

Pakistan in Turmoil May Complicate U.S. Plans

by Ramtanu Maitra

A deadly missile released from a U.S. aircraft in the dark of night, in the early hours of Jan. 14, killed 18 people and destroyed three houses on the outskirts of the village of Damadola Burkanday, in the Bajaur district in Pakistan's populous North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), bordering Afghanistan. A number of Pakistani civilians were killed. According to the Pentagon, the targets were al-Qaeda's number-two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the top Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, who were supposedly scheduled to attend a feast in that village.

Bajaur is one of the seven Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) situated along the border with Afghanistan. These mountain areas, home to 6 million inhabitants, have long been used as sanctuaries and rear bases by al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Central Asian terrorists, including some Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Chechens.

The Confusion

Amidst conflicting reports about exactly who was killed, Fahim Wazir, the chief Pakistani government official in the region where the strike occurred, issued a statement saying that militants had carted off the bodies of a few foreigners before authorities arrived at the scene of the attack. Locals have told reporters that Islamabad is afraid to admit that only Pakistani civilians were killed in that attack, and Fahim Wazir's statement of the deaths of a few unidentified "foreigners," whose bodies were not admittedly seen by anyone, is Islamabad's way of giving a seal of approval to Washington's murderous policies against Pakistanis.

The reason the local population is so upset, is that this is not the first time that such an incident has occurred, and despite routine diplomatic protests issued by Islamabad, ostensibly to soothe the rising temper of Pakistani citizens following every such incident, Pakistani intelligence sources say the United States has Islamabad's tacit agreement to carry out such operations in the Pushtun tribal areas.

In December 2005, an supposedly unidentified drone shelled a house inside Pakistan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and allegedly killed Abu Hamza Rabia, a leading al-Qaeda operative, whose body was never identified. The United States military, facing a growing opposition within the Pakistani population against the tacit agreement that allows the United States to carry out such sneak attacks within



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Speaking at a news conference with former U.S. President George H.W. Bush, a special UN envoy for relief for Pakistan's October earthquake, Shaukat Aziz, a banker and a favorite of Washington and Wall Street, said "naturally we cannot accept any action within our country which results in what happened over the weekend. . . . Our relationship with the U.S. is important, it is growing, but at the same time such actions cannot be condoned."

While the country's Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao complained about U.S. operations based upon false intelligence, former Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief, and one of the founders of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, retired Lt. Gen. Hameed Gul, talking to Radio Tehran, blamed Musharraf for adopting policies to help the United States hunt for al-Qaeda leaders. He said such policies have done great damage to the Pakistan Army and people.

Things To Follow

Pakistan's former army chief General Mirza Aslam Beg pointed out that the Jan. 14 attack was a pre-

Pakistani territory, and to have a military presence, had denied the attack.

In fact, U.S. Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Stephen Hadley declined to confirm that Rabia, said to be among al-Qaeda's top five leaders and responsible for planning overseas attacks, was dead, or that the attack was carried out by a pilotless U.S. plane. But marks on the shrapnel of the shell made clear that the attack was launched from a U.S. drone.

The Jan. 14 attack has enraged many Pakistanis, and the government of President Pervez Musharraf is now left to cope with the dead bodies and waves of protests. Many people had expected Musharraf to broach the issue in a televised address on Jan. 17, but he spoke at length instead about the civil war-like situation developing in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan, bordering Afghanistan and Iran. To the chagrin of Bajaur people, Musharraf avoided the Jan. 14 incident altogether.

Earlier, however, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, who left on an official visit to the United States on Jan. 17, called the air strike "one unfortunate event" in a long relationship.

clude to what the U.S. and its Western allies plan to do in the near future. He said the U.S. plan is to target Iranian and Pakistani nuclear assets. Meanwhile, Islamabad lodged a protest with U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker on Jan. 14 and mass protests erupted that day in the region of the attack zone, and attacks on U.S.-funded aid agencies were reported in the town of Khar, in the Bajaur tribal zone.

