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Natural law brings AfPak crashing

By M K Bhadrakumar
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Be it a baseball struck in a neighborhood sandlot game or in high-wire diplomacy, an elementary principle of physics holds good - what goes up must come down. In a way, the sheer dynamics of the nosedive of the United States' AfPak diplomacy in the four weeks since the London conference on Afghanistan on January 28 can be attributed to gravitational pulls.

Earth's gravity does not permit animated suspension, and US's AfPak special representative Richard Holbrooke has found it difficult to keep up the entente cordiale worked out in the British capital. United States President Barack Obama may need to act faster than he would have thought.

The US's AfPak special representative Richard Holbrooke has run into head wind almost simultaneously in four key capitals in and around the Hindu Kush - Islamabad, [Kabul](#), Tehran and New [Delhi](#).

Holbrooke no doubt achieved spectacular success in London, by rushing an agenda of "reintegration" and reconciliation of [the Afghan Taliban](#) through the assembled gathering of statesmen. The gathering included such inveterate critics of the doctrine of the "good Taliban" as India, China and Russia. But Holbrooke kept the lot together. That was probably the finest hour of AfPak diplomacy.

Pakistan sets ground rules

But did he force the pace? No sooner had the crowd dispersed from London, than AfPak

diplomacy began unraveling. First, Pakistan went ahead and "captured" the Taliban's deputy head Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The funny thing is that Baradar was shaping up as a key interlocutor for AfPak diplomacy. The Mullah or his men were darting in and out of the Persian Gulf oasis towns having secret rendezvous with American envoys. Call it Track II or whatever, but a track was being cleared for the US's reconciliation with the Taliban's Quetta shura - its top [leadership](#) organ.

Or, at least, that was how Washington assessed the situation. Of course, these goings on were completely [in the know](#) of Pakistan. But there was a crucial difference: they were not being conducted through Pakistani mediation. So, Pakistan just nabbed Baradar. The dilemma facing AfPak diplomacy today is: how do you negotiate when you don't have an interlocutor? A kind of recess is developing in the AfPak diplomatic calendar.

Pakistan's message is straightforward: any negotiations with the Taliban ought to be conducted through the proper channel, namely, Pakistan's ISI. Actually, it is not too much to demand. Pakistan committed a great deal of resources to stop the Taliban disintegrating through some of their darkest days between 2001 and 2004. Islamabad cannot be expected to just roll over and let the [Americans](#) inherit [the crown jewels](#) ("strategic assets") when the hour of glory is nearing.

Karzai delivers a blow

Witnessing the determination in Islamabad to lock the stable doors to prevent the studs from being stolen, Kabul seems to have followed suit. Afghan President Hamid Karzai went ahead with a decree "Afghanizing" the country's election commission. Curiously, Karzai acted unilaterally, just as Holbrooke was on a visit to Kabul.

There is some dramatic irony insofar as Karzai intended his move with the primary purpose of preempting the sort of regime change that Holbrooke attempted during the last presidential elections. Karzai has decreed that the Afghan election commission shall henceforth have no more foreigners - that is to say, there is no more scope for the US to plant proxy agents who might dictate terms within the election supervisory body.

The timing is interesting insofar as the Afghan parliamentary elections are due in August. Karzai expects insurgent groups to increase their participation in the elections to make the new parliament more representative. He has negotiated with the Taliban with this objective in mind. Karzai hopes to see the new parliament as an Afghan political base for himself that would [insure](#) against any US attempts to oust him.

AfPak diplomacy, on the other hand, is moving on an altogether different track to engage the Taliban with a view to integrate the latter in the Afghan mainstream politics, which would certainly necessitate Karzai making way for an "interim government" within a year or so. If he succeeds in constituting a new parliament with a four-year term as prescribed by the constitution, the US game plan will crash land.

The political stakes are indeed high. Karzai has, plainly put, cocked a snook at AfPak diplomacy. Washington has been left with no option for the present but to take Karzai's blow and pretend nothing happened. The only way out now will be to deny Karzai the international funding

without which he may be hard-pressed to the elections in August. But that is a blatant strong-arm tactic. Besides, Karzai is a tenacious leader and may still find a way out to hold the elections, and that could deal a blow to American prestige.

Conceivably, Holbrooke left Kabul with mixed feelings. It is unclear whether Karzai took him into confidence about his move to clip the AfPak wings, though Karzai probably did not. Quite obviously, Karzai's move is primarily directed at the sort of diplomacy Holbrooke practises - loaded with a lot of muscle power.

An Iranian set-up

From Kabul, Holbrooke apparently headed for his first ever tour of Central Asian capitals as "part of an accelerating intensification of our [AfPak] diplomatic outreach efforts". But Iranian reports have since interpreted that Holbrooke's real mission was to hold a clandestine meeting with the Jundullah terrorist leader Abdul Malik Rigi at the US airbase at Manas on the outskirts of the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.

Washington is studiously keeping mum at the Iranian allegation. But Tehran has followed up on the matter with Bishkek. The Kyrgyz ambassador in Tehran has been summoned to the foreign ministry and asked to explain how his country's government got mixed up with a notorious terrorist like Rigi.

