

Pakistan's Uncertain Future: A Victim of Geopolitics

by Ramtanu Maitra

The spate of violence in Pakistan in recent months has deeply undermined Islamabad's authority over its people and has posed questions in the minds of its well-wishers: Where the country is heading?

Pakistan has become a nation that has no clear objective for its people, and is driven exclusively by the geostrategic goals of the powers-that-be. What makes the problem even more complex, are Islamabad's simultaneous efforts to accommodate geostrategic directives issued by the United States and China, and at the same time, gingerly hold back the growing power of homegrown and foreign militant Islamic groups, who strongly resent the Pakistani authorities' kowtowing to the policies of the United States, in particular.

On March 1, only two days before President Bush arrived in Pakistan on his 24-hour (March 3-4) visit, Islamabad carried out a massive military campaign that pitched thousands of Pakistani security forces against locals residing in the area, as well as al-Qaeda militants near the town of Miranshah in North Waziristan (**Figure 1**). The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan border (**Figure 2**) remain a sparingly governed region in Pakistan where the locals have harbored al-Qaeda and other foreign militants for years. The Miranshah encounter took at least 125 lives, mostly U.S.-identified terrorists, but also 20 Pakistani soldiers and a Chechen commander linked to al-Qaeda.

The battle of Miranshah came to an end with the Pakistani troops in virtual control of the town, but it is a real question as to when Pakistani soldiers will be able to walk the streets of Miranshah again, unarmed. The hatred toward Islamabad of the "tribal agency" locals was created by these U.S.-instigated military operations, carried out by the Pakistani military at the expense of killing its own people.

The incident was rightly acknowledged by observers as yet another attempt by Islamabad

to convince the Americans of its commitment to eliminate al-Qaeda militants who have been lodged inside Pakistan since the Winter 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and to capture the alleged masterminds and financiers of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States.

A section of the Pakistani establishment understands that it is well-nigh impossible to develop a consensus to eliminate either al-Qaeda or the Taliban in order to serve the present U.S. interest; yet, it often turns its guns on the Pakistani people to appease Washington, in hope of some abstract geostrategic gains. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and

FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)



its increasingly violent rhetoric against Iran in recent months, the United States is now one of the most hated nations, among a large section of Pakistanis. Anti-American militant Islamic forces, which both al-Qaeda and the Taliban represent, are considered by the majority of Pakistanis, and a large section within the Pakistani military as well, as allies whom Washington wants to eliminate, in order to control strategically important Central Asia and Afghanistan.

On March 2, Islamabad, having bloodied its swords by killing a large number of locals in North Waziristan, received a severe setback. In Karachi, a suicide bomber rammed an American diplomat's car outside the Marriott Hotel, just yards from the U.S. consulate, killing four people, including a U.S. diplomat, and wounding 52 others. For years now, violent acts have been taking place, day in and day out, in Pakistan, and there is hardly an area which might not blow up on any given day. In the port city of Karachi, domestic and foreign-born militants have built their dens and are training extremists. Pakistani authorities make noise about it from time to time, but the militants have continued to thrive there.

Fallout From the Kashmir Dispute

Islamabad has now come to acknowledge what New Delhi had claimed for years, and Washington has grudgingly admitted only recently: that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have developed a working relationship with the anti-India Kashmiri terrorists, who seek an independent Jammu and Kashmir, or at least an autonomous Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir within Pakistan. Reports indicate that such a working relationship was developed through the help of some militant Pakistan

Islamist groups such as the Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba. However, it would be fair to claim that these Islamist groups were allowed to recruit, organize, train, and merge different terrorist groups, only because a powerful section of the Pakistani establishment wanted it that way.

In a recent interview, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf even admitted this little fact. The Kashmir dispute, he contended, "has its fallout on people wanting to operate in Kashmir, having nexus with the al-Qaeda or the Taliban or the extremists who live in our society. So this becomes a very, very dangerous nexus and combination. So therefore, Kashmir dispute and Palestinian dispute, both are ripe for resolution and we must resolve them."

If Pakistan had only to "manage" the terrorists of various ethnic groups and different aspirations, it would not be such a difficult problem to handle. But when a nation loses direction and is left with only geostrategic goals as its future objectives, things begin to fall apart. And, that is exactly what has happened to Pakistan. It is somewhat reminiscent of the early 1970s, when Pakistan, which then consisted of two separate wings—West and East Pakistan—divided by about 1,000 miles of Indian territory, driven by a section of the establishment, ignored realities that existed in East Pakistan. Genocide committed by the Pakistani Army there was driven by the establishment's obsession to deny those realities and silence the population. However, Bengalis of then-East Pakistan, despite opposition from Washington, took on the Pakistani establishment, and with a nudge from India across the border, won their independence, and in 1971 established the nation of Bangladesh. Islamabad was slapped on the face by reality.

