The Coming War - The War Starts Here

As the United States plots its military response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, it calls on friends and foes alike for support. In the following articles, the Review looks at the actions and attitudes of Asian nations, and the impact the coming war will have on the region. First, Afghanistan: Ground Zero

Far Eastern Economic Review- 20/09/2001

By Ahmed Rashid

As United States forces mobilize to attack Osama bin Laden's terrorist networks in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, the world enters a new era dominated by a global fear of terrorism and the deepening divide between the Muslim world and the West.

The total war against bin Laden and Afghanistan's Taliban being planned in the White House will dramatically reshape the political map of South Asia and Central Asia and lead to rapid changes in regional alliances.

Instead of merely dealing with the threat of terrorism, the magnitude of the U.S. response could unravel the region.

"Bin Laden and the Taliban believe they are about to draw the U.S. into the trap that devoured the Soviet Union, and if we lash out without a political and strategic plan for the region, they could be right," warns Barnett Rubin, a prominent Afghan scholar and Director of the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University.

Clearly the risks are huge. There could also be benefits. In Pakistan, the military could finally delink itself from support to Islamic fundamentalists and the growing culture of so-called jihad, or holy war, undermining the country. Pakistan could rebuild ties with the West and improve relations with India. The Central Asian republics may finally be rid of the militant Islamic opposition movements based in Afghanistan and concentrate on improving economic and democratic reforms-or dissolve into greater authoritarianism and poverty. And in Afghanistan, a U.S.-led alliance could help reconstruct a new government which could finally bring peace after 23 years of war.

On the other hand, as the U.S. offensive is drawn out, Pakistan could unravel and Islamic militants take to the streets, under pressure from the Islamic fundamentalists that are a growing force in the country. Afghanistan could descend into the warlordism that dominated it in the early 1990s (and cleared the way for Taliban rule), creating around the world a flood of refugees and angry new recruits for terrorist organizations.

Within hours of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centre, President Bush said America was at war with international terrorists. "Those who make war on the United States have chosen their own destruction," he said on September 15 after declaring a national state of emergency. He warned that the U.S. response would be "a conflict without battlefields or beachheads" and that "the conflict will not be short." He pledged to build an international alliance through Nato and other allies.

The U.S. has identified 19 suspected hijackers as belonging to bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization, which is based in Afghanistan. As the U.S. mobilized 50,000 reservists and began to ship and airlift men and supplies to its main depot in the region-the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean-it began to seek support from landlocked Afghanistan's neighbours. Pakistan, Russia, China, India, Iran and the Arab world all face a critical moment in their relationships with both the Islamic world and the West. Critical among them, China has already voiced support, as has India.

The big question was Pakistan. Within 24 hours of the attacks Washington was pounding on Islamabad's door looking for bases and support. Islamabad has spent the past seven years providing military, political and financial support to the Taliban. A reversal by Pakistani leader Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf would invite an intense backlash from Islamic fundamentalist parties and the officer corps of the military.

Late on September 14, after a seven-hour meeting with his generals, Musharraf summoned U.S. Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin to say his government would give total support to a U.S.-led multinational force to be based

in Pakistan. The conditions: Pakistani forces would not cross into Afghanistan, and the U.S.-led force would need a UN mandate and must exclude Indian and Israeli involvement (though not the use of Indian territory to stage attacks).

Pakistani and Western diplomats told the Review that Islamabad had accepted 18 U.S. demands. Among the most critical will be Pakistan's agreement to share intelligence on bin Laden and the Taliban. It also committed to closing its borders with Afghanistan so that an estimated 3,000 members of Al-Qaeda do not escape into Pakistan.

What Musharraf has agreed to is essentially a policy U-turn. For 20 years the Pakistan military has attempted to bolster Islamic groups to fight its proxy wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir-support which has rapidly spread the culture of jihad that now poses a threat to its own national security. At present, 3,000-4,000 Pakistani Islamic militants are fighting alongside the Taliban, while thousands more Pakistani and Kashmiri militants train in Afghanistan for the war in Kashmir.

