

Afghan-Pakistan Relations Reach A New Low: Will the Taliban Return?

by Ramtanu Maitra

In several discussions with Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid in mid-July, Afghan President Hamid Karzai expressed his deep concern at the hostile posture of the Pakistani troops along the borders of his country. Karzai has also accused Pakistan of carrying out a rampant insurgency within Afghanistan, and has made clear to Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf that Afghanistan cannot be considered as the "strategic depth" for the Pakistani Army—a phrase used by the pro-Taliban Pakistani Army officers repeatedly—and that the only way such a strategic depth can be established is through friendship.

These developments have not gone wholly unnoticed in Washington. But tied down by its contradictory policies, the Bush Administration can do little to intervene to change the equation. U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, a personal friend of President Karzai, has, however, acknowledged that Pakistan is playing the same game with Afghanistan as it is on the cross-border terrorism issue with India. On Pakistan not allowing its territory to be used by Taliban elements, Khalilzad said, "We need 100% assurances on this [from Pakistan], not 50% assurances, and we know the Taliban are planning in Quetta."

U.S. General Confirms Pakistan's Role

According to Ahmed Rashid, an expert on the Taliban and Afghanistan in general, President Karzai was clearly bolstered by the fact that every Western and Asian Ambassador in Kabul, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and every Afghan leader including those once extremely friendly to Pakistan—such as Vice President Hedayat Arsala and leaders of the Afghan Pushtuns—believe that President Musharraf, the Pakistani Army, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA—the Islamic fundamentalist party in political control of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas) are directly supporting the Taliban. This, President Karzai identifies as the Pakistani state policy, and not simply the policy of some rogue elements within Pakistan.

Meanwhile, for almost three weeks now, gunfire exchanges between the Pakistani and Afghan troops have become routine. On July 21, Jawed Ludin, spokesman for President Hamid Karzai, told the Pakistani *News* daily that Afghanistan has urged Islamabad to take "serious steps" against suspected Taliban fighters to prevent them from com-

ing over to launch terrorist attacks within Afghanistan. "We will take it seriously to confront it. So our expectation is for all those involved in the war against terror to take serious steps," Jawed Ludin added. Ludin's allegation against the authorities in Islamabad came a day after U.S. Maj. Gen. Frank "Buster" Hagenbeck said that Pakistan was helping the Taliban to regroup and cross over into Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province and the east of the country. "Several groups of fighters trained in Pakistan have crossed into Afghanistan and divided the eastern part of the country into three zones for mounting attacks. They have occupied large areas of the territory," Hagenbeck said.

Increased Taliban Presence

Phil Zabriskie of *Time* (Asia), reporting from Spin Boldak in the southeastern Afghan province of Kandahar close to the Pakistan border—the scene of a recent effort by U.S. troops to capture and eliminate al-Qaeda members—pointed out in the July 21 issue that the Taliban are regrouping now. Following their ouster from Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, most Taliban leaders found sanctuary among fellow ethnic Pushtuns in Pakistan's lawless and nominally governed Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Zabriskie said that accusations persist that ISI agents, or ex-agents, still back the Taliban.

On July 27, the governor of the volatile southern Afghan province of Zabul, Mullah Mohammad Omar—a namesake of the Taliban supremo—urged U.S. action on free-roaming hundreds of Taliban in their distinctive black or white robes and black or white turbans. The Zabul governor said these Taliban are moving around freely challenging the powerless district and provincial officials in southern Afghanistan. "If coalition forces do not launch a big operation here, it will be a big problem."

But President Karzai's accusations go beyond that. He told Ahmed Rashid: "I want to make Afghanistan's feelings known to both the United States and Pakistan. I saw President Musharraf's earlier remarks against us as pre-Sept. 11 thinking. There was a feeling amongst some Afghans that an understanding had been reached between the United States and Pakistan (when President Musharraf was in Washington last June) that Afghanistan could be 'sub-contracted' to the Pakistanis. I want nobody to be under any illusion that Afghanistan will allow any other country to control it. We are in control of our destiny."

Subsequent to these strong allegations, Islamabad has given some indications that it would like to talk things over. But the enmity has deepened and it is evident that unless Islamabad starts recognizing Afghanistan as an independent identity, and not a suzerainty of Pakistan approved by the Americans, the situation will not improve.

