

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/NJ03Ag01.html

Moscow beckons Pakistan's Kiani

By M K Bhadrakumar

10/3/2012

The phrase coined by the 17th-century English philosopher Francis Bacon is: "If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain." So, if Russian President Vladimir Putin won't come to Islamabad on Tuesday, then Pakistani army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kiani will still go to Moscow.

The Pakistani military spokesman has confirmed the "historic" visit will take place on Wednesday. The spokesman said Kiani is expected to meet top Russian military and civilian leaders to discuss possibilities of military-to-military cooperation between the two countries.

Russian sources explain that when Putin never really scheduled an Islamabad visit and none was announced, and the excitement was all on the Pakistani side, so how could it be deemed that the Kremlin cancelled the visit? It's a fair contention.

According to Moscow sources quoted by the media, there simply wasn't enough meat for a Putin visit at this point of time in the Russian-Pakistan normalization, since economic ties are languishing and there was nothing much in the pipeline except a couple of memorandums of understanding that could have been initialed.

But having said that, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is arriving in Islamabad on Wednesday on an unscheduled visit, presumably to assuage any sense of hurt in the Pakistani civilian leadership over the abrupt cancellation of Putin's visit.

The enemy's enemy...

Meanwhile, even as Lavrov heads for Islamabad, Kiani will have set out for Moscow. To be sure, Moscow's priority will be to sit across the table with Kiani, as he is the fountainhead of authority in Pakistan on major foreign and security policy issues. Also, he is an unusual Pakistani general, having run into difficulties with the United States, while pushing for Pakistan's "strategic autonomy" on the geopolitical chessboard.

Indeed, the present moment is pregnant with possibilities. Russia and Pakistan in varying measure - for different reasons though - have come under US pressure. Both appreciate that the US has "lost" the war in Afghanistan, is pulling out of it and would have little choice but to negotiate with the Taliban; both sense a power vacuum could develop in Afghanistan but also feel uneasy that the US is yet keeping strategic ambiguity about its future military presence in the region.

Meanwhile, Russia-Pakistan normalization through the recent years has reached a point where it is possible for the two countries to cooperate on a practical plane. In short, adversities and opportunities are compelling Russia and Pakistan to explore if they can swim together.

A core area of cooperation relates to the transit routes that supply the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan, which both Russia and Pakistan are providing for the Western alliance. The Northern Distribution Network via Russia becomes vital, in principle, for the US because of the imponderables over the Pakistani routes. But Washington is also chary of overtly depending on Russian goodwill. Again, Russia has supplied helicopters for the Afghan army and is maintaining them - they are paid for by the US, apart from training Afghan security personnel.

Evidently, Moscow has tenaciously finessed an Afghan "trump card" to play in the bigger game of the US-Russia reset. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko was quoted as saying last week that Moscow is ready to expand its joint projects with NATO concerning Afghanistan and "bring other players into them, too", but strictly within the framework of a mandate from the UN Security Council.

However, the US is easing itself out of the straitjacket of the UN Security Council mandate to conduct its activities without the Russians holding a veto over them. In reality, the US has all along been cherry picking, taking help from Moscow on a case-by-case basis but consistently keeping Russia at arm's length from the Hindu Kush. The US has repeatedly rebuffed the Russian attempts to insert the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO] even remotely as a provider of security for Afghanistan.

Washington's obduracy has only helped deepen the Russian suspicions regarding the US' long-term intentions, especially the establishment of permanent American military presence in Afghanistan. Grushko articulated the Russian angst:

One may suppose NATO will be turning to the Security Council for permission to train the Afghan cadres for the interior agencies and the armed forces. There should be no other military

functions and everything that spreads beyond the task of facilitating the Afghan stabilization will undermine regional security and generate an even greater uncertainty.

The plain truth is that among the regional powers, it is only Pakistan - aside of course Iran - which would feel genuine empathy for the Russian angst. Beijing may have reservations over a long-term US military presence but then it also has its well-honed methods (with Chinese characteristics) of harmonizing with the US (and NATO). To speak of the Central Asian elites, they have been beneficiaries of the lucrative war contracts and could be loathe to see the US forces depart.

As for India, it positively views a long-term US military presence as a factor of regional security and stability. It is Pakistan that feels threatened, like Russia, given the tense state of its relations with the US (and India). Both Russia and Pakistan have reason to worry about the deployment of a US missile defense system in Afghanistan.

