US prepares contingency plans to seize Pakistani nuclear triggers

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On November 9, the *New Yorker* magazine published a lengthy article by veteran correspondent Seymour Hersh dealing with the considerable nervousness in US ruling circles over the security of Pakistan's arsenal of between 80 and 100 nuclear weapons. Hersh's sources told him that the primary fear was not a Taliban takeover, but a mutiny by anti-American Islamist tendencies inside the Pakistani armed forces, in which they attempt to seize all or parts of the country's nuclear arsenal.

Like many of Hersh's exposés, the article uses information leaked by unnamed high-level sources to make public an aspect of US foreign policy causing concerns in ruling circles. In this case, the primary motive appears to be to press for greater Pakistani guarantees over its nuclear weapons and more intrusive American monitoring and involvement.

Hersh alleged that US officials have pushed over the past eight years for an "understanding" with their Pakistani counterparts that American forces can enter Pakistan to secure its nuclear arsenal in the event of a direct threat. According to Hersh's sources, a special unit drawn from several agencies is on four hours' notice to deploy to Pakistan from Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. The objective would be to seize the triggers that are needed to arm the weapons, and fly the devices out of the country. Pakistan reportedly keeps its warheads and nuclear triggers at separate locations.

A deployment nearly took place mid-year, Hersh was told, following an alert that a Pakistani "nuclear component had gone astray". The special American unit had arrived in Dubai before the reports were deemed to be a false alarm and the mission called off.

Hersh's article provoked a barrage of denials, especially in Pakistan. The Pakistani foreign ministry denounced the claims as "preposterous". The military labeled them "absurd". The US State Department added that the US has "no intention of seizing Pakistani nuclear weapons or material" and stated its "confidence in the ability of the Pakistani government to provide adequate security".

However, there is nothing preposterous about the claims. Pakistan has collaborated closely with Washington's bogus "war on terrorism". It has tacitly allowed US strikes on targets on Pakistani soil and launched its own major military operations against Islamist insurgents in tribal agencies near the border with Afghanistan.

Hersh reveals no more than that the Bush and Obama administrations have sought undertakings from Pakistan not to prevent US forces taking control of the country's nuclear weapons if they were in danger of falling into the hands of anti-American forces. According to the article, the Pakistani establishment has already cooperated to an extent, providing US agencies with some information regarding the scope and whereabouts of its arsenal.

Hersh focussed on the nervousness in American agencies that substantial layers of the Pakistani military apparatus, especially in the powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, hold Islamist views, are sympathetic to the Afghan Taliban, distrust the US and are hostile to their own government's attempts to suppress Islamist organisations. One unnamed Pakistani officer told Hersh: "My belief today is that it is better to have the Americans as an enemy rather than a friend, because you cannot be trusted."

What Hersh refers to as the "growing antipathy toward America in Pakistan" is palpable in many of the interviews. A senior Pakistani official angrily told him that "between you and the Indians, you will f*** us in every way." Referring to the latest Pakistani offensive in South Waziristan, Sultan Amir Tarar, a former ISI officer, said: "The Americans are trying to rent their war out to us. There will be an uprising here and this corrupt [Pakistani] government will collapse."

Hamid Gul, head of the ISI in the 1980s and an outspoken Islamist, told Hersh that if Pakistani officers had provided information about the country's nuclear weapons, then they would have been "cheating you and they would be right to do so. We should not be aiding and abetting Americans".

What Hersh did not explain, however, was that the US helped to cultivate these Islamist tendencies over the past three decades. Throughout the Cold War, Pakistan was the key US ally in Central and South Asia against both the Soviet Union and India, which aligned with Moscow on most international issues. The US had close relations with Pakistan during the military dictatorship of General Zia al-Haq, who came to power in a military coup in 1977 and ruled until his death in 1988.

Under conditions of tremendous social unrest, Zia promoted Islamism to create a base of support for his regime. Zia ruthlessly suppressed secular, left-wing and trade union movements, introduced medieval aspects of shar'ia law such as floggings and amputations, and provided state sponsorship for thousands of *madrassas* or religious seminaries.

