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European Languages

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Asia Times

A summit in Tehran trumps the US

By M K Bhadrakumar

06/22/2011



Almost directly in proportion to the nosedive in Washington's ties with its allies in Kabul and Islamabad, Iran has stepped up its political and diplomatic activity over the Afghan problem and the regional situation. Tehran estimates that the United States' relations with the Afghan and Pakistani governments have suffered a serious setback and a swift recovery is unlikely.

Thus, a window of opportunity has opened for Tehran to roll back the 10-year ascendancy of the US in the geopolitics of the region. Tehran is determined not to miss the opportunity.

The immediate focus is on somehow torpedoing the US's plans to establish military bases in Afghanistan and expand into the strategically vital Central Asian region, while also outflanking Iran in the east. The Iranian political and diplomatic thrust comes at a time when US-Afghan differences have surfaced during the negotiations, which lately spilled into the public domain.

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran have an existential interest to thwart the Anglo-American peace plan to directly negotiate with the Taliban behind their back.

But, Tehran also sees this as a high-stakes game with much wider ramifications than a matter of frustrating the US plans on military bases. Tehran's objective will be to scatter the cordon of the US-Saudi-Israeli alliance in the wake of the upheaval in the Middle East.

Afghanistan, after all, becomes part of the Greater Middle East and Pakistan has been a long-time ally of the US and Saudi Arabia and together the three countries - Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan - become a strategic hub of immense significance to the geopolitics of a vast region stretching from the Levant to the Ferghana Valley.

To be sure, Tehran's aim will be to forge regional unity with Kabul and Islamabad on the basis of their shared concerns and interests vis-a-vis US regional policies.

Iranian efforts will get a boost this week with the visits by the Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari and President Hamid Karzai to Tehran to participate in the international conference on terrorism at the invitation of the Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad. The conference is scheduled for on June 25-26, but Zardari is arriving on a two-day visit on Thursday.

The fact that Zardari and Karzai are attending a conference on terrorism hosted by Iran at this point in time is by itself a significant indicator of the way winds are blowing currently in regional politics. The Saudi Arabian government reportedly made a diplomatic demarche with Pakistan, suggesting it should ignore the Tehran conference and instead attend a similar conclave on terrorism that it proposes to convene shortly in Riyadh.

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The US will also be highly displeased with Karzai's decision to stand shoulder to shoulder with Iran at this juncture on the "war on terror". It knocks the bottom out of the US's contention that Iran foments terrorism. Zardari is taking a delegation of ministers that includes Interior Minister Rehman Malik, Minister for Oil and Natural Resources Asim Hussain and Minister for Water and Power Syed Naveed Qamar.

The Iranian media reported that Zardari's talks will cover the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, which is strongly opposed by the US, and that a "decisive step for the execution of the already delayed project" can be expected during his visit. Iran has already completed the construction of

1,000 kilometers of the pipeline out of the 1,100 kilometers portion on Iranian soil.

Iran has also proposed that an electricity transmission network be built next to the pipeline, connecting the electricity grid of Iran with that of Pakistan. Additionally, Iran has offered to sell 1,000 megawatts hours of electricity to Pakistan at a subsidized rate.

'Attempts to bypass'

Tehran is making an all-out attempt to impart a new dynamic to its bilateral ties with Pakistan. Tehran traditionally harbored a sense of frustration over the US-Pakistan alliance. Ahmadinejad said recently that Tehran is in possession of "specific evidence" to the effect that the US is planning to seize Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Indeed, Iranian intelligence is very active in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, given the US military presence and US support for the terrorist group Jundallah which foments violence in the Sistan-Balochistan region in eastern Iran bordering Pakistan. Tehran has an intelligence sharing mechanism at the bilateral level with Pakistan and most certainly Malik will be discussing ways and means of strengthening the arrangement. Pakistan can help Iran counter Jundallah while Iran can share intelligence regarding the US' covert activities on Pakistani soil.

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Iran seems to share the estimation by Russia and China that Pakistani foreign policy is on a course correction of reducing Islamabad's political, economic and military dependence on the US.

Equally, Tehran factors in that the US is keeping both Islamabad and Kabul at arm's length over its dealings with the Taliban and is adopting a method of sharing information with these key partners on a need-to-know basis.

Last Saturday, Karzai utilized a nationwide address to lash out at the US to the extent of exposing that US is already holding direct talks with the Taliban. Significantly, Pakistan swiftly took the cue from Karzai and made a strong demarche in the same regard with the Americans on Monday.

