

After the Afghan accord: another 'Lebanon' in Pakistan?

by Ramtanu Maitra

The signing of the Geneva Accords by Islamabad and Kabul on April 14, with the United States and Soviet Union as guarantors, has raised the instability factor in the region to a new threshold. Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto's recent proclamations as to the danger of Afghanistan becoming another "Lebanon" miss the point. It is now an open secret that the so-called Afghan settlement will likely lead to the partitioning of Afghanistan. The real danger, however, is the survival of Pakistan as one nation. It is Pakistan which has been set up for the "Lebanon" treatment.

The warning signals are there for all to see: Opening up the Durand Line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan; added instability caused by the 3 million Afghan refugees who are showing little interest in heading back home (not to mention the presence of 15,000-20,000 active Kabul-trained agents within the refugee population); efforts by secessionist movements within Pakistan to carve out Sind and Baluchistan as independent nations; a sizable population of Iran-backed Shi'ite fundamentalists; a weak economy which can hardly afford indulgence in curbing militant extremism; an increasingly fragmented political scene, and regular threats issuing from Moscow.

Pakistan has become the cat's paw of three geopolitical military powers—the Soviet Union, the United States, and China—each angling to gain a deeper hold in the subcontinent. The point of entry for bringing this game to a new and dangerous level is the projected Balkanization of Pakistan. The partitioning of Afghanistan will fuel a revival of the push for "Pakhtoonistan" and southern Afghanistan's gouging out a chunk of Pakistan. It is a fissuring process that will not be neatly confined within Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) or even within Pakistan itself.

It is this recognition, at least in part, which is undoubtedly motivating India's stony silence on Afghanistan's plight for the last nine years. India's role could be critical in the face of the new instabilities, provided New Delhi can muster a serious initiative to restore and build Indo-Pakistani relations, clearly the key to retaining the integrity of the region.

An accord for what?

The accord, which had been labeled the harbinger of lasting peace for the region, is no more than a "convenient

solution" worked out by the Soviets and the United States, with China an interested bystander. For the Soviets, in addition to more fuel for the "glasnost" and "perestroika" propaganda machine, the accord gives virtual control over northern Afghanistan. It is only a matter of time before that part of Afghanistan joins the "fraternal brotherhood" of fellow Tadjiks, Uzbeks, and Kirghizes belonging to the Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics.

For Pakistan, besides a temporary reprieve from condemnation as "saboteurs of peace and the negotiating process," the accord offers only intangibles—mainly, "hope."

The accord has elicited a torrent of babbling from the U.S. State Department and "experts" alike. The smug contention that the accord is "historic" because the mighty Red Army has been "pushed back" and the present Kabul government "will come down with a crash in no time," making way for the nationalist Afghans to assume control of Kabul, has already begun to wear off. Answering a question in Geneva after the accord was signed, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz was forced to admit that the war will not end. Poor George also had a problem answering what the State Department would say if the Soviet Union turned around and charged Pakistan with violating the accord.

It shouldn't be a surprise. The accord was never meant to stabilize the region; it was merely a "confidence-building" step leading to the Reagan-Gorbachov summit, the next high point in the current "New Yalta" game of the superpowers. Like its namesake, this round of superpower maneuvering is also laced with willful self-delusion.

Why instability?

There is scarcely a commentator on any side of the table who does not admit that Afghanistan will remain unstable. The chaos is bound to spill over to the neighboring nations—in particular, Pakistan.

Although Iran borders southern and western Afghanistan, the Afghanistan situation will not have a great impact on its domestic scene. For the last eight years, Iran has contained the 2 million Afghan refugees in its northern province. The totalitarian mullah regime did not give the Afghan refugees much scope for mischief-making. Moreover, historically, Iran has had few conflicts with the Afghans, even though a

part of Iran had earlier been claimed by the "Greater Baluchistan" secessionists.

More likely would be an increase in the already considerable Iranian pressure on Pakistan, erstwhile friend of the U.S. "Satan." In 1986, a violent confrontation between the Iran-backed Shi'ite fundamentalists and the majority Sunnis in Lahore claimed 18 lives. The Shi'ites have since formed a political association pledging allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini. It is well known that a large number of Pakistani army personnel are Shi'ites (one of the main reasons, incidentally, why Riyadh removed Pakistani forces from Saudi Arabia last year), so the mischief potential is not inconsiderable.

