

Bush administration threatens military intervention in Pakistan

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The Bush administration this week signalled a tough new stance on Pakistan, demanding that military strongman General Pervez Musharraf takes action against Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in areas bordering Afghanistan, and threatening US strikes if he failed to do so.

White House spokesman Tony Snow told the US media on Thursday that Musharraf was “going to have to be more aggressive”, in dealing with security problems in the border regions. Asked if US military forces would be sent into Pakistan, Snow declared: “We never rule out any options, including striking actionable targets.”

Bush’s Homeland Security Adviser Frances Townsend delivered essentially the same message during a media conference on Tuesday on the latest National Intelligence Estimate, which claimed that Al Qaeda had regenerated in “safehavens” in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). She diplomatically declared that Musharraf was a key ally in “war on terrorism” and hailed his speech against “extremism” following the Pakistan military’s bloody seizure of the Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, in Islamabad last week.

Nevertheless, Townsend stressed that US military strikes inside Pakistan would not depend on Musharraf’s permission. While refusing to be drawn on details, she declared: “There’s no question, the president’s made perfectly clear, if we had actionable targets anywhere in the world, putting aside whether it was Pakistan or any place else, we would pursue the targets.”

Townsend said the Bush administration had been pressuring the Musharraf regime for months to take military action against Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups. “It is no secret there have been a series of very senior-level US government officials to engage with President Musharraf and address this very issue, beginning with the vice president [Dick Cheney in February]. And obviously there are conversations between the president and President Musharraf. [Defence] Secretary Gates has been out, Deputy Secretary [of State] Negroponte and a raft of senior intelligence officials,” she said.

The comments produced a sharp rebuff from the Pakistani Foreign Office, which issued a statement on Friday declaring threats of unilateral US attacks on targets inside Pakistan as “irresponsible and dangerous”. The statement said Pakistan was committed to combatting “extremism and terrorism” and emphasised: “We have repeatedly made our position clear that whatever counter-terrorism action is to be taken inside Pakistan, it

will be taken by our own security forces.”

Such statements, however, are largely political posturing aimed at deflecting growing anti-US sentiment. As in September 2001, when the Bush administration threatened to bomb Pakistan back to the Stone Age if it did not end support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Musharraf is being confronted with an US ultimatum to take action in the border areas or face the consequences.

Constant American pressure was undoubtedly a major factor in Musharraf’s determination not to compromise with Islamic militants and to storm the Lal Masjid last week. More than 100 people, including 11 soldiers, died in the course of the siege that began in early July. The brutal military operation provoked protests in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and other areas of Pakistan, and prompted tribal leaders in the border area of North Waziristan to end last September’s agreement with the Musharraf regime to halt clashes with security forces.

Over the past week, suicide bombings and attacks on Pakistani military and police have claimed more than 130 lives. At least 48 people were killed on Thursday in three separate attacks across the country—two on army and police camps in the northwest and the third on a convoy of Chinese mining company workers in the southwestern province of Baluchistan. Another four people died yesterday after a suicide car bomber hit a security checkpoint on the outskirts of Miran Shah, the main town in North Waziristan.

Fighting between Pakistani security forces and Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters is set to intensify after Musharraf ordered the military to bolster its presence in tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan. A full army division was dispatched to the Swat district of North West Frontier Province, which was declared last week to be a “highly sensitive” zone. Parts of the district have been placed under military curfew. Extra troops have been reportedly sent to North and South Waziristan.

A delegation of tribal elders was meeting with pro-Taliban groups in North Waziristan yesterday, to try to resurrect the truce agreement, but any positive outcome is unlikely. Under last September’s deal, the Pakistani military agreed to pull out of the area in return for guarantees that tribal leaders would prevent the cross-border movement of anti-US insurgents. The Bush administration scarcely concealed its bitter opposition to the agreement, which it claims has allowed Al Qaeda and the Taliban to consolidate a safehaven. In her press briefing this week, Townsend declared: “It hasn’t worked for Pakistan. It hasn’t worked for the United States.”

