

US threatened to bomb Pakistan back to “the Stone Age”

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Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s revelation that a top US official said Pakistan would be bombed “back to the stone age” if Islamabad didn’t break its ties with the Taliban and provide logistical support to the US conquest of Afghanistan is yet another example of the mobster methods that have come to characterize US diplomacy, especially under the Bush administration.

Coming five years after the event and under conditions where Musharraf is under heavy pressure from Washington to do still more to assist the US in south, central and west Asia, the revelation also points to the increasingly desperate position of Pakistan’s military strongman.

In a pre-taped interview broadcast on CBS’s “Sixty Minutes” last Sunday, Musharraf said that in the days immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks Pakistan’s intelligence director was told by the then US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, that Pakistan could either totally acquiesce to the Bush administration’s demands for “cooperation” in the “war on terror” or “Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age.”

Musharraf, in his autobiography, *In the Line of Fire*—which was published this Monday, by CBS subsidiary Simon & Schuster—further claims that he “war-gamed the US as an adversary,” but concluded that in any such clash Pakistan would have been crushed, especially since Pakistan’s arch-rival India would have sought to exploit the situation.

Musharraf’s revelation of the US war threat, which was first reported by CBS on Thursday, September 21, led to a bizarre scene the next day when George W. Bush and the Pakistani president concluded a bi-lateral meeting at the White House with a joint press conference.

When asked about the threat made against Pakistan, Bush claimed that the first time he had ever heard of it was when he had read a report of Musharraf’s remarks in that day’s newspaper. “I guess I was taken aback by the harshness of the words,” said Bush. “All I can tell you is that shortly after 9/11, Secretary [of State] Colin Powell came in and said, President Musharraf understands the stakes and he wants to join and help root out an enemy that has come and killed 3,000 of our citizens. .. I don’t know of any conversation that was reported in the newspaper like that. I just don’t know about it.”

Responding to the same question, Musharraf claimed that he could not elaborate further on the fact that the US had threatened to all but annihilate his country, which with 150 million people is the sixth largest in the world, because he was honor-bound by the contract he had with Simon and Shuster not to comment until the official launch of his autobiography.

Trying to make light of the matter, Bush then broke in, “In other words, ‘Buy the book,’ is what he is saying.”

Throughout the press conference, Bush heaped praise on Musharraf, calling the dictator “a strong defender of freedom” and “a strong, forceful leader.”

Pakistan’s president and armed services chief, meanwhile, was at pains to prostrate himself before the US president. “I trust President Bush,” he

declared, “and I have total confidence in him that he desires well for Pakistan and for our region. And I trust him also that he’s trying to do his best for bringing peace to the world.”

Armitage has denied that he ever threatened Pakistan with military action, let alone to bomb it back to the Stone Age. Indeed the former number two man at the state department would have us believe he has never threatened anyone in his entire life. According to Armitage, he had a “strong and factual” exchange with the head of Pakistani intelligence post 9/11 in which he told him “Pakistan would need to be with us or against us. For Americans, this was seen as black or white.”

The denials of Armitage and Bush are, to say the least, preposterous.

As any politically literate person knows, for decades the US has bullied and threatened governments all over the world and pressed for the ouster of regimes deemed insufficiently amenable to US economic and geo-political interests.

But whereas in the past this was generally done surreptitiously, through covert destabilization campaigns and coups, and whereas in the past the US made a pretense of upholding law in international relations, under the Bush administration, Washington has waged and asserted the right to wage further pre-emptive wars—i.e., illegal wars of aggression—while routinely issuing publicly threats of violence against countries like Syria and Iran.

In threatening Pakistan with war, Armitage made explicit the choice Bush had said that every state had to make in the wake of his proclaiming an open-ended, worldwide “war on terrorism”—“you are either with us or against us.”

Nevertheless, Musharraf’s revelation has proved embarrassing for the Bush administration.

In announcing to the Pakistani people in September 2001 that his government was distancing itself from Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, Musharraf said that failure to do so would imperil the country’s national interests. But he had never said, till last week, that the US had threatened Pakistan with war. Such a war, it need be added, would not only have meant death and horror for countless Pakistanis. It could potentially have had horrendous consequences for all of South Asia and the world, since Pakistan is a nuclear-weapons state and the first priority of any US attack would undoubtedly have been to try to destroy Pakistan’s nuclear capacity.

So why did Musharraf choose to reveal this threat now, five years after the fact?

Clearly he is intent on promoting his autobiography, which he hopes will boost his image as a “progressive” leader at home and internationally.

But the real reason is to be found in the multiple crises swirling around Musharraf, crises which threaten his life as well as his regime.

As CBS noted in an on-line report on the “60 Minutes” interview and the Musharraf autobiography, “Most heads of state wait until they are comfortable in retirement before sitting down to write their memoirs, but in the case of Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf there are no

guarantees that he will live long enough to have one.”

There is widespread and deep-rooted popular anger at Musharraf's support for US imperialism's attempt to secure a stranglehold over the oil resources of the Middle East and Central Asia through military conquest. Musharraf's neo-liberal economic policies have caused economic insecurity and social inequality to grow, adversely affecting Pakistan's toiling masses. But the government's use of its privatization program to reward supportive companies has also alienated substantial sections of the elite.

