

US steps up plans for military intervention in Pakistan

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20 November 2007

In the midst of public statements of support for “democracy” in Pakistan and the recent visit to Islamabad by the American envoy John Negroponte, Washington is quietly preparing for a stepped-up military intervention in the crisis-ridden country.

According to the *New York Times* Monday, plans have been drawn up by the US military’s Special Operations Command for deploying Special Forces troops in Pakistan’s frontier regions for the purpose of training indigenous militias to combat forces aligned with the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Citing unnamed military officials, the newspaper reports that the proposal would “expand the presence of military trainers in Pakistan, directly finance a separate tribal paramilitary force that until now has proved largely ineffective and pay militias that agreed to fight Al Qaeda and foreign extremists.”

American military officials familiar with the proposal said that it was modeled on the initiative by American occupation forces in Iraq to arm and support Sunni militias in Anbar province in a campaign against the Al Qaeda in Iraq group there.

According to the *Times* report, skepticism that the same strategy can be adapted to the deteriorating situation in Pakistan centers on “the question of whether such partnerships can be forged without a significant American military presence in Pakistan.” The newspaper adds that “it is unclear whether enough support can be found among the tribes.”

While the Pentagon admits to only about 50 US troops currently stationed in Pakistan as “advisors” to the Pakistani armed forces, that number would swell substantially under the proposed escalation. The *Times* cites a briefing prepared by the Special Operations Command that claims the beefed-up US forces would not be engaged in “conventional combat” in Pakistan. It quotes unnamed military officials as acknowledging, however, that they “might be involved in strikes against senior militant leaders, under specific conditions.”

In other words, American Special Forces units would be used to carry out targeted assassinations and attacks on strongholds of Islamist forces.

In addition to the plan to recruit and train new paramilitary militias in the frontier region, Washington has developed a \$350 million program to train and equip the existing 85,000-member Frontier Corps, a uniformed force recruited from among tribes in the Pakistan border region.

There is also considerable skepticism about the prospects for this program. “The training of the Frontier Corps remains a concern for some,” the *Times* reports: “NATO and American soldiers in Afghanistan have often blamed the Frontier Corps for aiding and abetting Taliban insurgents mounting cross-border attacks. ‘It’s going to take years to turn them into a professional force,’ said one Western military official. ‘Is it worth it now?’”

There are growing concerns in Washington that the martial law regime imposed by the Pakistani president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, at the beginning of this month might unleash revolutionary convulsions that could topple the military regime, which has served as a lynchpin for American interests in the region.

The Bush administration has repeatedly demanded that Musharraf take action against Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the areas bordering Afghanistan. Residents on both sides of the border are ethnic Pashtuns. The latest US National Intelligence Estimate released last July charged that Al Qaeda had reestablished “safe havens” in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Taliban-aligned forces have been able to extend their influence from the Waziristan region along the Afghan border further into Pakistan, establishing control to the north over a large portion of the Swat valley in the North West Frontier Province.

According to press reports, over 1,000 civilians, members of the security forces and Islamist fighters have been killed in fighting in the region over the past five months.

Senior Pakistani military officials announced over the weekend that the army had massed nearly 20,000 troops

backed by tanks and artillery for a major offensive in the Swat district aimed at wresting control from militias loyal to Mullah Maulana Fazlullah, a pro-Taliban cleric.

Such offensives have proven ineffectual in the past, however, in no small part due to the support that the Islamists enjoy within influential sections of the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus, a relationship that was solidified during the CIA-backed war against the Soviet-supported regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

These forces have also gained strength as a result of popular hostility to the slaughter unleashed by the US occupation in neighboring Afghanistan, combined with resentment over the poverty and social inequality produced by the economic policies of the Pakistani regime.

A clear indication of the depths of concern in Washington over the unraveling of its client regime in Pakistan came Sunday in the form of an op-ed piece published by the *New York Times* under the bylines of Fred Kagan and Michael O'Hanlon. Kagan, a member of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, is a longstanding supporter of the US war in Iraq and was a signatory of the Project for a New American Century letter in 2001 demanding that the Bush administration invade the country in response to 9/11. He drafted a document that served as a blueprint for the recent "surge" that sent 35,000 more US troops into Iraq.

O'Hanlon, a member of the supposedly more liberal and Democratic-oriented Brookings Institute, has also emerged as a prominent supporter of the "surge" in Iraq and last April co-authored a paper with Kagan setting out a "grand strategy" for US imperialism. This envisioned a war against Iran as well as interventions in North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The document urged "finding the resources to field a large-enough standing Army and Marine Corps to handle personnel-intensive missions."

The *Times* piece, entitled "Pakistan's Collapse, Our Problem," advocates the immediate consideration of "feasible military options in Pakistan."

It states: "The most likely possible dangers are these: a complete collapse of Pakistani government rule that allows an extreme Islamist movement to fill the vacuum; a total loss of federal control over the outlying provinces, which splinter along ethnic and tribal lines; or a struggle within the Pakistani military in which the minority sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda try to establish Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism."

The article cautions against complacency that the Pakistani military command and the country's ruling elite will manage to maintain stability. "Americans felt similarly about the shah's regime in Iran until it was too late," it warns.

The two military analysts lay out alternate "scenarios" for

US interventions. The first, consisting of a full-scale intervention and occupation, would, they say, require more than a million troops, making it politically and militarily unfeasible.

Instead, they suggest a possible Special Forces operation aimed at seizing control of Pakistani warheads and nuclear materials.

They put forward an additional "broader option" that would involve the deployment of "a sizable combat force" with the mission of propping up the Pakistani military and waging war on the pro-Taliban forces in the border regions.

"So, if we got a large number of troops into the country, what would they do?" the article asks. "The most likely directive would be to help Pakistan's military and security forces hold the country's center—primarily the region around the capital, Islamabad, and the populous areas like Punjab Province to its south."

It adds: "If a holding operation in the nation's center was successful, we would probably then seek to establish order in the parts of Pakistan where extremists operate. Beyond propping up the state, this would benefit American efforts in Afghanistan by depriving terrorists of the sanctuaries they have enjoyed in Pakistan's tribal and frontier regions."

Whatever limited lip service the US State Department gives to the call for ending the martial law regime imposed by Musharraf in Pakistan, the real aims and methods of the American ruling establishment—Democratic and Republican alike—emerge clearly in the Kagan-O'Hanlon article.

What is now being seriously contemplated is yet another colonial-style war in a region that stretches across the Middle East and Central and South Asia, from Iraq to Pakistan, with the objective of salvaging, with or without Musharraf, the Pakistani military—the corrupt and repressive instrument with which Washington has been aligned for decades.

The crisis in Pakistan is symptomatic of the ever-widening instability created by the two wars—in Afghanistan and Iraq—which Washington has waged to tighten the US grip over the region's energy resources.

Now, with open and simultaneous discussions of possible military interventions in Iran and Pakistan, what is emerging is the growing threat of a global military conflagration.



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