

# Wikileaks, Afghanistan, and Pakistan

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On 25 July 2010, the New York Times carried an explosive story by Mark Mazzetti, Jane Perlez, Eric Schmitt and Andrew W. Lehren about some 92,000 classified Pentagon documents which had passed into the hands of Wikileaks, a Sweden-based whistleblower website headed by Julian Assange. Ostensibly, the leak sent shock waves through the US Administration – not just for the sheer volume of the leaked material but also because the revelations could significantly affect the course of the war in Afghanistan. The documents comprised a host of field intelligence reports initiated by covert sources, combat units and the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Much of the plethora of documents is a compilation of assorted reports known as “collation” in the intelligence craft. Such stuff is not deemed to be intelligence until it is sifted, corroborated and analysed for its value, the authenticity of the source and the plausibility of the information. The documents cover the period from 2004 to 2009. The fact that that such a large array of reports remained unprocessed for this long is a poor reflection on the Pentagon’s efficiency.

## **Dubious veracity**

Wikileaks has, thus far, released 77,000 of the documents, of which 180 reports – mostly originating from Afghan intelligence – pertain to the dubious role of Pakistan, its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and, especially, of retired General Hamid Gul who headed the ISI in the crucial years of the Afghan jihad during the Soviet Union’s occupation of Afghanistan. Gul earned a reputation as the architect of the Soviet defeat and the ignominious withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Once a darling of US strategists and intelligence big-wigs, Gul later became a bitter critic of the post-Reagan policies of the US. He routinely charges America of betraying the Afghan nation and causing an airplane crash in which then-president of Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq, and dozens of Pakistan’s top military brass died. Gul also claimed that the 9/11 events were an inside job and openly supported the Afghan resistance against what he described as the US-led occupation of Afghanistan which was not dissimilar to that of the Soviet Union.

He has repeatedly refuted the charges against him on various international media channels such as Al Jazeera, CNN, and BBC (for example, on the 25, 26, 27 and 28 July 2010), and labelled the reports as “preposterous”, “fictional” and deliberate “disinformation” to demonise him and the ISI in an attempt to find a scapegoat for the US military’s failures in Afghanistan. In these interviews, Gul also offered to travel to the US to face charges in court or be heard by the US Senate or Congress. In 2008, the US proposed a motion at the United Nations 1267 Committee to have him placed on the UN’s international terrorist list. He was saved by China, which blocked the move by applying a technical hold for lack of evidence.

The Pakistani government also strongly rebutted the Wikileaks reports regarding the alleged double role of the ISI in the Afghan war. Interestingly, a Pakistani official revealed that days before the New York Times story, US defence officials had advised their Pakistani counterparts to disregard the Wikileaks documents release.

## **Human rights and military discipline**

Apart from documents relating to Pakistan, the rest of the 77,000 documents cover a vast spectrum of excesses and human rights abuses committed by US and NATO forces, and narrate a harrowing tale of atrocities against innocent civilians. No less than 20,000 fatalities have been documented, painting a heart-rending picture of a callous disregard of Geneva Conventions and US laws. Task Force 373, a secret force, stands out as the most

trigger-happy, ruthless bunch of soldiers who seem to have exceeded every limit. It is not clear whether this force was ever authorised by the US Congress. If not, it would cast a negative light on the Pentagon, raising questions as to whether the Pentagon (or a certain element within it) had turned into a “rogue” institution.

## Questions

Wikileaks is still holding back some 15,000 documents. There are tremendous efforts by the US administration to block the release of these documents or, at least, to expunge the identities of sources and other named figures lest their security be jeopardised.

The whole sordid affair begs many a thorny question, and points to yawning cavities in the US systems of defence and intelligence. The more glaring of these questions, each of which warrants a separate query, are:

- a. Is the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) overly dependent on security contractors and largely amateurish Afghan intelligence operatives?
- b. Is there an attitudinal conflict among American policy makers on Afghanistan? That is, is there a conflict between those advocating winning the hearts and minds of Afghan people and those operators on the ground who are bent on the systematic and wilful alienation of the Afghan people?
- c. Does a dichotomy really exist between the stated US position of Pakistan as a front-line ally without whose support victory cannot be perceived, and the real perception of its role as a double crosser playing both sides? Or is this dichotomy inspired by extraneous influences which wish to drive a wedge into US-Pakistan relations?
- d. How will the leaks impact on US-Pakistan and Pakistan-Karzai government relations?
- e. How will they affect the war in Afghanistan and determine its outcome?
- f. Were the leaks deliberate and purposeful a la My Lai in Vietnam, which set in motion the public demand for withdrawal?

