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US puts the squeeze on Pakistan

By M K Bhadrakumar

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In a carefully framed diplomatic formulation, India's External Affairs Minister S M Krishna has warned of "devastating consequences" if the United States and Pakistan failed to heal their rift. Krishna chose to speak in the presence of the visiting French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe at their joint press conference in New Delhi. France just pulled out the first batch of 200 troops from Afghanistan as part of its withdrawal plans. Krishna said:

This concerns the relationship between two friendly powers - the US and Pakistan - and it is India's desire that all outstanding issues between the two countries should be settled across the table and thereby, create a situation in the region which will be conducive for the development.

Because, anything which upsets the region will have devastating consequences on the developmental agenda of other countries and, more particularly, India. So, we sincerely hope that they will be able to solve their differences.

This is the nearest India has gone to imply that the US's regional strategies are not invariably or necessarily always working in the interests of regional security and stability.

Two, it is the most clear-cut signal so far that India is not party to the US pressure tactic against Pakistan. India is demonstratively giving a wide berth to the US-Pakistan boxing ring and is charting its own course toward the Afghan problem - and indeed toward the dialogue with Pakistan. If the word "US" in Krishna's string of consciousness can be replaced by "India", the formulation could as well have belonged to Krishna's American counterpart Hillary Clinton.

However, the salient that towers above all else is that Delhi is greatly worried at the latest turn to

events and feels prompted to articulate its concerns in public. Indeed, Krishna spoke even as Clinton was arriving in Pakistan.

The fact is that the unthinkable seems to be happening. There is growing talk about a military conflict of some sort erupting on the Afghan-Pakistan border. With unprecedented candor, Pakistan's army chief Parvez Kiani admitted on Tuesday that he wouldn't rule out an attack by the United States on Pakistan. British newspaper the Independent quoted Pakistani army sources as saying the growing concentration of United States troops in the eastern sector of the Afghan-border signifies a "coordinated" move.

The core issue is what tangible gain could come out of a US military move against Pakistan. A military conflict with undefined, uncertain objective always carries the high risk of engendering unforeseen consequences. As a politician gearing up for a tough electoral battle, too, a military conflict involving US troops and likely war casualties wouldn't suit President Barack Obama. That being the case, what is the game plan?

Proxy war

The starting point is that the Afghan war cannot be won militarily. The budgetary environment in Washington and the opposition to the war in Western opinion compel the US to seek a political settlement, while the broader US regional strategies in Asia and the grand design for the advancement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a global force require the establishment of a long-term military presence in Afghanistan.

The US's doublespeak about the militant Haqqani network exposes its predicament. Hardly two months ago, US officials sat down with the Haqqani leadership in the presence of the head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Shuja Pasha. The back channel is at work even today between the US and the Haqqanis and, conceivably, ISI is continuing to provide its services as the facilitator. So, what happened all of a sudden?

Presumably, any US attack on Waziristan in Pakistan's tribal areas would be predicated on the faint hope of dividing the Pashtuns so that the latter's concerted opposition to the establishment of US military bases would dissipate. But the ground reality is that no matter the factionalism within the Taliban and the US's success - to a very limited extent, if any - to drive temporary wedges into that factionalism, Pashtuns have a great tradition of getting together whenever they come under attack by a foreigner.

These circumstances compel the US to lean on Pakistan to get the Taliban groups to fall in line with its strategic agreement with Kabul, which is all ready for signature. Washington is getting an optimal agreement with Kabul on its terms, finally, which despite his occasional bluster, Afghan President Hamid Karzai is simply unable to influence from his pitifully weak position on the Afghan political chessboard.

But the quicksands of Afghan (and regional politics) are treacherous and Washington would like to wrap up the agreement quickly. Time is running out since the agreement is expected to be

signed against the diplomatic backdrop of the two upcoming international conferences on Afghanistan - in Istanbul on November 2 and in Bonn a month later.

What leverage does the US have on Pakistan to extract a shift in its Afghan policy? Plainly put, the US has been using the "Pakistani Taliban" for sometime already to create havoc within Pakistan and the "proxy war" has finally burst into the open with the factual allegation by the Pakistani military this week that the US-led coalition in eastern Afghanistan is ignoring Islamabad's requests to follow up on specific intelligence regarding the Pakistani Taliban leadership who operate out of the sanctuaries on Afghan territory and indulge in cross-border attacks.

Quite obviously, the Pakistani military understood the political message behind these attacks. But it still refuses to fall in line with the US's regional strategy. On the other hand, Taliban and the ISI have largely succeeded in thwarting or rolling back the US stratagem to split the insurgent groups.

The fashion in which the US's famous Taliban interlocutor Tayeb Agha has been "silenced"; the tragi-comic incident of NATO forces and the US talking in great earnestness with a Taliban "imposter" out of sheer innocence regarding his identity as a petty shopkeeper; or the sudden disappearance of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from the playpen - all these only underscore the paradox that it actually suits Pakistan if the insurgent groups are scattered and kept under its control in various nooks and corners of the chessboard.

Asymmetrical response

Washington has carefully timed the decision to amass its troops on the Afghan-Pakistan border to coincide with the massive two-month long Indian military exercise currently under way on the India-Pakistan border region aimed at testing out the Indian doctrine to capture and hold territory deep inside the "enemy" lines.

But if Washington's calculation is to apply the maximum psychological pressure on the Pakistani military, it only betrays a lack of comprehension of what is prompting the Pakistani military leadership to resort to such "strategic defiance". (Pakistan, interestingly, is downplaying the Indian military exercise and the few instances of unwarranted rhetoric - and even Delhi's recent security pact with Karzai - and on the contrary, it is ostentatiously spreading petals of goodwill on India's path such as deciding to give India the most-favored-nation status in trade.)

