be leveraged, as indeed the Pashtun have depended upon them for thousands of years to resolve conflicts and blood feuds.

Lodged in between Iran and Pakistan, the Hindu Kush and the plains descending towards the Arab Sea, the Pashtun occupy a particularly strategic geographic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. While the jury is still out there in regards to their opinion of the West, nothing but seething anger is expressed by the average Afghan of

any ethnicity when speaking of Pakistan. The fact that this holds true even in the case of civilian Pashtun and especially of senior Taliban is particularly meaningful. Divide and rule usually wins nobody any friends, and we as Europeans, of any people, should know. Given the fact that the area will remain of some interest to us in the foreseeable future (and if anything to keep an eye on Pakistan), rapprochement and engagement with the Southern Pashtun on the basis of our strategic interests and their time-honoured traditions in the Pashtunwali is possible, and in time will yield gains for all interested parties, including non-Pashtun Afghans and Pakistanis, for stability in the Pashtun heartland means peace in Afghanistan and across the Durand line.