## US intelligence methodology

Over the years, the mammoth US intelligence establishment has shown deficiencies, fissures and failures. If glaring ones such as 9/11, Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, and the failure to capture the world’s most wanted terrorists are not enough evidence of its inherent flaws, Wikileaks has exposed it to the core. The human intelligence (humint) aspect of the US is well-known to have suffered from protracted neglect, poor funding, and the absence of a cogent cause to inspire enthusiasm.

As a consequence, the US substituted security contractors for regular and disciplined operatives. Most of these security contractors were former employees of the CIA, FBI and other agencies which thrived on old-buddy cronyism. Their only motivation was money. They are a tired and lacklustre group of people who rely mostly on “paper milling” – intelligence parlance for the production of make-believe reports. The bulk of the reports on Pakistan is the handiwork of Afghan intelligence agencies which are infested by communist die-hards looking to avenge their humiliation at the hands of

Pakistan and the ISI. To top it off, the Indian external intelligence agency – the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) – has established a strong field intelligence network in Afghanistan. Its insidious influence on Afghan intelligence agencies in an effort to malign Pakistan is an open secret.

Task Force 373 uses tactics and methods which run counter to the explicit purpose of the military high command. About 100,000 US security contractors have proven to be loose cannons. They disregard operational instructions, and are only in pursuit of quick results to earn more dollars. It was a disaster ab initio to mix mercenaries and burnt-out intelligence veterans with regular troops. The architects of this harebrained idea will realise the consequences of their folly.

### **Between policy and posture**

The US and NATO official position on Pakistan as a front-line state in the war against terrorism is a euphemism. In reality, Pakistan has always been suspected either of doing less than it could, or, worse, of complicity with some Taliban factions fighting US and NATO troops. No wonder, then, that each category and tier of the US leadership – from the Bush to the Obama administrations – continued to press Pakistan to do more.

While analysing the nature and extent of Pakistan's cooperation, one must bear in mind the circumstances under which Pakistan was recruited into this war. It was literally forced on board the American warship. The Pakistan leadership wrongly assumed that the war would be a short, swift retribution which would end in a few months. They failed to fathom the latent and long-term intentions of the Bush administration's war hawks. It was only after the Karzai government was foisted on Afghanistan, as a result of the Bonn dispensation and the induction of India, Pakistan's arch-rival, into the Afghan game that Pakistani authorities realised their mistake in unconditionally giving in to US demands. They felt cheated but could do little to redress the situation. Then-President Pervez Musharraf's quick surrender to US diktat had left the Pakistani nation and its institutions dazed and bewildered. They were torn between the demands of the US agenda and their national interests. The military and the ISI were hard put to maintain equilibrium. Drone attacks by the CIA in Pakistan's tribal regions, and clandestine deployment of US Special Forces and security contractors inside Pakistan further exacerbated frayed sentiments. To the Pakistani masses, from where most of the soldiers are drawn, it was somebody else's dirty war which Pakistan had to fight under duress. It reflects positively on the army and the ISI that there was no serious breach of discipline. But to expect an enthusiastic and wholesome participation under these conditions would be asking for too much.

### **Impact on US-Pakistan relations**

That the invaders would fail in Afghanistan was axiomatic for even elementary students of Afghan affairs; and no one is better educated on this subject than the ISI. Should the ISI not have maintained liaison with the real soul of the Afghan people, which is manifested in the national resistance symbolised by the Taliban? Let no one be duped into believing otherwise! But material support to the resistance is quite another matter. With US spies all over Pakistan, having logged deep into its systems, such an audacity cannot even be imagined, save by Pentagon stalwarts.

