

Will Washington Allow Zardari's Political Survival?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Our correspondent posted this article from New Delhi Sept. 11.

Inspired by acquiring a new Pakistani President, who has no base in the institutions of the country, or in the population, the United States landed troops inside Pakistan Sept. 3 to combat militants there, without permission of Pakistan's government. The operation was carried out about 72 hours before the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's spouse, Asif Ali Zardari, became President of Pakistan, securing more than two-thirds of the National Assembly votes.

The U.S. decision to land troops inside Pakistan's tribal areas produced the expected furor, and since the Army, formerly headed by the deposed President Pervez Musharraf, is no longer in power, the yet-to-be-sworn-in Zardari got an earful from the Pakistani people. In other words, Washington had no compunction about cutting off Zardari's feet before he could land.

According to the *New York Times*, it was President George W. Bush who made the "brilliant" tactical decision to land U.S. troops inside Pakistan. The *Times* cites senior U.S. officials who report that Bush had secretly approved orders allowing U.S. forces to conduct ground operations in Pakistan without that government's prior approval.

Pakistan Under the British Grip

Whether dealing with the complex Pakistan-Afghanistan situation is way beyond President Bush's intellectual capability is a moot question, but what remains to be answered is: What was the hurry?

Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, who has changed color often, recently became a rabid anti-Musharraf "Pakistani patriot," influencing the talking heads in Washington, and spreading his gospel that Pakistan desperately needs a "democratic form of government" to a section of the U.S. media, while "exposing" Musharraf's "duplicities." Haqqani had brought forward Zardari's candidacy to the Bush Administration. For an unfocused Washington, there could not be a better candidate for the Pakistani Presidency than Zardari: Zardari has no friend in the Army; none in the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence); no personal political base, because he was never elected to the National Assembly, and rose to the top of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), "a party of the Bhuttos," through marriage; and in fact, he has more enemies than friends within the PPP leadership, who point out that Zardari has systematically ousted close associates of Benazir Bhutto in the party hierarchy since her death last December. Moreover, Zardari has little or no support among the opposition, former Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif, for instance. Under the circumstances,



inside Pakistan's tribal areas, Mullen told the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, nearly seven years after U.S.-led forces toppled Afghanistan's Taliban regime following the Sept. 11 attacks: "I'm not convinced we are winning it in Afghanistan. I am convinced we can."

The 'Zardari Effect'

Mullen said he was already "looking at a new, more comprehensive strategy for the region" that would cover both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

"In my view, these two nations are inextricably linked in a common insurgency that crosses the border between them," he told lawmakers.

"We can hunt down and kill extremists as they cross over the border from Pakistan ... but until we work more closely with the Pakistani government to eliminate the safe havens from which they operate, the enemy will only keep coming."

Admiral Mullen's new-found confidence that "we can win in Afghanistan" stems from what can best be labeled the

on whom, then, Zardari will have to depend? Other than Haqqani, the United States, of course, through the thoughtful U.S. President, George W. Bush.

It is evident that the United States is looking at all this as an opportunity to move into the tribal areas to get rid of the "bad guys" a non-religious label for the jihadis, who have assembled under various umbrellas. Washington knows the Pakistani Army is in a state of disarray since the U.S. dumped Musharraf, the former army chief.

The problem that has emerged in the United States over the last few years, because of the complexities behind Musharraf's refusal to give the U.S. a free hand in the tribal areas, is an understanding that the United States/NATO can win the Afghan war only by squeezing Pakistan; this realization has reached not only President Bush, but even those who know better, such as Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Following the hullabaloo that erupted after it became evident that the Americans had indeed landed troops

"Zardari effect." Since 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan and routed the Taliban in no time, America's best ally was Pakistani President Musharraf. Although his credentials were the right ones to be a friend and combat ally of the U.S., Musharraf did have a base in the Army, among some in the ISI, and he had control of the political party PML(Q). But, the bottom line always was, that Musharraf was accountable to a large section of the Pakistani people. The fact that they supported him until late in 2006, was a problem for the United States and NATO, because Musharraf would not act to please the U.S., if it displeased the Pakistani people. Now, Washington has Zardari, who has no ties, no political accountability, and mansions in a number of countries, including one in Surrey, near London.

