

Afghanistan - a country in turmoil during the reign of the Taliban - seems to be re-emerging in its strength and political ideologies crossing over even to the borders of Pakistan into the Swat Valley. The Taliban labeled as a "terrorist organization", have regrouped and are more confident than ever to regain its power in Afghanistan as well as in neighboring Pakistan. The fall of the Taliban in 2001 swapped away the regime and significantly ouster the regime out of control. This also led to the "spill-over" effect into Pakistan, where the real danger has been lurking. During 2001 to 2005, a large number of Taliban militants fled to Peshawar in Pakistan while trying to evade capture by the US forces.

The fact remained that the current regime and the United States did not really consider the Taliban to regroup in such a short period and to re-emerge in Pakistan, was a lesson to be learnt. The Taliban - as much as it is an "extremist religious" regime - was not going to let their guard down by the defeat in 2001. Peshawar was the Taliban's "safe haven" to regroup over the years and till today the Taliban still operates from this region. On the other hand the Pakistani forces saw no interest in addressing the "spill-over" effect during those years. Currently the Taliban is still in control over certain parts of Afghanistan and especially in the Helmand province.

The Helmand province is the largest producer of opium in the world and this is infact the sole economic power of the Taliban to source for material goods as well as for weapons. The Helmand province is out of security forces and government control and is considered a stronghold of the Taliban operating in Afghanistan. The current regime and the US forces did not take seriously the threat of the Taliban and its capabilities after the initial fall in 2001.

The US failure in addressing the cultural and societal environment of Afghanistan in the earlier offensive in 2001 till the end of the Bush Administration is also another factor contributing to the escalation of unrest amongst the Afghan people. As stated in a prior operational article published in the Counter Terrorism Journal, it states that most Afghans live in a "primitive" dwelling of the fourteenth century ancestry of the British society. This clearly indicates the need to address the Afghan people in "winning the hearts and minds" in order to defeat the Taliban.

The current deployment of US troops to Afghanistan, totaling nearly four thousand under the Obama's Administration, set out to defeat the Taliban and its re-emergence is timely as the threat of terrorism is escalating and the re-emergence of several terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, whom most of its new recruits are being trained in the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, are beginning to threaten the Southeast Asia region more than ever. The current threats to Southeast Asia are the security of the regions waterways as well as the escalating threat in Southern Thailand the Mindanao Island of the Philippines and the Sulu waters where weapons smuggling is rampant.

Operation "Strike of the Sword" or dubbed "Operation Khanjar" is making a new start for the

Obama's Administration to address the Taliban threats and to initiate a new dimension in fighting the "war on terror". The offensive is backed by Afghan and British troops working closely in the operations. The Obama's Administration has declared the Taliban threat in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan to be the main foreign threat to US soil. The operation marks the first big test of Washington's new regional strategy to defeat the Taliban and its allies and stabilize Afghanistan. This is inline with helping to secure Afghanistan in the upcoming Presidential elections to be held in August of 2009.

The new approach to "Operation Khanjar" will ensure the safety of civilians and limit casualties as well as to "winning the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people. The Obama's Administration has vowed to send in more humanitarian aid and relevant agencies to assist on the ongoing re-construction of Afghanistan when it finally secures the country. The approach will also address the issues pertaining to understanding cultural and societal ways and working closely with the people of Afghanistan.

In a statement by Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, the commanding general in Afghanistan, "Operation Khanjar is different from other major offensives that have occurred before, such as its massive size of the force introduced and the speed at which it will insert". It would also see US troops remaining in place, building and working toward a transition of all security responsibilities to Afghan forces.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is finally on the offensive in coordination with the U.S. and Afghanistan. They are deploying more troops to the border to prevent the Taliban refuge when fleeing from the new onslaught. This comes on top of the Pakistan Army greatly pressing Taliban fighters along the border the past weeks. More now than ever, Pakistan is acting as if it is committed to fighting the Taliban. The military in recent days has expanded a high-stakes offensive along the Afghan border, while the government enjoys wide public support, even as casualties and refugees mount. The Pakistani military has since taken back the Swat Valley and shifted its sights to such tribal regions as Waziristan.

The decision to give the Swat Valley to the Taliban earlier this year, was in reality Pakistani's way to lure non-Taliban members to leave the valley and hence to solely concentrate to target and defeat the Taliban. This however had it share of failures but the initial stand proved to be of a success in engaging the Taliban at a disclosed province. With the current offensive by the US and the engagement of the Pakistani military in the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, is the days of the Taliban seem to be coming to a step closer to a defeat? Lastly, the US would still need to actively engage more cautiously and provide assurance to the transition and security of the Afghan people when it finally stabilizes the country.

Andrin Raj (andrin.raj@staratad.net) is Director/Security and Terrorism Analyst for Stratad Asia Pacific Strategic Centre (SAPSC) and Director for Chapter-SEA for the International Association for Counterterrorism and Security Professionals. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA) 2008-99. He is also one of the founding members of the Turkish Think Tank Dialogue (TOD TURKEY) of the Turkish Asian Center For Strategic Studies (TASAM) based in Istanbul, Turkey. The views expressed are of his own and does not reflect those of SAPSC, IACSP, TOD TURKEY, TASAM or JIIA.