

Neo-Cons Questioning Bush Faith in Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

Since 9/11, the Bush Administration has maintained a two-track policy towards Pakistan. Both the White House and the State Department have consistently exuded confidence in Pakistan's efforts to counter terrorists, both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, and to remain a steadfast ally of the United States in the war on terrorism. But signals from both the Pentagon and the neo-conservatives have been critical of Pakistan, constituting the other track. One of its illustrious representatives, U.S. Ambassador to Kabul Zalmay Khalilzad—described by some as “Bush’s favorite Afghan”—complains of Pakistani duplicity in dealing with the Taliban and other anti-U.S. terrorists, who are trying to disrupt the American-backed government in Kabul. Khalilzad, by expressing these views publicly, is challenging President Bush, who has repeatedly assured the American public that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is the most important ally in America’s war against terrorism and is doing everything possible to help.

Paul Wolfowitz associate Khalilzad, like the rest of the neo-con pack, has indicated little interest in Pakistan. The neo-cons, as of now, are not deeply interested in Afghanistan either, but they are of the view, as the White House believes, that holding of Presidential and parliamentary elections in Afghanistan prior to the U.S. Presidential election in November would help President Bush’s re-election.

A story in the *New Republic* on July 7, “Pakistan for Bush,” suggests that Musharraf is under pressure to deliver “high-value targets” (HVTs) to coincide with the Democratic National Convention in late July. Citing an official who works under Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence’s director, Lt. Gen. Ehsan ul-Haq, the *New Republic* said that the Pakistanis “have been told at every level that apprehension or killing of HVTs before [the] election is [an] absolute must.” This source claims that Bush Administration officials have told their Pakistani counterparts they have a date in mind for announcing this achievement: “The last ten days of July deadline has been given repeatedly by visitors to Islamabad and during [ul-Haq’s] meetings in Washington.” That would allow President Bush to extract maximum political mileage out of the whole affair, it is presumed.

Bush says the United States and Pakistan “are working together closely on common challenges.” Pakistan’s support

was essential in the campaign against the Taliban, he has said on many occasions.

Major Non-NATO Ally

A similar assurance was issued last March by Secretary of State Colin Powell. While visiting Pakistan, he said, “Pakistan is taking on a number of difficult challenges of counter-terrorism, stopping proliferation, reforms in education, and building strong democratic institutions. The United States supports Pakistan’s determination and courage.” As a gesture of trust and friendship, Powell told reporters at a joint press conference with Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri on March 19, that the Bush Administration “will be making notification to our Congress that will designate Pakistan as major non-NATO ally for purposes of our future military-military relations.”

Subsequently, on June 16, President Bush announced that decision at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida while addressing American troops.

Also important to note are the statements of the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca, during her testimony before the House Committee on International Relations on June 22. Rocca said Pakistan “continues to be very cooperative on all the fronts of . . . vital national interest to the United States,” including non-proliferation and terrorism. On terrorism, she said that so far this year, 77 Pakistani soldiers have lost their lives against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Tribal Areas. She added that Pakistani security forces also are waging a struggle against domestic terrorists. “There is a battle going on for the soul of Pakistan at the moment, between extremists and moderates,” Rocca said.

At Oak Ridge, Tennessee on July 13, President Bush said: “Three years ago, Pakistan was one of the few countries in the world that recognized the Taliban regime. Al-Qaeda was active and recruiting in Pakistan, and was not seriously opposed. Pakistan served as a transit point for al-Qaeda terrorists leaving Afghanistan on missions of murder. Today, the governments of the United States and Pakistan are working closely in the fight against terror. President Musharraf is a friend of our country, who helped us capture Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the operational planner behind the September 11th attacks. And Pakistani forces are rounding up terrorists along their nation’s western border. Today, because we’re working with the Pakistani leaders, Pakistan is an ally in the war on terror, and the American people are safer.”

But does the President’s confidence in Pakistan match his envoy’s views in Afghanistan? Apparently, not. On April 6, UPI news agency reported that Khalilzad, who was visiting Washington, had suggested on April 5 that U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan may enter Pakistan to destroy the Taliban and al-Qaeda hideouts if the Pakistanis fail to do the job. His comments caused an uproar in Islamabad, where President

Musharraf said he took very serious exception to Khalilzad. "His statement is totally out of tune with the official U.S. policy—he should better consult the State Department before issuing such statements," said Musharraf. A Foreign Ministry spokesman, Jalil Abbas Jilani, said that "Mr. Khalilzad is not aware of the realities on the ground . . . and is perhaps also unaware of the position of his own government. The U.S. Administration at the highest level has greatly appreciated Pakistan's effort in eliminating and rooting out the terrorist infrastructure and the al-Qaeda elements from Pakistan"

This angry reaction, and likely the pulling of strings by the White House, put Khalilzad on the defensive and on April 6, he reversed field. "Pakistan is a significant country, and we would like Pakistan to deal with the problem," said Khalilzad at a briefing at the National Press Club in Washington.

