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Pakistan deals with its devils

By Zahid U Kramet

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LAHORE - Pakistan and the United States are apparently not on the same page in regard to the Afghan Taliban, particularly insofar as the Haqqani network in Afghanistan is concerned.

Washington clearly sees Sirajuddin Haqqani as the enemy. Pakistan sees him as a possible ally in the exit of the US from the war theater beginning in 2011. The US views Haqqani's fallback position (read sanctuary) in Pakistan as a direct threat to the Western coalition in Afghanistan and has warned of expanded drone strikes into Pakistani territory if it did not move more aggressively against him. Pakistan's reactions to the threat have ranged from sullen silence to outright anger expressed by senior establishment officials who consider Haqqani key to any reconciliation process.

Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Kiani, made no bones about his reservations on the subject when he responded to US exhortations "to do more" by saying that he had his hands full countering the al-Qaeda-inspired Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and that the Pakistan army was in no position to open another front. But there seemed to be a level of understanding on the common threat posed by the Afghan Taliban when The Washington Post quoted a Pakistani intelligence official as having said, "The Pakistani Taliban are the clear and present danger. They are what matters most. Once we are done with them, we will go after the Haqqani network" - signaling that no hard and fast lines had been drawn on the issue.

Nevertheless, Pakistan could have reason to be ambivalent on fueling animosity with Haqqani's network, as it remains gravely concerned about the expansion of Indian influence in Afghanistan and fears encirclement by India after the US withdrawal begins in 2011. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, attempted recently to allay these fears when he agreed to the need of addressing the Kashmir dispute (the main bone of contention between the

two neighbors) for stability in the region. But with there being no signs of a breakthrough on this, Pakistan feels it would be an error to close the door on such former "strategic assets" as Haqqani, irrespective of the complications this presents at the moment.

Pakistan may be living in a time warp. From all the evidence available, Haqqani is as committed to expelling US forces from Afghanistan as any other branch of the Taliban. On this, an expert on al-Qaeda, Syed Saleem Shahzad, Pakistan bureau chief for Asia Times Online, has no doubts. He contends that sooner rather than later, Pakistan will have to re-evaluate Haqqani as a strategic asset in the broader context of the "war on terror". He believes Pakistan could come off second-best as the voice to be heard by the Taliban insurgents, with al-Qaeda looking beyond Pakistan's borders, toward India to its east, the Central Asian republics to Afghanistan's north and, more recently, towards Yemen, to merchandise its message of a global caliphate.

The US is only too aware of this and has geared itself to act against further al-Qaeda encroachment in the volatile Af-Pak region, with President Barack Obama therefore opting for a 30,000-troop surge in Afghanistan. At the same time, there has been repeated admittance that without Pakistan's unqualified support in the "war on terror", the US and its allies could end up at the losing end of the stick.

United States Vice President Joseph Biden reaffirmed this when he said in an MSNBC interview recently that "defeating al-Qaeda and stabilizing Pakistan" are America's main strategic interests. At the same time, he identified Pakistan as the flashpoint, as he felt that al-Qaeda was more entrenched there than in Afghanistan, but he said the US would provide more assistance to Pakistan to counter al-Qaeda's growing influence in this country.

But Pakistan has more than one devil to deal with. The ruling Pakistan People's Party is under pressure, with the Supreme Court ruling against former president Pervez Musharraf's National Reconciliation Ordinance, which sought to provide amnesty to a number of PPP stalwarts for past alleged misdemeanors. Foremost among them is the PPP's co-chairman and incumbent president, Asif Ali Zardari, who appears to have America's confidence. Zardari is not as popular with Pakistan's military establishment, and the burning question now is whether or not the judiciary will go along with the constitutional stipulations that immunize a president holding office against past cases registered against him.

Zardari suspects it will not. In a public address on December 27, the second anniversary of his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and repeatedly since, the president lamented that there was a conspiracy afoot to derail democracy through the country's courts. The US Central Command chief, General David Petraeus, however, certifies that Pakistan's military would play no role in this. Testifying before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Petraeus said he had been assured by senior military officials that the Pakistan army under Kiani was not interested in disrupting civilian rule. But a US State Department official, also testifying before said committee, admitted to tension between Pakistan's elected representatives and its military establishment.

Tension does exist. Pakistan's military commands the activities of the Inter-Services Intelligence, the country's premier intelligence service, and thus feels it is infinitely better equipped to tackle

Pakistan's security issues (both internal and external) than the country's elected contingent.

However, the US seems to be more inclined toward blanket democratic management of Pakistan's national affairs. And it has leverage. The US funneled close to US\$10 billion in military aid to Pakistan between fiscal 2001 and 2009 and has sanctioned \$1.6 billion for fiscal year 2010 under the Coalition Support Fund, along with \$700 million under the Counter-insurgency Capability Fund. But even that may not be enough to tackle Pakistan's security issues.

Zardari is alert to this reality and sounded fully supportive of the Pakistani military's views on the subject. In a letter to Obama revealed to The Washington Post by anonymous sources in December, Zardari spelled out that the bill for military operations in the Swat Valley alone had come to \$2.5 billion, to suggest that the allocated sums for the "war on terror" in Pakistan were grossly inadequate.

The December 28 strike in the heart of Pakistan's densely populated financial capital and, significantly, principal port city, Karachi, substantiated this. The suicide-cum-arson attack left 45 dead and scores injured, with 2,500 shops gutted and a reported 10,000 people jobless. Hardly had Pakistan time to catch its breath when this was followed by the as yet unspoken-for car-bomb attack in faraway Lakki Marwat, close by the restive Waziristan territories, that reportedly killed 96, mostly young people, either playing or watching a volleyball game.

The South Waziristan-based TTP commander, Asmatullah Shaheen, is reported to have claimed responsibility for the Karachi attack, but doubt remains about the authenticity of this claim, as seldom has Shaheen acted as a spokesman for the Taliban. Moreover, as the Shaheen testimonial was delivered over the telephone to news agencies from an undisclosed location, it remains suspect.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, in his media address from Gwadar, Balochistan province, to inaugurate a section of the Makran Coastal Highway, referred to the attack as a "foreign agenda" to destabilize Pakistan. Interior Minister Rehman Malik took up the refrain from Karachi with his statement reading the hand of "foreign elements cannot be ruled out".

Zardari made his apprehensions on the "foreign agenda" known in the three-page letter to Obama when he "repeatedly referred to Pakistan's core interests, unresolved historical conflicts and conventional imbalances", according to The Times of India. He urged Obama to propel Pakistan's "neighbors" (read India) toward diplomatic engagement. He has since repeated the message in Pakistan's press.

But Shahzad is convinced it is al-Qaeda's game to expand the war into India with more proxy operations along the lines of the Mumbai attacks of 2008, as bringing India and Pakistan eyeball to eyeball again would leave the field wide open for the terrorist organization to spread chaos throughout South Asia.

With this in view, the challenging question now is why the Indian army chief, General Deepak Kapoor, would want to raise a host of devils by issuing a statement to the effect that India had

the capacity to fight a two-front war against both Pakistan and China - and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion in 96 hours.