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Pakistan warns India to 'back off'

By M K Bhadrakumar
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The Indian embassy in Kabul has been targeted for bomb attack for a second time in the past 15 months. A least 17 people were killed in Thursday's attack, when a car loaded with explosives rammed into the embassy's compound wall.

The Indian chancery is not far from the presidential palace and, ironically enough, just across the road from the Afghan interior ministry. Needless to say, the Taliban, which claimed responsibility for the attack, have shown they have the capacity to hit anywhere, any time - a message that is already understood.

However, since the target is the Indian embassy, there also has to be a political message. In Delhi, the inclination is to suspect the hand of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The security agencies have their own strange codes to communicate signals, and Thursday's attack does seem to convey some complicated signal, which needs to be deciphered. Conceivably, the message is that India should back off from any enterprise to expand its presence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has not hidden its deep disquiet that India still maintains consulates in two key locations close to Pakistani border regions - Jalalabad and Kandahar. It suspects that India uses these outposts for electronic intelligence with an agenda of subverting Pakistan's stability and somehow laying its hands on Pakistan's nuclear assets.

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi publicly warned on Monday while on a visit to the United States that Indians "have to justify their interest" in Kabul. He told Los Angeles Times that India's "level of engagement [in Kabul] has to be commensurate with [the fact that] they do not share a border with Afghanistan, whereas we do ... If there is no massive reconstruction [in Afghanistan], if there are not long queues in Delhi waiting for visas to travel to Kabul, why do you have such a large [Indian] presence in Afghanistan? At times, it concerns us."

Indeed, the top United States commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal

underscored in his report last month to US President Barack Obama that India was "exacerbating regional tensions" via its activities in Afghanistan. He anticipated that Pakistan would take "counter-measures".

US-India collusion?

To compound matters, Indian officials have been needlessly stressing the country's "soft power" in Afghanistan. Sure, India is a major donor country, having committed to spend \$1.2 billion as assistance in Afghanistan. Delhi's aid program spans diverse fields such as education, health, power, telecommunications, road-building and other areas and has gone a long way in boosting India's profile and influence in Kabul.

Pakistan views the hyperactive Indian aid program in zero-sum terms as essentially aimed at undercutting its influence. India is also not helping matters. The discourse in Delhi is that India has deep and historical ties of friendship with the Afghan people and in any case, who are these Pakistanis to dictate what India should or shouldn't do?

India point blank refuses to concede that Pakistan has any "special interests" in Afghanistan similar or anywhere near to what India claims to have in Nepal or Sri Lanka. On the contrary, Indian commentators insist that Delhi has a right and an obligation to be assertive in Afghanistan, considering the overall stakes in the fight against terrorism and India's "burden" as a regional power. The argument is flawless although the hubris is highly offensive.

A turning point is coming in the Afghan war. All eyes are trained on Obama's new strategy. The discussion focuses on US troop levels, but it overlooks that enormous tension has been building up in Pakistan in the recent weeks. The Pakistani military seems to apprehend that Washington may be intensifying the drone attacks on top Taliban leadership.

Washington's assassination campaign has lately met with stunning success. High-value terrorist targets are getting killed. The campaign has been extended from the tribal areas to the North-West Frontier Province. The American ambassador in Islamabad recently hinted that the drones might soon come looking for the Taliban *shura* (council) headed by Mullah Omar, who is believed to be hiding in Balochistan.

The Americans seem to have developed intelligence resources for mounting the drone attacks. While there is collusion between the CIA and the Pakistani security agencies, the US also has intelligence-sharing with other countries, including India.

Certainly, at some point in the conceivable future, the drone may get the top Taliban leadership in its crosshairs. If that happens, Pakistan's so-called "strategic asset" in the Hindu Kush will get destroyed and Islamabad's capacity to project power into Afghanistan will drastically diminish.

Against such a backdrop, the ISI remains extremely wary of any Indian intelligence penetration in the southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan. Glancing through the Pakistani media on any single day, it becomes obvious there is virtual paranoia that the US is secretly colluding with India. There is suspicion that the US is needlessly increasing its physical presence in Pakistan. The corps commanders meeting in the GHQ in Rawalpindi on Wednesday took the unusual step of publicly airing the army's "concerns" over the implications for "national security" of the conditionalities attached by the Kerry-Lugar bill

which the US Congress legislated recently for channeling vastly increased American aid of US\$1.5 billion annually to Pakistan.

"Warlords" to hunt down Taliban ...

Interestingly, Pakistani commentators with links to the Pakistani military establishment have concluded that India had a hand in drafting the Kerry-Lugar bill.

