

U.S. Troops Enter Pakistani Territory

by Ramtanu Maitra

U.S.-Pakistani relations may take a sharp downturn in the near future, as Washington is mobilizing its resources to enter Pakistan to capture and eliminate foreign members of al-Qaeda. The first such move was made by the U.S. troops in the evening of May 2, when they “strayed into Pakistani territory” while hunting al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects in southeastern Afghanistan and were turned back by Pakistani troops, Pakistan’s Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan told the Pakistani media.

According to General Sultan, American soldiers came inside Pakistani territory in three military vehicles and rode into Lowara Mandi town in the North Waziristan tribal region. They had checked a few shops and a gas station looking for foreign terrorists, when Pakistani Army personnel arrived on the scene and told them that they were inside Pakistan. The U.S. troop commander apologized and left.

Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokesman Masood Khan said Islamabad has lodged a protest with the United States and demanded an inquiry into the incident. “We have protested to the U.S. authorities, both through the diplomatic and military channels,” he said. On May 6, the written statement that the U.S. State Department released did not mention the intrusion, but assured Pakistan that the United States respects the border that divides the tribal territory from Afghanistan.

In March, under pressure from the United States, Islamabad had sent about 70,000 troops inside the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) area of Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan. There was definite information that foreign terrorists—mostly Uzbeks, Chechens, Uighurs, and some Arab nationals—had set up their base in these tribal areas, to harass American troops and undermine the already-weakened Kabul regime.

For two weeks, Pakistani troops, who had never entered the FATA, let alone battled the fierce tribes there, in the country’s 57-year history, fought the tribes and in all 150 lives were lost. Intercepting the communication system used by the terrorists, Pakistanis claimed that they were close on the heels of some “big fish” within al-Qaeda. There were certainly a number of Uzbeks, affiliated to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has been declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. government, holding out in the area. It was said that IMU leader Tahir Yuldavesh was among the militants hiding there. The authorities were also probing the

presence of Chechen commanders Daniyar and Qurban Ata in South Waziristan. But the Pakistani Army came up empty-handed, and the Americans believe that the Pakistani Army was merely putting up a show, without any intent to nab any of the bigwigs.

Reluctant Warriors

Islamabad had gone into the FATA most unwillingly, and has no intention to antagonize the fierce tribes who had fought with the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s against the invading Soviet Army. Unlike the United States, which is obsessed with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Pakistan has no qualms about leaving them alone.

Pakistani troops made a foray into South Waziristan, the largest of the seven tribal agencies in terms of area, which has always been difficult to govern. It is also one of the bigger agencies in terms of population, and has, therefore, been given two seats in the country’s national assembly as against one for most of the other tribal regions. South Waziristan is largely mountainous, making it ideal for guerrilla warfare. The landscape is dotted by forts built by the British in the early part of the last century, in their largely unsuccessful colonial bid to crush the freedom struggle of the native tribes. Two Pashtun tribes, Ahmadzai Wazir and Mahsud, dominate South Waziristan. There are also some Burkis, a small ethnic group that has been assimilated by the Pashtuns and now mostly speaks the Pashto language. The Waziris live on both sides of the Durand Line, which serves as a border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most of the Pakistani tribesmen who gave refuge to the non-Pakistanis and are now fighting alongside them against the Pakistan Army, belong to the Zalikhel section of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe. These tribes are extremely volatile, and Islamabad has no intention whatsoever to mark them as enemies.

But the U.S. pressure has led the situation in that direction. The conflict between Pakistan’s Armed Forces and Islamic militants has spread to some of the other FATA areas, causing considerable loss of life on both sides. The recent firing of four rockets at targets in Peshawar city highlighted the kind of threat that the well-armed and trained tribesmen and some of their “guest fighters” now pose to President Pervez Musharraf’s government.