The story is still unfolding and there is no need to second-guess that if the Iranians chose to divulge so much already to the media, they must know a lot more. Rigi is presently undergoing interrogation at the hands of the Iranian authorities. If the Iranian media reports have any basis, AfPak diplomacy stands exposed as inept and ludicrous. The Iranians seem to have not only plucked Rigi out of the hands of his American mentors (which doesn't speak highly of the US intelligence capability) but it is all but certain that Pakistani intelligence may have directly or indirectly been privy to the Iranian operation.

A storm in Delhi

But what happened on last Tuesday was much worse. For no apparent reason, Holbrooke waded into the explosive subject of the terrorist attack in Kabul on February 25 which resulted in the killing of nine Indians, including two senior army officers. At a press briefing in Washington on Tuesday, he rubbished the preliminary assessment of Indian (and Afghan) officials that it was a targeted attack by the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-i-Taiba masterminded by the ISI.

"I don't accept the fact that this was an attack on an Indian facility like the embassy." Holbrooke said. "They were foreigners, non-Indian foreigners hurt. It was a soft target. And let's not jump to conclusions. I understand why everyone in Pakistan and everyone in India always focuses on the other. But, please, let's not draw a conclusion which - for which there's no proof."

The Indian embassy was attacked by a suicide bomber last October, with 17 people killed. It was also bombed in July 2008 when 60 people died.

In principle, Holbrooke had a point, as the inquiry into last week's Kabul attack is still underway. But there is evidence that the terrorists went from room to room and sought out the Indians

before killing them. Delhi is shocked that Holbrooke would go [out on a limb](#) apparently to cover up for the ISI.

But why he spoke at all - and its awkward timing - is becoming important. After all, diplomacy is also about remaining silent. Especially when Delhi and Islamabad are entangled in high-strung diplomacy under close US watch from behind the curtain.

The feeling in Delhi is that Holbrooke spoke on purpose. He is no doubt a consummate diplomat.

Holbrooke was likely indulging in a complex image-building exercise. The Baradar setback aside, Holbrooke has been having a rough time with the Pakistanis. According to the Delhi grapevine, he refers to the Pakistanis in a highly disparaging way as "useless fellows". [The reading](#) in Delhi is that the Pakistanis receive Holbrooke with elaborate courtesy and lavish hospitality, but prefer to do hard [business](#) with the Pentagon on the substantive issues of AfPak policy.

Holbrooke probably hoped that by placing ambassador Robin Raphel, who enjoyed past connections with the Pakistani establishment and the Taliban leadership, as his deputy in Islamabad he would get an inside track on the Quetta shura. But for Pakistan, anything involving the Quetta shura is for now deadly business. Pakistan is using Raphel to lobby in Washington for increased aid and so on, but it keeps the Quetta shura out of the matrix.

The harsh reality is that Pakistan is in a position to make or unmake AfPak diplomacy - and also AfPak diplomats. It holds the trump cards to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table. And Islamabad is skilled enough to manipulate Washington.

In sum, with Karzai spinning out of control and Islamabad making a mockery of AfPak diplomacy, Holbrooke most probably spoke out of pressure. Viewed from Delhi, Holbrooke made a high-profile attempt to ingratiate himself with the powers that be who control Lashkar-i-Taiba. Whether he will succeed in this enterprise or not remains to be seen but he has certainly annoyed the Indian establishment.

The Indians made diplomatic demarche both at Delhi and at Washington, taking exception to Holbrooke's "unhelpful" outburst over the Kabul terrorist strike. After repeatedly rebuffing Holbrooke's request to visit Delhi for consultations, Indians finally received him only in late January in the immediate run-up to the London conference. Holbrooke blithely forecast at his press conference on Tuesday that he hopes to visit Delhi next with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. How Mullen (or Delhi for that matter) views the prospect remains to be seen.

Will Obama step in?

Why is AfPak diplomacy in such disarray? It isn't entirely Holbrooke's fault. For one thing, South Asians aren't like the "junkyard dogs" that he came across in the Balkans in the mid-1990s. They are a deeper lot credited with oriental patience and can be every bit as tenacious as Holbrooke himself must be.

Then, there is also a far deeper issue. Holbrooke is seriously handicapped by an AfPak brief that keeps evolving in his hands. This was not like the case with Yugoslavia where the Bill Clinton administration pursued a cold-blooded agenda. The Washington Post reported that the AfPak diplomacy has confused all protagonists, including the Afghans.

At any rate, Holbrooke has been left somewhat stranded on the center stage. The worst thing that can happen to a diplomat is to be expected to stay in the limelight and yet not do anything.

Second, unlike in the 1990s, the US's influence is much diminished today, but its diplomats work as if they operate in a unipolar world. The plain truth is that regional powers like India, Iran or even Pakistan are far from convinced about the US's AfPak policy. And they can be expected to do their utmost to safeguard their interests, no matter what the US diplomats prescribe as good enough.

The tailwind that the London conference was expected to generate dissipated all too soon and AfPak diplomacy is running into head winds that may make forward movement difficult. But Obama gets an opportunity to tack into the wind in early April when he is due to meet the prime ministers of India and Pakistan on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington.