

Washington pushes Pakistan to the brink

Keith Jones
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Under heavy pressure from the Obama administration, Pakistan is now waging all-out war in South Waziristan. Since last Saturday, 28,000 Pakistani troops, supported by F-16 fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships, have mounted a three-pronged offensive in the Pashtun-speaking tribal agency.

Their target is the Tehrik-i-Taliban, an alliance of tribal-based militia groups opposed to the US occupation of Afghanistan and the pivotal logistical support that Pakistan's government has provided the occupation, first under the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf and since March 2008 by the Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government.

The US's guiding role in the Pakistani offensive was underscored by the sudden descent on Islamabad early this week of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, Obama's Afghan war chief, and Gen. David Petraeus, the head of the US Central Command.

Taking its cue from the White House, Capitol Hill and the Pentagon, the US media has been full of commentary lauding the widening civil war in Pakistan. Typical was a column by the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius titled "Pakistan Fights Back: The Offensive in South Waziristan is the Latest Sign It's Finally Taking the Taliban Seriously."

No matter that this offensive is being waged by the Pakistani military to assist the US in pursuing its geopolitical ambitions and with callous indifference to the lives and livelihoods of ordinary Pakistanis.

As was the case in last spring's offensive in Swat and adjoining districts of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, homes and schools are being flattened by bombs and artillery barrages and tens of thousands have been forced to flee for their lives.

South Waziristan and the Federally-Administered Tribal Agency (FATA) of which it is part constitute Pakistan's most socio-economically deprived region. Sixty percent of the population survives on less than the official subsistence-level poverty line.

Islamabad has historically treated FATA as a quasi-colonial dependency, giving it substantially less per capita aid than other regions and until little more than ten years ago

denying the vast majority of its inhabitants the right to vote. In seeking to quell support for the Afghan insurgency and enforce the British-imposed Durand Line that divides the Pashtun of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Pakistani authorities have regularly made use of regulations inherited from the British Raj sanctioning collective tribal punishments.

The violence in FATA—including repeated US drone missile strikes—has displaced more than one million people, or close to a third of its 3.5 million residents.

The enthusiasm in Washington for the bloodletting in South Waziristan exemplifies the bloody mindset that prevails within the US ruling elite. It also speaks to their shortsightedness and recklessness.

In pursuit of its twin objectives of securing a commanding US presence in oil-rich Central Asia—a region from which it was historically barred by the existence of the Soviet Union—and containing a rising China, US imperialism is destabilizing the entire region and sowing the seeds of future wars.

Iran, China, Russia, India and Pakistan either border or fall in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan and all, understandably, maintain that they have a major stake in the outcome of the ever-expanding Afghan war.

Moreover, all are acutely aware that under the Bush administration the US undertook to fundamentally reshape the geopolitics of Asia by aggressively courting India, including offering it a "global strategic partnership" and help in becoming a "world power."

Toward that end, the US secured for India a unique exception in the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows New Delhi to engage in civilian nuclear trade, although it developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As Pakistan has repeatedly protested, the Indo-US nuclear accord has changed the balance of power in Asia by providing its arch-rival India with the means to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on the development of its nuclear arsenal.

Russia and China have cooperated with the US-NATO intervention in Afghanistan. Russia is now allowing the transit of war material across its territory. But Moscow and Beijing share the objective of severely limiting US influence

in Central Asia. That common interest has found expression in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as in their attempts to coordinate their response to Washington's campaign to bully and threaten Iran over its nuclear program.

As in Iraq, Iran has reached a shaky *modus vivendi* with the US military forces in Afghanistan. But under conditions where Washington is threatening Iran with crippling economic sanctions, including an international gasoline import embargo, and the Obama administration is considering a Pentagon request to increase the US's Afghan troop strength to 100,000, Teheran cannot but feel anxious.

Teheran has accused the US, Britain and elements within Pakistan of complicity in two bombings last weekend in the eastern Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan that killed more than 40 people, including six high-ranking members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The Pakistani elite, and especially its military, have for decades enjoyed a mercenary relationship with US imperialism at the expense of the Pakistani people. Beginning with Ayub Khan in the mid-1950s and continuing through the only recently removed Musharraf, Washington has sponsored a succession of right-wing military dictatorships in Pakistan.

But of the major states in the region, Pakistan is the one whose internal equilibrium and strategic interests are most immediately threatened by the US war to subjugate Afghanistan and its attempt to make India a pivot of its drive to counter China.

So as to choke off support for the insurgency in Afghanistan, Islamabad has been pressed by Washington, through financial inducements and repeated violations of its sovereignty, to wage war in much of the country's northwest. And the US has made clear that it expects that the military operations will soon be expanded to include the volatile western province of Baluchistan.

Previous military offenses in South Waziristan ended in failure, not just because of the tenacity of the resistance, but because many of the Pashtun troops reportedly balked at killing their brethren. There are reports that in the current offensive, the Pakistani military is using predominantly non-Pashtun troops, but in a country riven by ethno-linguistic and communal frictions, this could well stoke centrifugal tendencies.

Less than two years ago, the Musharraf dictatorship unraveled under the combined impact of mounting economic crisis, popular opposition to its support for the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its denial of basic democratic rights. The PPP-led government that replaced it has only implicated Pakistan more deeply in the Afghan war, been forced to accept an IMF readjustment plan, and, so as to

secure the military's support, left Musharraf and his cronies at liberty.

Within Pakistan's political establishment and military there is enormous apprehension and resentment at the extent to which Islamabad is being forced to sacrifice what they perceive to be Pakistan's long-term strategic interests to secure US objectives, and to do this even as Washington showers favors on India.

The Pakistani elite is outraged that the US has encouraged India to play an ever greater role in Afghanistan, even as it demands that Islamabad sever all ties with the Pashtun-based Taliban and associated Islamist militia.

For its part, India, anxious to prevent Islamabad from using the US predicament in Afghanistan to gain leverage, has taken an increasingly hard line against Pakistan, demanding that it suppress Kashmir insurgent groups in Pakistan with the same vigor that it is battling the Pakistani Taliban.

The anxieties of the Pakistani elite over their rapidly deteriorating geopolitical position found expression this week in statements from Interior Minister Rehman Malik. First he charged that India is behind unrest in Baluchistan. Later he amplified the charge, saying that New Delhi is behind most terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Said Malik, "We have solid evidence not only in Baluchistan [that] India is involved in almost every terrorist activity in Pakistan." India, Malik complained, routinely makes threats against Pakistan. He then added, "We are a nuclear state and not so weak. We better know how to retaliate."

The US ruling elite's attempt to offset its economic decline through wars of aggression is destabilizing world geopolitics and throwing fuel on longstanding conflicts. If imperialism is to be prevented from reprising the catastrophes of the 20th century, the international working class must be mobilized against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system.

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