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The Mohmand Mayhem and its Impact on Pakistan-US Alliance: For the Friendship a Blush, for the Ties a Tear!

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Abstract

The implications of the recent incident in which 24 Pakistan soldiers were killed on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by NATO military action are likely to be far-reaching. It will severely dent Pakistan's relationship with the West. But this may not mean crossing the Rubicon. At the end, there will need to have a Modus Vivendi. But for now, an age-old alliance is in tatters!

The Incident

Forty Pakistani troops, asleep in two Pakistani check-posts on the rough terrain of Pakistan's Mohmand Agency were rudely awakened at the start of this weekend, on Saturday, 26 November 2011 at 2.00pm local time, by a sudden hail of shelling from NATO helicopters and aircraft. Within minutes, 24 of them according to some reports, including two officers, lay dead, with pretty much the rest, injured. The fire was returned, with no damage to the other side. But that return-fire is likely to be the first of the many reactions to follow from the Pakistan side, with grave implications for the relationship with the United States (US).

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Colonel Gary Kolb, spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) described it a 'coordinated action', but there was no doubt that it would be the US that would mainly draw the Pakistani flak. According to the Pakistani media, the NATO airpower penetrated deep into the Salala area of *Tehsil* (an administrative unit in Pakistan) Baizal, some 25 km west of Ghalnai, the headquarters of the Mohmand Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and 'completely destroyed' the two outposts, with The Pakistan Observer, an English daily, calling it 'naked aggression on the part of the US-led forces'. NATO said it was investigating, and its commander General John R. Allen offered his condolences to the family of any Pakistani soldiers who 'may have been killed or injured' (though, that casualties occurred is beyond doubt), but his, and those of senior Washington-based political leaders, words were likely to, as they did, fall on deaf ears on the other side. Instead, Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Khar made an angry telephone call to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Immediate Reactions

The Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, immediately called an emergency defence committee meeting. His government is already reeling under pressures emanating from the 'memogate affair', in which his President Asif Ali Zardari is seen as acting in cahoots with the former Ambassador to the US Husain Haqqani (since sacked) to try with the US authorities to clip the wings of the Pakistan army, which many, within and beyond the Army in Pakistan, see as a 'highly treasonable act'. So the civilian government cannot simply afford, or be even seen to, harbour any softness at all. Gilani's 'condemnation in the strongest terms' is expected to be the first of a series of reactions.

And so it was. Three more followed swiftly. The first related to supplies to the NATO. Pakistan is a vital land route for nearly half of NATO's supplies to its troops in Afghanistan, to Kabul through Torkham in the north and to Kandahar through Chaman in the south. Both were promptly stopped. The reason given was 'for their safety', which also cannot be dismissed entirely, for if history is any guide, much of Pakistani (combined with insurgent) ire would also be directed against these trucks and tankers. In the past, when these were torched for one reason or another, the maxim of 'Nelson's blind eye' was highly applicable to the authorities. A second action was a demand on the US, to vacate the Shamsi Air Base in south-western Baluchistan. The US is suspected of using it to launch the deadly unmanned drones and other observation aircraft, often with either a nudge and wink from the Pakistani army, or with it looking the other way. In any case, serious diplomatic intervention is now inevitable. As of now, though, Pakistan's powerful Army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, has matched the tone of his nominal civilian masters saying that 'all necessary steps will be undertaken for an effective response to this irresponsible act', without, understandably, elaborating on what they might be. The third was the announcement of the boycott of an all-

important Afghanistan Reconciliation Conference scheduled to take place in Germany in early December. The last action would severely limit the outcome of the event.

Long-Term Implications

There is an old French saying that tragedy but rarely comes singly. In contemporary international relations, nowhere is evidence of this more stark than in US-Pakistan ties. It is born of need, and of history. Crafted during the Cold War, it has brought too many mutual benefits to both sides to easily ignore. For the US, Pakistan has been an ally then against the Soviet Union, and conduit to China, and at present a partner to contain and constrain Islamist extremism. For Pakistan, the US has been a source of military hardware and material support, and for its important middle classes, of certain values and intellectual nourishment. But as always, in politics as in physics, everything is in a state of flux.

Recently the alliance has come under severe strain. The differences on dealing with the Taliban, the Osama bin Laden raid, the Raymond Davies incident, the memogate saga, have been, it appears, relentlessly contributing towards this downturn. On the broader international matrix, Pakistan has moved closer to China, and the US to India (though an unexpected, though not inexplicable ‘black swan’ effect has been a loosening of Pakistan-India relations!) After the mayhem in Mohmand, there will be public cries in Pakistan to cease all cooperation, political, diplomatic and even intelligence, with the US. Effigies and flags will burn, and sticks and stones will be hurled.

Conclusion

Would all that mean that the Rubicon of the ties will be crossed, as Caesar had famously done, and what need and history have wrought, would be torn asunder by soldiers and politicians? Perhaps unlikely, if interests are the main determinants of policy-making in international relations. Yet, through the annals of man, passions of nations have led to the inflicting of pains on themselves, as on others. Both the US and Pakistan will need to act, with both swiftness and sophistication, to limit damage. The horse and the rider are on the Rubicon, and both countries must ensure they turn back without actually crossing. It will test skills and patience, but not working together for them, at least in the foreseeable future, is not an option. However, right now, one might aptly paraphrase Lord Byron on Greece in commenting on Pakistan-US alliance: For the friendship a blush, for the ties a tear!

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