

US ally Musharraf in a tangle over Iran

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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The intense pressure from Washington on President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan to be cooperative in the “war on terror” is yielding dramatic results, although perhaps not of the kind initially anticipated.

The Pakistan-Iran relationship, which has never been easy, has nosedived to a low point in recent weeks, even as Musharraf remains under pressure to do more in clamping down on al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

The moot point is to what extent Musharraf is willingly cooperating with US regional policy against Iran. He is skating on thin ice. He may endear himself to Washington as a brave leader in the Muslim world, but Pakistani public opinion is averse to serving the US agenda over Iran. This contradiction is fraught with dangers. It can only further accentuate Musharraf’s isolation within Pakistan and add to the country’s overall political uncertainties.

Washington could be miscalculating that only the Shi’ites in Sunni-dominated Pakistan will feel alienated by Musharraf’s unfriendly attitude toward Tehran. The fact is, in emotive terms, the average Pakistani citizen is bound to view US hostility toward Iran as yet another instance of Washington’s “crusade” against the Islamic world.

But Washington, on its part, can draw satisfaction that it is killing two birds with one stone. It may become difficult to advance the Iran-Pakistan-India gas-pipeline project when a thick cloud of distrust threatens to engulf Pakistan-Iran relations.

But first things first.

The main point is that US covert operations from Pakistani soil directed against eastern Iran’s Sistan-Balochistan province have burst into public view. The administration of President George W Bush has earmarked US\$100 million for bringing about “regime change” in Iran. But in the implementation of this state policy, Washington has chosen not to count on the sizable Iranian expatriate community living in the US and Europe. The Iranian exiles have virtually no credibility within Iran. Washington knows that propaganda apart, Iranian revolution enjoys a social base.

Moreover, the experience over Iraq has taught Washington a lesson or two about emigre communities. A number of Iraqi exiles whom Washington patronized turned out to have dual loyalties. Some, like Ahmad Chalabi, would seem to have had even multiple loyalties. In Iran’s case the ground is even more slippery, since in the past decade and a half, Tehran has developed an active policy of building bridges with Iranian exiles, especially those living in the US, who fled the country in the wake of the revolution in 1979. Tehran even offered

that their properties that were seized by the revolutionary courts would be restored to them. The official policy encourages the exiles to return or, at the very least, to identify with their native country.

All this leaves the Bush administration in a quandary: how to craft the tools of subversion against such an astute regime? Iran's complex ethnic make-up provided the answer. Persians dominate, but there are many smaller ethnic groups with their own agendas. Edward Luttwak, consultant to the US National Security Council, the White House chief of staff and the Pentagon, recently wrote, "Viewed from the inside, Iran is hardly the formidable power that some see from the outside. The natural outcome of ... widening ethnic divisions ... is the breakup of Iran.

"There is no reason why Iran should be the only multinational state to resist the nationalist separatism that destroyed the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, divided Belgium in all but name, and has decentralized Spain and even the United Kingdom. As with the Soviet Union, there is a better alternative to detente with a repulsive regime - and that is to be true to the Wilsonian tradition of American foreign policy by encouraging and helping the forces of national liberation within Iran," wrote Luttwak.

But here, too, Washington faces a dilemma. The largest among the Iranian ethnic minorities, Azeris (a quarter of Iran's 70 million population), also happen to have assimilated well, speaking their own language and enjoying a presence in the body politic proportionately in excess of their demographic strength. Besides, the intricate calculus of Iran-Azerbaijan-Armenia (and Iran-Russia) relations is such that Baku cannot connive with subversive activities against Iran. The authoritative regime in Azerbaijan cannot be destabilized either, as Washington has huge economic stakes in the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. In other words, finessing an Azeri "national liberation movement" takes time.

The next big Iranian ethnic minority consists of the Kurds (roughly 9% of the population), but Kurdish nationalism is a double-edged sword for Washington brazenly to promote, as it has implications for the integrity of Iraq, Syria and Turkey as well. Besides, Tehran has kept up good relations with the Kurdish faction led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani that dominates the eastern areas of northern Iraq.

