

The Plan To Topple Pakistan Military

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This is not about Musharraf anymore. This is about clipping the wings of a strong Pakistani military, denying space for China in Pakistan, squashing the ISI, stirring ethnic unrest, and neutralizing Pakistan's nuclear program. The first shot in this plan was fired in Pakistan's Balochistan province in 2004. The last bullet will be toppling Musharraf, sidelining the military and installing a pliant government in Islamabad. Musharraf shares the blame for letting things come this far. But he is also punching holes in Washington's game plan. He needs to be supported.

ISLAMABAD , Pakistan—On the evening of Tuesday, 26 September, 2006, Pakistani strongman Pervez Musharraf walked into the studio of Comedy Central's 'Daily Show' with Jon Stewart, the first sitting president anywhere to dare do this political satire show.

Stewart offered his guest some tea and cookies and played the perfect host by asking, "Is it good?" before springing a surprise: "Where's Osama bin Laden?"

"I don't know," Musharraf replied, as the audience enjoyed the rare sight of a strong leader apparently cornered. " You know where he is?" Musharraf snapped back, "You lead on, we'll follow you."

What Gen. Musharraf didn't know then is that he really was being cornered. Some of the smiles that greeted him in Washington and back home gave no hint of the betrayal that awaited him.

As he completed the remaining part of his U.S. visit, his allies in Washington and elsewhere, as all evidence suggests now, were plotting his downfall. They had decided to take a page from the book of successful 'color revolutions' where western governments covertly used money, private media, student unions, NGOs and international pressure to stage coups, basically overthrowing individuals not fitting well with Washington's agenda.

This recipe proved its success in former Yugoslavia, and more recently in Georgia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

In Pakistan, the target is a Pakistani president who refuses to play ball with the United States on Afghanistan, China, and Dr. A.Q. Khan.

To get rid of him, an impressive operation is underway:

A carefully crafted media blitzkrieg launched early this year assailing the Pakistani president from all sides, questioning his power, his role in Washington's war on terror and predicting his downfall.

Money pumped into the country to pay for organized dissent.

Willing activists assigned to mobilize and organize accessible social groups.

A campaign waged on Internet where tens of mailing lists and 'news agencies' have sprung up from nowhere, all demonizing Musharraf and the Pakistani military.

European- and American-funded Pakistani NGOs taking a temporary leave from their real jobs to work as a makeshift anti-government mobilization machine.

U.S. government agencies directly funding some private Pakistani television networks; the channels go into an open anti-government mode, cashing in on some manufactured and other real public grievances regarding inflation and corruption.

Some of Musharraf's shady and corrupt political allies feed this campaign, hoping to stay in power under a weakened president.

All this groundwork completed and chips in place when the judicial crisis breaks out in March 2007. Even Pakistani politicians surprised at a well-greased and well-organized lawyers campaign, complete with flyers, rented cars and buses, excellent event-management and media outreach.

Currently, students are being recruited and organized into a street movement. The work is ongoing and urban Pakistani students are being cultivated, especially using popular Internet Web sites and 'online hangouts'. The people behind this effort are mostly unknown and faceless, limiting themselves to organizing sporadic, small student gatherings in Lahore and Islamabad, complete with banners, placards and little babies with arm bands for maximum media effect. No major student association has announced yet that it is behind these student protests, which is a very interesting fact glossed over by most journalists covering this story. Only a few students from affluent schools have responded so far and it's not because the Pakistani government's countermeasures are effective. They're not. The reason is that social activism attracts people from affluent backgrounds, closely reflecting a uniquely Pakistani phenomenon where local NGOs are mostly founded and run by rich, westernized Pakistanis.

All of this may appear to be spur-of-the-moment and Musharraf-specific. But it all really began almost three years ago, when, out of the blue and recycling old political arguments, Mr. Akbar Bugti launched an armed rebellion against the Pakistani state, surprising security analysts by using rockets and other military equipment that shouldn't normally be available to a smalltime village thug. Since then, Islamabad sits on a pile of evidence that links Mr. Bugti's campaign to money and ammunition and logistical support from Afghanistan, directly aided by the Indians and the Karzai administration, with the Americans turning a blind eye.

For reasons not clear to our analysts yet, Islamabad has kept quiet on Washington's involvement with anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan. But Pakistan did send an indirect public message to the Americans recently.

