



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Storm Brews in South Asia: India-Pakistan conflict and the US-Afghan Connection

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No sooner had the guns fallen silent and the terrorist carnage ended in Mumbai than a keen three-way diplomatic tussle began involving India, Pakistan and the United States. The two South Asian nuclear powers are locked in race to get the US on their respective side.

For the US, though, it is no longer a matter of acting as a fair-minded, neutral mediator. Today, Washington is a full-fledged participant with its own stakes in the South Asian strategic power equations, thanks to the war in Afghanistan, which is critically poised. Indeed, the South Asian brew couldn't be more strange.

As "The Old Man" in William Shakespeare's play Macbeth would say,

"Threescore and ten I can remember well:
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange: but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings."

Washington seems to apprehend that the escalating tensions in South Asia may spin out of hand. According to the latest indications, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is arriving in New Delhi on Wednesday on a mediatory mission.

Again, Israeli intelligence Mossad is watching from the shade. The apparently Pakistani fidayeen (guerillas) who attacked Mumbai made it a point to target Jews, including Israeli citizens, for particularly gruesome violence. There were nine Jewish victims. Israeli experts have arrived in Mumbai. Israel's fury knows no bounds.

Meanwhile, China is gently wading into the eye of the storm. On Saturday, China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi discussed by telephone the crisis with his Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mehmood Qureshi. They surely condemned the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. But then, Yang went on to express the hope that "Pakistan and India could continue to strengthen cooperation, maintain the Pakistan-India peace process, and to advance bilateral ties in a healthy and steady way", to quote Xinhua news agency.

Yang said, "These measures are in the fundamental interests of both Pakistan and India." Curiously, Yang and Qureshi also "pledged joint efforts to push forward bilateral ties". In essence, Yang has voiced solidarity with Pakistan and counseled restraint on the part of India. It is unclear whether Washington prompted Beijing to use its good offices to calm the troubled waters or Beijing wished to underscore its relevance to South Asian security.

One thing is clear, though. As the death toll in Mumbai continues to steadily climb and is about to cross 200 innocent lives, India is overwhelmed by waves of sorrow and anger. The government in Delhi has been shaken to its very foundations by the public outrage that has erupted at the colossal failure of political leadership. The ruling party, Congress, which is the grand old party that led India's freedom struggle, faces an existential threat to its future standing on the chessboard of India's national politics.



Taj Mahal Hotel under attack

Senior politicians of all shades sat huddled in the prime minister's residence for hours altogether until midnight Sunday, figuring out how to face the daylight and a public which is fast losing faith in them and their shenanigans.

The interior minister has been forced by an irate Congress party leadership to resign, owning responsibility for the massive failure to prevent the fidayeen from storming India's financial capital with such impunity. Curiously, intelligence wasn't altogether lacking that precisely such an attack from the Arabian Sea needed to be anticipated.

But the public is not impressed that the dapper minister's head has rolled. The wounds on the Indian psyche cut deep. And there is a growing possibility that the public anger may result in a wild swing in the popular mood toward right-wing nationalist politics in the ongoing provincial assembly elections and the fast-approaching parliamentary elections.

The government is pointing its finger at Pakistan as the base from where the fidayeen staged their carefully planned attack. The popular perception in India is that there had to be some very substantial degree of involvement by elements within the Pakistani establishment for such a massive, meticulously choreographed operation with detailed logistical back-up to be staged.

The government is having a hard time maintaining its formal position, which distinguishes terrorist groups based in Pakistan that would have carried out the attack and the Pakistani government as such. The public opinion doesn't buy the subtle distinction, but the government has little choice in the matter.

Indeed, the Indian establishment seems to lack conviction in what it is saying by way of absolving the Pakistani security agencies of any hand in perpetrating the

terrorist attack. The alternative for the government would be tantamount to calling the attack by its name - an act of war - on the part of the Pakistani establishment, given its massive scale. But that will oblige India to respond to the perceived aggression militarily, which of course is unthinkable as a nuclear flashpoint is reachable within no time.

The point is, the India-Pakistan adversarial relationship with its undercurrents of mutual suspicion and bristling with countless animosities bordering on hostility, is so delicately poised at any given moment that it doesn't need more than a few hours to degenerate into a conflict situation on account of a misstep or two on either side, even when it is camouflaged in veneers of cordiality as it has been during the past three to four years.

Islamabad, of course, stubbornly rejects all imputations of involvement in the terrorist attack. Under direct pressure from the United States, Islamabad hurriedly accepted the idea that Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha, director general of the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) Pakistan's premier intelligence service, would visit India to discuss the issue. But this decision, emanating out of a telephone conversation between Rice and Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari, seemed to have been a shrewd attempt to finesse the mounting Indian anger. It has since been watered down by the Pakistani military. Evidently, Pakistani army chief General Pervez Kiani, who previously headed the ISI, concluded it might sap the morale for the military to be seen wobbling under Indian pressure.

Reflexes are hardening on both sides. In the domestic political environment in India with impending national elections, it is politically suicidal for the government to be seen helpless in even coaxing Islamabad into a meaningful exchange. While the Indian left parties have set aside their recent acrimonious differences with the government and called for "national unity", right-wing politicians do not feel the impetus to do so when they sense the chances of their being catapulted into power on a nationalistic wave of popular outrage.

