THE DEATH OF A LION: OPERATION GERONIMO

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For years after the 2001 September 11 attacks, the name of Al-Qaida and the fame of Osama Bin Laden spread like a 21st century political plague. The most hunted man on the planet was holed up in a fortified mansion that stood higher than any other in the vicinity - that too in an army hub called Abbottabad, 50 km from Islamabad. It was a cat and mouse game between CIA headquarters - Langley and Rawalpindi - the seat of Pakistan army General Headquarters, which began with the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 when Americans, foolishly trusting Gen. Pervez Musharaf then, enabled the ISI to facilitate the safe passage of Osama from Tora Bora Mountains through deceit. It took nearly a decade after the 9/11 before the quest finally ended in Pakistan with the death of Osama during confrontation with American forces on Monday morning (Indian time).

US may be compelled to dump Pakistan as its key ally in the war against terror. Contrary to the carefully cultivated perception in Washington and Islamabad about the fallout of killing Osama, a new US-Pakistan security alliance has been sealed in Abbottabad with the blood of the Saudi billionaire turned terrorist. Pakistan may suggest Osama was cunning enough to pick a spot right under the nose of the military as no one is expected to look there, but calls were beginning to surface in America that Islamabad should prove that she did not know the fugitive was hiding in Abbottabad. Obama’s Counter Terrorism Advisor John Brenan said it was inconceivable that Osama had not had a support system to help him inside Pakistan. However, any Pakistani admission of a direct role in the operation carried out by a foreign power is fraught with domestic risks.

Bin Laden was a son of the Saudi elite whose radical, violent campaign to recreate a seventh century Muslim empire redefined the threat of terrorism for 21st century. He had united disparate militant groups, from Egypt to Chechnya, from Yemen to Philippines, under the banner of Al Qaida and his ideal of a borderless brotherhood of radical Islam. He waged what he claimed was holy war with distinctly modern methods. He sent fatwa’s - religious decrees - by fax and declared war on Americans in an email beamed by satellite around the world. He railed against globalization, even as his agents in Europe and North America took advantage of a globalised world to carry out the attacks, insinuating themselves into the very western culture he despised. He styled himself as a Muslim ascetic, a billionaire’s son who gave up a life of privilege for the cause. Interestingly he was acutely conscious about the media and his own image. His voice seemed to belie the warrior image he cultivated, a man whose constant companion was a Kalashnikov rifle that he boasted he had taken from a Russian soldier he had killed.

Although he claimed to follow the purest form of Islam, many scholars insisted that he was glossing over the faith’s edicts against killing innocents and civilians. Islam draws boundaries on where and why holy war can be waged; Osama declared the entire world a fair territory. As the Quran had been revealed to Muhammad amid intense persecution, Osama saw his own expulsions during the 1990s – from Saudi Arabia and then Sudan - as affirmation of himself as a chosen one. In his vision he would be the “emir”, or the prince, in restoration of the khalifa, a political empire extending from Afghanistan across the globe.
The Indian government was told about Osama’s death about an hour before the official announcement was made by President Barrack Obama on Monday morning (Indian time). New Delhi, however, could not overrule the possibility that Osama could not have lived in the garrison town of Abbottabad without the blessings or active complicity of the ISI. However, to India - Pakistan’s strategic value would remain & she would not bring the latter to her knees.

China hailed the death of Osama Bin Laden while defending its regional partner Pakistan against accusation (as they are known to be all weather friends!). China showed no appetite, however, for turning the US raid that killed Osama on Pakistani soil into a point of dispute. Critics of Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang, which shares a border with Pakistan, have said it has exaggerated those links to justify political and religious controls on the restive Muslim Uyghur minority. Osama’s death and any rift between the US and Pakistan will not affect Beijing’s policies towards Islamabad, said Guo Xian’ Gang, vice president of China Institute of International Studies- a government think tank.

It seemed ironic that the Americans and Osama Bin Laden had fought on the same side against the soviets in Afghanistan- as if the Americans had somehow created the Bin Laden monster by providing arms and cash to the Arabs. Osama who had supported the resistance with money, construction equipment and housing, saw the retreat of the Soviets as an affirmation of the Muslim power and an opportunity to recreate Islamic political power and topple infidel governments through jihad. For the US, which had supported the Afghan resistance with $3 billions in arms and ammunition, that defeat marked the beginning of the end of the cold war and the birth of a new world order.

Several Muslim leaders panned America for allegedly creating a Frankenstein and then executing him when he turned against his creator. The man whose name was emblematic of terrorism has been eliminated- his exit from the world represents an act of cleansing- but does that mean an end to global terrorism or the common people would be engulfed by the wrath of the Al Qaida? There is now a higher opinion of Obama handling of the war on terrorism. The killing of the north star of global terrorism has given president Obama a popularity boost and presidential leadership skills which was recently hurt by high petrol prices.

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