"We have indications of Indian involvement with anti-state elements in Pakistan," declared the spokesman of the Pakistan Foreign Office in a regular briefing in October. The statement was terse and direct and the spokesman, Ms. Tasnim Aslam, quickly moved on to other issues.

This is how a Pakistani official explained Ms. Aslam's statement: "What she was really saying is this: We know what the Indians are doing. They've sold the Americans on the idea that [the Indians] are an authority on Pakistan and can be helpful in Afghanistan. The Americans have bought the idea and are in on the plan, giving the Indians a free hand in Afghanistan. What the Americans don't know is that we, too, know the Indians very well. Better still, we know Afghanistan very well. You can't beat us at our own game."

Mr. Bugti's armed rebellion coincided with the Gwadar project entering its final stages. No coincidence here. Mr. Bugti's real job was to scare the Chinese away and scuttle Chinese President Hu Jintao's planned visit to Gwadar a few months later to formally launch the port city.

Gwadar is the pinnacle of Sino-Pakistani strategic cooperation. It's a modern port city that is supposed to link Central Asia, western China, and Pakistan with markets in Mideast and Africa. It's supposed to have roads stretching all the way to China. It's no coincidence either that China has also earmarked millions of dollars to renovate the Karakoram Highway linking northern Pakistan to western China.

Some reports in the American media, however, have accused Pakistan and China of building a naval base in the guise of a commercial seaport directly overlooking international oil shipping lanes. The Indians and some other regional actors are also not comfortable with this project because they see it as commercial competition.

What Mr. Bugti's regional and international supporters never expected is Pakistan moving firmly and strongly to nip his rebellion in the bud. Even Mr. Bugti himself probably never expected the Pakistani state to react in the way it did to his betrayal of the homeland. He was killed in a military operation where scores of his mercenaries surrendered to Pakistan army soldiers.

U.S. intelligence and their Indian advisors could not cultivate an immediate replacement for Mr. Bugti. So they moved to Plan B. They supported Abdullah Mehsud, a Pakistani Taliban fighter held for five years in Guantanamo Bay, and then handed over back to the Afghan government, only to return to his homeland, Pakistan, to kidnap two Chinese engineers working in Balochistan, one of whom was eventually killed during a rescue operation by the Pakistani government.

Islamabad could not tolerate this shadowy figure, who was creating a following among ordinary Pakistanis masquerading as a Taliban while in reality towing a vague agenda. He was rightly eliminated earlier this year by Pakistani security forces while secretly returning from Afghanistan after meeting his handlers there. Again, no surprises here.

SMELLING A RAT

This is where Pakistani political and military officials finally started smelling a rat. All of this was an indication of a bigger problem. There were growing indications that, ever since Islamabad joined Washington's regional plans, Pakistan was gradually turning into a 'besieged-nation', heavily targeted by the American media while being subjected to strategic sabotage and espionage from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, under America's watch, has turned into a vast staging ground for sophisticated psychological and military operations to destabilize neighboring Pakistan.

During the past three years, the heat has gradually been turned up against Pakistan and its military along Pakistan's western regions:

A shadowy group called the BLA, a Cold War relic, rose from the dead to restart a separatist war in southwestern Pakistan.

Bugti's death was a blow to neo-BLA, but the shadowy group's backers didn't repent. His grandson, Brahmday Bugti, is currently enjoying a safe shelter in the Afghan capital, Kabul, where he continues to operate and remote-control his assets in Pakistan.

Saboteurs trained in Afghanistan have been inserted into Pakistan to aggravate extremist passions here, especially after the Red Mosque operation.

Chinese citizens continue to be targeted by individuals pretending to be Islamists, when no known Islamic group has claimed responsibility.

A succession of 'religious rebels' with suspicious foreign links have suddenly emerged in Pakistan over the past months claiming to be 'Pakistani Taliban'. Some of the names include Abdul Rashid Ghazi, Baitullah Mehsud, and now the Maulana of Swat. Some of them have used and are using encrypted communication equipment far superior to what Pakistani military owns.

Money and weapons have been fed into the religious movements and al Qaeda remnants in the tribal areas.

Exploiting the situation, assets within the Pakistani media started promoting the idea that the Pakistani military was killing its own people. The rest of the unsuspecting media quickly picked up this message. Some botched American and Pakistani military operations against Al Qaeda that caused civilian deaths accidentally fed this media campaign.