It is evident that Islamabad is left with no choice but to control the damage caused by the missile attack. If Sherpao's statement is correct, it is likely that al-Qaeda or the Taliban had managed to plant a false lead with the action-seeking U.S. intelligence agencies by means of informers. According to Israeli intelligence reports, this decoy operation had two objectives:

- To confuse the commanders of the American forces hunting for bin Laden and Mullah Omar and expose their failure to penetrate al-Qaeda's top ranks, and
- To expose U.S. pursuit tactics and uncover any American collaborators in their midst. The speed with which the news of the air raid appeared on U.S. television channels on the night of Jan. 13 was an indication of the CIA's certainty

that this time it had hit one of its primary marks in the war on terror; al-Zawahiri.

There were, however, serious questions raised about the Jan. 14 attack. Was it really targeted against the al-Qaeda, or against Pakistan? The reason that such a question has been raised, is that it has become evident in recent months, that Washington is getting increasingly impatient with Pakistan.

Pakistan has, all along, been a key ally in the Bush Administration's stated war on terrorism. Pakistan broke ranks in the Winter of 2001 to help the United States oust the Taliban militia from Kabul and install Hamid Karzai, a handpicked Pushtun from the important Popalzai tribe, and a dear friend of the Americans. It had been earlier well established that the Pakistani army was the key firepower that had brought the Taliban to power in Kabul in 1995-1996.

While the special ops-led military operation to oust the Taliban was a cinch, what followed in the subsequent four years of the proxy American occupation has not only reddened many neo-con faces in Washington, but has also continued to claim many American lives. The violent re-emergence of the hard-line Taliban in recent months, particularly since last Fall, in Afghanistan, has upset the U.S. military. The Pentagon, after spending years in a state of denial, has come to realize that the Pakistani population, and the Pakistani military, have no intention to sign on the dotted line in their cooperation with the United States against the Afghans. Not only does the Pakistani military not want the presence of U.S. or NATO troops, next door in control of Afghanistan, but also the Pakistani military is just not interested in working in tandem with the Pentagon in carrying out the neo-cons' long-term plans for the region, such as the weakening and invasion of Iran.

Did Pakistan Double-Cross Bush?

On the other hand, the Bush Administration believes that since they have invested massively in Pakistan, and have treated Islamabad lightly for their past sins, such as a top Pakistani nuclear engineer passing out alleged secrets of nuclear bomb-making to "enemy" nations like Iran and North Korea over the years, and the strengthening, arming, and even protecting the virulently anti-U.S. Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Therefore, the extension of logic suggests, Pakistan as a whole should feel indebted to Washington's generosity. What upsets the neo-cons within the Bush Administration in particular is that Islamabad, which has received billions of dollars from the U.S. in the form of economic help, and was forgiven of part of its foreign debt, is still nurturing the al-Qaeda leaders and bringing up the Taliban for an eventual takeover of Kabul.

In addition, Pakistan's close relations with China have once more been put under a magnifying glass. In the past, it had been a point of contention in the corridors of power in Washington. The Bush Administration expected that equa-

tion to change following 9/11, but it really has not followed that path. That reality was driven home in Washington in early January when a media report said that the CIA is making a fresh assessment of the nuclear and missile cooperation between Pakistan and China, after a Chinese revelation to set up civilian nuclear reactors in Pakistan and modernize Pakistan's fissile material storage facilities.

The report claimed the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, had told Musharraf in December 2005 that China could upgrade Pakistan's military nuclear program, if Pakistan formally requested it. The CIA claimed that it has received intelligence that a Chinese technical team was in Pakistan in the first week of December to assess the damage to Pakistani nuclear storage facilities in the earthquake disaster.

