

Will the US use Indian military bases to wage its Afghan War?

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In a blog titled “US unleashes the dogs of war in Afghanistan,” Indian geopolitical analyst M.K. Bhadrakumar has warned that Washington will likely soon seek to use Indian military bases and combat troops to wage war in Afghanistan.

Such action, he warns, would rile China and Pakistan, both of which border Afghanistan, and would set the region on a path to a catastrophic war that from the outset could involve four nuclear-armed powers.

In making this argument, Bhadrakumar points to India’s integration into the US drive to strategically isolate, encircle and prepare for war against China and the fresh impetus it received when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with US President Barack Obama in Washington last month.

At the conclusion of their talks, Modi and Obama issued a statement that pledged India and the US will cooperate militarily across the Indo-Pacific regions and in all “domains...land, maritime, air, space and cyber (space)”; named India a “Major Defense Partner” of the US, thereby allowing it to buy advanced US weaponry; and announced Washington and New Delhi have finalized the wording of a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA).

A major US objective for a decade, the LEMOA will enable the Pentagon to use Indian military bases and ports for resupply, repairs and rest. It will also allow the US military to “forward position” material on Indian bases.

The agreement is reciprocal, meaning it also opens the door for India to use US military bases. This, writes Bhadrakumar, “will come in extremely handy if Indian forces get involved in a military role in Afghanistan,” since it will allow them to operate from the US’s extensive network of Afghan bases.

The US-Indian axis rattles China and Pakistan

The “emergent US-Indian axis,” as Bhadrakumar observes, is rattling China, as well as India’s traditional archrival, Pakistan, and upending the strategic calculations of all the region’s major powers.

Pakistan was for decades the US’s principal South Asian ally and for the past 15 years has played a pivotal role in supporting the US occupation of Afghanistan. Yet as a result of the US’s aggressive courting and promotion of India, Pakistan now finds its relations with the US seriously downgraded and the already large military-strategic gap between it and India dramatically widening.

Beijing and Islamabad have responded to the Indo-US embrace by deepening their own strategic collaboration. This is exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which would link western China to the Pakistani Arabian Sea Port of Gwadar, providing China with a means of partially circumventing the Pentagon’s plans to impose an economic blockade on China by seizing Indian Ocean “chokepoints.”

Pointing to the increasing military-strategic polarization in South Asia and the not unrelated fraying of US-Pakistani ties over Islamabad’s role in the Afghan War, Bhadrakumar writes, “Logically, at some point in a near future, [the] US will demand a direct Indian military role in Afghanistan.”

He then adds, “India may be already positioning itself for undertaking such a role in Afghanistan as the US’s key partner.”

Bhadrakumar is a former high-level Indian diplomat, who has numerous contacts in Indian diplomatic and political circles. In his blog, he voices the concerns of a section of the Indian elite over the risks they run in acting as satraps for US imperialism in its reckless war drive against China. Generally, this is presented as concern over India’s “strategic autonomy”—that is, its room to maneuver among the great powers in pursuit of the Indian bourgeoisie’s own predatory interests. But the apprehensions of this faction of the elite are also fueled by their recognition that the mass of India’s workers and toilers are hostile to Washington’s aggression and wars. The burgeoning Indo-US alliance thus threatens to incite opposition and rapidly become a politically destabilizing factor.

Bhadrakumar suggests that the war in Afghanistan could serve “as the perfect alibi to beef up the US military presence in the region,” providing a mechanism to counter popular opposition to the Pentagon’s use of Indian bases and to acclimatize the population to Indian and US troops jointly waging war.

This is because Modi, his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, the corporate media and the pro-US political and military-strategic establishments would present a direct role in the US-led war in Afghanistan as in keeping with India’s strategic orientation and core “interests.” Publicly, they would frame it as part of India’s longstanding strategic competition with Pakistan and of India’s fight against “Islamist terrorism” (whose rise in South Asia is invariably presented as entirely separate from the concomitant growth of Hindu supremacism).

“If India gets involved militarily in Afghanistan,” writes Bhadrakumar, “it will be killing two birds with a single shot, insofar as, one, it can hope to roll back China’s expanding influence in Afghanistan, and, two, a military role in Afghanistan will help India to exert the maximum pressure on Pakistan. In strategic terms, indeed, Afghanistan is a high plateau that looks down on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.”

India’s strategic offensive in Central Asia

India has long been vying with Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan, and has sought to do so in tandem with Washington.

The previous BJP-led government was bitterly disappointed in the fall of 2001 when the Bush administration spurned its offers of support and instead made Washington’s traditional South Asian partner, Pakistan, the focus for the US attack on Afghanistan.

Subsequently, the entire political establishment, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), supported the US invasion of Afghanistan. New Delhi used its influence within the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance to rally support for the invasion and assist the formation of a US-installed puppet government headed by Hamid Karzai.

Since then, India has worked systematically to expand its ties with Kabul, including through the provision of economic and military aid. In 2011, President Karzai and India’s then-Congress Party-led government

entered into a defense pact that included India agreeing to train 600 Afghan soldiers annually. In 2014, India supplied Kabul with Russian-made helicopters and military hardware.

Pakistan has accused India of using its growing presence in Afghanistan, including its network of diplomatic missions, to covertly support Baluchi separatists and other anti-Pakistan insurgents.