But it did not take long for Islamabad to forget the past and indulge in new fantasies centered on Afghanistan. Having helped the Americans to drive the Red Army from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Pakistan began to dream of extending its western borders into Central Asia, developing Afghanistan as its satrapy in the process. However, once again, fresh realities emerged and were ignored by the Pakistani establishment. With the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan, the United States, which had walked away in the 1980s leaving Afghanistan under Pakistan's geostrategic control, began to take a second look at the Afghan situation. The 9/11 attacks forced the realities into view.

Post-9/11 Smoke and Mirrors

Post-9/11 Pakistan under President Musharraf is mostly smoke and mirrors. On one hand, Pakistan pretends to act as the strongest ally of the United States in helping to eliminate the Taliban and al-Qaeda. On the other, Pakistan, having been the mentor and protector of the Taliban and al-Qaeda for at least a decade, has no real intention to wholly antagonize the Islamic militants, whom the Americans label as "terrorists," but whom most Pakistanis consider to be "Islamic jihadis." For four years, the Pakistani establishment has carried out this complex game of smoke and mirrors, but it is evident

now that the game has neither convinced the Americans, nor satisfied those who would like the Americans to leave.

U.S.-Pakistani relations further soured following the discovery that Pakistani metallurgical engineer A.Q. Khan was running an international network, providing bits and pieces of nuclear-bomb-making ingredients to nations that were keen on developing nuclear weapons. It so happened that a number of nations listed in U.S. President Bush's "axis of evil" had been in contact with Khan.

Washington is deeply suspicious of Pakistan, and Islamabad no longer has the capability to assuage those suspicions. For instance, during Bush's March 4 meeting with Musharraf, neither President had any constructive things to discuss. Besides summarily turning down Musharraf's request for a U.S.-Pakistani nuclear deal, whereby the United States would provide technology and fuel, for Pakistan's nuclear-power program, the U.S. President made it clear that Washington wants a full interrogation of A.Q. Khan, to find out more about the nuclear program of America's "enemy" nations, such as North Korea and Iran. Khan is under house arrest, and Islamabad has so far kept him from being fully interrogated by U.S. agencies.

The "Khan network" is yet another smoke-and-mirrors story which involves not only Pakistan, but the United States as well. Khan had carried out his nuclear black-market operation in dozens of countries, with the help of a network which was surely not invisible. Since it involved the manufacturing of centrifuge cascades, developing drawings, etc., it could not have altogether escaped international agencies' attention. It is inconceivable that neither international agencies, nor the Pakistani military, were aware of this network. But no one is willing to say why this operation, which began in the 1970s, was allowed to continue for decades.

Khan was working in 1975 with an engineering firm based in Amsterdam and a subcontractor to the URENCO consortium specializing in the manufacture of nuclear equipment. He had begun to work on copying centrifuge drawings, sending them to Pakistan and setting up his international network. There are dozens in the Netherlands who knew about this operation back then. It was an open secret.

In addition, honestly, nothing much happens in Pakistan at that level without the military having a foot in it. Pakistan's nuclear program, which is not open even to the country's prime ministers, is controlled top-down by the Pakistani military, and no one else. In a recent paper, "The Myth of an Islamist Peril," Frédéric Grare, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, based in Washington, D.C., pointed out that "the Pakistani military is the main source of insecurity on the subcontinent, making it necessary to challenge the common perception and policy in the international community that stability and security depend on not pressuring military sovereigns such as Musharraf." Grare went on to claim that the Islamic threat in Pakistan is a myth. He said that Islamic parties participate in electoral politics

and seek power and influence through democratic means; it is the jihadi groups that resort to violence. In reality, this shadow play is orchestrated through the Pakistani military.

The problem is that in Pakistan, often the shadows in the shadow play get out of control.

The Baloch Uprising

Beside the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the local Islamic militants, the Musharraf government has been confronted with a serious insurgency in Balochistan. Having antagonized the Baloch tribes in southwestern Pakistan since the 1970s, Islamabad has very little political capital left in that province, and is left with playing one tribe against the other. But it seems that that game has now also reached an end point. For months now, the Pakistani Army has been battling the Baloch tribes in the moon-like terrain of Balochistan, and the tribes have remained unified against the much-maligned "Punjabi-dominated" government in Islamabad.

The Baloch insurgency worries Pakistani strategists for a number of reasons. Besides the fact that Balochistan borders both Afghanistan and Iran, the province has more than 90% of Pakistan's oil and gas fields. The Baloch insurgents are blowing up the gas pipelines and attacking the gas fields, encouraging a brutal response from the Pakistani military.