"Reversing this policy will not be easy," admits a retired Pakistani general.

Musharraf has since been lobbying politicians, religious leaders and the media in order to woo a sceptical public. "The present critical situation requires a unified response from the nation," Musharraf said on September 16. Pakistan has already enacted stringent security measures to avert terrorist attacks within its borders.

Musharraf will have to do even more. He will need to crack down on Islamic extremists in Pakistan who provide Al-Qaeda with logistics, communications and other support. He will have to ban Pakistani groups that could pose a threat to U.S. forces, such as Harakat ul-Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which are listed by Washington as terrorist organizations. The largest Pakistani party fighting in Kashmir, Laskar-e-Toiba, is on the U.S. terrorist watchlist. Stopping their activities would lead to an intense political backlash.

A backlash has already begun. Prominent Pakistani Maulana Samiul Haq heads a string of madrassas-the Islamic religious schools that also serve, in Pakistan, as preparatory academies for jihad-that many Taliban leaders attended in the early 1990s. Haq, who also leads the pro-Taliban fundamentalist alliance in Pakistan known as the Afghan Defence Council, publicly threatened Musharraf on September 14, saying Musharraf must be "mindful of the sentiments of his under-command."

Qazi Hussain Ahmad, leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamic political party, told a religious meeting on September 15 that "we will oppose the attack on Afghanistan tooth and nail and force the Pakistan government not to become a party to it." Several retired generals and former chiefs of the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, known for their hardline Islamic views, were even more provocative-claiming that the bombings in the U.S. were carried out as part of an Israeli-Jewish conspiracy in league with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in order to give Israel a free hand to crush the Palestinians and defame Muslims.

The effect of the international crisis is already being felt on the Pakistan economy, which was fragile prior to September 11. With the temporary closure of markets, enormous capital flight and rupee value tumbling as banks buy dollars, the country will soon need emergency financial support from abroad.

Concessions to the U.S. could bring a major write-off of Pakistan's $38 billion in foreign debt. On the other hand, an economic meltdown would only serve to strengthen Pakistan's fundamentalists.

In contrast to the uproar in Pakistan, India's support for the U.S. has been unambiguous in the days following the attacks. That's because along with the U.S. and Israel, India is also a target for militants pursuing a global jihad, namely in Kashmir. India has supported Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, also known as the United Front, in an effort to destabilize the Taliban, and wants Pakistan to stop helping the groups that cross into Kashmir and carry out attacks there. According to The Times of India, the Indian government has offered three air bases as well as port facilities on its Western seaboard for use in a U.S. offensive.

India's main goal is to keep pressure on Pakistan, though not to the point of collapse. "We'd be at the receiving end of the detritus," says Bharat Karnad of the Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research.

"The last thing India wants is a failed state on its border," says a senior Indian diplomat. "We want a Pakistan

that sees itself coexisting with its neighbours, rather than one using jihad as a tool of state policy."

Meanwhile, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar threatened that the Taliban would attack any neighbouring country that provided military bases for a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. "It is not impossible that we would attack such a country under compulsion and the mujahideen would have to enter the territory of such a country," Omar said from the Taliban's base in Kandahar on September 15.

His invective followed the failure of two days of secret talks between Omar and senior officers of the ISI in Kandahar to persuade Omar to hand over bin Laden. ISI chief Lt.-Gen. Mehmood Ahmed returned on September 17 for further talks. As the Review went to press over 1,000 Taliban officials had gathered in Kabul to debate bin Laden's extradition and under what conditions they would agree to it.

