

Washington ratchets up pressure on Pakistan's new government

Keith Jones
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In increasingly blunt fashion, Washington is making known its displeasure with Pakistan's new elected government, which is comprised of parties opposed to the US-backed military strongman and president Pervez Musharraf.

At issue is Islamabad's attempt to reach truces and peace accords with pro-Taliban militias who have seized control of large swathes of territory in the country's autonomous tribal region, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and much of the Swat Valley in the North-West Frontier Province. These areas are inhabited by Pashtun, the ethno-linguistic group that has borne the brunt of the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Recent days have seen a mounting chorus of criticism of the Pakistani government's peace initiative from Bush administration officials, US Congressmen, and US and NATO military leaders.

In an interview with the BBC last Saturday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claimed Washington "fully respect[s]" the Pakistani government's decision to initiate peace talks, all the while suggesting that they will only benefit "the terrorists."

"I don't believe," declared Rice, "that the Pakistani government wants to create circumstances in which terrorists can get breathing space. I certainly don't think that Pakistan wants to make this Afghanistan's problem."

On Sunday, NATO's civilian spokesman in Afghanistan, Mark Laity, claimed that the Pakistani peace talks are responsible for a surge in Taliban activity in Afghanistan. Said Laity, "We have seen increased activity in the eastern part of the country especially, which we believe can only be attributed to the de facto ceasefires and a reduction of Pakistani military activity."

Encouraged by the US stance, Afghanistan has said it will send a high-level delegation to Islamabad to voice its concerns about the Pakistan peace talks. Meanwhile an Afghan government newspaper, the *Hewad*, advocated in an editorial published Monday that the US military step up missile strikes in neighboring Pakistan.

Washington has not been content with just verbal protests. According to Pakistan's ARY TV, since late last week US fighter jets and spy drones have repeatedly violated Pakistan's airspace in the North Waziristan region.

The US has mounted missile attacks, using drones, within Pakistan on at least four occasions this year, most recently on May 15 in Damadola, a village in Bajaur, FATA's most north-westerly district. At least 14 people were killed in the attack, which was reportedly the third US missile strike on Damadola since October 2006.

According to the *Dawn*, an anti-US insurgent attending a funeral for some of the victims of the latest attack said: "The missile strike was aimed at subverting the peace process between the government and

the Pakistani Taliban but we will not allow this conspiracy to succeed."

The Pakistani military has confirmed that the missile was fired by an unmanned predator drone launched from a secret CIA base inside Pakistan, whose very existence was only recently revealed. As in previous such incidents, the Pakistani government issued a timid protest of the flagrant violation of its sovereignty, saying the action was taken without its knowledge.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the other parties that have formed Pakistan's new coalition government repeatedly denounced the Musharraf regime for the brutal methods it employed in seeking to stamp out armed opposition to the US invasion of Afghanistan in Pakistan's border areas. These methods included invading the historically autonomous FATA with tens of thousands of troops, imposing colonial-style collective punishments on entire villages and tribes, and disappearing and summarily executing alleged terrorist suspects. The invasion of FATA also became a source of dissension within the army after the military suffered substantial casualties and repeated humiliating mass kidnappings of its personnel, and after significant numbers of Pashtun soldiers resisted orders or deserted.

The anti-Musharraf parties, including the Pashtun-based Awami National Party, which now leads the governing coalition in the North-West Frontier Province, pledged during the election campaign that they would seek to end the pro-Taliban insurgency within Pakistan by offering peace talks and economic assistance. Their policy implied some recognition that the US war of conquest in Afghanistan and the Musharraf regime's complicity in that war, the Pakistani state's own cultivation of Islamic fundamentalism as a political and geo-political tool, and the historic failure of the Pakistani state to provide the tribal peoples with the most elementary public and social services have enabled the Taliban to gain a popular following.

More generally, in the elections the anti-Musharraf parties benefited from a groundswell of popular anti-US sentiment. The US is reviled amongst large sections of the Pakistani population for its steadfast support for a succession of military dictatorships in Islamabad and for its wars of conquest in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite this popular opposition to US imperialism, the new government and the Pakistani elite as a whole are anxious to maintain Pakistan's decades-long alliance with the US and, resentments over US support for the Pakistani officer corps' massive political and economic role notwithstanding, the elite recognizes that the crux of that relationship is the partnership between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military.

Zardari's hand-picked prime minister, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, has repeatedly affirmed that combating terrorism is his top priority

and that the Pakistani government fully supports the US-NATO counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan. Pakistan is the principal conduit for pivotal supplies to US-NATO forces in Afghanistan, including much of their gasoline.