Khalilzad has sometimes gotten support for his "suspicions about Pakistan" from the Pentagon. For instance, on April 20 this year, the top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David Barno, told reporters the U.S. military was watching closely how Pakistan deals with the militants, but said a "significant" number of the terrorists lodged in Pakistan's Tribal Areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border had to be "killed or captured. . . . We have some concerns that [Pakistan's operation] could go in the wrong directions," he said. Attacks on U.S. forces just across the border from Pakistan's Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan are frequent, and militants often retreat into the mountains toward the Pakistani region, U.S. officers allege.

AEI Writes Khalilzad's Questions

These statements by the U.S. military, however, do not suggest that Pakistan is backing the terrorists acting against Kabul and American troops. What Khalilzad vents, from time to time, is really the view of the neo-cons in Washington. On May 31, the *Washington Times* published an article by Arnaud de Borchgrave, a neo-con mouthpiece. De Borchgrave wrote that Pakistan, a "major non-NATO ally" of America, has 22 Urdu-language publications that advocate *jihād* against the United States, Israel, and India. He cited *Zarb-e-Momin* (Blow of the Pious), a weekly published by the Al Rashid Trust in Karachi, charging that U.S. soldiers were promoting pornography in Afghanistan. "In Khost, the Americans are distributing triple-X CDs, videos and magazines as freebies by the thousands. They have even set up Internet cafes that show free porn movies. . . . If the Afghans got rid of the Russians, how can they tolerate the Americans who are committing atrocities against Muslims all over the world?" And *Nida-e-Millat*, a weekly of the Nawa-i-Waqt Group in Lahore, said Christian missionaries "under the guise of aid missions are forcing Iraqis to abandon their Muslim faith with bread and medicines," quoted de Borchgrave. "They are setting up churches in every nook and cranny of every Muslim country. Iran is the next target of the missionaries." De

Borchgrave's meaning is that despite what President Bush and Secretary of State Powell claim, Pakistan is siding with the fundamentalists and is less than a staunch American ally against terrorism.

Similar views come out routinely from the neo-con bastion, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). One of AEI's resident fellows, Reuel Marc Gerecht, wrote "Pakistan's Taliban Problem" on Oct. 29, 2001, noting that for over 20 years, Pakistan has been supporting an array of militant Islamic groups inside Afghanistan. During the Soviet-Afghan War (1980-89), Pakistan's dictator, Zia al-Haq, made Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a fire-breathing Islamic militant, Islamabad's favorite Afghan guerrilla leader. In 1995, the Western-educated prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, and her right-hand man, Gen. Nasrullah Babar, abandoned Hekmatyar for the intellectually more primitive, though no less militant, Taliban, who'd sprung in late 1994 from the hundreds of *madrassas*, religious schools, located on both sides of the Pakistani-Afghan border, Gerecht said.

Gerecht claimed, "What Secretary of State Powell and Ambassador [Richard] Haass (then Powell's Special Envoy to Afghanistan) were suggesting is that General Musharraf can and will stand athwart his country's history and yell, 'Stop!' Musharraf, who recently described the United States as 'the lesser of two evils' (the other evil, by the way, wasn't bin Laden, but the possibility that Pakistan could get caught in a war between the United States and the Saudi militant), is most unlikely to be so foolish, even if he is so ideologically inclined." Gerecht's contention is that the Talibanization of Pakistan will stop only when the Taliban in Afghanistan have been extirpated—and not by Pakistan.

Another AEI resident fellow, William Schneider, pointed out on June 8, 2002 that the U.S. response to the terrorism of Sept. 11 also triggered unintended consequences. The United States again teamed up with Pakistan, this time to overthrow the Taliban. The unintended consequence was that al-Qaeda terrorists took refuge in Pakistan, joining with local Islamic militants, Schneider said. "Al-Qaeda is believed to have had a hand in the bombings of Christian churches in Pakistan, the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl, and the Karachi car bombing that killed 12 French technical advisors."

Schneider warned the Bush Administration that taking Pakistan as a partner in the war on terrorism may also lead to a nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

But beyond the neo-cons, who belong to the Republican stable, Khalilzad was once paid by the UNOCAL oil giant to negotiate with the Taliban for getting their approval on a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Khalilzad is also close to Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Democrat. It has been said that if the Kerry-Edwards ticket wins the next Presidential election in November, "Zbig" may get in the administration. It is not unlikely that Khalilzad is getting his orders from somewhere else.