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Pakistan

The bloody show will go on

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The Pakistani ISI, having been badly exposed, will devise new strategy. For a while, it will hunt more seriously along the hounds while run more discreetly along the hare. It cannot give up either.

The sensational killing of al-Qaida's figurehead king, Osama bin Laden, at a well-guarded compound in the scenic Abbottabad valley is incredible in many ways. Outside of Pakistan, it is incredible to believe OBL being hunted in a country considered US ally in "war on terror" even if Gen. Musharraf was offering interesting clue. The back cover of his celebrated book, *In The Line Of Fire*, written in 2006, reads: "Since shortly after 9/11 when many al Qaeda leaders fled Afghanistan and crossed the border into Pakistan we have played multiple games of cat and mouse with them. The biggest of them all, Osama bin Laden, is still at large at the time of this writing but we have caught many, many others. We have captured 672 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totaling millions of dollars. Here, I will tell the story of just a few of the most significant manhunts."

He was the military chief, country's "president" and chief architect of Pakistan's "cat and mouse" policy all along the time Osama escaped Tora Bora and ended up at palatial villa we are watching ceaselessly on our TV screens across the world.

The "cat and mouse" game now stands exposed, leaving Pakistan military deeply embarrassed. On May 3, the ISI spokesperson told BBC that it was ignorant of OBL's presence at the said compound. This is a lie even former ISI chief and staunch al-Qaida supporter, Gen Hameed Gul, is not ready to buy. In a recorded interview, Gul said: bin Laden being in Abbottabad unknown to authorities "is a bit amazing". Aside from the military, Gul said "there is the local police, the Intelligence Bureau, the Military Intelligence, the ISI" they all had a presence there.

To unpack the "cat and mouse" policy, some background information is necessary for any outsider. The ISI, or Inter Services Intelligence, is country's most powerful spy agency that controls--- from behind the scene--- country's foreign policy, politics and media while army as an institution is Pakistan's most powerful political and economic institution. Since independence as British colony in 1947, army has ruled the country for 33 years. It runs over two dozen business concerns: from banks to cement factories, Pakistan military is a major stakeholder in every sector of country's industrial and financial life. One third of federal budget is reserved for defense.

Ever since the start of Afghan conflict in 1979, the ISI has been a key player in Afghanistan. Pakistan's military strategists consider Afghanistan a backyard that may provide, what they call strategic depth, in case of any likely Indian aggression. Also, the military strategists want to control Afghanistan in order to gain influence in Central Asian States blessed with immense gas reserves. In view of these considerations, Taliban and al-Qaida network have been protected and patronized by the ISI ever since 9/11. The strategy is to wait USA out. Like Soviet troops in the 1980s, ISI hopes US troops will also leave if Taliban continue bleeding them.

Hence, military has been until recently running with the al-Qaida/Taliban hare and hunting with the US hounds. It joined the hounds to secure \$11 billion military aid (since 2002) and has been running along the bearded hare to secure the so called "strategic depth". However, Washington found out the reality of "cat and mouse" play after a while. Hence, it began to drone Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan (Waziristan) in 2004 and raided the Abbottabad's (in)famous villa on May 1 without any prior information to Pakistan.

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However, when Obama mentioned Pakistani cooperation in hunting Osama down, it was an act of subtle diplomacy. Without logistic support from Pakistan, Washington knows, the NATO troops will be starving in Afghanistan. Hence, to secure supply lines, Washington will continue hunting along the reluctant ISI. The ISI, having badly exposed, will devise new strategy. For a while, it will hunt more seriously along the hounds while run more discreetly along the hare. It cannot give up either. The Pakistan military, ever since 1950s, has been trained and armed by the USA. A US military embargo will not merely render Pakistan military ineffective, it will also cost generals their perks and lavish lifestyles. The Khakis cannot give up bearded freemasonry either. "Strategic assets" ---as Taliban/al-Qaida and their Pakistani counterparts are called in Pakistani media--- are not merely imperative for "strategic depth." They are vital also to bleed India in Kashmir. Conflict with India must be kept alive. The entire military façade in Pakistan is built upon the imaginary threat from India. Hence, Osama or no Osama, as long as the USA is there in Afghanistan while military continue calling shots in Pakistan, the Afghan conflict will continue unabated. It is a catch 22 situation.

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