At the present moment, what really worries the Pakistani military is that despite previous assurances to the contrary, Washington may finally accept the new line-up taking shape in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai that includes prominent Northern Alliance "warlords" who had worked closely with India in the latter half of the 1990s and right until the US ousted the Taliban regime in 2001.

Arguably, these "warlords" could play a useful role for the US in stabilizing Afghanistan and in the "Afghanization" of the war in a very near term in a way that will significantly ease the pressure on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops. Actually, this could be an Afghan variant of the Sunni "Awakening" that the US implemented with considerable success within a short timeframe in Iraq. Obama is indeed looking for ways of quickly retrieving the security situation in Afghanistan and is working within a tight timeframe.

The Pakistani military worries about any proximity developing between the US and the Northern Alliance "warlords". Needless to say, India's influence in Afghanistan will take a quantum jump if the "warlords" are resurrected by the US and put in charge of the Afghan security for battling a tenacious Taliban. As longtime opponents of the Taliban, the "warlords" advocate a tough line against the insurgency. As Mohammed Fahim, who is likely to be the vice-president in Karzai's new government told New York Times, "My belief is the time for peace is when we are strong and the Taliban are weak. Now would not be a good time for Afghanistan to make peace."

Fahim said the government and coalition forces should hit Taliban bases inside Pakistan and in southern Afghanistan. "The method of fighting should be studied very carefully; there should be a new strategy," Fahim added. He is not opposed to the continued foreign troop presence in Afghanistan, maintaining that it is a "reality".

In short, if "warlords" are put in the driving seat of anti-Taliban operations, the ISI may be compelled to suffer the ultimate humiliation of passively witnessing the "warlords" systematically ravaging the Taliban cadres - as only local Afghan militia can effectively do - and reducing them to a useless rabble or, worse still, force the residual elements to flee to their mentors across the border in Pakistan for protection.

...with Indian help?

India, of course, can do a lot to help the US and NATO in such a scenario by training the militia operating under the "warlords" and also providing them with weapons. In sum, without military deployment in Afghanistan, Delhi has the capacity to play a decisive role in crushing the Taliban insurgency, which is what makes the Pakistani military establishment extremely anxious in the developing political scenario on the Afghan chessboard.

No wonder, the Pakistani military is watching with great anxiety any signs of new thinking in Washington in the direction of co-opting the Northern Alliance "warlords" in the fight against the Taliban. It is a close call. Opinion is divided in Washington. The general perception of Afghan realities through Western eyes makes the "warlords" appear a highly disagreeable constituency to serve even as collaborators in the current desperate situation. There is a serious mental block that needs to be overcome in the West in comprehending the Afghan realities. Pakistan counts on that.

Secondly, Pakistan expects the Obama administration to be sensitive to its concerns vis-a-vis an Indian presence in Afghanistan. Indeed, Washington needs to walk a fine line by not annoying the Pakistani military even while tapping into any help India can render. NATO has just urged Moscow to be a partner in the "Afghanization" of the war despite the backlog of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. India, on the contrary, would be regarded as a benign friendly power in Afghanistan. Yet, Washington has to make a choice in favor of optimally getting the Pakistani military's help, which is crucial, rather than co-opting an Indian sideshow.

All in all, taking into account the distinct possibility that a friendly Karzai-led government will be in power in Kabul for the next five years, the mood in Delhi is increasingly that India should adopt a "forward policy" toward terrorism in the region rather than allow itself to be bled periodically by Pakistan-based terrorists.

Influential sections of Indian opinion are stridently calling for an outright Indian intervention in Afghanistan without awaiting the niceties of an American invitation letter. The fact of the matter is that there is tremendous frustration that Pakistan has neither moved against the perpetrators of the terrorist strikes on Mumbai last November nor folded up the terrorist infrastructure on Pakistani soil. Islamabad's alibi that "non-state actors" are responsible does not convince Delhi, either.

Interestingly, even as these maneuverings are edging their way to a climax in the coming weeks, Delhi just hosted an international conference titled "Peace and Stability in Afghanistan", which was attended by among others Lieutenant General David W Barno, who heads the National Defense University in Washington.

Barno, an expert consultant on counter-insurgency, had a 19-month tour of Afghanistan from October 2003 commanding the US and Coalition Forces. It so happens Barno's tenure in Afghanistan was also the period the Northern Alliance "warlords" look back with nostalgia as their halcyon days in the power structure in Kabul.

The two-day conference in Delhi, which was addressed by top officials of the Indian foreign ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, ended on Wednesday. The Taliban struck at the Indian embassy in Kabul on Thursday. Maybe it is mere coincidence, maybe it is not. In the world of John le Carre's spymaster George Smiley, you can never tell.