

THE WAR ON TERRORISM: WHAT WENT WRONG?

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What has gone wrong with the war on terrorism that its failures have been as big as its successes?

First, the campaign was launched in the accompaniment of dangerous war hysteria in the West that led to the profiling of Islam as a universal creed of terrorism. Everything wrong with Muslim societies was equated with religion, thereby making the war on terrorism look like a war on Islam, and the distinction between the terrorists and their societies was blurred.

The West then claimed that it was a war of ideas, provoking Muslims to uphold and defend their value system. Elements on both sides began seeing their basic value system as under siege and exaggerated their mutual fears defaming and demonizing each other. Moral issues were undifferentiated or confused, or sacrificed to self-righteousness. Each side began judging the other with its own ideals, ideals from which it has fallen short itself. No wonder in the Islamic world the Islamists, moderates and extremists alike began "winning" this war of ideas as religion became the centre of discourse - while the West was looking at it as the source of the problem and the Muslims as the key part of the solution.

Many Muslims now believe that Islam is under siege and the only way for them to break free will be to wage "Jihad". The extremists have been able to present Muslims as victims and the West as oppressors.

This victim complex is helping Muslims to find external reasons for their own failings and consequently turning the attention away from self-reform to fighting the external "enemy".

The West will not succeed in the war on terrorism as long as the tensions with the Islamic world continue and Muslims believe it is not theirs but the West's war they are being made to fight, even at the expense of national cohesion and social stability, as is the case in Pakistan. No wonder President Musharraf has become deeply unpopular. But unfortunately Washington is still relating to Pakistan as a compliant ally with a client regime and pliant citizens as in the past and continues to see Pakistan through Musharraf's eyes.

Washington does not realize that Pakistan's domestic order has been changing and that this has been happening for some time even since before 9/11. Pakistan, like much of the Islamic world, has been under a slow and sustained assault from an illiberal, pro-Western elite and religious extremism has been fomenting such popular feelings as national honour, social discontent and religious identity. The liberal intelligentsia has been protesting in the name of freedom and progress and the weak and vulnerable masses could do no more than despair and contemplate extreme and illusionary avenues to empowerment, swayed as they were by ideologues, demagogues and political opportunists.

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The US has alienated both, on one hand by blocking true democratic reform and on the other by appearing to be working against Islam.

The US does not realize that while Pakistan may be a crucial partner in the war on terrorism, it is also a conflicted country in search of stability and a reformulated vision of its role in world events. However, if achieving near-term stability and future reform of Pakistan is subordinated to the war on terrorism, the US will have no partner to pursue this war. Thus, Pakistan will become a target instead of a partner, creating an even bigger crisis.

The war on terrorism is for the long haul. The US must for a moment focus on Pakistan and not this war. A stable and prosperous Pakistan will become a more willing and effective partner in the war on terrorism and enhance US capacity to fix Afghanistan. Besides that, Pakistan's stability is critical to the fulfilment of America's larger economic and strategic objectives in the region. All US aspirations to help India become a great power and a balancer to China will remain stillborn if Pakistan remains troubled, a threat to itself, to the regional peace and stability and to US and global security.

The US can make a good beginning by throwing its weight behind the revival of full democratic reform and neither support Musharraf's emergency measures nor broker any deals to extend the lease of life of his system. People want full restoration of democracy based on free, fair and inclusive elections, which must take place as planned. This should be followed by a reassessment of the strategy of the war on terrorism that is based on the support of the people and not just

the regime. A relationship with people is essential to strengthen a future democratic regime and to ensure the success of the war on terrorism.

Finally, the US should stop talking about Islam and exercise the full range of its economic strength and diplomatic assets to repair the damage done to the relations with the Islamic world and address the underlying issues that cradle extremism. Extremism is essentially a crisis within the Islamic world, which should be left alone to deal with it. The West must help, but through a different strategy, which would co-opt people. But by taking the lead in fighting it with the help of unpopular leaderships and a politically insensitive and military dominated strategy that has maligned religion, the West has alienated Muslims and lost its influence on them.