

U.S. Could Trigger India-Pakistan War

by Ramtanu Maitra

In a *New York Times* interview March 21, a commander of American forces in Afghanistan, Maj. Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck, said that the U.S. troops “might cross the border into Pakistan to capture or kill al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters widely believed to have found sanctuary there.” Declining to give specifics, General Hagenbeck said: “Hot pursuit would probably be my last resort.”

Subsequently, at a March 26 Pentagon briefing in Washington, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, when asked whether U.S. troops are going to cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, said, “No.” Why the Defense Secretary chose to undermine his top commander in Afghanistan is anyone’s guess. One obvious reason could be that the admission of such an operation in advance, would compromise intelligence and might lead to the failure of the proposed raids.

India and Pakistan Troops Still Mobilized

But there is another, more important reason: the plan Rumsfeld chose to deny could trigger an India-Pakistan war. For months now, almost a million troops (700,000 on the Indian side) troops have been facing each other along the India-Pakistan borders. Despite repeated requests by Beijing, London, Moscow, Washington, and other capitals, neither India nor Pakistan has withdrawn its troops or lowered the alert level. In addition, India continues to point out that Pakistan has not slowed down the cross-border terrorism and that Pakistani militants are now infiltrating inside the India-held part of Jammu and Kashmir state at almost the same rate as before. New Delhi has expressed repeated concerns that these terrorist activities may increase further in the Spring when the snows of Kashmir will begin to melt.

Indian intelligence sources confirm continued Pakistani material support to terrorist groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir, in the form of provision of weapons and equipment, undisturbed movement of finances, training of terrorists, and active assistance from the Pakistani Army to the infiltration operations, including suppressive fire support against Indian Army posts.

Although this massive number of troops has remained poised for months now, not a single serious incident along the border has occurred. But, at the same time, New Delhi, in particular, has fought hard to fend off pressures exerted from within to go for “hot pursuit” across the border into the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir and to dismantle the

terrorist training camps. India has been resisting this internal pressure because of the support and promises extended by United States and others, that Pakistan would dismantle its terrorist structure and cross-border terrorism would come to an end.

On the other hand, if the United States now chooses to cross the Afghan border into Pakistan, chasing al-Qaeda and Taliban renegades, New Delhi may not be able to hold back any longer the pressure for a “hot pursuit” incursion of its own into Pakistan. Pakistan’s continuing cross-border terrorism has rejuvenated the strong anti-Pakistan elements within India.

Not An Honest Face

There are also other reasons why the India-Pakistan war may break out. The most important is the unwillingness exhibited by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to take on the Islamic jihadis and the terrorists aligned against India.

On Jan. 12, amidst much fanfare, President Musharraf had unveiled his plan to pull Pakistan out of its present state of lawlessness by banning the terrorist and jihadi groups. The speech was applauded far and wide, particularly in the West, which considers President Musharraf, not Pakistan, a key factor in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. In addition, the West surely needs an “Islamic friend” at a time when most Islamic nations believe that its intent to fight terrorism is an intent to fight Islam.

But long before the echoes of Musharraf’s speech stopped reverberating, reports out of Pakistan indicated that the Pakistani President, too, is less than honest about his war against jihadis and terrorists. A Pakistani scholar and author of a number of well-researched books on the region, Ahmed Rashid, pointed this out in a recent interview with *Asian Source*. “Unfortunately,” he told the magazine, “the Musharraf regime has not carried out the promised crackdown on these militant groups that it had pledged to do after his Jan. 12 speech. The 2,000 militants who were caught have all been freed, none of them have been charged with anything, and the leadership is now free.”

Rashid also noted that out of the extremist groups who were banned, hardly anyone has been caught, and certainly no one has been charged for the sectarian Sunni-Shi’a killings between Muslims. In addition, it is widely known by now that there exists support among some sections of the military for the now-deposed Taliban. But more important, there is a very powerful group of retired and active duty Pakistani intelligence officers who have, over the last 20 years, built up very effective grids with each other and with militant groups. The Army refuses to discipline these generals, although very senior retired officers among them are making scandalous remarks which are fuelling extremist sentiment in the country, Ahmed Rashid says.