Air Strip To Enter Pakistan

There is no doubt that the situation will deteriorate, and most likely, rapidly. The U.S. military has built a new airbase in southeastern Afghanistan, in a remote desert area near the border with Pakistan, BBC reported on May 3. U.S. commanders say the airstrip, in Afghanistan’s Paktika province, will be capable of taking large transport aircraft such as the C-130. The base will allow U.S. forces to bring in more ground troops to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda allegedly hiding in bordering FATA areas of Pakistan. North Waziristan and adjoining South Waziristan lie along Afghanistan’s southeastern provinces of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost, where the

Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)



United States often searches for Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents.

The Americans took extreme caution to get the air strip built without fanfare. The operation began in late April in the dark, with five giant U.S. Air Force planes dropping tons of construction equipment onto the desert plateau. The exact location of the air strip is still secret, but it is known to be very close to Pakistan's borders—so close that Islamabad is certain that every time a plane takes off from the strip, it would veer into Pakistani air space, violating international law.

According to reports, U.S. soldiers on the ground guided in the transport planes, which had flown all the way from Germany. Work began soon afterwards, bulldozing the hard, rocky scrub. In less than four days' time, the troops of the 27th Combat Engineering Battalion created an airstrip capable of taking C-130 transport aircraft, and eventually even larger planes, according to reports.

U.S. commanders will not say exactly how they intend to use the base, but it will allow them to move far larger forces into this region more quickly. This is an area where suspected Taliban militants remain active, and just across the border is the Pakistani tribal area of Waziristan.

American Objectives

The U.S. move to build the air strip has two basic objectives. First, the Americans are convinced that Pakistan is "soft" on the terrorists. The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David Barno, on May 3 questioned Pakistan's commitment to fighting Taliban and al-Qaeda militants along the border, saying that appeasing extremists will only put off an inevitable battle. Barno said the U.S. military was watching closely how Pakistan deals with the militants, but said that a "significant" number had to be "killed or captured." Barno

told reporters that the United States has "some concerns that [the Pakistani operation] could go in the wrong directions." Attacks on U.S. forces just across the border from Waziristan are frequent, and militants often retreat into the mountains toward the Pakistani region, he pointed out.

While the first objective of the Bush Administration is to take control of search-and-destroy missions inside Pakistan, the second objective is to find Osama bin Laden well before the U.S. Presidential election. It is also certain that friendship with Pakistan, however much it is touted by Washington, will not be allowed to stand in the way of the U.S. desire to kill off al-Qaeda members and grab Osama.

Beyond Repair

It has become evident to Washington by now that the United States is wholly trapped in Afghanistan. No matter how long it stays, its stated objectives, which very few outside of the United States really believe—to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan—are even more elusive than Osama bin Laden. On May 5, the Asian Development Bank's representative in Afghanistan, Frank Polman, at a news conference in Washington, made it clear that development of Afghanistan is not possible unless the security situation improves. At the core of the security problem lies the booming opium trade, endorsed fully by the occupying U.S. forces. "Everybody knows" that the warlords, local commanders, and heroin factories are involved, he said. "Get these guys and put them in jail. But this is not happening. You can put a truck full of opium in Kandahar and drive all the way through the country; nobody will stop you."

In other words, things have gone too dirty in Afghanistan. Any talk of development, stabilization, and democracy are mere lollipops meant for public consumption.

Under the circumstances, Washington will most likely unleash brutal force to kill and capture the "terrorist suspects." The U.S. military has sent 2,000 Marines to the area around Tirin Kot, 250 miles southwest of the capital, Kabul, in Uruzgan province, Lt. Col. Tucker Mansager said. Uruzgan, the home province of fugitive Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar and several of his lieutenants, remains a stronghold of the ousted militia. Colonel Mansager said the Marines were a "surge force," available to go anywhere at short notice. It is likely that these Marines would be deployed inside Pakistani borders as well.

Pakistan is well aware that none of these methods will bring about peace or stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan is also concerned that when the storm and thunder represented by the U.S. military withdraws from the scene, it would leave behind those who would identify Islamabad as the sole partner of the murderous Americans. The wrath that Pakistan would face then will be not only from Taliban and al-Qaeda, but also its own fierce tribes bordering Afghanistan.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said the other day, "You break it, you own it." But in this case, the U.S. breaks it, but Pakistan owns it. A friendly job, indeed!