But, the single most pressing problem Pakistan faces is the 3 million rambunctious Afghan refugees who have settled all over the country, busying themselves with gaining wealth and business through cash or firepower.

In spite of what U.S. National Security Council chief Frank Carlucci may say, the Kabul regime is not going to roll over and die while the Red Army sits at a distance and watches. The regime has an 80,000-plus strong army and air force, armed with helicopter gunships, and other modern weapons. The Kabul regime will act from its position of strength and is expected to rope in a few of the rebel commanders to share power—strictly on Kabul's terms.

Since there is very little likelihood that the Najibullah regime will fold up the way Vietnam's infamous Nguyen Van Thieu regime did in 1975 following the U.S. evacuation from Saigon (now, Ho Chi Minh City), it is evident that a large segment of Afghan refugees has come to stay in Pakistan. The existence of such a huge refugee population would by itself be a destabilizing factor for any nation. In the case of Pakistan, the historical enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan adds a sharp twist.

How it works

The migration of Afghan refugees south to settle in Karachi, the most populous city in Pakistan, demonstrates the nature of the problem. Karachi is the capital and port city of Sind province, long a province beset with secessionist movements. Until the end of the 1970s, the political scene in Sind was dominated by the Muslim League, a pro-government and pro-Islam political party with a number of factions, and the Pakistani People's Party (PPP), a hodgepodge of landlords, socialists, pro-Soviet elements, anti-army liberals, and some trade union workers. The Muslim migrants from India, called Mohajirs, had settled mainly in Sind and have been the backbone of the Muslim League for decades.

In the midst of this melange, a secessionist movement, called the "Jiye Sind" movement, also exists, drawing its support from Sindhis who were upset over their diluted identity and over Punjabi domination in the army and bureaucracy of Pakistan. "Jiye Sind" also drew support from a spectrum of sectarian left forces of varying shades. In 1983, the "Jiye Sind" movement turned violent and was contained, albeit at

the expense of a good deal of bloodshed, only because the political forces supportive of a sovereign Pakistani nation did not ally with the secessionists. In this, the Mohajirs were a significant stabilizing factor.

Arrival of the Afghan refugees, flush with drug-peddling revenues and automatic assault rifles, changed the ethnic dynamics of Karachi almost overnight. Since the Mohajirs were not willing to give up their hard-earned turf, Karachi became a violent city. In fact, during the two years since this crisis has surfaced, Karachi has seen more violence than ever before. The Mohajirs, in the meantime, have formed their own political grouping, the "Mohajir Quam" movement, accusing the Islamabad government of unleashing the aggressive Pathans to take over Karachi, the traditional seat of the Mohajir community. The effect has been disastrous. Now out of the mainstream, the Mohajirs have begun courting the "Jiye Sind" movement.

The Sind conflict, in turn, provided the proponents of "Pakhtoonistan," the tribal secessionist movement in NWFP of Pakistan, a chance to show their muscle. Two Pakistani Pathan leaders, National Awami Party chief Khan Wali Khan and his father, the Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, wasted no time in expressing solidarity with the Pathans against the Mohajirs.

The Durand Line

To add further fuel to this fire, the issue of the Durand Line has been re-opened, with the Soviets seconding Afghanistan's claim that it never accepted the present line of control as the legitimate border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The 1893 treaty from the British Raj days, according to which the Durand Line marks the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been a contentious issue since Pakistan became an independent nation in 1947. No Afghan regime—Marxist or non-Marxist—has accepted it, and it is doubtful whether any Afghan refugee, even after receiving handouts from Pakistan for the last nine years or so, accepts it today. In 1966, the Khalq—one of the two parties which form the Soviet-backed Kabul regime, the other being the Parcham—declared that the Durand Line had been imposed upon Afghanistan "against the wishes of its people, and as a result, a part of the territory of the country was detached from the body."

It was an open declaration that a part of Baluchistan and also a part of the NWFP, the two western provinces of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, belong to Afghanistan. The dispute on the Durand Line has given rise over the years to secessionist movements for independent Baluchistan and Pakhtoonistan, supported by Afghanistan. In his first declaration of party principles, Afghan President Nur Mohammad Raraki, who was later assassinated by his prime minister, Hafizullah Amin, had called for a "solution of the national issue of the Pushtun and Baluch people." When Amin, who

later as President "invited" the Soviet Army to come in and in the process got himself assassinated by his guests, became prime minister in March 1979, his "Greater Afghanistan" rhetoric intensified and he convened a series of meetings of Pushtun tribal leaders from border areas where rebel activity was raging.