This was the perfect timing for the launch of *Military, Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, a book authored by Dr. Ayesha Siddiq Agha, a columnist for a Pakistani English-language paper and a correspondent for 'Jane's Defence Weekly', a private intelligence service founded by experts close to the British intelligence.

TARGET: PAK MILITARY

The book was launched in Pakistan in early 2007 by Oxford Press. And, contrary to most reports, it is openly available in Islamabad's biggest bookshops. The book portrays the Pakistani military as an institution that is eating up whatever little resources Pakistan has.

Pakistani military's successful financial management, creating alternate financial sources to spend on a vast military machine and build a conventional and nuclear near-match with a neighboring adversary five times larger – an impressive record for any nation by any standard – was distorted in the book and reduced to a mere attempt by the military to control the nation's economy in the same way it was controlling its politics.

The timing was interesting. After all, it was hard to defend a military in the eyes of its own proud people when the chief of the military is ruling the country, the army is fighting insurgents and extremists who claim to be defending Islam, grumpy politicians are out of business, and the military's side businesses, meant to feed the nation's military machine, are doing well compared to the shabby state of the nation's civilian departments.

A closer look at Ms. Siddiq, the author, revealed disturbing information to Pakistani officials. In the months before launching her book, she was a frequent visitor to India where, as a defense expert, she cultivated important contacts. On her return, she developed friendship with an Indian lady diplomat posted in Islamabad. Both of these activities – travel to India and ties to Indian diplomats – are not a crime in Pakistan and don't raise interest anymore. Pakistanis are hospitable and friendly people and these qualities have been amply displayed to the Indians during the four-year-old peace process.

What is interesting is that Ms. Siddiq left her car in the house of the said Indian diplomat during one of her recent trips to London. And, according to a report, she stayed in London at a place owned by an individual linked to the Indian lady diplomat friend in Islamabad.

The point here is this: Who assigned her to investigate the Pakistani Armed Forces and present a distorted image of a proud and efficient Pakistani institution?

From 1988 to 2001, Dr. Siddiq worked in the Pakistan civil service, the Pakistani civil bureaucracy. Her responsibilities included dealing with Military Accounts, which come under the Pakistan Ministry of Defense. She had thirteen years of rich experience in dealing with the budgetary matters of the Pakistani military and people working in this area.

Dr. Siddiq received a year-long fellowship to research and write a book in the United States. There are strong indications that some of her Indian contacts played a role in arranging financing for her book project through a paid fellowship. The final manuscript of her book was vetted at a publishing office in New Delhi.

All of these details are insignificant if detached from the real issue at hand. And the issue is the demonization of the Pakistani military as an integral part of the media siege around Pakistan, with the

American media leading the way in this campaign.

Some of the juicy details of this campaign include:

The attempt by Dr. Siddiqa to pitch junior officers against senior officers in Pakistan Armed Forces by alleging discrimination in the distribution of benefits. Apart from being malicious and unfounded, her argument was carefully designed to generate frustration and demoralize Pakistani soldiers.

The American media insisting on handing over Dr. A. Q. Khan to the United States so that a final conviction against the Pakistani military can be secured.

Mrs. Benazir Bhutto demanding after returning to Pakistan that the ISI be restructured; and in a press conference during her house arrest in Lahore in November she went as far as asking Pakistan army officers to revolt against the army chief, a damning attempt at destroying a professional army from within.

Some of this appears to be eerily similar to the campaign waged against the Pakistani military in 1999, when, in July that year, an unsigned full page advertisement appeared in major American newspapers with the following headline: "A Modern Rogue Army With Its Finger On The Nuclear Button."

Till this day, it is not clear who exactly paid for such an expensive newspaper full-page advertisement. But one thing is clear: the agenda behind that advertisement is back in action.

Strangely, just a few days before Mrs. Bhutto's statements about restructuring the ISI and her open call to army officers to stage a mutiny against their leadership, the American conservative magazine The Weekly Standard interviewed an American security expert who offered similar ideas:

"A large number of ISI agents who are responsible for helping the Taliban and al Qaeda should be thrown in jail or killed. What I think we should do in Pakistan is a parallel version of what Iran has run against us in Iraq : giving money [and] empowering actors. Some of this will involve working with some shady characters, but the alternative—sending U.S. forces into Pakistan for a sustained bombing campaign—is worse." Steve Schippert, Weekly Standard, Nov. 2007.

