

Pakistan's military regime rallies to US war coalition

Keith Jones
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Faced with an ultimatum from Washington, Pakistan's military regime has scuttled its alliance with the Taliban and given permission for US military forces to attack Afghanistan from Pakistani territory.

Late Sunday, a high-level US delegation arrived in Islamabad to discuss the US's military and intelligence needs. But Pakistani government officials have already signaled their readiness to agree to an expected US request for permission to use the country's air, army and naval bases. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2,500 kilometer (1,550 mile) border. Apparently, the only form of cooperation that Pakistan's military rulers have rejected outright is the participation of Pakistan's armed forces in a US-led invasion of Afghanistan. "We have our limitations with regard to providing assistance to the US," said Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar. But those will "only be determined when we are aware of the US's operational plans," he added.

In the days immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington reportedly demanded to know if Pakistan was "friend or foe" and threatened the South Asian state with all measures "short of war" if Islamabad did not assist the US in confronting Afghanistan.

Now Pakistan and its military—traditional Cold War allies of the US—have been restored to Washington's favor. Following Pakistani dictator General Pervez Musharraf's nationwide televised address announcing that Pakistan was aligning with the US, President George W. Bush hailed the general for his "bold position": "I said we'll give the [Pakistani] president a chance to perform and I believe he has done so."

On September 22, Bush announced the waiving of the economic sanctions that the US had imposed on Pakistan and India after their May 1998 tit-for-tat nuclear weapons tests. Yesterday, the US agreed to reschedule \$375 million of Pakistani debt and has indicated it will support the IMF providing Pakistan with a major injection of funds.

US government spokesmen have repeatedly said that they appreciate the risks Musharraf is taking, a reference to the

fact that a US assault on Afghanistan, let alone a US occupation of the Central Asian state, would be opposed by large numbers of Pakistanis.

The Western media has focused almost exclusively on the anti-American agitation being mounted by various right-wing Islamic fundamentalist groups. Certainly, the fundamentalists constitute a significant political force in contemporary Pakistan, largely because the elite, and especially the military, have patronized them. But there are many reasons aside from religious obscurantism for Pakistanis to oppose the world's greatest military power targeting Afghanistan.

War, poverty, drought and political repression have already caused three million Afghans to seek refuge in Pakistan. A sizeable portion of Pakistan's population, including the majority in the North-West Frontier Province, are Pakthuns, the largest ethnic-linguistic group in Afghanistan. Last but not least, the US has a long history of supporting military dictatorships in Pakistan in the name of strategic imperatives. Indeed, it was the US which pressed Pakistan to become embroiled in Afghanistan, a 22-year gambit that has proven disastrous for the Pakistani people.

Prior to 1979 Pakistan had little involvement in Afghanistan, accepting, as did the US, that it was on the margins of the Soviet sphere of influence. But following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan's then military regime eagerly accepted Washington's demand that Pakistan serve as the frontline state in what proved to be the last great Cold War confrontation.

US support enabled Zia-ul-Huq, who in 1977 had overthrown a populist regime that initially derived much of its support from Pakistan's impoverished masses, to consolidate his right-wing dictatorship and re-equip Pakistan's military. The US also encouraged the oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf to funnel large sums to Pakistan, Pakistani religious organizations and the Afghani opposition. The Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), became increasingly important as it served as the nexus for funding the US-

backed, Islamic fundamentalist Afghani opposition. Through their Afghani connections, ISI leaders soon developed a major financial interest in the country's drug and small-arms trade.

Although the drive for the partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India was based on the promotion of a religious-communal identity, it was only during the Zia-ul-Huq dictatorship that the Islamic fundamentalists emerged as a major political force. Huq sought to give legitimacy to his rule by claiming to be an Islamicist. He cultivated clerical political support and joined with the Reagan administration in hailing the Afghani fundamentalists as freedom fighters. The ISI meanwhile supported a major push to found Koranic schools or *madrassas*, initially in the two Pakistani provinces that border Afghanistan, as a recruiting ground for its operatives and an ideological bulwark against socialism.

Following the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US likewise pulled out, refusing to provide any meaningful assistance to a country it had helped raze so as to weaken the USSR. Thereafter, the Pakistani elite sought to maintain and expand the strategic and financial interests it had developed in Afghanistan. Much as Islamabad denies it today, there is no doubt the Pakistani government supported the Taliban in coming to power and that it has sought to use Kabul in its rivalry with India, especially in providing men and weaponry to the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

The Pakistani people, meanwhile, have had to endure countless malignant side effects from the Afghan maneuvers of the military and political elite: an increasingly powerful security apparatus with close ties to the fundamentalists and economic interests tied to Pakistani intervention in Afghanistan; a well-organized and well-funded Islamic political opposition; growing sectarian strife between Shia and Sunni Muslims; and a vast traffic in illegal arms. While certainly not the cause, the ready access to weapons has fueled a number of ethnic conflicts in Pakistan.

The resentment of many Pakistanis for the US support of Zia-ul-Huq and for Pakistan's US-directed intervention in the Afghan civil war is typified by the following comment from a Pakistani journalist: "What handsome revenge for America's debacle in Vietnam was the savaging of the Soviet bear in Afghanistan. A handful of Pakistani generals enriched themselves during that momentous struggle. But what did the country get? Guns, violence, drugs and a sea of refugees. All the glory America's, all the recurring costs Pakistan's. Anyone could be forgiven for thinking that history is being repeated."

Like the rest of Pakistan's general staff, Musharraf is deeply implicated in Pakistan's Afghanistan adventure and its support for the Taliban regime. His October 1999 coup

was in part caused by conflicts with the elected prime minister over a Pakistan military incursion into Indian-held Kashmir that brought South Asia's two nuclear powers to the brink of war.

Musharraf's September 19 speech announcing Pakistan's support for the US was laced with anti-Indian rhetoric. Seizing on anti-Pakistani statements made by the Hindu chauvinists who dominate India's government, Musharraf presented his stand as an unavoidable tactical shift in the greater struggle against India.

The confrontation between Washington and the Taliban represents a debacle for the Pakistani elite. Musharraf himself has called it the greatest crisis Pakistan has faced since 1971, when India routed Pakistan on the battlefield and East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh. Nonetheless, the generals and the Pakistani ruling class hope that by proving their loyalty to Washington they can yet turn a disaster into a strategic advantage.

The US government and media have already shown that they are game. Since seizing power, Musharraf has dispensed with one democratic norm after another. He has even arrogated to himself the power to rewrite the country's constitution. Yet there has been no mention by the US establishment, let alone any protest, that Musharraf has fallen silent concerning his pledge to hold national elections in 13 months. The truth is, in US government circles it is viewed as a plus that basic democratic rights have already been suppressed prior to Pakistan being used as a staging ground for an unpopular attack on Afghanistan. Following meetings with government and security officials over the weekend, Pakistani authorities let it be known that they will deal harshly with future anti-US protests. A government official commented on Sunday, "Our stand is absolutely clear and anyone who tries to disrupt law and order will not be spared."

Both of the main bourgeois parties, the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League, have supported Musharraf's policy shift. Yet leading PPP officials concede the result of the new alliance between Pakistan's military rulers and Washington will be to further entrench dictatorship. "Zia also used the Afghan card to prolong his rule," says PPP spokesman Farhatullah Barbar. "The Americans will not be pushing for democracy as long as their international agenda is fulfilled by Musharraf."



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