US presses Pakistan for offensive in South Waziristan

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US special envoy Richard Holbrooke spent five days in Pakistan attempting to pressure Islamabad into staging a major military offensive in South Waziristan, which is considered a stronghold of the Taliban. Holbrooke, who arrived in Islamabad last Saturday, engaged in wide ranging discussions with political leaders, including those of Islamic groups, as part of a broader US agenda of increasing its grip on the country.

Underscoring the Obama administration's escalating intervention in the country, General David Petraeus, chief of the US Central Command, also arrived in Pakistan on Wednesday to talk with Pakistani generals about providing arms and equipment for the proposed operation.

South Waziristan, situated in northwest Pakistan, is home to Pakistan's Pashtuns. It is dominated by Taliban groups and tribes that have ethnic ties with Afghan Pashtuns and support the resistance against the American-led NATO forces occupying Afghanistan.

In order to crush this support for the Afghan resistance coming from Pakistani border areas, including South Waziristan, the CIA is increasingly conducting predator drone attacks, killing scores of militants and civilians. Pakistani troops supporting the US operations have carried out bombing and limited ground attacks in the past, but have not yet launched the full scale ground offensive demanded by Washington.

In a CIA drone attack on August 5, Mehsud Baitullah, the leader of Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organization of Taliban groups was killed along with many others. Since then, Washington has been applying pressure on Islamabad to push ahead towards a major offensive in South Waziristan.

Bowing to the pressure from the Obama administration, the Islamabad government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the military launched a brutal offensive on April 26 in the Swat Valley and adjoining districts in the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP).

About 2.5 million people were displaced. Many of them have yet to return to the area, which was devastated by the offensive of 15,000 troops backed by fighter jets and helicopters. The army claimed victory in July, but has admitted the continuation of frequent hit-and-run guerrilla attacks staged by militants who retreated into the mountains. According to the army's account, 166 soldiers and some 2,000 Taliban fighters were killed in the offensive.

Washington expected Pakistan to extend the offensive into South Waziristan after the operation in the Swat Valley. But the government and the military have been hesitating in the face of popular anger and out of fear of getting the army bogged down in the difficult mountainous region.

Underlining the purpose of Holbrooke's visit, the *New York Times* reported on Wednesday: "Obama administration officials...have been delivering strong messages to military and civilian leaders here to aggressively pursue the Taliban and other militants including some close to Al Qaeda."

The article continued, "But it [US pressure] also reflects worry among senior American officials that the Pakistani military will now declare victory and go home—pulling back from its recent offensive in the Swat Valley, and avoiding a similar push into Waziristan...."

Speaking at a press conference on Tuesday, Holbrooke praised Islamabad and the military for collaborating with the US in hunting down Taliban militants along the Afghan Pakistan border. He stressed, however, "I wanted to encourage greater cooperation going forward."

Meeting with Pakistan's Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani on Tuesday, Holbrooke again praised the military for the Swat offensive, while demanding that it press ahead.

Kayani agreed, but requested US military hardware, including drone technology, to strengthen the army. According to the Pakistani media, Kayani drew attention to the fact that US attacks "were increasingly creating anti-US sentiments."

General Nadeem Ahmed, who met Holbrooke later, told the press, "Once you feel that the conditions are right and you have been able to substantially dent their (the Taliban's) infrastructure and their fighting capacity, then you go in for a ground offensive." He made the request for the "right kind of equipment" from the US.

On Monday, the commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley A. McChrystal, met Kayani. The chairman of the US Joint Chief of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, made telephone calls to his Pakistani counterparts as part of what one administration official described to the *Times* as a strategy intended to get the Pakistani military to maintain a "constant battle rhythm."

General Petraeus came to Islamabad on Wednesday to meet Kayani and deliver the same message. Holbrooke told the media on Wednesday that the US Centcom chief was there to expedite

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the supply of US equipment to enable Pakistan to extend its offensive against the Taliban. “It is part of a substantial effort to strengthen US-Pakistani military cooperation,” Holbrooke, told *Reuters*.

Holbrooke met with Pakistan President Asif Al Zardari and Yousuf Raza Gilani, the country’s prime minister, who both relayed the military’s request for advanced weaponry.

Underscoring Zardari’s role as a virtual client of Washington, Holbrooke told journalists, “I am obviously hopeful that he (Zardari) will complete his role as democratically-elected president. Let there be no mistake about it...we support the democratic process (in Pakistan).” What he covered up is the essential fact that Washington is driving the Zardari government into a war against its own people in order to secure US strategic interests.

Zardari is acting according to Washington’s wishes, but seeking more military, economic and trade assistance as fees for services rendered. The Pakistan president’s office announced in a statement: “The president impressed upon the US envoy the need for allowing greater market access to Pakistani goods in the US and European markets.”

Federal Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin was informed that disbursements under the Kerry-Lugar Bill, approximately US$1.5 billion a year and around $500 million from the Tokyo donors conference, would be made beginning in October.

The US is also seeking to gain control of Pakistan’s energy market. “We’re looking at the energy sector in an effort to be responsive to a critical issue facing the Pakistani people,” said Mary Beth Goodman, Holbrooke’s economic adviser. Eighty percent of Pakistan’s energy needs are imported from abroad.

On Wednesday in Karachi, Holbrooke announced that a team of US experts would arrive in Pakistan on Thursday to help address its energy crisis. He was speaking to business leaders before flying to Afghanistan. He said that the US will make arrangements to issue 100 business visas every week in Karachi beginning next month, restore consular services next year and take steps to “strengthen bilateral ties and facilitate Pakistan’s access to international markets, especially the US.”

Holbrooke’s itinerary included meeting political and religious leaders. Holbrook met with Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistani Muslim League (PMLN) leader, on Tuesday. Sharif supports the US-Pakistan coordinated military operations. He likewise met with leaders of the Awami National Party (ANP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Fazl (JUF), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and Jamaat-i-Islami (JiI).

The US envoy’s meetings with the religious party leaders, including those of the JUF and JiI, signal somewhat of a tactical shift from the policy of the Bush administration. Obama is trying to woo some Islamic groups to get their support for US policy, or at least to deflect their opposition. Among those who met with him were JiI leader, Liaqat Baloch, and JUI leader, Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

While Holbrooke was in Islamabad, Obama reiterated his new approach. Speaking on Monday at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Phoenix, Arizona, Obama declared that he had refocused the military on the war against Al Qaeda and other “extremist allies” in Afghanistan and Pakistan. “This strategy recognizes that Al Qaeda and its allies have moved their base to the remote, tribal areas of Pakistan,” he said. He went on: “If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defence of our people.”

This so-called defence of the American people is a cover for a colonial war to force Afghanistan to submit to US domination. The war in Pakistan’s tribal area is aimed at bolstering this campaign to assert control over Afghanistan. This war is bound up with US strategic interests, specifically to control Central Asia and its rich oil and gas deposits as part of the broader aim of securing decisive geo-political advantages over American capitalism’s rivals in the world arena.

A military offensive in South Waziristan would represent a significant further extension of the US war in Afghanistan into Pakistan. It will not stop there. John Brennan, Obama’s adviser on counter-terrorism and homeland security, indicated in a speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in early August that Washington is also focusing on Pakistan’s southern province of Baluchistan.

Replying to a question he said: “Baluchistan is a concern for all of us as tension seems to be rising, adversely affecting Pakistan and Afghanistan.” He did not elaborate on this concern, but said the Pakistan government will have to deal with the situation.

The US war in Afghanistan and in the Pakistan border area is destabilizing the whole country and will have far reaching implications for the entire South Asian region.

This is underscored by the increasing mass opposition to the US presence as well as to the PPP-led government in Islamabad. A Pew Global Attitudes poll released on August 13 showed 64 percent of Pakistan’s people regarding America as an enemy. Only 9 percent accepted the US as a partner of the country. Just 13 percent expressed confidence in President Barack Obama, and only16 percent had a favourable view of the US.

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