In addition to these media attacks, which security experts call 'psychological operations', the American media and politicians have intensified over the past year their campaign to prepare the international public opinion to accept a western intervention in Pakistan along the lines of Iraq and Afghanistan:

Newsweek came up with an entire cover story with a single storyline: Pakistan is a more dangerous place than Iraq.

Senior American politicians, Republican and Democrat, have argued that Pakistan is more dangerous than Iran and merits similar treatment. On 20 October, senator Joe Biden told ABC News that Washington needs to put soldiers on the ground in Pakistan and invite the international community to join in. "We should be in there," he said. "We should be supplying tens of millions of dollars to build

new schools to compete with the madrassas. We should be in there building democratic institutions. We should be in there, and get the rest of the world in there, giving some structure to the emergence of, hopefully, the reemergence of a democratic process."

The International Crisis Group (ICG) has recommended gradual sanctions on Pakistan similar to those imposed on Iran, e.g. slapping travel bans on Pakistani military officers and seizing Pakistani military assets abroad.

The process of painting Pakistan's nuclear assets as pure evil lying around waiting for some do-gooder to come in and 'secure' them has reached unprecedented levels, with the U.S. media again depicting Pakistan as a nation incapable of protecting its nuclear installations. On 22 October, Jane Harman from the U.S. House Intelligence panel gave the following statement: "I think the U.S. would be wise – and I trust we are doing this – to have contingency plans [to seize Pakistan's nuclear assets], especially because should [Musharraf] fall, there are nuclear weapons there."

The American media has now begun discussing the possibility of Pakistan breaking up and the possibility of new states of 'Balochistan' and 'Pashtunistan' being carved out of it. Interestingly, one of the first acts of the shady Maulana of Swat after capturing a few towns was to take down the Pakistani flag from the top of state buildings and replacing them with his own party flag.

The 'chatter' about President Musharraf's eminent fall has also increased dramatically in the mainly American media, which has been very generous in marketing theories about how Musharraf might "disappear" or be "removed" from the scene. According to some Pakistani analysts, this could be an attempt to prepare the public opinion for a possible assassination of the Pakistani president.

Another worrying thing is how American officials are publicly signaling to the Pakistanis that Mrs. Benazir Bhutto has their backing as the next leader of the country. Such signals from Washington are not only a kiss of death for any public leader in Pakistan, but the Americans also know that their actions are inviting potential assassins to target Mrs. Bhutto. If she is killed in this way, there won't be enough time to find the real culprit, but what's certain is that unprecedented international pressure will be placed on Islamabad while everyone will use their local assets to create maximum internal chaos in the country. A dress rehearsal of this scenario has already taken place in October when no less than the U.N. Security Council itself intervened to ask the international community to "assist" in the investigations into the assassination attempt on Mrs. Bhutto on 18 October. This generous move was sponsored by the U.S. and, interestingly, had no input from Pakistan which did not ask for help in investigations in the first place.

Some Pakistani security analysts privately say that American 'chatter' about Musharraf or Bhutto getting killed is a serious matter that can't be easily dismissed. Getting Bhutto killed can generate the kind of pressure that could result in permanently putting the Pakistani military on a back foot, giving Washington enough room to push for installing a new pliant leadership in Islamabad.

Having Musharraf killed isn't a bad option either. The unknown Islamists can always be blamed and the military will not be able to put another soldier at the top, and circumstances will be created to ensure that either Mrs. Bhutto or someone like her is eased into power.

The Americans are very serious this time. They cannot let Pakistan get out of their hands. They have been kicked out of Uzbekistan last year, where they were maintaining bases. They are in trouble in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran continues to be a mess for them and Russia and China are not making it any easier. Pakistan must be 'secured' at all costs.

This is why most Pakistanis have never seen American diplomats in Pakistan active like this before. And it's not just the current U.S. ambassador, who has added one more address to her other most-frequently-visited address in Karachi, Mrs. Bhutto's house. The new address is the office of GEO, one of two news channels shut down by Islamabad for not signing the mandatory code-of-conduct. Thirty-eight other channels are operating and no one has censored the newspapers. But never mind this. The Americans have developed a 'thing' for GEO. No solace of course for ARY, the other banned channel.

Now there's also one Bryan Hunt, the U.S. consul general in Lahore, who wears the national Pakistani dress, the long shirt and baggy trousers, and is moving around these days issuing tough warnings to Islamabad and to the Pakistani government and to President Musharraf to end emergency rule, resign as army chief and give Mrs. Bhutto access to power.