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By M K Bhadrakumar

The hearings of the US congressional committees on intelligence in Washington in the past two successive weeks make it clear that the administration of President George W Bush has no intention of pressuring Pakistan over the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf

Moreover, there may be no need for the Bush administration to pressure President General Pervez Musharraf. The Pakistani leader seems to be positioning to play a profoundly meaningful role in US regional policy as a whole that will go far beyond the limited turf of Afghanistan. In return, he can be confident of solid US backing for his controversial re-election bid as Pakistan's president in September. (Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.)

The Bush administration's predicament was fully revealed in the contradictory references contained in the written statement handed in by the then director of national intelligence, John

Negroponte, during his testimony before the US Senate subcommittee on intelligence on January 11. On the one hand, Negroponte claimed that al-Qaeda's core elements are still "resilient" and are plotting against US national-security interests from their leaders' "secure hideout" in Pakistan and, furthermore, that the Taliban and al-Qaeda maintained "critical sanctuaries" in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Negroponte described Pakistan as the United States' "frontline partner in the war on terror", even though Pakistan remained a "major source of Islamic terrorism".

Again, Negroponte estimated that the challenges facing President Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul are "significantly exacerbated by terrorism but not exclusively attributable to it". Negroponte also put in proper perspective the Taliban challenge by saying it didn't pose any direct threat as such to the Kabul government, though it could be deterring reconstruction and "undermining popular support" for Karzai himself.

Negroponte treated with kid gloves the entire delicate issue of Taliban and al-Qaeda activities in Pakistan's tribal agencies, which is the heart of the matter. Notably, he spoke with understanding about Pakistan's genuine difficulty in cracking down on the militants' "safe haven" in the tribal agencies, given the potential for tribal rebellions and a "backlash" by sympathetic Islamic political parties in Pakistan, which are staunchly opposed to the US military presence in Afghanistan.

President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai

But the astonishing part of Negroponte's statement was his observations regarding the nexus between the "war on terror" and Musharraf's own political future. Negroponte implicitly acknowledged that Musharraf is politically vulnerable and his ability to crack down on the Taliban will, therefore, be significantly reduced in the months ahead because of the compulsions of the elections in Pakistan.

But elsewhere in his testimony, Negroponte contradicted himself by virtually expressing confidence that Musharraf's continuance in power is beyond doubt, despite the huge criticism within Pakistan about his remaining president as well as chief of army staff. Negroponte said, "There are no political leaders inside the country able to challenge his continued leadership. Musharraf's secular opponents are in disarray, and the main Islamic parties continue to suffer from internal divisions and an inability to expand their support base."

What explains such verbal jugglery? Indeed, statements at other senior levels in the Bush administration in recent days have also paid handsome compliments to Musharraf's

cooperative attitude in countering the Taliban challenge, including at the level of the military leadership.

The commander of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan, General David Richards, went out of his way on at least two occasions in recent weeks to express total satisfaction over Pakistan's role. He even attributed to Pakistan credit for the reduced level of Taliban activity since autumn.

Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General David Richards

In an interview with an Afghan news agency last week, Richards said the Pakistani army was fully cooperating and was doing its best to stop cross-border activities by the Taliban. He said categorically, "It is no longer the policy of the Pakistan government to see the Taliban in Afghanistan." No matter Islamabad's past policies in Afghanistan, Richards stressed, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is now fully cooperating. He then revealed that it was thanks to an ISI tipoff that it had been possible to kill prominent Taliban commander Mullah Akhtar Osmani in Helmand province last month.

"The conditions are ripe for a complete victory," Richards claimed. So what has happened to the crisis that Karzai has been complaining about in respect of Pakistan's alleged role in masterminding the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan? Was it all a concoction by the international media? (Richards actually put the blame on the media for unduly exaggerating the Taliban challenge.)

Someone also seems to have advised Karzai to see the writing on the wall. He too has calmed down. In his presidential address to the Afghan Parliament in Kabul on Sunday, Karzai refrained from criticizing Pakistan. He vaguely attributed in a passing reference all the "Talibanphobia" to "certain Pakistani circles". Only a few weeks ago an agitated Karzai indulged in a "public display of resentment" toward visiting Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz through "hot words, gestures, body language and finger-pointing", to quote a former Pakistani ambassador in Kabul.

Evidently, Karzai has been advised by the United States to restrain himself. There is a deliberate US attempt to play down the gravity of the Afghan crisis - and Pakistan's role in it. Yet The Economist magazine wrote, "Insurgents allied to the Taliban are believed to be planning a big offensive. NATO has hopes its soldiers in Afghanistan could forestall this during the winter, through military pressure on the Taliban and huge amounts of civilian aid. That strategy is in tatters."

And indeed, the White House is to ask Congress next month for US$8 billion in new funds for Afghanistan, which is more than half the $14.2 billion Washington has spent on the country since the US-led invasion in 2001. And about 3,200 US troops who were due to end their tour of duty are to remain for a further 120 days.

A sense of alarm over the Taliban's resurgence

is apparent in regional capitals, especially Moscow, Tehran and New Delhi. Top leaders of the erstwhile Northern Alliance (which spearheaded the anti-Taliban resistance) visited Tehran in recent weeks and held consultations with Iranian officials. Iranian and Indian foreign ministers visited Kabul. The Russian foreign minister was scheduled to pay a visit to Kabul on Wednesday en route to Delhi, but the visit was called off at the last minute because of "bad weather".

However, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov said in Moscow on Wednesday, "Taking into consideration the continued escalation of tension in Afghanistan, we intend to continue to provide assistance to that country, including in the military field. [This will be done] primarily to help the Afghan Army to improve its combat preparedness and equipment and ensure its ability to protect the state's interests on its own." In a recent article, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov critically referred to the United States' proclivity toward "monopolizing conflict resolution" in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Russian and Indian foreign ministers reviewed the regional situation, including Afghanistan, during consultations on the sidelines of President Vladimir Putin's visit to Delhi on Thursday. The indications are that Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee will visit Tehran on February 6.

Central Asian countries feel equally nervous about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. A spurt in radical Islamist activities in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia is noticeable. China also recently claimed to have come across extensive links between Uighur militants in Xinjiang and "international terrorist" organizations. Evidently, the "war on terror" in Afghanistan is becoming a hot topic in the region all over again.

But will the cozy US-Pakistan condominium that has been at the steering wheel in the "war on terror" in Afghanistan allow regional powers like Russia (or Iran and India) to mess around in the Hindu Kush? The exclusivity of that condominium has been an integral part of the war through the past five years.

The geopolitics of the Afghan war are seldom talked about, but they have figured throughout at the center of the closely guarded US-Pakistan agenda. For the same reason, very little is heard nowadays about the idea mooted by French President Jacques Chirac at NATO's Riga summit in late November regarding the formation if a "contact group" on Afghanistan comprising countries in the region that have an interest in Afghanistan's stability. The proposed group would have made the conduct of the war more transparent and regional powers would have found such a forum useful.

But Washington has all but smothered the French proposal. Both the US and Pakistan would be horrified if any such contact group took shape and then proceeded to demystify the hunt for the elusive Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

But there are other nuances, too. It appears that the US has broached with Pakistan the issue of "help and assistance" in respect of its standoff with Iran. At any rate, the timing of Musharraf's tour of the pro-American Sunni Arab capitals Riyadh, Cairo and Amman last weekend was important. The hurriedly arranged tour followed consultations of the US secretaries of state and defense in Riyadh.

In a rare gesture, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia personally received Musharraf at the airport at Riyadh. Also, a grateful Saudi king conferred on Musharraf the "King Abdul Aziz Prize", Saudi Arabia's highest award. For some obscure reason, Musharraf has become the first-ever Pakistani leader to receive such an honor.

The emphasis during Musharraf's discussions in the pro-American Sunni Arab capitals has been on joint "Islamic action" in tackling the crisis in

the Middle East. Curiously, fleshing out Bush's new Iraq strategy, former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger recently explained at some length from another angle what such an "Islamic action" could amount to.

Kissinger wrote that Bush's Iraq strategy will require in the downstream "an international concept involving both Iraq's neighbors and countries further away that have a significant interest in the outcome". Kissinger underlined that the US will expect that "other countries must be prepared to share responsibilities for regional peace ... [since] it is impossible for America to deal with these trends unilaterally".

Equally, Pakistan and NATO seem to have finalized their agreement establishing an institutionalized framework of cooperation. NATO and the US have been pressing Musharraf for early conclusion of such an agreement. But Pakistan has been dragging its feet. Without doubt, Washington will appreciate that Musharraf has once again braved potentially vehement domestic opposition to deliver on a key US demand.

Musharraf is sending Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to NATO headquarters in Brussels on Tuesday. A NATO spokesman hailed the visit as "vitally important", and underlined that the visit will "deepen the political relationship between NATO and Pakistan".

Burning oil tanker carrying fuel for NATO forces after suspected
Taliban fighters attacked it at thePakistan-Afghan border post
of Chaman, January 14, 2007.

Formal NATO-Pakistan cooperation is bound to impact on the "war on terror" in Afghanistan. As the NATO spokesman succinctly put it, Pakistan will henceforth become "part of the solution". The million-dollar question for regional powers is whether the Taliban also will become "part of the solution".

Conceivably, a significant step was taken by the Afghan Parliament when it approved on Wednesday the formation of a National Reconciliation Commission. Speaking in Parliament, the enigmatic veteran Wahhabi leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf strongly urged dialogue with the Taliban. Sayyaf couldn't have spoken in a vacuum. In a checkered political life spanning four decades, he has kept links with Saudi Arabia, the ISI, the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and Karzai. Who precisely motivated him on Wednesday, it is not easy to tell.

At the same time, emerging ties with Pakistan will enable NATO to begin to reduce its dependence on Russian airspace (and Russian goodwill) for ferrying supplies for troops in Afghanistan. Not only that: at a time when Israel's formal admission to NATO is under active discussion, NATO will have already established a foothold on the Persian Gulf region's eastern periphery. Most important, the configuration works to the great advantage of the US in the event of an outbreak of military hostilities against Iran, which borders Pakistan.

The rapid sequencing of these developments is interesting, to say the least. It is hardly a week since the new chairman of the US Senate Intelligence Committee, Jay Rockefeller, told the New York Times that the Bush administration's statements about Iran were uncomfortably reminiscent of the rhetoric in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Being a lawmaker

with access to highly classified intelligence, Rockefeller's views carry particular weight. So indeed do Negroponte's.

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