



An interview with Lt. General Masood Aslam (Retired)

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“Military Perspective: An Interview with Lt. General Masood Aslam (Retired)” was researched, compiled and written by **Faisal Aijaz**, Senior Analyst.

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Founded in 2015, CommandEleven provides situational awareness to facilitate a better understanding of the key dynamics that effect Pakistan from a national security perspective, especially in relation to terrorism, insurgencies and extremism.

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Decorated with Hilal-e-Imtiaz, Hilal-e-Imtiaz (Mil), and Sitar-e-Jurat, Lieutenant General Masood Aslam (Retired) served for almost 40 years in the Pakistan Army. He was seriously wounded during the 1971 War with India and was awarded Imtiaz Sanad. He held important command and staff appointments such as Command of Brigade during Kargil Operations, GOC 23RD Division, DG-National Accountability Bureau (NAB) Punjab, IG Training & Evaluation and Corps Commander Peshawar. He commanded Army's XI Corps for 3 years (2007-2010), where he oversaw and supervised some of the major military operations against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and lost his only son, Hashim Masood, in the December 2009 suicide bombing at the Parade Lane mosque in Rawalpindi. Director General-Operations Faisal Aijaz spoke to him about War on Terror, U.S relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Extremism and Line of Control.

How do you see the United States relations with Pakistan and more importantly with the Army?

Historically the U.S – Pakistan relations have always been transactional, where the US geo political considerations for this region remained the decisive factor. You must know that the U.S interests in Afghanistan have reduced but not finished. The U.S focus now is on Daesh in Middle East as it currently has taken over from Al-Qaeda as the real threat. It will neither want Daesh to gain any major successes in Afghanistan nor like to see the current dispensation totally crumble before the Taliban.

The U.S will also not like to see China-Russia-Pakistan and Iran to have a control of this region and for that India and Northern Alliance will remain its proxies. U.S relationship with Pakistan and the Army will remain transactional and has to keep the carrot of aid/technology dangling before both civil and military leadership. Pakistan has to keep all options open. However, the regional alliance is of greater advantage and permanent nature in long terms.

Afghanistan says that they have targeted Mullah Fazlullah of TTP several times; whereas Pakistan never dared to dismantle or attack the Haqqani Network nor Afghan Taliban, despite the fact that some of them are living in Quetta. How do you see this statement from the military lens?

Well, the current political leadership in Afghanistan is not a true representative of the Afghan Society. They are rather seen as stooges of foreign powers and are placed there because of presence of U.S led forces.

The entire military machine of 42+ countries alliance failed to control the country side and the situation today in Afghanistan is well known.

Blaming presence of Taliban leadership in Pakistan is an alibi. As long as there are more than 2 million refugees in Pakistan, no concerted action is possible against any Afghan group as every Afghan's movement will have to be curtailed and monitored.

Any militant group which resists own LEAs is taken on indiscriminately. Mullah Fazlullah is present with a small group of fighters and moving against him by the U.S or ANSF is just an eye wash.

U.S Drone Strikes in Pakistan's tribal belt is quite a muddy topic. How do you see it in the legal nature including the Collateral Damage Estimate?

On drones, I would just say that the unilateral employment of Drones to target anyone in Pakistan is an issue of legal and moral nature.

It has to be opposed because of graver far reaching implications. If accepted, it would then allow any country to use same methods to take out any HVT or group considered as its enemy.

Recently, the U.S launched tomahawk cruise missiles in Syria. How do you see the U.S Military escalation in Syria when the Russians are already there?

U.S attack in Syria is just an ongoing Game of Thrones. Muslims killing Muslims.

Back in 2002-03 during the intense stand-off between Pakistan and India, you were commanding 23rd Division as GOC. What issues are usually faced by the Army at Line of Control and why our own people are prone to casualties by the Indians?

In Azad Kashmir, the population has no restrictions on movement or selection of places of abode. Many places like the villages or the agricultural fields are right up to the LOC. The Indian troops occupying heights along LOC or liberty to target any movement in open. The population close to winters has to cut as much as possible for their cattle or harvest the last possible corn or maize crop. Similarly, they cannot afford to let any of their cows go across and will try to catch it even next to the LOC.

Since there is no clear line/ define feature on ground, the Indians fire at the civilian personnel even. At time when in cross firing they suffer casualties, they take a sort of revenge by firing at the villagers.

It is also wrongly perceived by the Indians that this targeting of the villages will deter the locals from aiding or joining the resistance forces in India-held Kashmir (IHK).

From 2007 till 2010, you were the Corps Commander Peshawar and thus oversaw some of the major military operations in FATA. When we analyse the military operation in North Waziristan, how important were the previous ones?

Faisal, you must understand that all military operations are part of a total Campaign Plan. These operations were conducted sequentially and some simultaneously depending upon the security environment and availability of resources. All of these should be seen as building blocks to achieve the greater aim. No one could have succeeded without the success of the earlier military operations.

What is your impression of the situation in Afghanistan? Do you believe that peace will ever prevail in Afghanistan if the foreign troops leave the country?

There is a common perception that peace will come automatically once the U.S quits Afghanistan. Marine Corps General and U.S National Security Advisor General James Jones visited us in Swat in March 2010. He wanted to talk to the locals and then asked if he can mix up with them. They were about 3-400 of them. I allowed him to go and mix/talk with them. While walking back to the circuit house Mingora, he asked me the same question. On being surprised on the question, he told me that one of the locals had told him to just quit Afghanistan and within 3 months they shall have peace. This is not totally true. However, we had seen in the past that the Soviet withdrawal initiated a new power struggle in Kabul amongst the Mujahideen groups which continued for years till the advent of Taliban.

However, the exit of foreign forces will help initiate a constructive intra afghan dialogue to find a solution for reconciliation of all warring factions. It will still be an uphill task as the world and regional powers have too many proxies to act as spoilers.

And who do you think are the actual stakeholders?

The actual stakeholders are the local ethnic groups who have seen internecine fighting and killing throughout history. If left at their own will work out a power sharing agreement themselves. But before that, there will be more bloodshed and instability.

How do people of FATA view the U.S presence in Afghanistan?

The people don't differentiate between the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan in 80s and the presence of US Troops in Afghanistan. We must understand the Afghan psyche who always view foreigners specially the uniformed personnel as enemies.

What are your views on the current security situation in Pakistan?

We have a much-improved security environment today in Pakistan essentially because of two reasons. Firstly, there are no spaces available in FATA or anywhere else in Pakistan which can be used as safe haven for planning and preparations by the militants. Kinetic operations in Karachi, Balochistan and Punjab have further deterred the silent abettors, financiers and sympathisers of these forces.

However, there is still a reasonable space available to the militants to plan and execute a one-off terrorist attack anywhere in Pakistan.

You once told me that we are an extremist nation. To what extent, we've been successful in eliminating the extremist mind-set?

We have failed badly as a nation to undertake genuine serious measures to counter violent extremism. NAP was a good initiative but except for the kinetic and trial by military courts is concerned, there has no visible progress on this front. Resultantly, the nurseries have not finished and the indoctrinated recruits continue to join these groups.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faisal Aijaz brings his hard-charging and reliable analysis to spearhead the domains of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and national security. He brings a great deal of understanding about military affairs, strategy and tactics, helping his team to better analyze the current and potential security situations in the region.

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