As the threat of a U.S. attack mounts, Omar, bin Laden and Arab and Afghan hardliners around them will stand increasingly isolated. The Taliban, dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group, are deeply factionalized. Moderate Taliban leaders in Kabul have started to send their families out of harm's way to Pakistan. Many of them will desert if they see a credible Pashtun alternative. That is why U.S. officials knowledgeable on Afghanistan are advocating that the U.S. help create an anti-Taliban armed force in the belt of southern Afghanistan in which the ethnic Pashtun dominate. Such a force would express its loyalty to former King Zahir Shah, who has stepped up efforts to call a Loya Jirga, or tribal council, of all Afghans in a bid to set up an alternative government.

"We are looking at a defining moment, if only we will grasp the opportunity," says a senior U.S. official in Washington. "It is especially important that this international alliance be more than a military enterprise so that it can help shape a post-Taliban/bin Laden Afghanistan."

Last year Washington provided $100,000 to Loya Jirga efforts. At the end of September, Nato and the European Union will hold meetings which are expected to endorse this process.

Further destabilizing the Taliban, tens of thousands of refugees have fled Kabul, Kandahar and the eastern city of Jalalabad since the attack on the U.S., according to the United Nations refugee agency. Many are headed for villages within Afghanistan, while others are headed to the Pakistani and Iranian borders. The "critical" humanitarian situation may soon deteriorate as aid agencies evacuate staff, says the UN. Pakistan is already host to 2 million Afghan refugees, with 1.5 million refugees in Iran.

Meanwhile Russia, Iran and India have stepped up their military support to the anti-Taliban United Front, whose leader, Ahmad Shah Masud, was assassinated on September 9 by two suicide bombers who allegedly belonged to Al-Qaeda. Masud's forces, who control just 10% of Afghanistan, are presently battling some 25,000 Taliban troops. United Front leaders have offered their support to the U.S. coalition, and their forces could play a critical role in finding targets and reducing Afghan civilian casualties.

U.S. forces are also going to need bases in the Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, which border Afghanistan. But bases will not be offered without clearance from Moscow, which is playing hard to get. Even though Russian President Vladimir Putin strongly condemned the terrorist attacks and pledged support for U.S. air strikes on Afghanistan, Russian officials have said they will not allow U.S. or Nato forces to be based in the region. Russia appears to be taking a bargaining position from which it can extract concessions from Washington.

For Iran, Afghanistan's western neighbour, the U.S. will have to reassure leaders that its military action will pose no threat. Iran will also want to be consulted about the nature of any future government in Kabul.

The U.S. is also rapidly mustering Arab support and troops from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to join the multinational force-not an easy task with current Arab anger at Washington for coddling Israel.

Enlisting Arab support is critical if Washington is to appease the Islamic world's fear that a war of civilizations between Islam and Christianity is about to break out. "Washington needs to demonstrate to ordinary Muslims that this is a global effort against terrorism which Muslim countries support," says the retired Pakistani general.

Islamabad is also keen to enlist Saudi support as a means to provide political cover at home. On September 15, a high-level Saudi military delegation arrived in Islamabad to discuss military cooperation.

There is no doubt that the U.S. will face major military difficulties in Afghanistan, where the terrain of high mountains and deserts is extreme.

There are few obvious targets and overexposure of U.S. forces could lead to a wider backlash by the fiercely nationalistic Afghans, who in the last two centuries have defeated British and Soviet invaders. The U.S. is unlikely to occupy major portions of Afghan territory, but will need to use ground troops and commandos. Missile strikes alone, which the U.S. carried out in 1998 against bin Laden's camps, are unlikely to succeed.

America's effectiveness will ultimately depend on how Washington sees its military campaign in the region-as merely an attack on terrorism or a broader attempt to restructure Afghanistan, push the peace process between India and Pakistan and help the Central Asian regimes. Emotional and angry demands are being made by many Americans for instant and overpowering retaliation that could devastate the region if the U.S. moves in without a clear-cut political and military strategy. Paul Wolfowitz, the U.S. deputy secretary of defence, spoke ominously of "ending states who sponsor terrorism."

Says Rubin, "The more U.S. action is seen as an act of revenge, the greater the risks of it failing. The more it is seen as meting out justice, the greater support it will muster."