A slap on the face

Clearly, the backdrop cannot be overlooked - the US-Russia relationship has run into headwinds. Writing for the official Novosti agency, its weekly columnist Konstantin von Eggert assessed Moscow's recent decision to shut down USAID activities in Russia:

This week, Vladimir Putin laid to rest the reset policy ... The reasons given by the [Russian foreign] ministry's spokesman were couched in language reminiscent of the Brezhnev era. In a nutshell, USAID was kicked out because, in the Kremlin's view, it tried to influence Russian politics ... The Russian president seems to have decided that it is time for the era of niceties in US-Russian relations to end. This is surely the first time since Gorbachev came to power that official Russia has slapped official America on the face so hard.

He [Putin] is irritated by President Barack Obama's stance on ballistic missile defense deployment in Europe ... What this show of force testifies to is the utter shallowness of US-Russian political relations. In the last ten years it has whittled down to just a few perennial topics ... Russia became an irrelevant second-tier policy issue for the Americans quite some time ago. Until fairly recently, the Russian leadership had responded by using the so-called nuisance factor - ie making life difficult for the US without crossing any red lines that might prompt an unpredictable US reaction. No more.

The point is, Washington is hitting hard at Russia's first circle of strategic interests in the so-called post-Soviet space. A telltale sign of the enormous loss of Russian influence in the Central Asian region surfaced over the weekend when Moscow admitted the failure of its protracted diplomacy in wrapping up an agreement with Tajikistan for the extension of the lease of the Russian military base in time for Putin's visit to Dushanbe slated for Friday.

Only 10 days back, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who was deputed to Dushanbe to prepare for Putin's visit, had exuded optimism that the two countries were "very close" to signing an agreement. However, the commander of the Russian Ground Forces, General Vladimir Chirkin, retracted on Saturday that the negotiations may continue for months.

"I believe the countries' leaders will sign the deal on the base's continuing stay [in Tajikistan] in the first half of next year," Chirkin said.

He admitted that Moscow is having problem persuading Dushanbe to agree to a 49-year lease and that the Tajiks are demanding US\$100 million in an annual fee for the base (which used to be provided without fee). The Kommersant newspaper reported that Dushanbe is demanding \$250 million as the annual fee.

Without a presence on the Tajik-Afghan border, Russia's Afghan strategy will be thrown into disarray in the post-2014 period. To be sure, Dushanbe feels encouraged that the US is interested in having a base of its own in Tajikistan. Indeed, there is a perceptible stepping up of the US diplomatic activities in Dushanbe, Tashkent and Ashgabat - key regional capitals across the Afghan border - in the past year. These capitals have a major role to play in any post-2014 scenario.

Water, water everywhere ...

The US has toyed with the idea of opening a transit route to Afghanistan via the Caspian, altogether bypassing Russian territory. The Western calculus is as follows: if NATO establishes a viable route from Turkey across the Caucasus and the Caspian region leading to the northern Afghanistan regions (via Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), Russia's capacity to dictate terms to the Western alliance would sharply diminish and the viability of long-term US military bases in Afghanistan will also be firmly ensured.

Things seem to be moving in this direction - although neither side talks about it openly. This is one reason why the parliamentary election in Georgia on Monday has become a high-stakes game: if President Mikhail Saakashvili loses to the opposition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, Tbilisi may opt for a course correction in its close relationship with the US.

Meanwhile, in Central Asia itself, Uzbekistan has edged close to the Turkmen ideology of "positive neutrality" after suspending its membership of the Moscow-led Collective Treaty Organization (CSTO) in June. Tashkent is making a determined effort to build up its ties with Turkmenistan. The Western countries are actively encouraging a Uzbek-Turkmen axis to develop (which would also have ramifications for energy security).

The Uzbek national news agency disclosed last week that Uzbek President Islam Karimov would pay a two-day visit to Ashgabat early this week. The report said, "The agenda of the summit includes the talks [with Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow] and exchanging views on the development of multifaceted Uzbek-Turkmen cooperation and important regional and international issues."

The report noted that Tashkent and Ashgabat have similar views on strengthening regional security and stability, creating "new effective mechanisms to intensify the negotiation process to resolve the Afghan crisis" with the participation of international organizations, joint fight against threats such as international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking and trans-national organized crime.