According to available reports, during 2005, Balochistan experienced 187 bomb blasts, 275 rocket attacks, 8 attacks on gas pipelines, 36 attacks on electricity-transmission lines, and 19 explosions on railway tracks. At least 182 civilians and 26 security personnel were killed. On Dec. 14, 2005, when President Musharraf went to visit Kohlu, a small Baloch town, to announce a development package for the province, rockets were hurled at him. Subsequently, an Army helicopter carrying Inspector-General of the Frontier Corps Maj.-Gen. Shujaat Zamir Dar and his deputy, came under fire.

This year, on Feb. 21, the locomotive of the Lahore-bound Chiltan Express was derailed after insurgents blew up part of the track, cutting off Balochistan's rail link with the rest of the country.

Balochistan is important to Islamabad for a number of geostrategic reasons. Quetta, the provincial capital, and Chaman, a town near the Afghanistan borders, are the major centers where many Taliban leaders have been sheltered, as Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently pointed out. For years, Pushtun refugees and Taliban militants have been settled in Balochistan by the Pakistani authorities, instilling fear in the mind of the Baloch tribes that Islamabad is relocating Pushtuns and Punjabis there, to make them a minority in their own province. This is perhaps the dominant reason that the Baloch tribes have joined hands now to oppose the Pakistani Army.

The Gwadar Port Gambit

More importantly, in the southwest corner of the Balochistan coast, a stone's throw from the Strait of Hormuz, Pakistan

is building up the Gwadar port, with the help of China. This strategic project began soon after 9/11, and China flew in its Vice Premier, Wu Bangguo, to lay the foundation on March 22, 2002. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was on hand to inaugurate the first phase of the project last March. The total cost is estimated at \$1.16 billion, of which the Chinese contribution for the first phase was \$198 million, and Pakistan's, \$50 million. China has reportedly invested another \$200 million into building a coastal highway that will connect the Gwadar port with Pakistan's premier port, Karachi, located at the mouth of the River Indus in the east. The second phase, which will cost \$526 million, will feature the construction of nine more berths and terminals, and it is expected that China will finance the second phase in its entirety.

During his recent visit to China, President Musharraf made clear that Pakistan wants to act as a transit facility, giving China access to Central Asian markets and energy sources. "We are interested in setting up a trade and energy corridor for China," he told *China Daily* in a March 2 interview.

China plans to carry crude oil imports from Iran and Africa, headed to northwest China's Xinjiang byroad, through Pakistan. Musharraf pointed out to *China Daily* that such a route will be much shorter, compared to the one via the Straits of Malacca.

But the Baloch uprising has raised questions about the future efficacy of the Gwadar port and related planned infrastructure. On Feb. 15, three Chinese engineers were killed some 700 kilometers southeast of Quetta. Several other Chinese engineers had been killed or kidnapped in Pakistan in 2004.

Although it is not clear who was behind these killings, the matter has definitely caught Beijing's attention. Following the Feb. 15 killing, Chinese President Hu Jintao ordered the Foreign Ministry "to put pressure on the local government to capture the murderers, ensure the safety of the Chinese there, and properly handle the aftermath," whatever that might be.

Islamabad has blamed both New Delhi and Tehran for the Baloch insurgency. During the recent visit of Afghan President Karzai to Islamabad, Pakistan reportedly provided evidence to him of involvement by the Indian foreign intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing, with Balochistan and the Tribal Areas. The *Pakistan Tribune* claimed on Feb. 21 that Pakistan gave President Karzai details of Indian activities against Pakistan being conducted through their consulates in Afghanistan.

While such accusations are routine, whether true or not, there is little doubt that India is deeply concerned about the development of the Gwadar port. New Delhi worries that Chinese participation in the project is bound to shift the strategic balance in the region against India, and perceives it as a clear bid by the Chinese to gain a firm footing in the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean.

Beyond the port itself, New Delhi believes that one of the major strategic objectives of China is to connect western China with Central Asia by land routes—and there is no doubt that Pakistan is working to help China in that area. In order to optimize the potential of Balochistan, Pakistan has begun working on the province's infrastructure, and has planned to construct a network of roads linking Gwadar with Karachi, Pasni, Ormara, and Turbat. This coastal highway will reach the Iranian border at Gupt. The whole network would be connected to the Indus Highway, and through it to China. There has also been an agreement concluded among Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, for development of a railroad link between Central Asia and the Xinjiang province of China, and the Arabian Sea Coast. A road from Gwadar to Saindak, which is under construction and runs parallel to the Iran-Pakistan border, will be the shortest route between Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. None of these developments are eyed positively by the geostrategists of New Delhi.