Meanwhile, Delhi turns toward Washington for more help. And, anticipating further US pressure, the Pakistani military has begun holding out veiled threats that unless Washington and Delhi backed off, all bets are off on its participation in the "war on terror" in Afghanistan. This may put Washington in some quandary - and explain Rice's hurried trip to the region.

The Pakistani military knows only too well that once the "Afghanistan factor" is brought into play, the calculus changes completely. With an estimated 32,000 US troops already on the field and a prospective force of more than 20,000 combat and support troops possibly on their way on the request of commanders in Afghanistan, it becomes a high stakes game for Washington.

From Washington's perspective, the crisis erupts at an awkward time, with various departments and agencies of the US administration engaged in devising a fresh strategy towards the war in Afghanistan - White House coordinator for Iraq and Afghanistan General Douglas Lute; CENTCOM commander General Petraeus; chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen; the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency are yet to complete their assignment.

The Afghan factor cuts into US interests in different ways. First, in the event of an escalation of India-Pakistan tensions in the coming days and weeks, the US should anticipate a Pakistani decision to divert its crack divisions from the Afghan border regions, roughly totaling 100,000 troops, to its western border with India. Almost immediately, the impact will be felt on the dynamics of the war in Afghanistan.

In a recent speech in Washington, General David McKiernan, supreme commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan, had underscored how important it was that Pakistani military stayed the course in Afghanistan. He said Kiani was shortly expected in Kabul and "we've started from talking to each other to today we coordinate tactical-level cooperation along the border".

McKiernan added he saw a "shift in thinking at the senior levels in Pakistan that this insurgency is a problem that threatens the very existence of Pakistan, and that they have to deal with it perhaps in ways that they didn't contemplate a few years ago on their side of the border. So I see a willingness and a capacity, although they have a long way to go to conduct counterinsurgency operations on the Pak side of the border".

He expressed "cautious optimism" about the war, taking into account the Pakistani military's willingness to cooperate. McKiernan's worst fear now will be that the Pakistani military leadership may be about to plead it has the will to fight the al-Qaeda and the Taliban but lacks the capacity and resources due to the urgent requirement of redeployment on the border with India.

A second factor working on the US will be the pressure that all this might put on the transit facilities for supplying the troops. Roughly 75% of the supplies for the US troops pass through Pakistan and there are no viable alternate routes except through Iran for supplying the units deployed in the insurgency-ridden southern and southeastern regions of Afghanistan. Third, without Pakistan's support, the Taliban will have a field day in the border regions. And the casualties for the NATO forces will mount, which will have serious political implications for the European capitals.

Therefore, Washington's prime task will be to cool tempers and avoid an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between the two South Asian nuclear adversaries. It will be the last major foreign policy act for the departing George W Bush administration and a curious full-dress rehearsal for the incoming Barack Obama presidency.

The Pakistani interest lies in forcing a mediatory role on the US that "restrains" India. The Pakistani military feels nervous about the rapidly expanding US-India strategic partnership and would like Washington to be even-handed in its South Asia policies. Curiously, the fidayeen attack on Mumbai forcefully underscores the Pakistani plea that Washington cannot compartmentalize the Afghan war without addressing the core issues of India-Pakistan tensions.

But all this overlooks the possibility that the Pakistani military may well have a grand motive for ratcheting up tensions with India precisely at the present juncture so as to find an alibi to wriggle out of the commitments to the "war on terror" in Afghanistan. The point is, the Pakistani military harbors deep misgivings about the incoming Obama administration's Afghan policy. Obama has dropped enough hints that he will get tough with the Pakistani military for its twin-track policy of fighting the war and at the same time harnessing the Taliban as the charioteer of its geopolitical influence in Afghanistan.

The current US thinking leans towards equipping select Pashtun tribes to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It is a controversial move that worries the Pakistani military, as it might ignite violence in the Pashtun regions inside Pakistan and fuel the Pashtunistan demand. Besides, Obama has bluntly warned that he would get the US Special Forces to strike inside the Pakistani territory if the security situation warranted. Such moves will be seen by the Pakistani military as a humiliating slap in the face.

What is more disconcerting for the Pakistani military is the likelihood that Obama's "exit strategy" will emphasize the rapid build-up of a 134,000-strong Afghan national army. This has been a favorite idea of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and it may largely explain Obama's decision to keep him in his cabinet post.

However, the law of diminishing returns begins to work for the Pakistani military once an Afghan national army gains traction. Indeed, an Afghan army will, most certainly, be led by ethnic Tajik officers. At present, Tajiks constitute over three-quarters of the Afghan army's officer corps. But Tajiks have been entirely beyond the pale of Pakistani influence - even during the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Tajik nationalism challenges Pakistani aspirations to control Afghanistan. Summing up these dilemmas facing the Pakistani military, former Pakistani foreign secretary Najmuddin Sheikh recently pointed out, "It [Obama's Afghan policy] would in fact be the realization of Pakistan's worst security fears."

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This article appeared in The Asia Times on December 2, 2008 and at Japan Focus on December 1, 2008.

Recommended citation: M K Bhadrakumar, "Storm Brews in South Asia: India-Pakistan conflict and the US-Afghan Connection" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 49-