Recently the Pakistani government was forced to sign a humiliating “peace treaty” with tribal leaders in the Waziristan region after waging a two-year war, at the behest of the US, in pursuit of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters who have taken refuge there.

Oblivious to Pakistan's tribal and ethnic complexities, the US pressed Pakistan to send troops into the tribal border regions for the first time since 1947 and to wage a brutal counter-insurgency campaign that caused large numbers of civilian casualties and included collective punishments of entire villages and tribal groups.

The conflict is said to have resulted in 4,000 deaths, including at least 900 Pakistani troops.

Under the treaty signed with the “tribal elders” the Pakistan military is obliged to withdraw its forces from this area, to return all arms confiscated by the military and to pay reparations to the tribal leaders for the damage done by the Pakistani military to life and property.

The Musharraf regime also faces a serious crisis in the south-west province of Baluchistan, a crisis that the bourgeois opposition to Musharraf and much of the press warns could, if not defused, lead to an implosion akin to that of 1971 when East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh.

For two years resource-rich Baluchistan has been wracked by a tribal insurgency, fed by complaints that the Pakistani elite is siphoning off the province's wealth. But the insurgency escalated to a national crisis, when the Pakistani military killed the long-time Baluchi tribal leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti in late August 2006 in what appears to have been a deliberate assassination aimed at thwarting any attempt to reach a negotiated settlement.

By revealing the US threat to attack Pakistan, Musharraf is trying to persuade his bourgeois critics that there is no viable alternative to his policy of doing Washington's bidding and that in September 2001 he moved adroitly to secure the interests of the Pakistani elite under conditions of grave danger.

He also is likely trying to send Washington a message that there are limits to how far he can go in accommodating its demands.

The think-tank Stratfor in a September 22 report points out that Musharraf's comments were publicized just a day after Bush remarked that US forces would enter Pakistan—with or without Pakistani permission—to capture or kill Al Qaeda leaders if the US obtained “actionable” information.

According to Stratfor, which has links with US intelligence and other government agencies, both Musharraf and Bush are publicly positioning themselves for more intensive operations by the US military inside Pakistan itself. Mired in crisis, the Bush administration is desperately looking for a foreign policy “success” such as the capture or killing of a top Al Qaeda leader ahead of the upcoming November congressional elections

While Musharraf now boasts that he “war-gamed” the US in September 2001 before deciding that he best bow to Washington's demands, the Pakistani elite never anticipated, let alone wanted, its geo-political maneuvers in Afghanistan to place it on a collision course with Washington. This is especially true of the Pakistani military, which has a decades-long close partnership with the Pentagon.

It was the US after all, under the Democrat Jimmy Carter and

subsequent Republican administrations, which pressed Pakistan to play a pivotal role in transforming Afghanistan into a Cold War battlefield.

At the US's behest, Pakistan took a leading role in organizing the Afghan Mujahidin and served for a decade as the conduit for sending US and Saudi Arabian money and arms and foreign Islamicist fighters to Afghanistan, thereby planting the seeds from which Al Qaeda and the Taliban sprung in the 1990s.

After Soviet troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan, the US effectively washed its hands of Afghanistan. This left the Pakistani elite free to try to realize its own ambitions of using Afghanistan to give it “strategic depth” in its confrontation with India and to serve as a gateway to the oil-rich post-Soviet Central Asian republics. But the Clinton administration did support the coming to power of the Pakistani-backed Taliban. Just as it cynically allied with Islamic fundamentalists elements and various other communalist forces, while singling out Serb chauvinist atrocities for denunciation, in the dismembering of Yugoslavia.

One further point should be made.

The US establishment maintains that it was the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that drove it to forge a strategic alliance with Pakistan's then military dictator Zia-ul Haq.

The truth is the US was more than happy to see Zia depose Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's populist, democratically-elected prime minister, in 1977. And, Washington's plan, of which Zbigniew Brzezinski's now boasts, to goad the Soviet Union into invading Afghanistan by stoking an Islamic opposition to the secular, pro-Soviet government, was always predicated on the fact that the US would be able to arm the Afghan Islamicist opposition through Pakistan.

If relations between the Carter administration and Zia soured for a time in 1979 it was principally because the Pakistani government was pursuing nuclear weapons in defiance of the US.

No sooner had the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, than the Carter administration came running to Zia with an offer of economic aid. On assuming office the Reagan administration embraced Brzezinski's strategy and soon made Zia's regime the third largest recipient of foreign aid.

The US-backed Zia regime presided over the “Islamicization” of Pakistan. It provided state patronage to right-wing religious parties, encouraged religious organizations to assume social and educational functions the state was no longer prepared to finance, introduced laws discriminating against women and minorities, and helped generate sectarian religious divisions that continue to plague Pakistan. As for Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan civil war, not only did it give a major boost to the growth of fundamentalist religious-political organizations and provide a new source of power and influence to the military and its intelligence agencies, it also contributed to the development of a host of social problems in Pakistan, from drugs to a Kalashnikov-culture.

The Bush administration's threat to wage war on Pakistan in 2001 and subsequent fulsome embrace of the dictator Musharraf as a major US ally in the “war on terror” is only the latest in a long series of events in which the US elite, in pursuit of its own predatory geo-political objectives, has shown itself to be utterly indifferent, in fact hostile, to the Pakistani people and their most elementary democratic rights.



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