Nevertheless, the US is incensed by the Pakistani government's peace initiative as it cuts across US plans to intensify the war in Afghanistan. In an attempt to staunch a deteriorating military and political situation in Afghanistan, which has seen the Karzai regime lose popular support due to endemic corruption and gangsterism and a Taliban resurgence, the US military recently began a troop "surge" in Afghanistan.

At the same time it has been pressing Islamabad to allow an increased presence of US forces in Pakistan. According to Pakistani press sources, some if not all of a planned contingent of up to 200 US troops have been deployed to Pakistan to train Pakistani troops in counter-insurgency warfare.

A recent *New York Times* report says that the US has also been pressing for the right to mount border raids. "In an unusual step," wrote a *Times* correspondent May 16, "Admiral Eric T. Olson, the commander of United States Special Operations Command, held a round-table discussion with a group of civilian Pakistani leaders to sound them out on the possibility of cross-border raids by American forces. He was told in no uncertain terms that from a Pakistani point of view it was a bad idea, said one of the participants."

The report went on to cite Khalid Aziz, a former chief secretary of the North-West Frontier Province. Aziz said he had told Olson. "It would increase the number of militants, it would be a war of liberation for the Pashtuns. They would say, 'We are being slaughtered. Our enemy is the United States'."

To date, two ceasefire agreements have reportedly been concluded. The first covers the Swat Valley in the North-West Frontier Province. A local pro-Taliban group has agreed to cease attacks on Pakistani security forces and government installations. In return, troops will be gradually withdrawn from the area, sharia law will be strengthened, the group's spiritual leader (Maulana Fazlullah) who was imprisoned for organizing Pakistanis to go to Afghanistan in 2001 to resist the US invasion will be released, the group will be allowed to found an Islamic university, and its militia members will be given a role in assisting police in maintaining law and order.

Details of the second agreement, which is more important and covers parts of South Waziristan, are sketchier. There Pakistani authorities have been negotiating with Tehrik-e-Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, whom the government has blamed for a series of suicide attacks. Thus far troops have reportedly pulled back from positions surrounding the territory held by Mehsud's forces and there has been an exchange of prisoners.

A second important source of friction between the Bush administration and the new government, which is being led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and supported by three other parties including the country's second largest, the Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif), is the role of President Pervez Musharraf in the new political set up.

The US staunchly supported the repressive, authoritarian regime of Musharraf through thick and thin for eight long years, including his purge of the country's judiciary and imposition of martial law for six weeks late last year.

Since Musharraf's political cronies were routed in last February's national and provincial assembly elections, the Bush administration has backed off from describing him as an "indispensable ally" in the

war on terror, i.e., in its efforts to use the US's military might to seize a strategic stranglehold over oil-rich West and Central Asia. But in the name of national reconciliation and "not dwelling on the past," Washington has repeatedly made clear that it opposes any attempt to impeach Musharraf or otherwise challenge his patently illegal presidency. Bush, Cheney and other top Bush officials appear to have genuine affection for the autocrat, but their continued support for Musharraf is above all due to his continued support from the military top brass.

PPP supreme Asif Ali Zardari appeared until recently to be bowing to Washington's wishes. He resisted pressure from Nawaz Sharif and his PML (N), to restore the judiciary as it existed prior to Musharraf's imposition of martial law and allow the constitutional challenges to his staged presidential election to proceed. But late last week, Zardari, to Washington's consternation, made an about-face. He publicly declared Musharraf to be "a relic of the past," announced that he hopes to persuade the general to step down, and signaled that he will soon bring forward a package of constitutional amendments that would strip the president of his most important powers, including the right to dismiss the government and to appoint the heads of the armed services.

The backdrop to this reversal is a growing rift between the PPP and the PML (N)—which has seen Sharif, who owes his political career to military patronage, casting himself as the irreconcilable opponent of the hated Musharraf—and an ever-widening economic crisis, exemplified by power cuts and spiraling food prices.

The PPP has been touting the national budget to be tabled next month as a "poor people's budget." But it is an open secret that the government will be slashing development spending, imposing further increases in petroleum products, and stepping up privatization.

The PPP leadership appears to be flirting with staging a confrontation with Musharraf as a means of giving the government the political cover to impose such an austerity budget.

In any event, Zardari, under pressure from a visiting US congressional delegation and the Pakistani military's high command, has reportedly now agreed to an early meeting with Musharraf.



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