

Pakistan: U.S. Challenged As NATO Surrounds Iran

US outed, and far from drawn down

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The United States-Pakistan relationship has reached a turning point reminiscent of the run-up to October 1958, when Washington encouraged General Ayub Khan's coup, apprehending the coming into power of an elected government in Pakistan that might have refused to collaborate as the US's Cold War ally against the Soviet Union.

An innocuous-looking thing happened on Sunday – Pakistan regained possession of the Shamsi air base in Balochistan near the border with Iran after evicting the US military presence from there. The base itself had been leased to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since 1992.

The event is at once symbolic and tactical, while at the same time highly strategic even as war clouds are on the horizon over Iran. Symbolic in the sense that it is an assertion of Pakistan's sovereignty; tactical because the US war strategy, which heavily depended on the drone attacks on North Waziristan, will now have to be reworked. Is the drone era in the Afghan war coming to a brusque end?

However, in all of this, what needs some careful analysis is why the US's eviction from Shamsi holds strategic implications.

A mild stimulus

Washington initially viewed Islamabad's decision to expel the US personnel and drone systems from Shamsi with disbelief as a knee-jerk reaction by the Pakistani generals upset over the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) air strike on the border post at Salala in the Mohmand Agency on November 26, which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Thus, Washington pressed its ally the UAE into a mediatory role.

UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan met President Asif Ali Zardari to seek revocation of the Pakistani decision or at least an extension of the 15-day deadline, but returned empty-handed. On getting the bad news from the sheikh, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton phoned Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, which was followed by a call a day later by President Barack Obama to Zardari.

Both Clinton and Obama drew a blank and thereafter the Pentagon reluctantly began the evacuation from Shamsi.

Clearly, the US underestimated the downstream consequences of the November 26 attack on Pakistan. Pakistani director general of military operations, Major General Ashfaq Nadeem told the federal cabinet and the parliament's defense committee last week in a detailed

briefing in Islamabad that the NATO attack bore the hallmark of a well-planned “plot” by the US and NATO command in Afghanistan.

If the likely US intention was to “engage” the Pakistani military leadership with a mild stimulus of “shock and awe”, it proved counter-productive. The civil-military leadership in Pakistan still continues to talk in the same voice. Gilani’s “ex-post facto” endorsement of army chief General Ashfaq Kiani’s decision to deploy the defense systems on the Afghan border to “detect any aircraft or helicopter and to shoot it down”, at their meeting in Islamabad on Saturday is the latest evidence of this.

But the crux of the matter is that the Obama administration has once again ceded policy to the Pentagon. With the Central Intelligence Agency also headed by an army general, David Petraeus, the Pentagon is pushing through a long-term military presence in Afghanistan although a political solution is Obama’s stated goal. The US military aims to step up the fighting. The “drawdown” strategy outlined by Obama last year is being conveniently reinterpreted for this purpose.

The US’s most recent statements have shed the strategic ambiguity over the “drawdown” and it is now crystal clear that tens of thousands of American combat troops are after all going to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014 for an indeterminate future in addition to the trainers and advisers devoted to “capacity-building” of the Afghan armed forces.

The New York Times noted that Pentagon had been “quietly pushing” for this policy shift for some time. In essence, even as the negotiations over the US-Afghan strategic pact paving the way for the establishment of American military bases in Afghanistan have come to the final stage, the US is discarding the strategic ambiguity about the scope and nature of its long-term military presence.

Demand-driven partnership

This shouldn’t have come as a surprise. But Pakistan is facing a difficult situation. Contrary to Pakistan’s line of thinking that the military path is futile, the US is sticking to the “fight-talk” approach, which is to go on fighting while exploring the scope for opening talks with a militarily degraded Taliban from a position of strength.

Two, the US is not willing to concede a central role for Pakistan in the peace talks and is non-committal about Pakistan’s wish to have a “friendly” government in Kabul, because it seeks to choreograph a settlement that first and foremost would meet the needs of its regional strategies.

Three, paradoxical as it may seem, the continued fighting actually suits the US in the coming period, because it not only provides the justification for the long-term deployment of combat troops in Afghanistan despite regional (and Afghan) opposition but also gives the *raison d’être* for the Northern Distribution Network (read US-NATO military presence in Central Asia), which Russia is showing signs of linking to the resolution of the dispute over the US’s missile defense system and the dissipation of the US-Russia “reset”.