While New Delhi is determined to prevent Pakistan from using Afghanistan to provide “strategic depth” against India, its involvement in the impoverished, war-scorched country is also motivated by its growing economic and strategic rivalry with China.

New Delhi views Afghanistan as the gateway to Central Asia, where it is competing with Beijing for influence, including access to the region’s abundant oil and natural gas reserves.

In late May, Modi, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani signed an agreement to develop an economic corridor linking the Iranian port of Chabahar to Afghanistan and through it to several of the former Central Asian Soviet republics. Hitherto, Pakistan has used its geographic position between Afghanistan and India to block land trade between them and thwart India’s ambitions in Central Asia.

US imperialism and its “India card”

Undoubtedly, Washington is anxious to make maximum use of the newly minted Indian basing agreement, including in waging war, so as to establish precedents that further harness India to its wars plans. Similarly, the Pentagon would welcome an opportunity to draw Indian forces into combat alongside the US military.

That said, there are, from the US standpoint, still major strategic and practical obstacles to India taking a more direct role in the Afghan War.

Over the past decade, the US has showered India with strategic favours, so as to ensnare it in its war drive against China. This has included supporting the expansion of Indian influence in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, South China Sea, and Africa and negotiating a special exemption for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime giving it access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel although it has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty.

However, in the case of Afghanistan, this has had definite limits. While Washington has encouraged India to provide Kabul with aid, because of its dependence on Pakistan to supply the US-NATO forces in Afghanistan and squeeze Taliban “safe-havens” in Pakistan, it has partially deferred to Islamabad’s wishes and until now opposed Indian troops being deployed to Afghanistan. It has also ceded New Delhi only a marginal role in the political maneuvers to create a more stable US-client government in Kabul.

This has been a source of considerable tension between New Delhi and Washington, with Indian analysts charging that the US is marginalizing India in Afghanistan.

Fearing Pakistan will gain leverage from any “political settlement” that results in the Taliban or sections of it being incorporated into the Afghan government, India—both under the current government and the previous Congress-led one—has repeatedly expressed skepticism, if not outright opposition, to any “peace talks.” According to New Delhi, there are “no good Talibans” with whom to negotiate.

Were the US to change course and conscript India into playing a direct role in the Afghan war, it would bring relations with Pakistan to the breaking point.

There are also practical problems with the US using India as a staging ground to wage war in Afghanistan. US planes flying from Indian bases could only reach Afghanistan by traversing Pakistani airspace. Washington might calculate it could bully the Pakistani elite into accepting this, at least tacitly, as it has the drone war that the CIA and Pentagon have waged in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas. But the US’s systematic violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty and savage drone war have already incited mass opposition in Pakistan.

The reality is that the mere suggestion the US is considering pressing India to take a more direct role in the Afghan war would constitute a dire threat to the geopolitical interests and strategy of Pakistan’s elite and for multiple reasons. Were India to join the US-led Afghan war, it would represent a qualitative escalation of the Indo-US military partnership; expand India’s military-strategic footprint in Afghanistan, thereby intensifying Pakistan’s strategic vulnerability; and invariably be associated with a further downgrading of the already frayed relations between Islamabad and Washington.

For expediency’s sake, the US, therefore, will likely first deploy its Indian Afghan card as a threat, in the form of trial balloons or by encouraging India to expand its Afghan footprint. And all with the aim of intimidating Pakistan into sharing a still larger burden of the war, leveraging the substantial sections of the Pakistani bourgeoisie who still look to US imperialism as the bulwark of their rule, and breaking the Sino-Pakistani strategic partnership.

The Pakistani elite is keenly aware that it is the butt of mounting hostility within Washington’s political and military-security establishment. In late May, the Pentagon violated Islamabad’s “red lines” to assassinate the political leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, and blow up Pakistan’s efforts to persuade the Taliban to join peace talks. This action, which was hailed by Obama personally, was interpreted and touted by Washington nation-security insiders as a blunt message to Islamabad that the US is intent on rewriting the rules of its relations with Pakistan.

Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing under the title “Pakistan: Friend or Foe in the Fight Against Terrorism?” At the hearing, “expert witnesses” and congressmen railed against Pakistani duplicity and denounced Islamabad for consorting with terrorists, blithely ignoring Washington’s own notorious decades-long record of using Islamist groups as proxies in its regime change operation.

In public forums, the criticisms directed at Pakistan from members of the US political and national-security establishments focus on its failure to do Washington’s bidding in Afghanistan and the “war on terror.” But increasingly, the real or at least more important issue is Pakistan’s relations with China and the strategic implications of Pakistan’s leading role, via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, in China’s One Belt, One Road and Maritime Silk Road initiatives.

Pointing to Afghanistan as an example and flashpoint of “rising” tensions “throughout Asia,” Bhadrakumar concludes, “The danger is real that the major powers may be drifting toward a general war.”

The US’s drive to secure its global hegemony—through its 15-year Afghan war and its push to transform India into a “front-line” state in its military-strategic offensive against China—has drawn all of South and Central Asia into a maelstrom of intensifying geo-political conflict, with nuclear-armed states the principal protagonists. The India-China and India-Pakistan conflicts have become inextricably intertwined with American imperialism’s campaign to thwart China’s rise, rendering all of them still more unpredictable and explosive and threatening, absent the revolutionary intervention of the international working class, to trigger a conflagration that will dwarf the imperialist world wars of the last century.

The authors also recommend:

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