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AfPak stumps an Obama up for sharing

By Zahid U Kramet

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It's not only about Afghanistan. It's about Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran. And it's about the United States presence in the region and its face-saving military exit from the Afghan war theater that's set to begin in July 2011.

By the accounts of almost every "expert" following frequent polls, the American public has had enough of the Afghan war. President Barack Obama has become acutely conscious of this. Without a breakthrough in Afghanistan in sight, enthusiasm for military action from fellow North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members is rapidly receding.

Pankaj Mishra, writing in the Dawn-Guardian does not see the coming Kandahar summer offensive as paying dividends, and effectively concludes that "the ranks of the homicidally enraged will swell as long as the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the Pentagon seek to achieve victory through ... murder and destruction." He spells out a jihadi terrorist arc "expanding from Waziristan to Connecticut", as a consequence.

On this, it appears Obama is inclined to agree - to a point. "The burdens of this century cannot fall on our soldiers alone," Obama told graduating students at the West Point Military Academy on Saturday. "We need intelligence agencies that work seamlessly with their counterparts to unravel plots that run from the mountains of Pakistan to the streets of our cities."

There was in this a hint that the call of the hour could be new, possibly regional alliances which must be anathema to Republican "hawks" for whom backing away from the George W Bush-era pre-emptive strike formula to more fully embrace multilateral ties and sound intelligence would put them on the wrong side of history.

In keeping with his bipartisan baptism, however, Obama does not openly concede this.

Nor does Obama indicate a retreat in haste from the Republican penchant of propping up military governments, as in the case of Pakistan. Anatol Lieven explains why. In an essay in *The National Interest* referring to the power of Pakistan army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kiani, the noted scholar begins with Voltaire's remark on Frederick the Great's Prussia: "Where some states have an army, the Prussian army has a state." The same can easily be said of Pakistan.

Lieven continues, "The destruction of the army would mean the destruction of the country", and adds, "The collapse of Pakistan [read the Pakistan army] would so vastly increase the power of Islamist extremism as to constitute a strategic defeat in the war on terror."

If this is the reality, it is also true that Pakistan and the US are not on the same page over the Afghan Taliban: it is common knowledge that Pakistan views them from a "strategic depth" angle; the US, as the enemy set to dislodge it from its strategic perch.

With that die cast, Obama's vision of a new regional alliance (conceivably between India and Pakistan) surfaces as a "no-brainer" - not least with the Kashmir issue unresolved. On this last, there is little sign of anybody but the extremists eager to tackle the problem.

Moreover, with the US standing in the way of the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and both India and Pakistan facing energy crises of monumental proportions, any agreements arrived at between the US and the two South Asian rivals would remain tenuous at best.

The Indian perspective on this and regional affairs is perhaps best presented by M K Bhadrakumar in his *Asia Times Online* column of May 22 "India's course correction on Iran" which takes the Indian government to task for falling prey to US machinations.

On the Iran, Turkey and Brazil nuclear fuel swap deal, the author castigates India for missing out on the opportunity, contending that "India's traditional ties with Iran suffered when it began blindly toeing the American line", with Russia and China gaining ground.

But the former diplomat hit the nail on the head in assessing, "Alas, the Indian strategic community has a closed mind, as things stand, when it comes to developing a matrix of regional cooperation that even remotely includes Pakistan."

"Talking with the Taliban" has repeatedly been tabled as a possible solution for the Afghan imbroglio, with Afghan President Hamid Karzai taking up the refrain. But with serious graft charges leveled against his administration, his intentions remain suspect.

However, there appears to be a convergence of views between Pakistan and India on the al-Qaeda-inspired Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which poses a serious threat to both countries as it negates the existence of nation states in pursuit of a global Muslim order.

Battlelines thus appear to have been drawn between the new world order of economic globalization and those who aspire to have the caliphate revived through a relentless tide of ideological terrorist wars, paradoxically based on national independence movements.

Iran, Pakistan and India have observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the regional alliance of Central Asian countries overseen by Russia and China that was founded in 2001 to counter terrorism and separatism. Tellingly, each now aspires for full membership.

Obama's continuing dilemma is that as much as he might wish to pursue his promised policy of "change", the US establishment is not yet ready to concede Russia and China are rival powers. Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India already have.

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