

# Pakistan faces mounting US demands to suppress “terrorism”

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Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani is due in Washington next week for top-level discussions, including with President Bush, in which the escalating war in Afghanistan will certainly be a central focus. The Pakistani government has come under mounting pressure from Washington to take action against anti-US insurgents operating from bases inside the tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan.

The dilemmas facing Gilani were evident in his first address to the nation last weekend, marking 100 days of rule by his fragile coalition government. He declared his unequivocal support for the Bush administration's “war on terror”, saying: “The international war against terrorism is our own war. We should tell the world that we ourselves are victim of terrorism and we will leave no stone unturned to combat it”.

At the same time, Gilani confronts broad popular hostility to the US war in Afghanistan, particularly among the Pashtun tribes in the border areas, which have already been subjected to US aerial attacks. The killing of 11 Frontier Corps troops in a US air raid earlier this month has only intensified the anger felt not only by local tribes but also within the Pakistani military.

While tacitly permitting the US military to carry out limited operations in the border areas, Pakistan has repeatedly ruled out openly allowing US or NATO forces to operate inside its territory. Gilani reiterated that stance, declaring: “We will not compromise on the sovereignty of Pakistan. No foreign power will be allowed to take action on Pakistani soil.”

Gilani convened a meeting of political leaders and military heads on Wednesday to discuss the situation in the tribal areas. The ruling coalition partners were present, including Gilani's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN) and the National Awami Party (NAP), which heads the provincial government in the volatile North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The gathering reaffirmed that negotiations, rather than military force, should be used to resolve ongoing conflicts.

Gilani will undoubtedly come under pressure in Washington to reverse this policy. Earlier this month, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher visited Islamabad to register US objections to deals that were struck with Islamist militias in the tribal areas in May. He told the media that the US was not against agreements with tribal groups, but it did not support “making concessions to militant leaders such as Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud”. Boucher also opposed the release of captured militants as part of the deals, saying: “We don't support releasing terrorists in the wild so that they can strike again.”

The message was underscored by US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen who made an unannounced trip in Pakistan on July 12—his fourth this year. He bluntly told a press conference: “The bottom line is this: we are seeing a greater number of insurgents and foreign fighters flowing across the border with Pakistan unmolested and unhindered. This movement needs to stop.”

The underlying threat is that the US will take action unilaterally if Pakistan fails to crack down on insurgents. An exasperated senior Pakistani official told the *New York Times* that Mullen had been told that such military action inside Pakistan would be “counterproductive” and result in “chaos”. The problem, he explained, is that the Americans “don't see that. They have tunnel vision. They see more foreign fighters pouring in, more training, more cross-border attacks”.

The concern in Islamabad is fuelled by a growing focus of attention in Washington on the deteriorating military situation facing the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has called for more US troops for Afghanistan and supported unilateral US military strikes inside Pakistan. While not publicly supporting such attacks at this stage, the Bush administration has continued the pressure on Islamabad since Mullen's latest trip.

Behind the scenes, according to a *New York Times* article on June 30, the Pentagon has drawn up a plan for special operation forces to conduct raids inside Pakistan. Sharp

differences over the plan's consequences had held up its implementation, the newspaper reported. But pressure was continuing, particularly from American commanders in Afghanistan, for a green light for such operations.

The increasingly chaotic state of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is a direct product of the Bush administration's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The Pashtun tribes have strong ties with their counterparts in southern and eastern Afghanistan and have traditionally had significant autonomy from Islamabad. In the 1980s, the region was the base of operations for the CIA-funded war by Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda, against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

In the aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration forced Pakistani strongman General Pervez Musharraf to end his support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and send security forces into the FATA to establish control of the border. Efforts by the Pakistani army to stamp out support for anti-US insurgents inside Afghanistan provoked increasing hostility and armed opposition. At one point, Musharraf ordered 100,000 troops into the FATA, but the army ran into determined resistance. The Pakistani military has lost more than 1,000 personnel in fighting since 2001.

Despite opposition from Washington, the Gilani government, formed after Musharraf was compelled to allow elections earlier this year, has continued the policy of attempting to negotiate deals with various armed militias operating in the FATA region. The agreements are a tacit admission that the government and the military have effectively lost control in these areas. Militia commanders like Baitullah Mehsud, who has been accused of carrying out the assassination of PPP leader Benazir Bhutto, operate with impunity in the tribal region, holding press conferences and laying down the law.

While the international press routinely describes the militias as "Al Qaeda" and "Taliban," the situation is far more complex. Various tribal-based militias, both Pakistani and Afghan, and Islamist groups, have established bases as part of a new war against the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The region has once again become a centre of intrigue as the loose networks of militants and militias vie for dominance and flex their muscles.

Late last month, Peshawar, the provincial capital of North West Frontier Province, came under threat as militias loyal to Mangal Bagh moved to control the main roads into the city and choke off a major route for fuel and other US military supplies into Afghanistan. Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani military launched a major operation to drive the militants out of the area. While the army declared the operation a success, critics pointed to the lack of any decisive clashes and branded it a stage-managed

affair.

The situation in Peshawar, which is directly adjacent to the FATA region, is highly volatile. Last week Baitullah Mehsud issued an ultimatum to the NWFP provincial government to resign within five days or "prepare itself for the consequences". While the deadline passed without incident and the ruling National Awami Party (NAP) insists that it will continue to pursue negotiations with various militias, the existing agreements with Mehsud over the Swat Valley and other FATA areas remain precarious.

Clashes are continuing. In one army operation near Quetta in Balochistan, launched after a paramilitary convoy was ambushed, military spokesman Colonel Shahid Mehmood Khan announced on Monday that troops had destroyed two insurgent bases and killed about 30. Another operation is taking place in the Hangu district of NWFP after an attack on government paramilitary forces. The military claims to have killed scores of militants in the fighting.

In Washington, Gilani will undoubtedly face US demands to take tougher military action. To do so, however, will only compound his political problems as he tries to hold together an unstable coalition that is confronting growing opposition over the country's mounting economic and social crisis, as well as its support for the US war in Afghanistan. If Gilani does not fall into line, the danger looms of a sharp escalation of unilateral US military action inside Pakistan that threatens to turn the Afghan war into one that embroils the whole region.



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