There is yet another inflexion point. Barely a week before the U.S. Special Forces entered Angorada in the South Waziristan tribal area, where members of al-Qaeda's *shura* (council)—Arabs and Uzbeks—were believed to be operating, a meeting took place on the

aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* in the Indian Ocean, between Admiral Mullen and the Pakistani Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, ostensibly to discuss infiltration points for militants going from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and to pinpoint the al-Qaeda training camps. The rugged mountainous area where the U.S. troops had landed, is also a launching pad for militants staging attacks on a U.S. military post in the Birmal area in Paktika province in Afghanistan.

What exactly was discussed on the decks of *Lincoln* is anyone's guess. Indian intelligence sources indicate that Mullen took the opportunity to thank Kiyani for cooperation in helping to set up the democratic government in Islamabad, and with the U.S./NATO troops along the Afghan-Pakistan borders. Whether the U.S. intent to enter Pakistan to eliminate the "bad guys" was under discussion is not known. Some Indian analysts believe that it was discussed, but that Kiyani had laid out the limitations of such actions.

The angry response in Pakistan at the governmental level, Zardari excluded, that followed the U.S. deployment, indicates that whatever Kiyani said, or did not say, aboard the *Lincoln*, the assumption in Washington that the "Zardari effect" would allow the United States to have unlimited latitude in dealing with insurgents functioning within Pakistan should be considered as good as dead.

Army on the Rocks

Gen. Tariq Majid, chairman of Pakistan's Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, said cross-border strikes such as the one Sept. 3, would alienate ethnic Pashuns, who live on both sides of the border, and be counterproductive. "Pakistan reserves the right to appropriately retaliate," he told visiting German Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung.

On Sept. 10, General Kiyani said that no foreign forces will be allowed to conduct operations inside Pakistan in light of last week's "reckless" U.S. military ground operation. Responding to the U.S. attack using Predator drones, Kiyani said, Pakistan's "territorial integrity ... will be defended at all cost and no external force is allowed to conduct operations ... inside Pakistan." At the same time, Pakistan's military resumed its battle against the Taliban militants in its tribal region, two Army spokesmen said.



Office of the President of Pakistan

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari meets with Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, Sept. 10. Zardari, with no political base, is at the mercy of the Bush Administration, which is moving into Pakistan's tribal areas, without permission from the government, to "get rid of the 'bad guys.'"

But, despite the harsh words by the Army Chief, he has begun to make the rounds. For instance, the Pakistani top brass, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) and the three service chiefs called on President Zardari at the President's office on Sept. 10, to "greet" him on assuming his office. CJCSC General Majeed, Chief of Army Staff General Kayani, Chief of Naval Staff Adm. Muhammad Afzal Tahir, and Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshall Tanvir Mehmood Ahmad expressed their good wishes for the President. They briefed Zardari about the overall command structure and the operational preparedness of the country's armed forces.

In addition, Kiyani convened a corps commanders' meeting on Sept. 11 to discuss U.S. attacks in Pakistan, *Express News* reported. It said a statement by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman regarding air strikes inside Pakistan would also be discussed.

It is evident that the "Zardari effect" will not last long, and the sooner Admiral Mullen realizes that, the better. The situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is becoming untenable, just the way the British had planned. Now, the British have offered the United States a situation whereby if you hit Pakistan, you break it up. And, if you do not hit Pakistan, but do not recognize your enemy, Pakistan will also break up. And, then, perhaps, Zardari will set up his fabulous home in Surrey to entertain the new owners of a part of Pakistan.