

A Decade of Terror

By Khalid Aziz | From the Dawn Newspaper 9th Sept 2011

This Sept 11 we will complete a decade of living with the consequences of the 9/11 attack on the US. That cataclysmic event has changed the world permanently.

In terms of its impact, this period is equal in importance to the Cold War between the US and the USSR. Here, I will focus on understanding how the war was conducted in the context of Pakistan and its parallels with similar events in our history.

In October 1999 Gen Musharraf led a coup ousting the democratically elected government of Nawaz Sharif and thus was available to be claimed by the US as an ally. His was a government that was sorely in need of legitimisation of its illegal grab of power.

The situation was not too different from what happened in 1977 after a coup by Gen Ziaul Haq, who removed prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Gen Zia too was a political destitute without legitimacy when the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan took place, and, like Musharraf, he got a golden opportunity to become kosher by assisting the US in launching a jihad against the Soviet intervention. In both cases, the country was worse off.

Gen Zia remained in power until his death in 1988. However, by then he had transformed Pakistan into an ideologically based Islamic state more suited to regional power politics than the development of its people.

During this period, Pakistan undertook jihad by creating the infrastructure that by the 1990s had turned on the West and was subsequently used by Osama bin Laden to gain popularity in Pakistan.

It fell to Gen Musharraf's lot to demolish this infrastructure created by his predecessor in an alliance with the US. Gen Musharraf too held on to power for about nine years on the basis of his role as a service provider to the US.

The 'war on terror', as president Bush termed his military response to the 9/11 attack, had many conceptual problems. The war had no clear objective and thus lacked clarity in execution.

Wars are fought to destroy enemies; president Bush conversely wanted this war to bring Osama bin Laden to justice. Bringing one to justice is the task of the police force and has a post-occurrence procedure that involves investigation and a hearing for the rendering of justice. However, in this case the military was used to bring Bin Laden to justice. This is a major anomaly with regard to the action in Afghanistan and has led to several conceptual issues.

True, the Taliban were removed and Al Qaeda fled Afghanistan, but unlike the end result of an investigation into a criminal conspiracy, there was no closure.

Secondly, when the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, the terrorists entered Pakistan and the Afghan war shifted to Pakistani towns and cities. It continues to pulsate within Pakistan and has caused immense destruction and loss of life so far. Losses are estimated at more than \$68bn.

One of the main objectives of the US after 9/11 was to not permit a repeat of Al Qaeda terrorist activity on American mainland. Except for the attempted Times Square bombing, no one has come close to repeating a terrorist strike on US soil. This is a major achievement of the US and indicates that despite criticism on some fronts, it has succeeded in destroying the capability of Al Qaeda.

This is not to say that such attempts will not be made in the future, but Al Qaeda as an organisation has gone into hibernation in Somalia and Yemen for the present. However, it remains active within Pakistan.

The impact of these years of war on Pakistan has been destructive, while the US has become safer. Pakistan has descended into chaos. It still confronts threats from the extremists who have adopted a virulent form of extremism that will take many years to neutralise. In the process, Pakistani society has become fragmented and faces multiple challenges.

Simultaneously, the alliance with the US has become brittle and has forced Pakistan to look towards China to provide it comfort and assistance in meeting its challenges. How this will shape the future of our unfortunate nation is yet to be seen. Will we enter another colonial relationship?

The war has generated a spate of analysis and research on counter-insurgency, perhaps the most important being Gen Petraeus's manual on counter-insurgency that defines the elements essential for dealing with this kind of a challenge. The manual remains mostly a military perspective of counter-insurgency; it is weak in its sociological and cultural aspects and thus places conciliation and the militant's reintroduction into communities as a lower priority.

For example the doctrine's core precept of 'clear, hold and build' does not address the issue of those who have fled their homes to evade arrest or military action. Until these persons are reunited with their families, they will continue to fight.

For instance, after the operations in Swat in May 2010, many militants took shelter in the nearby safe haven of Kunar in Afghanistan. They constitute a sizable group of dissidents who have transformed themselves into bandits and frequently raid Pakistani border villages in Dir, Bajaur and Chitral.

It is only a matter of time when they emerge as a new factor in this war. Clearly, the answer lies in reconciling such elements by using local cultural processes that will also ensure state protection.

It can be surmised that while the US has enhanced its own security in the last decade Pakistan has suffered extensively and is worse off than before.