The presence of a Chinese technical team inside Pakistan triggered Washington to convey its concerns to both Pakistan and China, and to ask them to respect the American concerns. CIA director Porter Goss, briefing the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence about fresh cooperation between China and Pakistan, said China had so far expressed its intent to assist Pakistan, but if it went ahead, then the U.S. would reconsider its existing relations with both states.

U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has already warned China during a recent visit to Beijing, that the U.S. would be concerned about any cooperation between China and other countries in the area of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

It is evident, then, that U.S.-Pakistan relations, if not altogether soured, have surely not taken the turns the neo-cons expected. The Bush Administration, which is not interested in analyzing why the Pakistanis do not dance to every tune that Washington plays, has reacted the only way it knows—by hitting Pakistan with missiles to let America's antagonists in Pakistan know what the Americans would do if they finally choose to.

Future Complications

But, one does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why the Pakistanis will not play ball with the United States for ever. To begin with, Pakistan is an Islamic nation, and many Pakistanis would like to make it a more orthodox Islamic nation. These promoters of orthodox Islam have no difficulty in pointing out that the acts of the United States in recent years make it a virtual enemy of Islamic nations. The Bush Administration, since 9/11, has handpicked its enemy nations and, barring North Korea, all others are Islamic nations. Beside President Musharraf, and a few other significant people, most Pakistanis are more willing to be enemies of the United States, than to identify themselves as its friends.

Secondly, the American military presence within Pakistan creates anger among its population, as well as within a section of the military. Washington denies such a presence, and so does Islamabad. But, millions of Pakistanis see U.S.

forces, get pushed around by them, and consider their presence as a violation of Pakistan's national sovereignty.

The airfield at Dalbandin is one of four Pakistani bases used by U.S. and allied forces to support the Operation Enduring Freedom campaign in Afghanistan. Both the Dalbandin and the Shamsi air bases used by the Americans are close to the Afghan borders. The other bases, at Jacobabad and Pasni, are more distant from the Afghan border, and are used for logistical support. The Dalbandin base is relatively remote, but it is located in a province where many Pakistanis share ethnic and religious kinship with the Taliban.

In late December 2001, Pakistan notified the U.S. that the bases at Jacobabad and Pasni might be needed by the Pakistani Air Force, in the wake of rising tensions between India and Pakistan. The facilities were partially reclaimed by Pakistan, and, as of early January 2002, both Pakistani and American forces were operating at the two airfields. The U.S. military retained exclusive use of the Dalbandin and Shamsi bases.

By March 2004, there were reports of increased U.S. operations in Pakistan. Two air bases—Dalbandin and Shahbaz (near Shamsi)—were the focus of extensive movements to provide logistical support for Special Forces and intelligence operations.

These American bases are eye sores, and targets of many orthodox Islamist groups who are also armed and instigated by the many enemies that the Bush Administration has created among the Muslims in recent years. The presence of these air bases, and the American military personnel, has convinced some Pakistanis that with Islamabad's tacit agreement, Pakistan could be used as the launching pad, or the support base, for a military invasion of Iran. The argument may, or may not, be strategically sound, but in a country such as Pakistan, where suspicion of America's overall intent is deep-rooted, propaganda sells easily. And, one can be sure that there is no dearth of individuals to carry out the anti-America propaganda there.

The increasing destabilization of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and the re-emergence of the hard-line Taliban in Afghanistan, should make the Pentagon sit up and think again about the "never-to-be-given-up option" of military invasion of Iran. As the sins of the U.S. and NATO occupation of Afghanistan, Afghanistan-Pakistan, and Afghanistan-Iran borders, have begun to bear fruit, an invasion of Iran may turn out to be extremely costly.

To begin with, the U.S. troops in the region will be facing the enemy at its front and its rear. Under the circumstances, what will minimally occur is the collapse of the Karzai regime and re-takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, with the help of a section of the Pakistani military. What that would mean for Afghanistan may not be much worse than what prevails today, but it would surely embarrass and anger the neo-cons in Washington and the believers of the United States-controlled unipolar world.