In an op-ed with the *Daily Times* of Lahore, Ahmed Rashid pointed out that since the Taliban were ousted, the Indians have built schools for Afghan children and hospitals for Afghan women, and Indian buses ply the hundreds of streets in Kabul; the national airline Ariana is being resurrected by the free gift of three Airbus from India. India is building roads in western Afghanistan and repairing dams in eastern Afghanistan. As a contrast, Ahmed Rashid notes, "Pakistan has not built a single hospital, school or road in Afghanistan. There is no Fatima Jinnah Hospital for Women or Mohammad Iqbal School for Children to compete with the Indira Gandhi, Nehru and other signposted Indian monuments to reconstruction."

The Durand Line Fiasco

The open hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan began on the night of July 11, when the Afghan troops fired at a Pakistani check post in Yakubi Kandau. The firing continued throughout the next day while the choppers flew overhead. The Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan Defense Secretary, and the governor of Nangarhar, Din Mohammad, a close associate of President Karzai, all alleged that Pakistani forces had made incursions into Afghanistan. While the allegations were rejected by President Musharraf's spokesman, thousands of Afghans ransacked the premises of the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul, burned the Pakistani flag, attacked and injured members of the Pakistani diplomatic staff and other employees.

It is an irony that only about three weeks before the first shooting incidents across the borders, on June 17, a tripartite meeting of the Americans, Afghans, and Pakistanis in Islamabad had decided on launching a joint operation, Operation United Resolve, under the supervision of the U.S. military command, to flush out the remnant Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters in the southeastern border region of Afghanistan.

The subsequent hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been taken seriously in Washington and elsewhere. Writing for the Power and Interest News Group (PINR), Jonathan Feiser said the Durand Line has now been destabilized. The Line was drawn in 1893 by Sir Mortimer Durand during the British Raj, to stabilize a clear security risk to British interests—the Pushtun tribes of the Indian frontier. In light of recent events in Afghanistan, it is probable that deeper roots of friction are at work along wobbly ethnic, historical, and tribal fault lines. Today, Feiser pointed out, the United States finds itself in a similar position to that of the British Empire before it: Faced with a situation in which military expansion is necessary to establish national security. In this light, the geopolitical as well as the symbolic value of the Durand Line

is not lost on the United States.

Human Rights Abuses

While the border situation with Pakistan makes things difficult for President Karzai, and makes him wonder about Washington's commitment to the well-being of Afghanistan, problems inside Afghanistan are more serious. The New York-based Human Rights Watch groups published on July 29 a 101-page document, "Killing You Is a Very Easy Thing for Us." It details the army and police kidnappings of Afghans and holding them for ransom in unofficial prisons; breaking into households and robbing families; raping women, girls, and boys; and extorting shopkeepers and bus, truck, and taxi drivers. "Human rights abuses in Afghanistan are being committed by gunmen and warlords who were propelled into power by the United States and its coalition partners after the Taliban fell in 2001," said Brad Adams, executive director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch.

The document, besides accusing the United States of collusion with the warlords, has implicated military and political officials through the testimonies given by witnesses. These officials include Mohammad Qaseem Fahim, the Minister of Defense; Hazrat Ali, the military leader of the Eastern Region; Younis Qanooni, the Minister of Education; Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former President of Afghanistan; and Abdul Rab al-Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful former mujahideen leader and part of the Northern Alliance. The document has, in essence, accused not only the most prominent leaders but also the pillars of the Northern Alliance. It is the virulently anti-Taliban, anti-Pakistan Northern Alliance that has kept the U.S.-backed Hamid Karzai in power. The document suggests that these Northern Alliance leaders are as deplorable as the Taliban, if not more.

This report would provide a boost to the Taliban, weaken the Karzai regime, and may start a process of separation between Kabul and the Northern Alliance. If that happens, the whole wobbly Afghan system that George Bush and his henchmen had propped up, will fall flat on its face. It is almost a certainty that very little help will ensue from Washington at that point. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out which way Islamabad would lean.

During the week of July 21, Washington, after months of paralysis, shone a little ray of hope on Kabul when the *Washington Post* quoted senior officials of the Bush Administration saying that it is now ready to push a \$1 billion aid package to Afghanistan. If the U.S. Congress accepts the proposal, it would more than triple the paltry \$300 million in U.S. aid. Reports also indicated that the Afghan and U.S. officials expect other international donors to come up with another \$600 million to \$1 billion.

If that happens, there will be at least some money made available to reconstruct infrastructure. "Reconstruction creates jobs. It creates a sense of trust and gives people hope for a more peaceful future," said Tayab Jawad, President Karzai's chief of staff, on July 27.