The US policy towards Pakistan was described aptly – though insultingly – by Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton as a “carrot and stick” doctrine that would keep Pakistan on the leash and aligned to US objectives. This policy seems to have worked reasonably well for America. Pakistan has been held to the course by the US promoting a dictator, and then imposing a truncated democracy through an externally-brokered deal

called the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). America's whip hand, however, began to test the limits of national tolerance after the Mumbai attacks, when the US started openly to promote India's brow-beating tactics against Pakistan on unsubstantiated charges. Following Obama's 1 December 2009 policy speech, the US attitude began to change. It is now less belligerent, and often placatory, towards Pakistan. There is also a perceptible shift in the policy from dealing with government to addressing the people of Pakistan. This is a healthy change indicative of a possible focus on an exit strategy.

The recent floods in Pakistan have enhanced the need for a fresh approach. Currently, there seem to be two overriding American concerns. Firstly, to create an environment for the graceful exit of the US from Afghanistan, while safeguarding its core interests and making room for India in a post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Secondly, to thwart a populist – inevitably anti-American ground-swell – in the wake of the catastrophic deluge in Pakistan. How these can objectives be achieved with the help of a tottering and largely dysfunctional democracy in Pakistan will be a daunting challenge for American policy makers.

Pakistan and the US need each other for their own good reasons, but India is the obstacle, and it will remain so until the Kashmir issue is dealt with.

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai began to lean towards Pakistan after Obama's 1 December 2009 speech. To show his altered preferences, he fired his Pakistan-hating intelligence czar, Amrullah Saleh. After the Wikileaks affair, however, Karzai revealed his true intentions when he demanded that the US bomb Pakistan. But that simmered down rather quickly. Perhaps the Americans whispered the same gospel in his ears as they did for Pakistan: "Don't take it too seriously."

## **Outcomes and purposes**

It is too early to pass judgement, but there are unerring similarities between My Lai and the Wikileaks affair. Lieutenant William Calley and Captain Ernest L. Medina's misconduct then, and the TF-373's misdemeanour now reflect the same propensity for frustration spawned by failures. How close are the parallels of General Westmoreland's demand for more troops and General Stanley McChrystal's urge for the surge, intelligence failures, and search for scapegoats – Cambodia then and Pakistan now? It's an uncanny match of the scenarios, a rebirth of the tragedy that was Vietnam. Afghanistan is a wrong war at a wrong place against a wrong enemy. Not a single Afghan has been found involved in terrorism outside the war zone. "Reversing Taliban's momentum" was not the original aim of the NATO war. At this stage, it would be like defeating the Afghan nation; it would be mission impossible. The initial goal was to disperse Al-Qaeda and capture or kill Osama Bin Laden. All western intelligence sources believe Osama Bin Laden is not in Afghanistan, or, at least, not in the southern part of Afghanistan where much of the US and NATO forces are committed. Leon E. Panetta said there were no more than 60 to 100 Al-Qaeda operatives in that part of the world. That many may be present in any European country. The reality is that Al-Qaeda has long since migrated to the Red Sea area to be in closer proximity to its strategic "centre of gravity" – the Middle East.

The hard truth is that the war in Afghanistan is a lost cause for America. The problem is how to convince the Pentagon and the self-indulgent, bigoted neo-cons who would not let reason get the better of their unrealistic ambitions. Obama's heart is in the right place. He knows he came into the Oval Office on the promise of change, and he was aware of the stumbling blocks on his way to change. As a master chess player, he let the Pentagon

have its say (two surges since his inauguration) but asked for results. The Pentagon merely reinforced failure and could not deliver.

Operation Moshtarak, in February 2010, was an unmitigated disaster, and the Kandahar operation is a non-starter. One obstacle in Obama's march towards his objective has been removed. If allowed to operate with freedom, Wikileaks will remove the other. Its publication of the remaining 15,000 documents is bound to whip up a public debate reminiscent of the Nixon years. Already, the antiwar opinion has climbed to 62 percent. A "moratorium" – as in the case of Vietnam – may well be in the offing, thanks to Wikileaks. Is Obama playing Nixon? If yes, Wikileaks is a gift to him. Or, did he manage the gift? Whatever the case, the draw-down from Afghanistan is likely to begin as per schedule, if not earlier. Conventional wisdom commands that losses be cut.

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