As one Indian analyst pointed out in a vernacular news daily in India, on Feb. 2, Musharraf recently revealed his



Despite some reports in the United States, Indian and Pakistani troops at their border have not been reduced in number or alert level; the prospect of U.S. forces entering Pakistan from Afghanistan in "hot pursuit," may push India to do the same, and start a broader war.

strategy in an address to the Joint Session of the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir Assembly. He categorically reversed his Jan. 12 position, saying that Kashmir remains the core issue of the conflict with India, and promotion of cross-border action would remain the preferred instrument of state policy.

Problem With Washington

Between Pakistan and the United States a dance is in progress. It is not clear who is setting the dance steps for the other. When the United States and its British allies went pell mell into Afghanistan in October to set the country straight, there was hardly any strategy for how to bring stability in the region. At first, Washington leaned very heavily on Pakistan for intelligence. After receiving a number of setbacks, it dawned on Washington that the intelligence coming out of Islamabad is tainted, and unless the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence/al-Qaeda/Taliban nexus is crushed, the victory in Afghanistan will remain illusory.

A case in point are the two recent incidents that involved Americans. First was the kidnapping and killing in Karachi of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. The second jolt came on March 17, when the International Protestant Church in the most heavily guarded area in Islamabad was attacked with grenades during Sunday services. The attack caused five deaths—two of which were Americans, and 45 injuries, including the Sri Lankan Ambassador and his family. Pakistani authorities claim they have no suspect to track down. Shortly after this, Islamabad refused to let 1,700 British troops, bound for Afghanistan deployment, land in Pakistan.

The United States has the choice of going with the Russia-Iran-India triangle to help settle the Afghan quagmire, or go-

ing with Pakistan. Pakistan is preferred because it will be less demanding, and will be willing to deliver to Washington what, undoubtedly, the other nations would object to.

For instance, the media did not notice two statements by President Musharraf during his recent foreign visits. In Washington, as well in Tokyo, he said Pakistan wants to be a part of Central Asia. With the oil- and gas-rich Central Asia perceived to have become the focus of the United States and its Western allies, Pakistan has assumed a pivotal role due to its geographical location, and the stated intent of its President. Eventually, the Clash of Civilizations faction in Washington perceives that the control of Central Asia will lead it to a confrontation against Russia-China, and even against India.

Also, Washington is interested to have a "friend" who must be "democratic." President Musharraf has already announced that he will hold general elections in October 2002. What-

ever the ultimate format of this election turns out to be, Musharraf, with the support of Washington and London, has proposed a referendum which will continue his own Presidency for another five years. All Pakistani political parties have rejected the proposal.

As a result, reports indicate that Musharraf is now wooing the religious leaders for support. A recent report from Islamabad by Internews says the President has sought separate meetings with the chiefs of the three largest religious parties. These leaders were under arrest for their anti-government stance in the post-Sept. 11 period, but all have been released recently. Two of these invitees are Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the Emir of Jamaat-e-Islami, and Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiatul Ulema-e-Islam. Maulana Fazlur is widely recognized as the mentor of the Taliban and has produced thousands of Taliban through his madrassahs, or religious schools.

New Delhi sees a definite pattern in this retreat by Musharraf, tolerated by Washington. Not only the leaders of the Pakistani Islamic parties, but also the leaders and cadres of the various components of the Army of Islam and other sectarian and jihadi groups—who were detained before and after Jan. 12—are out of confinement. Assurances are now being delivered by President Musharraf himself to these religious leaders and jihadi groups, that Islamabad will not betray them and weaken their capability to carry on jihad against India.

Pakistani media reports recently noted that of 50 bank accounts of Afghan groups and individuals seized by the Pakistani authorities, a "disappointingly low amount" of money was found. *The News International* pointed out that the freezing of the accounts "in pieces, gave ample time to most of these account holders to withdraw their money."