Above all, what may cement a Turkmen-Uzbek understanding is that the two countries share a

common position on water and energy issues in Central Asia. Specifically, they are opposed to the present Russian plans to assist the construction of the Kambarata and Rogun dams in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The European Union, the World Bank and the US back the Uzbek-Turkmen stance on this issue. Thus, amidst the tense Uzbek-Tajik standoff in recent months, the results of "expert studies" in the US have just added fuel to the fire by counseling Tashkent that if Dushanbe goes ahead with the Rogun hydropower project, Uzbekistan's annual "loss" would be \$600 million in terms of shortage of water for irrigation, unemployment in the agriculture sector and so forth.

Waiting for the Taliban

Clearly, the Russians are on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, Moscow is keen to ensure a long-term military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. But Bishkek and Dushanbe are demanding in return financial concessions and Russian assistance in building and managing their hydroelectric projects, which are central to their economic development.

On the other hand, if Russia gets involved in the construction of these projects, it will annoy Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and push these key regional states into the Western embrace.

As things stand, the US is systematically elbowing Russia out of the entire southern tier of the Central Asian region bordering Afghanistan - Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Nor is the US showing any sense of hurry to vacate its air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

Of course, Washington will not seek a UN Security Council mandate for its future plans in Afghanistan and will prefer to enter into bilateral agreements with Kabul. This is where the post-2014 political alignments within Afghanistan and the calculus of power in Kabul become a matter of great concern to Moscow.

But Russia's capacity to influence the ebb and flow of Afghan politics in its favor is virtually nil. The specter that is haunting Moscow (and Pakistan) is that the US might at some point decide to come to terms with a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. The mainstream opinion within the US strategic community is veering round to the view that the Taliban as such do not pose any threats to America's national security interests and therefore Washington must differentiate the al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

A Carnegie study last month titled "Waiting for the Taliban in Afghanistan", in fact, recommended a bold policy option for Washington:

After 2014, the level of US support for the Afghan regime will be limited and, after a new phase in the civil war, a Taliban victory will likely follow ... Even a (relatively) hostile new Taliban force in Kabul will be easier to deal with because, since they will have established their control on the Afghan side of the border, they will be directly responsible for key security issues.

The desirable endgame should be a stabilization of Afghanistan, probably with the Taliban in Kabul. There would have to be a measure of political or economic support from the United States because a difficult relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is very likely whatever

the regime in Kabul. That is essentially the best situation from a US point of view. A difficult relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan will give the United States more leverage on both.

At the present juncture, therefore, from the Russian viewpoint, Kayani becomes an extremely valuable interlocutor. As Moscow would see it, the Pakistani military leadership's interest also lies in forestalling the US efforts to perpetuate a regime in Afghanistan in the post-2014 period that attaches primacy to American interests. Moscow apprehends - and, rightly so - that an Islamist regime in Kabul that comes under American influence could herald an Arab Spring in the region and pose existential threats to the political order in Central Asia and North Caucasus.

In short, Moscow is betting that the Pakistani military will play a crucial role in the shaping up of the future Afghan polity and given the commonality of interests between Pakistan and Russia, the two countries need to cooperate and coordinate their approaches to the evolving Afghan situation.

Suffice to say, the reining in of the US influence in Kabul in the post-2014 period has become a shared Russian-Pakistani strategic objective. Kayani's visit to Moscow is timely. It is taking place even as the US-Afghan negotiations for the conclusion of agreements relating to long-term NATO/US military presence are due to begin within the coming three weeks. Also, both Russia and Pakistan anticipate that President Barack Obama will revisit the Afghan strategy no sooner than the November election in the US is over.

Of course, it is possible to argue that Moscow could be skating on thin ice. Its dalliance with the Pakistani military leadership will complicate Washington's sustained attempts to get Rawalpindi to cooperate in the Afghan endgame. The negative fallouts on the US-Russia reset could be serious, since Moscow is audaciously challenging the first circle of the US' regional strategy. This is an area where even China has treaded softly, notwithstanding its "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan.

Far more consequential would be the reliability of the Pakistani military leadership as Moscow's newfound ally in Afghanistan. The former US ambassador, Cameron Munter, who concluded his tour in Islamabad recently, said last week in a speech that Pakistan is a country with a strong society but a weak state. Russian policy is in sync with the spirit of our times insofar as Pakistani society is virulently "anti-American".

However, the heart of the matter is that the Pakistani state is also simultaneously cooking many broths in its Rawalpindi kitchen and Grandma's Russian Borsch cannot be the main course there.