What the US refuses to face up to is that rightly or wrongly, Pakistan no longer trusts Washington's intentions. The Pakistani military is convinced that the US is working on a strategy to "defang" Pakistan by seizing its nuclear-weapon stockpile. Obviously, there is no leeway for compromising its "strategic assets" in Afghanistan, as far as the Pakistani military is concerned. A long-term US military presence in the region is perceived as constituting a threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Pakistani military has also refused to fall into the trap of launching a full-fledged operation in North Waziristan, which, it knows fully well, can only become a quagmire of such proportions

that the military juggernaut itself might ultimately disintegrate. The Pakistani civil and military leaderships are today agreed that the only means to pacify the tribal areas is through networking with the tribal chieftains and the various militant groups and that is going to be a long haul. In the meanwhile, Pakistan is not going to be hustled by the US into precipitate actions.

Some commentators have rushed to interpret Kiani's statement on Tuesday as "nuclear blackmail". But the decision to deploy regular troops on the border suggests that the Pakistani military will resist and make the US pay an intolerably high price in casualties that Obama simply cannot afford as a badly-battered politician gearing up for a crucial election campaign.

Therefore, any false step in the shadow boxing and high-pitched rhetoric that has been going on between the US and Pakistan ever since the Raymond Davis affair in January (when the ISI and the military leadership came to know the full extent of the US' covert operations inside Pakistan) can easily lead to a full-fledged "asymmetrical war" in the region - with "disastrous consequences" for regional security and stability, as Krishna put it.

A US attack on Pakistan would only ensure that the Taliban would have access to a seamless reservoir of manpower (and equipment and supplies) to carry on with the insurgency. In political terms, the insurgency will come to assume the nature of a war of "liberation".

How does that help the US? Given the current state of play on many attendant fronts - opposition to the war in Western public opinion, the American and eurozone economic crisis, countless failings of the Kabul set-up in governance, debilitating weaknesses of the Afghan armed forces, overall lawlessness and corruption swarming Afghanistan - an "asymmetrical" war can only work to Pakistan's advantage.

On the other hand, a US attack on Pakistan would conclusively shut the door to the avenue leading to a political settlement in Afghanistan. Pakistan's response will be to hunker down and to continue to defy the US diktat. In the process, something of fundamental significance with grave long-term implications may also be happening to Pakistan's political economy.

Suffice to say, if Nawaz Sharif was found to be an unsavory choice as Pervez Musharraf's potential successor and if Washington did everything possible to keep him from the corridors of power solely because of dubious "Islamist" baggage, the US may now have to learn to live with something far worse in Pakistan.

Pakistan is no Cambodia and it will not disintegrate into anarchy. By South Asian standards, the Pakistani state is strong enough to survive. But that will be small comfort since the US will have "lost" Pakistan - for a while at least. It is for Washington to judge how that, in turn, would serve the US in the highly-strategic region that forms the tri-junction of Central Asia, South Asia proper and the Persian Gulf. What happens to the New Silk Road project?

In sum, logically speaking, better sense should prevail in Washington than to launch a military strike against Pakistan. Yet, the unprecedented "joint" visit to Islamabad by Clinton, David Petraeus and Martin Dempsey underscores the brinkmanship that is going on.

Masks and masquerade

Indeed, Bruce Riedel, former Central Intelligence Agency officer who advised Obama on the Afghan war, espoused in a provocative article in the New York Times over the weekend that the United States should pursue a 'containment' policy toward Pakistan.

Riedel got the big picture absolutely right by estimating that the US needed a new policy toward Pakistan since the two countries' "strategic interests are in conflict, not in harmony." He also cannot be faulted for projecting the wish list that the US must "contain the Pakistani Army's ambitions" so that civilian supremacy got asserted in Islamabad and Pakistan's foreign policy took a "new direction."

Now, how can a "containment" strategy toward Pakistan be made to work? Most interestingly, Riedel recommends that the US needs to craft a "more hostile relationship" which will be "a focused hostility ... holding its [Pakistan's] army and intelligence branches accountable." Now, this can be achieved if there is a US military incursion into Pakistani territory which the Pakistani military fails to prevent.

Riedel concludes his voyeurism with the categorical affirmation that the US needs military bases in Afghanistan, if it is to pursue the "containment" strategy. All in all, his labored justification for the establishment of US military bases in Afghanistan happens to be masqueraded as the need to pursue a "containment" strategy toward Pakistan.

This blueprint seems to reflect the establishment thinking. But a "containment" strategy could only succeed if it is backed by a strong regional and international consensus to isolate the country in question. Ideally, it needs to be backed up by creating an alliance of nations that subscribes to a common strategy. In the case of Pakistan, these prerequisites are totally lacking. Pakistan does not face regional isolation.

On the contrary, it is networking actively with almost all regional players (with the exception of India) on the Afghan problem - Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, etc. The US would have an uphill task to get the countries in the region to fall in line with a containment strategy toward Pakistan.

Besides, a containment strategy takes a long time to work, if at all. (It has been in operation against Iran for over three decades with hopeless results.) Does Obama have that much time in hand? Indeed, if the "Occupy Wall Street" movement is any reflection of the public mood in the US, the Afghan war is a low priority in the national agenda.

In sum, the US's intention seems to be to create the political and security conditions in the "post-Osama bin Laden phase" in Afghanistan that would give raison d'etre to the long-term military presence. The maximum pressure is being brought to bear on the Pakistani military in this direction. Precipitating a crisis in the relationship with Pakistan at this juncture may become a geopolitical necessity for the US if Pakistan doesn't give in. But it is a dangerous game. Krishna's statement will find resonance in other regional capitals.