

During the Peter Nailor Memorial Lecture on defence, Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) gave a terse but incisive assessment of the Pakistan/ Al Qaeda situation.

Pakistan is a key ally in the wrongly named "global war on terror" but is manifestly inadequate in fulfilling the role the West would like it to have. Its importance can be shown by the reality that almost every conspiracy heads back to Pakistan and in particular the Federal administered Tribal areas. The Americans are right to focus on AfPak.

Pakistani security is one of the strongest reasons for not leaving Afghanistan quickly. There are problems however resulting from the view of senior Pakistani military officers that India is a bigger threat to their nation than Islamic terrorists.

In this context, a controversial contention is that Al Qaeda is passed its peak and has made a strategic error by focusing on Pakistan this might be evidenced by the lack of unexpected attacks being successful for so long.

It should be noted that US counter-terrorism strategy remains hard line under President Obama. E.g. the approval of targeted killings in Pakistan. Presidential powers seem to be continuing to be used without limitations for interceptions.

Al Qaeda is qualitatively different from "conventional" and historical terrorists. It might be described as non-Clausewitzian. Terrorists are pursuing political goals by means of violence (c.f. Irish Terrorism stretching back into the nineteenth century). Al Qaeda has no realistic political aim; has a disregard for the consequences of its actions; an unlimited interest in violence, an absolute destructiveness amounting to nihilism; but operates in non-negotiable space.

The integrity of the Pakistan nuclear arsenal however, remains a key concern. Security requires that those who develop weapons of mass effect (including nuclear) must not use them and must not pass on the technology. The weapons themselves must not fall into the hands of those the international community would find difficult to restrain or deter. Graham Allison has written that the ultimate terrorist catastrophe is preventable, but requires a tight hold on the bottleneck.