

U.S. Troop Presence in Afghanistan Causes Regional Disharmony

by Ramtanu Maitra

June 11—Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said on June 9 that the U.S. deployment of 21,000 additional troops to war-ravaged Afghanistan could have serious implications for Pakistan. He was speaking at a news conference in Islamabad with the visiting Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu. His statement is not only on the mark, it should have been issued a long time ago.

In addition to the instability caused by the U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan for the last eight years, President Obama's decision to send another 21,000 troops has caused further disharmony in the broader region that includes China, India, Central Asia, and Iran. This disharmony stems from the fact that Washington has not revealed to any nation in the region what it is really after in Afghanistan, and what its plans are in the long or short term. As a result of the ongoing military activities and massive production of opium and other opiates there, all of Eurasia, as far north as Russia, has been adversely affected. U.S. objectives, and its capability to address the issues, are now questioned throughout this region, and a close friendship of any nation with Washington at this juncture raises a danger signal.

So far, Washington, under President Obama, has followed the Afghanistan policy laid out by the Bush Administration, with one significant difference. Obama, while saying repeatedly that the Afghan war cannot be won militarily, is putting in more troops for the purpose of a military victory. What Qureshi referred to, is the futility of this two-faced policy, and the threat that Washington's "new" strategy poses to Pakistan.

Concerns in Islamabad

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, with the ostensible intent to dethrone the Taliban government, which had provided shelter to al-Qaeda leaders allegedly involved in the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan was a safe country, although pockets of Islamic jihadis

and terrorist groups existed even then. These terrorist groups were kept in check by Islamabad with the help of its military and intelligence apparatus. That changed with the invasion of Afghanistan.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda, no match for U.S. firepower or the opposition from the local people to their obscurantist and oppressive policies, fled to Pakistan across the undefined Afghanistan-Pakistan border, known as the Durand Line. These fighters, both Afghan and non-Afghan, settled in Pakistan's loosely governed Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Balochistan, and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)—all bordering Afghanistan. The immediate objective of these militants was not only to protect themselves from the U.S. troops, but also to set up bases for armed forays to harass and inflict damage on the foreign troops, and the Afghan national army that the United States was raising.

The situation began to get worse by 2003, when it became evident that killing of Afghan civilians by U.S. and NATO troops not only shifted Afghanistan's Pushtuns (the dominant ethnic group) against the foreign troops, but also created strong anti-U.S. sentiment among Pakistan's Pushtuns who inhabit the areas where the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda had set up their bases. An undefined U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, bringing in the Pakistani Army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to kill the militants, indiscriminate drone and missile attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas by the United States, and successful propaganda by the jihadis against the Bush-Cheney war on terror soon began to bring Pakistani militants into the Taliban-al-Qaeda fold. Violence was ignited all along the Pakistani side of the border, and by 2007, it became evident that Pakistan's western border areas were coming under the control of the militants. A number of militant groups emerged, financed by the explosion of opium production in southern Afghanistan, and they began to challenge Islam-

abad's authority. In 2008, it became evident that the Pakistani militants and many of the al-Qaeda men had moved eastward to take control of the Swat Valley, posing a threat to the western part of Pakistan's most populous and prosperous province, Punjab, where the capital, Islamabad, and the military headquarters in Rawalpindi are located.

Crisis Deepens in Pakistan

Washington's repeated review of the Afghanistan situation under President Obama has neither clarified what Washington wants to achieve in Afghanistan, nor does Islamabad notice any change in U.S. policy on the ground. On June 8, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates ordered the new U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and his deputy, Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, to submit a review of the U.S. strategy within 60 days of their arrival in Afghanistan.

The U.S. National Security Council, the Central Command, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have each already reviewed the U.S. Afghan strategy, and civilian departments conducted a separate interagency review. On March 27, shortly after those reviews were completed, the Administration announced a new strategy that called for defeating al-Qaeda, reducing civilian casualties, and eliminating terrorist safe havens.