Senior Pakistani officials have reportedly conveyed concerns to visiting US deputy special representative Frank Ruggiero about Washington's "attempts to bypass" Islamabad and to deliberately keep Pakistan at bay about its efforts to seek a peace deal with the Taliban ahead of the phased withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The statement issued by the Pakistani Foreign Ministry after talks between State Minister Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar and Ruggiero in Islamabad on Monday said: "The minister underscored the importance of clarity and strategic coherence as well as transparency to facilitate the Afghan people and the Afghan government in the process for peace and reconciliation."

The Pakistani newspaper Tribune quoted a Pakistani diplomat, who is posted in Kabul, as

alleging that Islamabad is being kept in the dark by the US over its recent contacts with the Taliban. "We do know that some meetings have taken place between the US officials and the Afghan Taliban in Germany and Qatar. It seems Pakistan is being deliberately kept out by the US to minimize our role in future political dispensation of Afghanistan," he insisted.

Again, Dawn newspaper quoted an unnamed Pakistani official as saying, "On one hand they [the Americans] are talking to Mullah Omar's aide, but on the other the Taliban leader is on the list of the five men that they [the Americans] want to be taken out," asking acerbically if there could be space in the US's political dialogue for the Haqqani network as well.

However, it will be a rush to judgment to conclude that Islamabad and Kabul are coordinating their opposition to the US. The Afghan-Pakistan relationship remains highly problematic, the trust deficit is substantial and a radical improvement in the climate of relations proved elusive.

In fact, border skirmishes have increased in frequency. To what extent the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are fueling these tensions as part of the concerted effort to "pressure" Pakistan remains unclear. Clearly, a genuine meeting of minds between Karzai and Islamabad cannot materialize so long as these subterranean tensions keep erupting on the Afghan-border region involving the Pakistani military and the Afghan forces.

Maybe, Tehran can lend a hand to sort out these tensions. To be sure, Iran has a strong interest at this point in bringing Afghanistan and Pakistan closer together in a purposive working relationship.

Iranian Defense minister Ahmed Vahidi, who visited Kabul last week, had a substantive meeting with the former Northern Alliance strong man and current vice president, Mohammed Fahim. Vahidi told Fahim, "The great and brave nation of Afghanistan is capable of establishing its security in the best possible form without the interference of the trans-regional forces [read the US and NATO]."

Vahidi told his Iranian counterpart Abdulrahim Wardak, "Their [the US] presence hinders materialization of the will of the great, hard-working and resolute nation of Afghanistan and will cause discord, tension and insecurity and waste of the country's capital."

Wardak and Vahidi signed a document relating to bilateral security cooperation. At the signing ceremony, interestingly, Wardak responded, "Given the threats and challenges facing the region, we believe that joint defense and security cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan is very important for establishing peace and security in the region." Wardak also said, significantly, that Afghanistan will try to increase its defense and security ties with Iran at this juncture to "fulfill our joint security objectives in the region. We believe that expansion of joint defense and security cooperation with Iran is in favor of our interests."

Pashtun fault line

On his return to Tehran on Sunday, Vahidi said US efforts to establish bases in Afghanistan are part of its plan to impose a "hegemonistic system" on the region, "but all of the countries and

peoples of the region are opposed to this plot. The presence of the foreign forces in the region, especially US troops, is very harmful and represents a gross violation of the national sovereignty of regional countries and undermines their security."

Interestingly, he added, "As far as we know, the great Afghan nation does not agree to the establishment of US military bases, and it is natural that the country's officials, following their people, do not approve of such plans." In a veiled reference to Pakistan, Vahidi said the countries of the region are also opposed to the presence of foreign troops in a neighboring country because extra-regional countries are actually seeking to impede the Islamic countries' progress."

Tehran would factor in the prevailing impression in the region that the US and Britain are working on the so-called "Blackwill plan" - named after Robert Blackwill, a US official who served in the George W Bush administration's National Security Council - who first argued that the best Afghan solution lies in partitioning that country along the main Pashtun ethnic fault line.

The plan suggested that the US should vacate the southern and southeastern provinces of Afghanistan and let Taliban rule be re-established in those parts, and withdraw its forces instead to the safe haven of the northern region inhabited by the non-Pashtun tribes, which are friendly, from where it could effectively sustain its counterinsurgency operations through special forces and/or use of air power.