Iran has also been dragged into this blame game, with Pakistani officials claiming that the Iranian town of Mand is a sanctuary for rebel activity. In addition, Iran had raised serious concerns, in 2001, over the transfer to U.S. forces of three Pakistani bases in Balochistan at the start of the war in Afghanistan. Observers claim that an unstable Balochistan may come in handy for Iran as a buffer state, in case the United States chooses to attack Iran from Pakistan, to eliminate Tehran's nuclear capabilities.

By the same token, Washington, and particularly the geostrategists in the United States, are concerned that the Gwadar port would not only allow Beijing to ensure its presence in the Persian Gulf, but would also help China in enhancing its energy security, by offering a transit terminal for oil imports from the Gulf region. At present, the bulk of oil imported by China has to pass through the Strait of Malacca, a route that is quite long and increases the risk factor in abnormal times, due to American presence in the region.

A New Enemy

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the arm-twisting by Washington to force Pakistan to cooperate in the war on terrorism, has created for Pakistan a new enemy: Afghanistan. It is widely acknowledged that Islamabad does not like the presence of the United States, NATO, or the American puppet in Kabul, President Hamid Karzai. What Pakistan wants in order to satiate its geostrategic illusions, is to bring the Taliban to power in Kabul—or other Afghans who would not indulge in forming a "Greater Pakhtoonistan" and would remain under Islamabad's control. However, this conflicts with what Washington wants, at least for now.

Kabul, as well as Washington, had long been aware of what Islamabad's long-term strategy was toward Afghanistan. From time to time, the two allies, Kabul and Islamabad, engaged in the war against terrorism on behalf of Washington,

accusing each other and venting their frustrations. Now, however, the feud has come out in the open.

In February, when President Karzai went to Islamabad, he was carrying, with Washington's approval, a list of Taliban militants who were residing openly in Pakistan's garrison town of Quetta in Balochistan, under the protection of the Pakistani Army, since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The presence of Taliban leaders there had been known for years.

President Karzai's Foreign Minister, Abdullah Abdullah, said in early March that there was concern in Kabul that Islamabad was not following up on the list.

That got President Musharraf's goat. In an interview with CNN on March 6, he said that the list that Afghan officials gave to Pakistan, with supposed details about Taliban militants in Pakistan—including the fugitive leader, Mullah Omar—was "nonsense." There was "a very, very deliberate attempt to malign Pakistan by some [Afghan] agents and President Karzai is totally oblivious of what is happening in his own country," Musharraf declared.

Within 24 hours, U.S. CENTCOM chief Gen. John Abizaid was in Islamabad, urging President Musharraf to lower his voice. But, as in so many areas of the world, Washington depends, in Pakistan, on people whom it does not trust. It is conceivable that Washington understands that Afghan policy is not wholly under the control of Islamabad, and even if it

were, Musharraf sees no real geostrategic advantage in following the U.S. diktat.

Islamabad-Beijing Alliance

At the same time, Pakistan makes no bones about its closeness to China. That relationship remains at the official Islamabad-Beijing level, and there is very little contact between the Islamic Pakistan and China. In fact, a number of Chinese Muslim secessionists from Xinjiang province live in Pakistan, where they are plotting against Beijing. Although there are a number of areas where Islamabad and Beijing work closely with each other, the Pakistani President also makes it a point to dash off to Beijing whenever he gets into difficulties with Washington. This is more of a sideshow, to keep the Americans slightly off-balance.

During his recent visit to China, President Musharraf, while talking to the governor of Sichuan province, Secretary of the Communist Party Zhang Xue Zhong, and other provincial leaders, said on Feb. 23: "We have a resolve to take forward broad-based relations between Pakistan and China and take our bilateral economic interaction to new heights in the future."

Over the years, Pakistan's defense ties with China have grown. China has been the most steadfast supplier of military hardware to Pakistan. It has signed 13 agreements and memoranda of understanding on broad areas, including energy, trade, defense, energy, and communications. Joint production of JF-17 Thunder fighters and probable sales of high-tech F-10 aircraft, exhibited by China during Musharraf's China visit, will pave the way for firmer cooperation in the military arena, which forms the foundation of Sino-Pak relations.

China has assisted Pakistan with its entire nuclear program—military and civilian—and is now setting up the Chashma II, a second 300 MW nuclear reactor, where the major components for the reactor, the first uranium core, and three reloads will be supplied by China. The 300 MW nuclear reactors at Chashma were built with Chinese assistance, despite the de facto international supply embargo. Earlier, heavy water for the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant (KANUPP) and technical assistance in uranium enrichment were provided by China.

Pakistan, like India, is seeking observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and expects help from China. A full membership in the SCO could raise its economic link to China to a higher plane. Meanwhile, Pakistan is supporting China's entry into the South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC), which consists of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. This is seen by observers as Islamabad's attempt to restructure the regional balance of power—another geostrategic move, rather than anything real in South Asia, which is being increasingly dominated by the growing economic and military power of India.

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