While all these reviews were going on, 11,000 more U.S. troops landed in Afghanistan to challenge the resurgent Taliban. The first five months of this year have seen a 59% increase in insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, a 62% increase in coalition deaths, and a 64% increase in the use of improvised explosives compared to the same period last year, according to U.S. Defense Department statistics. Those are highest levels so far in the eight-year war.

What perhaps led Foreign Minister Qureshi to speak out against Obama's plan to put more troops in Afghanistan is that the Taliban, no match to the U.S. troop in conventional warfare, will move back into Pakistani territory as they did in 2001 and 2002. This time around, they have an advantage, which also puts Pakistan in greater jeopardy: They will find the Pakistani Taliban, trained and armed, waiting to support them. With more U.S. boots on the ground, the Afghan Taliban will find it difficult to regain the territory they have now in Afghanistan, and they would vent their ire on Pakistan, which supports the U.S. war on terror. In 2009, Pakistan is much more unstable than it was in 2002, and the Pak-

istani Army is stretched thin battling the militants within Pakistan over a large area. Suicide bombers and truck bombers have hit deep inside Pakistan's Punjab province. There is no telling what awaits Pakistan, when another wave of Afghan Taliban fighters shows up, in response to the new U.S. troop deployment.

In addition to this foolhardy policy of the United States vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Washington has jacked up its rhetoric about Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling in the hands of the militants. This cacophony, which began in earnest in April 2009, when the Swat Valley was taken over by the militants, has now reached a crescendo.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in an interview with Fox television on April 26, said that Pakistan has assured the United States about the safety of its nuclear weapons, but the current volatile situation of the country raises questions about all of Islamabad assurances.

"One of our concerns, which we've raised with the Pakistani government and military," she said, "is that if the worst, the unthinkable were to happen, and this advancing Taliban encouraged and supported by al-Qaeda and other extremists were to essentially topple the government for failure to beat them back, then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan."

On May 6, U.S. National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones (ret.), in an interview with the BBC, said that the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is a cause of concern for Washington, despite reassurances that the weapons are out of reach of Taliban militants. "We have received many assurances from the military that this is something they have under control, but this is very much an ongoing topic.... The world would like to know that on this question, that there's absolute security and transparency," the Pakistani daily *The Dawn* quoted him as saying; and that the United States is ready to take emergency action to prevent Pakistan's nuclear arsenals from falling into the hands of the Taliban.

Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer now with the Brookings Institution in Washington, and an advisor to Obama on Afghanistan policy, in a May 30 Brookings paper pointed to the dangers this presents. He said that "the fighting has cast a spotlight on the shaky security of Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal—the fastest growing arsenal in the world.... Today the arsenal is under the control of its military leaders; it is well protected, concealed, and dispersed. But if the country fell into the wrong hands—those of the militant Islamic ji-

FIGURE 1



hadists and al-Qaeda—so would the arsenal. The U.S. and the rest of the world would face the worst security threat since the end of the Cold War. Containing this nuclear threat would be difficult, if not impossible.”

These recent statements by high officials in the Obama Administration go hand in hand with Washington’s “assuring” the world that the United States has a contingency plan to ensure security to Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal. “I am sure that our planners take whatever requisite action is required to ensure the arsenal in a country that is obviously in the midst of a great deal—that finds itself with a great deal of challenges right now—that they have some visibility on where such weapons are located,” said Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell. When asked whether U.S. Special Operations

forces have an emergency plan in place, Morell replied: “The last thing we want is to have the Taliban have access to the nuclear weapons in Pakistan.”

These pointed statements of the U.S. officials have also raised questions within Pakistan: What really is Washington’s intent? On May 12, former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar said that the U.S. can never be Pakistan’s friend, because it wants to seize the nuclear program by creating unrest and proving that Pakistan is a failed state. Many senior Pakistani analysts have come to a similar conclusion.

It is noteworthy, however, that none of these statements direct concerns at the British oligarchy, which has been caught repeatedly fomenting destabilizations all across the Subcontinent and through Central Asia.