US demands for military action and threats of intervention can only further destabilise the already beleaguered Musharraf regime. The bloody end to the Lal Mashid siege provoked widespread revulsion and further alienated Islamic fundamentalist parties on which Musharraf has previously relied at both the national level and the provincial level in the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Renewed military operations in the tribal border areas will generate greater opposition and resistance.

At the same time, Musharraf's efforts to forge closer political relations with secular parties has been plagued by sustained protests against his attempts to dismiss Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. The Supreme Court yesterday delivered a blow to Musharraf by throwing out corruption charges against Chaudhry and reinstating the suspended judge. The decision will only complicate Musharraf's plans to be reelected as president, while retaining his post as army chief—an arrangement that Chaudhry may declare unconstitutional.

At a meeting with newspaper editors on Wednesday, Musharraf downplayed fears that he would use the eruption of Islamist violence as the pretext to declare a state of emergency and postpone elections. He nevertheless made clear that he intended to remain as military head. Musharraf's determination to do so reflects his very narrow base of support and his fear that the army could turn against him if he relinquished direct control.

One of the reasons why Musharraf struck a deal with pro-Taliban tribes in North Waziristan last September was that signs of rebellion were already beginning to emerge in the officer corps. Significant layers of the military are ethnic Pashtuns who have strong ties with tribal groups in the border areas and inside Afghanistan itself. Some 600 Pakistani troops had died in the fighting.

Any unilateral US intervention in Pakistan would evoke broad public opposition and exacerbate tensions inside the country's security forces. In comments reported by McClatchy Newspapers, retired Lieutenant General Hamid Gul warned: "People in that area are really angry and annoyed with what happened [at the Lal Mashid]... If our military moves in there it will have to fight its way through and that will be very bad—you cannot do reconstruction in that sort of environment and you will lose the battle for hearts and minds."

Whatever the political consequences, however, Musharraf has little choice but to accede to US demands for a crackdown on Islamic militants and anti-US insurgents. A senior US official involved in the White House discussion told the *New York Times* on Wednesday: "We've seen in the past that he's sent people in and they get wiped out. You can tell from the language today that we take the threat from the tribal areas incredibly seriously. It has to be dealt with. If he can deal with it, amen. But if he can't, he's got to build and borrow the capability."

The Bush administration is currently providing support to Pakistan to bring the border tribes under control. Washington has pledged \$750 million in economic development aid over five years to "win hearts and minds"—a drop in the bucket compared to the huge social problems in these impoverished and economically backward areas. The US is considering a \$350 million request from Islamabad to help train, equip and deploy Pakistani military

forces, including to establish a new "Frontier Corps" to police the tribal regions.

Washington has already carried the "war on terror" into Pakistan. US intelligence and police officials have collaborated closely with Pakistani authorities since 2001 to hunt down key members of the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. Several incidents over the past five years indicate that the US military is engaged in covert operations inside Pakistan using predator drones and possibly special forces troops. Last October, local villagers in the Bajaur agency accused the US military of being directly involved in a devastating missile attack on a mosque that left more than 80 students and teachers dead.

The hardening of Washington's public stance this week is a warning that more extensive US operations are being prepared. An article published on the *Asia Times* website on July 3 entitled "US to hunt Taliban inside Pakistan" revealed that discussions in Washington and with Islamabad have been underway for sometime. According to its sources, at least four areas in North and South Waziristan are being targeted. "Operations inside Pakistan might be carried out independently by the United States, probably with air power, by Pakistani forces acting alone or as joint offensives. In all cases, though, the US will pull the strings, for instance, by providing the Pakistanis with information on targets to hit."

The *New York Times* on Wednesday also confirmed that the White House is planning to escalate military operations inside Pakistan. "In weighing how to deal with the Qaeda threat in Pakistan, American officials have been meeting in recent weeks to discuss what some said was emerging as an aggressive new strategy, one that would include both public and covert elements. They said there was growing concern that pinprick attacks on Qaeda targets were not enough, but also said some new American measures might have to remain secret to avoid embarrassing General Musharraf," the article stated.

In the event of a US attack inside Pakistan, few people will be fooled by Musharraf's denials of any involvement. Hoping to stem its own deep political crisis at home, the Bush administration is recklessly destabilising another country in a move that is certain to further fuel anti-American sentiment and reverberate throughout the broader region.



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