

"Pakistan: Obama's Nightmare"

On the evening of Nov. 26, 2008, a small group of 10 persons attacked two luxury hotels and other sites in central Mumbai (India) and, over several days, managed both to kill and hurt a very large number of persons and to create massive material destruction in the city. It took several days before the slaughter was brought to an end. It is widely believed that the attacks were the work of a Pakistani group called Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), a group thought to be similar in motivation to al-Qaeda, perhaps directly linked to it. The world press immediately called the Mumbai massacres the 9/11 of India, a repetition of the attacks al-Qaeda launched against the United States in 2001.

The motivations and strategy of al-Qaeda in 2001 were largely misunderstood in 2001, both by the U.S. government and by analysts. The same thing risks happening now. Al-Qaeda in 2001 was of course seeking to humiliate the United States. But this was, from a strategic point of view, only a secondary motivation. Al-Qaeda has always made clear that its primary objective is the re-creation of the Islamic caliphate. And, as a matter of political strategy, it has considered that the necessary first step is the collapse of the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda considers that these two governments have been the essential political supports of Western (primarily U.S.) political dominance in the greater Middle East, and therefore the biggest obstacles to the re-creation of the caliphate, whose initial geographic base would of course be in this region.

The attack of September 11 can be seen as an attempt to get the U.S. government to engage in political activities that would put pressures on the Saudi and Pakistani governments of a kind that would undermine their political viability. The primary actions of the U.S. government in the region since 2001 - the invasion first of Afghanistan and then of Iraq - certainly met the expectations of al-Qaeda. What has been the result?

The Saudi government has reacted with great political astuteness, fending off U.S. pressures that would have weakened it internally, and has been able thus far to minimize al-Qaeda political success in Saudi Arabia. The Pakistani government has been far less successful. The regime in Islamabad is far weaker in 2008 than its predecessor regime was in 2001, while the political strength of al-Qaeda-type elements has been on a steady rise. The Mumbai attacks seem to have been an effort to weaken the Pakistani state still further. Of course, LET wished to hurt India and those seen as its allies - the United States, Great Britain, and Israel - but this was a secondary objective. The primary objective was to bring down the Pakistani government.

In Pakistan, as in every country of the world, the political elites are nationalist and seek to further the geopolitical interests of their country. This objective is fundamentally different from that of al-Qaeda-like groups, for whom the only legitimate function of a state is to further the re-creation of the caliphate. The persistent refusal of the Western world to understand this distinction has been a major source of al-Qaeda's continuing strength. It is what will turn Pakistan into Obama's nightmare.

What are Pakistan's geopolitical interests? Before anything else, it worries about its principal neighbors, India and Afghanistan. These concerns have fashioned its geopolitical strategy for the last sixty years. Pakistan sought powerful allies against India. It found two historically, the United States and China. Both the United States and China supported Pakistan for one simple

reason, to keep India in check. India was seen by both as too close geopolitically to the Soviet Union, with whom both the United States and China were in conflict.

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the momentary geopolitical weakness of Russia, both the United States and China sought tentatively to obtain closer relations with India. India was geopolitically a more important prize than Pakistan, and Pakistan knew this. One of the ways Pakistan reacted was to expand its role in (and control over) Afghanistan, by supporting the eventually successful Taliban takeover of the country.

What happened after 2001? The United States invaded Afghanistan, ousted the Taliban, and installed a government which had elements friendly to the United States, to Russia, even to Iran, but not at all to Pakistan. At the same time, the United States and India got still cozier, with the new arrangements on nuclear energy. So, the Pakistani government turned a blind eye to the renewal of Taliban strength in the northwest tribal regions bordering Afghanistan. The Taliban elements there, supported by al-Qaeda elements, renewed military operations in Afghanistan - and with considerable success, it should be noted.

The United States became quite upset, pressed the Pakistani army to act militarily against these Taliban/al-Qaeda elements, and itself engaged in direct (albeit covert) military action in this region. The Pakistani government found itself between a rock and a hard place. It had never had much capacity to control matters in the tribal regions. And the attempts it made as a result of U.S. government pressure weakened it still further. But its inefficacy pushed the U.S. military to act even more directly, which led to severe anti-American sentiment even among the most historically pro-American elites.

What can Obama do? Send in troops? Against whom? The Pakistani government itself? It is said that the U.S. government is particularly concerned with the nuclear stockpile that Pakistan has. Would the United States try to seize this stockpile? Any action along these lines - and Obama recklessly hinted at such actions during the electoral campaign - would make the Iraqi fiasco seem like a minor event. It would certainly doom Obama's domestic objectives.

There will be no shortage of people who will counsel him that doing nothing is unacceptable weakness. Is that Obama's only alternative? It seems clear that pursuing his agenda, as he himself has defined it, requires getting out from under the unending and geopolitically fruitless U.S. activities in the Middle East. Iraq will be easy, since the Iraqis will insist on U.S. withdrawal. Afghanistan will be harder, but a political deal is not impossible. Iran can be negotiated. The Israel/Palestine conflict is for the moment unresolvable, and Obama may be able to do little else than let the situation fester still longer.

But Pakistan requires a decision. If a Pakistani government is to survive, it will have to be one that can show it holds its own geopolitically. This will not be at all easy, given the internal situation, and an angry Indian public opinion. If there is anywhere where Obama can act intelligently, this is the place.

by Immanuel Wallerstein