The moves by the US and its allies to hold direct talks with the Taliban (without involving Afghanistan or Pakistan), as well as the decision to incrementally remove the sanctions against those select Taliban leaders who are willing to compromise, mesh with the objectives of the Blackwill plan.

The US aims to persuade the Taliban to give up their trenchant opposition to long-term US-NATO military presence in the Hindu Kush.

The Taliban hope to reclaim their lost strongholds in the Pashtun-dominated southern and south-eastern regions of Afghanistan. Bearing this in mind, over the past two year period, the US has been spending huge funds on renovating or reconstructing bases in the non-Pashtun regions of Afghanistan so as to bring them on par with Western standards and living conditions.

The US drawdown commencing in July essentially devolves upon 30,000 troops which were inducted last year for the surge. Both US and NATO officials have recently begun hinting that the departure of the Western troops from the region need not be expected for the foreseeable future.

What is particularly noteworthy in this context is the role being played by Germany in setting up peace parleys between the US and the Taliban. Der Spiegel first reported that more than one meeting has taken place in Germany between a key aide to Mullah Omar and US officials. Last Sunday, in a television interview the US defense secretary Robert Gates confirmed that such meetings have been held.

The German forces occupy the Amu Darya region, which straddles the safe haven that Blackwill outlined for relocating the US troops on a long-term basis. The German forces initiated a robust anti-insurgency campaign in the northern region in the recent months with a view to sanitizing the region, which, in turn, resulted in reprisal attacks by the insurgents. The German operations seem to be geared to the Blackwill plan.

The Germans have worked hard to develop good working relations with the Uzbek government in Tashkent and are extensively using the Termez military base, which used to be the biggest Soviet base in Central Asia, as a supply base for the operations in the northern region. New railway lines are under construction connecting Mazari-i-Sharif with Termez across the Amu Darya, which will connect Afghanistan with the Soviet-era railway grid that goes all the way to Berlin.

The Germans have also tapped into their expanding strategic ties with Russia to systematically develop a transit route through Russian territory, which enable them to bring supplies into Afghanistan via Termez. The Russian route leading to Termez enables the NATO forces to drastically reduce the dependence on the two Pakistani routes. Russia has lately allowed even weapons and ammunition being transported via this route. (These communication links can eventually be a new Silk Route.)

The Blackwill plan holds the dangerous potential to splinter the Afghan nation. Afghanistan has historically held been together by tenuous bonds of nationhood. Regionalism and ethnicity continue to pose challenges to national unity.

If Afghan unity comes under serious threat, the consequences will be extremely serious for Pakistan. It will be a matter of time before the Pashtun residues spill over the Durand Line and destabilize Pakistan. Any accentuation of the ethnic fault lines or strengthening of ethnic identities in neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan, in turn, would have serious negative repercussions for Iran (and Central Asian countries).

Quite obviously, the US is overestimating its capacity to realize its "grand strategy". The Pakistani army chief Parvez Kiani told a visiting German delegation in Rawalpindi on Monday rather bluntly that Pakistan's stability will be his first priority.

In sum, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran have an existential interest to thwart the Anglo-American peace plan to directly negotiate with the Taliban behind their back. This is precisely why all three are strongly pitching for a genuinely indigenous "Afghan-led" peace process. Put differently, a realignment of the three-way relationship between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran will be in the interests of regional stability.

The recent visits of the Pakistani leaders to Moscow and Beijing are being followed up with Zardari's talks this week in Tehran. Iran has shifted into a proactive mode vis-a-vis the Afghan situation, shedding its low-key, reticent approach. On his part, Karzai is also strategically defying the US by strengthening his ties with Tehran.

How these nascent tendencies play out is worthy of a close look. They are to be seen against the broader regional backdrop which shows up many currents - the "thaw" in Russia-Pakistan relations; Russia's "return" to Afghanistan; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) aspirations to play a formative role in Afghanistan in the post-2014 scenario; the India-Pakistan dialogue process; India's pursuit of an independent Afghan policy with accent on equations with Karzai's government; China's growing interest in contributing to an Afghan settlement; and, finally the commencement of a process that could lead to SCO membership for India and Pakistan.

Within hours of Obama's announcement on Wednesday regarding troop drawdown in Afghanistan, Zardari will be heading for Tehran to confabulate with Ahmadinejad; two days later Karzai also arrives in the Iranian capital. Nothing brings out more vividly the extraordinary tilt in regional politics.