Khan Abdul Wali Khan is also a proponent of the Pakhtoonistan movement. Wali Khan spends part of his time in Kabul, and the rest in Pakistan inciting the Pathans against the Islamabad government. He never forgave the late Paki-

The single most pressing problem Pakistan faces is the 3 million rambunctious Afghan refugees who have settled all over the country, busying themselves with gaining wealth and business through cash or firepower.

stani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto for the latter's attempt to crush the Pakhtoon secessionists. It is widely known in Pakistan that Wali Khan played a key role at a crucial time which led to Bhutto's arrest in 1977, and eventual death by hanging.

The independent Baluchistan movement is also aided and abetted by the Kabul regime under the guidance of Moscow. Two major Baluch tribal leaders, Khair Bakhsh Marri and Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, spend a lot of their time in Kabul making statements in support of an independent Baluchistan. While other Baluch leaders have also promoted an independent Baluchistan, Marri and Bizenjo are well-liked in Kabul because of their fluency with Marxist jargon.

The geopolitical game

The U.S. side of the three-way game among China, the Soviet Union, and the United States is transparent. That the United States was never serious about defending Afghanistan has been evident since at least 1954, when the allegedly anti-Soviet U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles summarily turned down Afghan Prime Minister Mohammed Doud's request for military assistance. Pakistan, on the other hand, was seen to have a certain geopolitical value. Besides being a stumbling block to the Soviets' eastward march and to their direct access to the Arabian Sea in particular, Pakistan was more recently seen as a watchpost and even considered a jump-off point for the American Rapid Deployment Force in the Gulf.

But, the United States never seriously tried to make Pakistan a strong and stable economy, and the general Pakistani perception of its erstwhile ally was probably accurately reflected in the storming of the U.S. Embassy in 1979. Since the advent of the mullah regime in Iran, Pakistan lost some of its importance as the Soviet-stopper in the eyes of some in the United States. Those policymakers closely associated with Zbigniew Brzezinski and his ilk have seen in the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic fundamentalism a flashier political weapon against Moscow. It is this thinking which led to the substantial financial support for nine years to the disparate Afghan Mujahideen based in Pakistan.

As the U.S. interest in Pakistan as a nation waned in favor of the Islamic fundamentalist card, China has moved in to develop a close bilateral relationship with the Pakistani administration. President Zia ul-Haq himself acknowledged in 1982 that Beijing's military aid to Pakistan for the Afghan Mujahideen had been as important as that of the United States.

Sino-Pak defense ties now include supply of the Chinese type-59 main battle tanks, development of advanced jet trainers, and fighter planes, among others. There has also been a frequent exchange of visits by defense personnel. Unconfirmed reports also indicate that China, a nuclear weapon state since the early 1960s, is involved in nuclear cooperation with Pakistan and has passed a nuclear weapon design to Pakistan in return for the uranium enrichment technology which Pakistan has acquired from abroad.

The close cooperation between China and Pakistan is not confined to defense ties. In the economic field, China has helped Pakistan in the construction of such vital projects as the Heavy Mechanical Complex and the Heavy Foundry and Forge in Taxila. In addition, China is also helping Pakistan to construct the Heavy Electricals Complex at Haripur. The Karakoram Highway, which links the Chinese province of Xinkiang with Pakistan, as well as the Karachi seaport, reconstructed with Chinese assistance, have considerable strategic importance for China. There are also reports that Pakistan has ceded 4,500 sq. km. of territory to China in the Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

The Soviets have cards of their own in Pakistan. The various secessionist movements are theirs to play. That asset and the extensive network of Afghan agents on the ground throughout the country give the Kremlin a massive capability to subvert Pakistan from within. The towns of Pakistan, particularly in the NWFP near the Afghanistan border, are experiencing bomb blasts and gunfights daily. The blowing up of several billion dollars' worth of freshly delivered American arms on April 10 at the Ojri camp between Rawalpindi and Islamabad, and the explosion of an arms depot in January outside of Lahore are clear indications of what these agents are capable of doing.

At the diplomatic level, the Soviets will continue to dangle the carrot, in the form of continued offers of large-scale economic assistance, among other things.