The next big ethnic-minority group within Iran is Arabs, roughly 2-3%. They mainly inhabit the region contiguous to southern Iraq where the British contingent is located. In recent months, Tehran repeatedly held British intelligence responsible for staging various terrorist acts inside Kuzestan province. But Iran's capacity to retaliate is virtually unlimited. This compels London to be self-restrained.

All this says that, apart from sundry other minority groups of minuscule size, such as the Turkmens, Talysh, Qashqai, Lurs, Gilaki or Mazandarani, with hardly any surplus of militant ethnic nationalism available for inciting, the Balochs (who form roughly 2% of the population) offer themselves as the obvious choice for Washington to train its terrorism weapon against the Iranian regime.

US intelligence has obviously sized up that Balochi nationalism within Pakistan is historically deep-rooted and has matured. Actually, it goes all the way back to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Religion further compounds matters, since Balochs are Sunnis. It is extremely significant that unlike Britain, Washington has shied away from proscribing the Balochi

Liberation Army (BLA) , despite its being a secessionist movement waging armed insurgency against the state of Pakistan. Islamabad alleges that the BLA receives weapons and other forms of support from Afghanistan.

The US is using Balochi nationalism for staging an insurgency inside Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province. The "war on terror" in Afghanistan gives a useful political backdrop for the ascendancy of Balochi militancy. Tehran has been giving Musharraf a long rope so far on the premise that the besieged general is so preoccupied with securing US political backing for his presidency that he is hardly in a position to lean on the formidable US security apparatus operating on Pakistani soil.

But Tehran probably has fresh grounds to reassess Musharraf's intentions. Or, it is running out of patience. Last month, terrorists killed 13 officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Zahedan. Last week, in another incident in the town of Negor in Sistan-Balochistan, four Iranian policemen were killed, one abducted and another wounded. The perpetrators fled across the border into Pakistan.

Iran last week announced its intention to erect a 3-meter-high concrete wall reinforced with steel rods along its border with Pakistan. Islamabad put on a brave face, with the Foreign Ministry maintaining, "The fence is on the Iranian side of the border, and we have no problem with that." But Tehran calculates that the sheer humiliation of being treated as an infectious gangrene by all its neighbors - Afghanistan, India and Iran - should eventually begin to tell on the Musharraf regime.

The depth of the Iranian sense of hurt and bitterness came out in remarks made by Ahmad Khatami, who led last Friday's prayer meeting in Tehran. With biting sarcasm, the religious leader said, "Pakistan is becoming a terrorist state and even though it is our neighbor, little by little it is losing its neighborly manners as it has become a sanctuary for terrorists who [kill people in Zahedan](#)."

Pakistani observers view this with dismay and disbelief. Prominent strategic thinker and retired army general Talat Masood was quoted as saying, "Pakistan has to review its whole foreign policy, as it has not only become the most fenced country in the region, but also since it is being taken to task by all its neighbors for interfering inside their states."

Masood said, "Pakistan has to assure Iran by word and deed that in no way it is going to allow the US to implement its designs through the territory that it controls. The recent statements and activities at the Pak-Afghan border are making the Iranians suspicious of Pakistan's present government, added to which are a spurt in the activities at the Pak-Iran border." The prominent Lahore daily The Nation editorially commented that Islamabad must genuinely pay heed to Iran's concerns.

But things are not that simple. Musharraf seems to consider it expedient to put distance between him and the Iranian leadership at this juncture. The processes apparent since Musharraf's recent extended tours of the Islamic world fall into a pattern. He began with a tour of the pro-American states of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East soon after visits to the region by the US secretaries of defense and state. Musharraf was received with extraordinary courtesies in Riyadh. King Abdullah received him at the airport, and he became the first Pakistani leader to be conferred the Abdul Aziz Prize, Saudi Arabia's highest award to a foreign dignitary.

