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Pakistan “reassessing” relations with US following Modi visit, Mansour assassination

By Sampath Perera

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Amid sharply deteriorating relations between Washington and Islamabad, a high-level US delegation that included the commander of US forces in Afghanistan visited Pakistan late last week for talks with the country’s political and military leadership.

Escalating tensions between Pakistan, its neighbours, India and Afghanistan, and Washington, its long-time strategic partner, are rooted in US imperialism’s promotion of India as its principal South Asian ally in its incendiary military-strategic offensive against China.

Two recent developments have further inflamed the situation.

On May 21, the Pentagon summarily executed the political leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, through a drone strike in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. Not only was the US drone strike a flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty, it was aimed at blowing up Islamabad’s efforts to draw the Taliban into peace talks.

Last week’s visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington marked a further strengthening of the Indo-US military-strategic alliance. India agreed to allow the Pentagon to routinely use Indian military bases for resupply and repairs, while the US proclaimed India a

“Major Defense Partner,” giving it access to sophisticated US weaponry on a par with Washington’s closest allies.

Through their comments and actions, the US political and military-security establishment have made clear that India has entrenched its position as Washington’s preferred regional ally. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter recently contrasted Washington’s attitude toward Islamabad and New Delhi, saying that while the US has “important business” in respect to the Afghan War and terrorism to transact with the former, “we have much more, a whole global agenda with India.”

Recently Pakistan’s plan to purchase eight F-16 fighter aircraft collapsed after the US reneged on an offer of financial support. Meanwhile, Washington has given the green light for the most advanced version of the F-16 to be manufactured in India as part of its pledge to co-develop and co-produce advanced weapons with India.

Frustrated and angered by the downgrading of its alliance with the US and increasing marginalization, Pakistan’s ruling elite have issued alarmed warnings.

Speaking on the eve of the US delegation’s visit, Sartaj Aziz, the Pakistan prime minister’s foreign affairs adviser, said that in light of the US’s actions, “Relations between Pakistan and the US need to be reassessed.”

He accused Washington of treating the country like a mercenary. It approaches Pakistan “whenever it needs our help,” said Aziz, and “abandons us when its objectives are achieved.”

He said that Mansour’s assassination had “damaged the level of trust with the United States” and warned that the US’s alliance with India “will disturb the regional balance, both conventional and strategic (i.e. nuclear).” He threatened a further build-up of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, saying that Islamabad has “firmly conveyed ... to the US that maintaining effective nuclear deterrence is critical for Pakistan’s security and only Pakistan itself can determine how it should respond to (the) growing strategic imbalance in South Asia.”

Fearing the growing economic and conventional military gap between India and Pakistan, Islamabad has been rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal, including through the development of tactical or “battlefield” nuclear weapons.

Washington has repeatedly brushed aside Pakistan’s warnings about how its alliance with India has overturned the regional balance of power and is fueling a nuclear arms race. While taking Pakistan to task over lowering the nuclear threshold by developing tactical weapons, the US has taken steps to help India trade for advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel, which will enable New Delhi to concentrate India’s indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

The Obama administration is currently mounting a push for India to be included in the 48-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), even though it has failed to meet the criteria for membership by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The US delegation for last Friday's talks in Islamabad included: Richard Olson, Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Senior Adviser and Director for South Asian Affairs at the National Security Council Peter Lavoy; and General John Nicholson, the top US commander in Afghanistan.

This dispatch of such a top level delegation is part of Washington's carrot and stick approach towards Islamabad. Having ratcheted up the pressure on Islamabad by strengthening its military alliance with India and by killing Mansour and derailing prospects for Afghan peace talks, the Obama administration sent envoys to Pakistan to demand it bear more of the burden in the Afghan War. No matter that the 15 year war has already resulted in large parts of Pakistan's tribal areas being transformed into killing fields.

In particular, Washington is adamant Islamabad take the war to the Haqqani Network, a Taliban allied militia that has ties to Pakistani intelligence dating back to the days when the CIA and ISI were jointly funding and organizing Islamicist opposition to the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

Little has been said about the outcome of Friday's talks. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed the discussions were centred on the assassination of Mansour, which has been quickly followed by an intensification of the US war in Afghanistan.