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The US government, starting with the Carter administration, used Zia to wage a proxy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Across Pakistan's north west, the ISI, alongside CIA operatives, ran the training camps for the tens of thousands of Islamists from Afghanistan, Pakistan and around the world who fought the Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989. Zia's regime played the key role in funneling billions of dollars in US payments to the Afghan *mujahaddin*. On the dictator's orders, only radical Islamist organisations received funding.

In return, Pakistan received at least $6 billion in military aid between 1982 and 1990, including F-16 jet fighters, despite formally being subject to US sanctions over its nuclear programs.

With the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War, US policy toward Pakistan began to shift. In 1990, the first Bush administration was compelled by Congress to enforce military sanctions over the country's pursuit of nuclear weapons. While some military hardware was delivered in the 1990s, Islamabad was denied additional F-16 fighters to strengthen its position in its armed standoff with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

New tensions emerged in the late 1990s over Pakistan's testing of nuclear weapons and its backing for the Afghan Taliban regime. By 1999, it was already evident that Washington was considering direct intervention into Afghanistan, as part of a broader agenda of dominating energy-rich Central Asia. Even more controversially in Pakistan, the Clinton administration began to cultivate US relations with India, with the perspective of a "strategic partnership" against the growing influence of China.

The turning point in US-Pakistani relations took place in September 2001. On the pretext of a "war on terrorism", the Bush administration set in motion previous plans for an invasion of Afghanistan. Washington demanded that the Pakistani establishment cease all support for the Afghanistan Taliban regime, which it had played a central role in bringing to power, and collaborate with the US intervention. According to former dictator Pervez Musharraf, the US-backed military dictator at the time, he was threatened that Pakistan would be "bombed back into the stone ages" if he refused.

Musharraf's support for the US invasion provoked widespread popular opposition and sharp divisions within the armed forces. The Pakistani military was effectively ordered to turn on the very people with whom it had long worked and whose views were shared by many officers and soldiers. Pakistan received military and economic aid but it has been constantly linked to demands that Islamabad suppress the Islamist organisations inside the country.

At the same time, the US has continued to pursue a "strategic partnership" with India, provoking fears in Pakistan that the US is favouring its regional rival. Whereas the US has signed a nuclear agreement with India, effectively granting it an exemption from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, it has refused to do the same for Pakistan. Last month, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari was bullied into agreeing to new offensives against Islamist militias inside the country in return for just $1.5 billion a year in non-military economic aid.

A large proportion of the Pakistani officer and political elite who now occupy middle- to high-ranking positions of authority began their careers under Zia al-Haq when the US not only accepted Islamist radicalism but encouraged it as part of the CIA-sponsored anti-Soviet holy war in neighbouring Afghanistan. Their attitudes are shaped by a deep sense of betrayal.

As a former Bush administration official told Hersh: "They [the Pakistanis] don't trust us and they will not tell you the truth." Another declared: "If a Pakistani general is talking to you about nuclear issues, and his lips are moving, he is lying … from their point of view, [the US] used them like a Dixie cup and then threw them away."

There is also widespread popular hostility to the US. In a Gallup poll this month, the US was named as Pakistan's greatest threat by 59 percent of respondents, compared with 18 percent who named India and just 11 percent who nominated the Taliban. The military operations against Pakistani Islamists divide the country, with 51 percent supporting and 49 percent opposing or unsure. Nearly 40 percent believe it is being fought entirely for the interests of the US government.

A Gallup spokesperson, Sohail Qalandar, observed: "Earlier, anti-Americanism was confined to supporters of right-wing groups. But over the years, young, educated Pakistanis, left activists, people you'd normally expect to be pro-American modernists, have turned against America." This deep-seated resentment is one of the factors fuelling popular opposition to Zardari, who is regarded by many as a US puppet.

All of this points to the profoundly destabilising consequences of US military aggression in Afghanistan, which the Obama administration is preparing to escalate through the dispatch of tens of thousands more US soldiers and to extend into Pakistan with new diktats to Islamabad to intensify military operations against Islamist militants.

Having helped create the conditions for a political explosion in Pakistan, including a potential fracturing of the military, the US is now considering an even more reckless course of action should that eventuate—a direct US military intervention into Pakistan to disable or even seize its nuclear weapons.

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