Musharraf's diplomatic activity culminated in the meeting of the foreign ministers of the seven countries belonging to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Islamabad late last month. The countries represented were Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia – Sunni Muslim countries subscribing to what Musharraf calls "enlightened moderation".

Ostensibly, the Islamabad conclave aimed at addressing the Middle East crisis and at coordinating the draft communique of the OIC summit scheduled for Mecca. Yet it was something like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. Iran was kept out of the conclave.

It hasn't been difficult for Tehran to figure out Musharraf's game plan. When the Pakistani Foreign Ministry invited OIC ambassadors for a briefing on the Islamabad conclave, the Iranian ambassador didn't show up. On Sunday, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini hit out, commenting that the way the Islamabad meet was convened "raised many questions".

He said: "Everyone believes that all sides should have taken part in the Islamabad meeting." He revealed that the Pakistani ambassador in Tehran was called to the Foreign Ministry to "discuss issues related to the Islamabad meeting". Hosseini added a bit of public advice to Islamabad that while organizing such conferences, "the major countries involved should always be invited".

But what raises the diplomatic stakes is that President Mahmud Ahmadinejad spoke on the issue. Significantly, his comments came just as he was emplaning for Riyadh on a working visit on Saturday. In a clear warning that Musharraf was overreaching, Ahmadinejad insisted that all countries in the region have raised questions about the recent conference in Islamabad and they "should be answered explicitly".

Ahmadinejad added, "We will certainly follow up the issue to find out the details and goals of the conference." What incensed the Iranian leadership was that the Islamabad meet also aimed at working out a consensus within the OIC over the so-called "Arab peace initiative", which is being resurrected by Riyadh (at the behest of the US), devolving on a five-year-old Saudi formula adopted at the Beirut summit of the Arab League in 2002 for settling the Arab-Israeli conflict.

(The Saudi peace formula envisaged that Israel would withdraw to the borders that existed prior to the 1967 Six Day War – when Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan; the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt; and the Golan Heights from Syria – and in return the Arab world would fully recognize and normalize relations with Israel.)

Iran rightly estimates that Musharraf's grandiloquent "Islamic action plan" for the Middle East crisis in essence sub-serves the US agenda of ameliorating Israel's regional isolation without substantially addressing the Palestinian problem. On Sunday, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki reminded Islamabad on the imperatives of Iran-Pakistan cooperation at the bilateral, regional and international levels. A hurried visit by the Pakistani foreign minister to Tehran seems to be in the cards – his second visit in as many months. (Musharraf paid a visit to Tehran on February 5.)

However, there is a sideshow to these happenings that is no less profound. US intelligence operatives must be laughing all the way to Washington that they could manage with such

ease what their suave diplomats (and wily Congress members) have had a hard time achieving in recent years – arresting Islamabad and New Delhi from finalizing the \$7 billion [Iran-Pakistan-India gas-pipeline project](#). In geopolitical terms, the project holds the definite potential to forge a unified Asian energy market, with deep implications for US energy security.

Washington was increasingly finding it counterproductive to resort to arm-twisting New Delhi and Islamabad into putting the project on the back burner until such time as US-Iran relations were normalized and Washington, too, could dip into Iran’s energy reserves.

Now, just as it was becoming clear that the three regional capitals were inching toward finalization of the project at a trilateral meeting in Tehran in June, the high volatility in the security situation in the Iran-Pakistan border region puts question marks on their energy dialogue. To be sure, the pipeline project is predicated on a climate of trust and confidence prevailing among the three parties.

There was much merit in US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s recent fulsome praise that “this has been a stalwart fighter, Pakistan’s Musharraf, in this fight”. Those in Washington who insinuated that he deserved “an unusually tough message” over the “war on terror” have since hastily beaten a retreat. They didn’t know what they were saying.

***M K Bhadrakumar** served as a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service for more than 29 years, with postings including ambassador to Uzbekistan (1995-98) and to Turkey (1998-2001).*

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