Predictably none of the US plenipotentiaries expressed any apology or regret for the blatant violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and international law, or for the US having strung Islamabad on about drawing the Taliban into a peace dialogue even as it prepared Mansour's murder.

The Pakistan Foreign Ministry said Aziz had conveyed a "strong message" that the drone attack was "not only a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and breach of the principles of the United Nation's Charter, but has also vitiated bilateral ties." Any future drone strike in Pakistan, the statement emphasized, "will be detrimental to our common desire to strengthen relations."

Islamabad's growing tensions with Washington's puppet regime in Afghanistan were also evident during the discussions.

Aziz, said the Foreign Ministry statement, highlighted the need for "better border management" with Afghanistan and "early repatriation of Afghan refugees" to "safeguard [Pakistan's] own security." He also called for Afghan military action against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the so-called Pakistani Taliban, which Islamabad charges is being given "safe-haven" by Kabul.

In his discussions with General Nicholson, General Raheel Sharif, the head of Pakistan's military, reportedly accused India's intelligence agency, RAW, and its Afghan counterpart, the NDS, of "fomenting terrorism" in Pakistan.

Just two days later, on Sunday evening, a clash erupted between Pakistan and Afghan security forces at the Torkham border crossing, one of the most important border crossing between the two countries. The following day the clashes resumed on a far bigger scale, leaving more than 20 people injured and an Afghan soldier and a Pakistani major dead.

Both sides are now reported to be rushing troops to the area.

The immediate trigger for the clashes is Pakistan's building a fence and gate on the Pakistan side at the Torkham crossing, ignoring Afghanistan's vociferous opposition. Kabul has long refused to accept the current border with Pakistan. It follows the Durand Line, a border dictated by the British when they were South Asia's colonial overlords.

The souring of US-Pakistan ties and the growing economic and military-security support Afghanistan is receiving from New Delhi are no doubt encouraging Kabul in challenging Islamabad.

Bolstered by the Obama administration's decision to anoint it Washington's principal regional ally, New Delhi has, for its part, adopted an increasingly bellicose policy towards Pakistan, aimed at forcing Islamabad to accept its regional hegemony. New Delhi's rapidly expanding role in Afghanistan is intended to counter and ultimately eclipse Islamabad's influence, denying it "strategic depth" in its reactionary geopolitical rivalry with India.

The Indo-US alliance has led Pakistan and China to enhance their ties. India has vehemently protested against Beijing's plans to invest \$46 billion in a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), stretching from western China to the Pakistani Arabian seaport of Gwadar. New Delhi has denounced the CPEC on the grounds that it goes through parts of the disputed Kashmir region India claims as its own territory. But its real objection is the shot-in-the arm the CPEC represents for Pakistan's economy.

Publicly the US's response to the CPEC has been muted, but there is no question it views it as a major threat. Were the plans to develop rail, road and pipeline links from Gwadar to China to be realized they would to a large degree circumvent the US strategy to impose an economic blockade on China by seizing Indian Ocean/South China sea chokepoints in the event of a war or war crisis.

Pakistan's corporate media has responded cautiously to the growing crisis in US-Pakistani relations. Commenting on Islamabad's response to the NSG controversy, *The News* declared, Pakistan "cannot afford to strain ties with the US at the moment." *Dawn* columnist Cyril Almeida complained, "We've gone so all-in with the China card."

Meanwhile, M. K. Bhadrakumar, a former Indian diplomat, has expressed alarm at the extent to which Washington has ratcheted up tensions in the region between India and Pakistan and India and China and helped transform Afghanistan into an arena of strategic competition between New Delhi and Islamabad. In a blog entitled "The US unleashes the Dogs of War in Afghanistan," he warned last week, "Beijing will understand that the shift in the US policy in Afghanistan—and towards Pakistan—and the newfound alliance with India is in reality aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China. ... The danger is real that the major regional powers may be drifting toward a general war."