The failure to see the British hand behind these current events, could be fatal.

Acrimony between China and India

Pakistan's nuclear issue is a bone of contention between New Delhi and Beijing. India, a non-recognized nuclear weapons state like Pakistan, would like to see Pakistan de-nuclearized. While New Delhi agrees with Washington on the dangers it would pose if the weapons come under militants' control, India neither condones forcible takeover of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, nor does it believe that the Pakistani Army will ever allow the nuclear weapons to get into the militants' hands. But, India would welcome efforts by the United States or any other nation to de-nuclearize Pakistan.

On the other hand, China, which has allegedly helped Pakistan to a certain extent to develop its nuclear weapons capabilities, would not like India to be the sole nuclear weapons power in the Subcontinent. This remains a very delicate issue between the two countries, an obstacle to trust.

While the China-India trade has zoomed ahead in recent years, the same cannot be said of their trust of each other with respect to South Asia. Recent statements from both countries suggest that the level of trust has not only remained low, but may be going down further.

India's Air Chief Marshal Fali Homi Major, in an interview with the Indian daily *Hindustan Times*, said that India faces a greater threat from China than from Pakistan. "We know very little about the actual capabilities of China, their combat edge or how professional their military is," he said. "They are certainly a greater threat."

On May 31, the Indian Air Force made operational an old air base, Daulatbeigh Oldi, in the mountainous Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir along the India-China border, and plans to renovate two more bases soon. The Daulatbeigh base was closed 43 years ago. In addition, there are reports that India is developing its infrastructure along the India-China border in the eastern sector, and has sent 60,000 more troops to man the long border.

A Tragedy in Progress

This has not gone down well in Beijing. On June 11, an article in the *People's Daily* online took a swipe at India's pretense of power: "But India can't actually compete with China in a number of areas, like international influence, overall national power and economic

scale. India apparently has not yet realized this. Indian politicians these days seem to think their country would be doing China a huge favor simply by not joining the 'ring around China' established by the U.S. and Japan. India's growing power would have a significant impact on the balance of this equation, which has led India to think that fear and gratitude for its restraint will cause China to defer to it on territorial disputes."

On the same day, in an article in the *Global Times*, titled, "90 percent in online poll believe India threatens China's security," author Zhu Shanshan pointed out that "about 74% people in the poll by huanqiu.com believed China should not maintain friendly relations with India anymore after its military provocation. And more than 65% of people taking part in the poll believed India's actions were harmful to bilateral ties and it is more harmful to India."

This exchange of barbs cannot be pinned entirely on the U.S. policy on Afghanistan, but the U.S. presence there, the weakening of Pakistan, the explosion of opium in Afghanistan on the American and British watch, and the talk of seizing Pakistan's nuclear arsenal if, and when, the militants get close to it, have adversely affected relations between India and China. Beijing's suspicion is that even if New Delhi is not working hand-in-glove with the United States in Afghanistan, India is quietly encouraging the United States to further weaken and de-nuclearize China's long-time friend, Pakistan.

President Obama's policy in Afghanistan can best be summed up as a tragedy in progress. The weakening of Pakistan, a nation with 160 million people, and turning it into an ungovernable nation fraught with violence, is itself a great tragedy. If one adds the criminalization of a large number of people because of the opium trade, illegal gun running, money-laundering—all part and parcel of the war on terror—one wonders what lies ahead for this region.

Eurasia depends heavily on the harmony of China, India, and Russia, but this cannot be achieved without a positive contribution from the United States. Indeed, those nations are the Four Powers that Lyndon LaRouche has called upon to ally against the British financier empire, to lead the world to a new global credit system that would replace the current bankrupt monetary system. The Afghanistan War has sacrificed harmony among these nations, as Washington strives for short-term relief from anti-U.S. terrorists. That goal, too, is elusive; but not recognizing this broader reality is a tragedy that will visit the entire region.