Over and above all this, Obama’s decision to keep a large force of combat troops in Afghanistan needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the growing tensions in the US-Iran relations. In the eventuality of any conflict with Iran in a near future, this sort of massive military presence on Iran’s eastern flank would be a great strategic asset for the US and

NATO.

Make no mistake, the US intends to use the military bases in Afghanistan as a springboard to invade eastern Iran if conflict erupts, no matter what President Hamid Karzai may think or say. By the way, Shamsi is also key air base close to the Iran border. Unsurprisingly, NATO is considering a “joint center” in the Persian Gulf region with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Thus, the US hopes to “box in” Iran militarily from the Persian Gulf on one side and Afghanistan on the other.

Indeed, NATO is fast transforming as a “smart alliance” based on a security partnership between the 28 members and the rest of the world, thanks to the military intervention in Libya. Ivo Daalder, the US ambassador to NATO, put it explicitly in a recent briefing:

“The Libya operation was a logical outflow of the view that we need to have partnerships with countries around the world...The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan and Morocco not only supported the operation, but also participated in it ... Lebanon was also a key in the operation, as it was president of the UN Security Council at that time and enacted the 1973 resolution...This is a demand-driven partnership. A demand by Arab countries.”

All in all, therefore, the “hidden agenda” of the Afghan war is out in the open. Pakistan finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. First of all, the Pakistani military distrusts the US’s intentions behind such large-scale intelligence penetration of its security apparatus in the recent years under the pretext of the “war on terror”, including the Inter-Services Intelligence and the military. In particular, the military leadership fears that the US harbors intentions of seizing Pakistan’s nuclear assets at an opportune moment.

Obama’s unprecedented decision to promote Petraeus as the Central Intelligence Agency head rang alarm bells in the Pakistani mind. Second, US interests and priorities in Afghanistan are increasingly in conflict with Pakistan’s. Third, Pakistan simply cannot afford to alienate China and Iran (or Russia for that matter). Finally, the US will sooner or later deploy its missile defense system in the region, which will threaten Pakistan’s strategic capability.

Shaking the albatross

The message of the US strike of November 26 was a test case intended to “soften up” the Pakistani military leadership and compel it to fall in line with the US’s strategy. Sheikh Nahyan tried to talk some good sense into the minds of the Pakistani generals. But the Shamsi episode underscores that the contradiction in US-Pakistan relations is far too acute to be reconciled easily or in a near term.

The point is, it is turning out to be contradiction of a fundamental character. The implications are serious. Pakistan is “obstructing” the US’s regional strategy. Put differently, Pakistan is a vital cog in the wheel of the US strategy.

Pakistan dissociated openly from the agenda of the recent Istanbul conference (November 2), which aimed at creating an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe-type regional security mechanism for Central and South Asia and launching the New Silk Road project aimed at rolling back Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia. Pakistan also boycotted the Bonn conference (December 5) that was expected to legitimize the long-term US military presence in Afghanistan. To be sure, the two events floundered.

Washington is now left guessing whether Pakistan's strategic defiance is for real. Its historical experience is that the Pakistani elites eventually buckle under American pressure. But the "strategic defiance" over Shamsi would come as a surprise. Meanwhile, by ceding Afghan policy to the Pentagon (and CIA), Obama has taken the precaution of minimizing the scope of this problem area causing controversy during his re-election bid next year. Petraeus is also well liked by the Republicans.

This is an "Ayub-Khan moment" in the US-Pakistan relationship. Once again, popular opinion in Pakistan threatens to intrude into the relationship. But then, there are key differences, too. Kiani is far from the jovial Sandhurst-trained general Ayub Khan was, who was fond of his drink and all good things in life and was used to obeying orders.

Besides, China is not only not the Soviet Union or an adversary of Pakistan, but is in reality its one and only "all-weather friend". How can or why should Pakistan possibly collaborate with the US's containment strategy toward China?

The most important difference between 1958 and 2011, however, is, firstly, that Kiani's "nativist traditions" require him to act within the collegium of corps commanders who are acutely conscious of the mood within the armed forces, which is that Pakistan should shake off the albatross that was hung around its neck in late 2001.

Second, the Pakistani army is taking great and meticulous care that while traversing the shark-infested waters in the months ahead, it holds the hands of the country's civilian leadership at every stage, every moment.

The challenge facing the US is to locate an Ayub Khan, but it is an improbable challenge.

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