

Obama to extend US attacks in Pakistan

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President Obama's deployment of 30,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan will be accompanied by increased US attacks inside Pakistan. According to the *New York Times*, the White House is pressuring the Pakistani government to allow US forces to assassinate alleged Taliban leaders in the province of Balochistan. The US claims that Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban, is directing the insurgency against the US-led occupation of Afghanistan from the city of Quetta, the provincial capital.

The US military has been using unmanned Predator drones to kill Islamist militants in Pakistan's tribal area bordering Afghanistan since 2001. After Obama took office, the attacks became more frequent. Of the estimated 80 strikes since mid-2008, most were ordered by Obama. At least 400 alleged Islamist militants have been killed and an unknown number of civilians. The Pakistani government publicly opposes these covert operations but makes no attempt to prevent them and its intelligence agencies are believed to collaborate with the CIA in identifying targets.

The attacks to this point have been limited to the tribal agencies, which are remote border areas thinly populated by predominantly ethnic Pashtun subsistence farmers. Generally, there is no on-the-spot media coverage of the results of Predator strikes. Quetta, by contrast, has a population of some 800,000 people and is one of the country's most important urban centres. Any US attack inside the city would be highly publicised and provoke nationwide outrage. Most Pakistanis oppose the US occupation of Afghanistan and sympathise to some extent with the armed resistance against it.

The Obama administration is nevertheless intent on pursuing this reckless and politically explosive course of action as part of its escalating AfPak War.

Various press reports indicate that Pakistan was a

central issue in the protracted White House discussions over how to respond to the burgeoning Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Afghan guerillas use Pakistani territory as a safe haven, training area and recruiting zone.

An unnamed US official, cited in an article in the *Washington Post* on November 30, stated: "We can't succeed without Pakistan." Another told the *New York Times* on November 25: "We agree that no matter how many troops you send, if the safe haven in Pakistan isn't cracked, the whole mission is compromised."

According to the *Washington Post*, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a message to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari during her visit to Islamabad last month that the White House wanted his government to give greater cooperation in fighting five organisations that the US claims are involved in the Afghan insurgency.

The organisations named were Al Qaeda; the Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Omar; the militias commanded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, which control much of the tribal agency of North Waziristan; the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban which was largely based among the ethnic Pashtun tribes in South Waziristan; and the militant Islamist movement, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is blamed for the 2008 terrorist attacks in the Indian city of Mumbai that killed 173 people.

The Pakistani military, under US pressure, has already conducted major operations against Tehrik-e-Taliban in South Waziristan, other tribal agencies and areas of North West Frontier Province. In the past few months, hundreds of alleged Islamist militants have been killed and over 400,000 tribal civilians forced to flee their homes.

However, no move has been made against the Haqqani network and the Afghan insurgent bases in North Waziristan. In US military circles, the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency has been repeatedly

accused of maintaining close relations with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani. The ISI actively assisted the Taliban to come to power in Afghanistan between 1994 and 1996 and supported its government until the eve of the US invasion in late 2001.

There are even greater suspicions of links between sections of the Pakistani military and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The ISI sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba in the 1990s when it was primarily focused on waging a guerrilla war against Indian rule in Kashmir. Its militants are believed to be concentrated in areas of Pakistan's main province, Punjab.

US demands for the destruction of the Islamist networks were spelt out in a two-page letter from Obama that was delivered to Zardari by National Security Advisor and former marine general James Jones.

The web site *Stratfor*, which has links to US intelligence agencies, reported on December 1 that it had been told by reliable sources that the "Obama administration's tone toward Pakistan's current civilian government resembles the tone adopted by the Bush administration toward the Musharraf regime in the aftermath of September 11".

By "tone", *Stratfor* is referring to ultimatums. Former Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf revealed in 2006 that he was told in 2001 by Richard Armitage, Bush's Deputy Secretary of State, that Pakistan would be bombed "back to the Stone Age" if his government did not cooperate with the overthrow of the Taliban.

Eight years later, the White House can deliver somewhat more nuanced threats. The Pakistani state is on the brink of bankruptcy and depends upon the regular injection of emergency funds from the International Monetary Fund and directly from the US. Summing up the relationship between Pakistan and the US, Zulfiqar Magsi, the governor of Balochistan province, told the *Daily Times*: "You cannot oppose someone who pays you money. The US is paying money to Pakistan. How can we oppose it? It will do whatever it pleases."

Obama has essentially told Islamabad that it must allow the US to even more flagrantly violate Pakistan's national sovereignty. It has been instructed to launch a costly and unpopular military offensive in North Waziristan, crack down on Islamist activity in the major cities and submit to

Predator strikes in Balochistan.

There are some signs that the entry into Pakistan of US special forces' hit squads, to hunt down and execute Taliban leaders, has also been discussed. American ground troops have only crossed the border on one known previous occasion. In September 2008, an alleged militant compound was stormed in the tribal agency of South Waziristan. The result was the death of an estimated 20 civilians, including women and young children.

Zardari's collaboration with Obama's escalation of the AfPak War is certain to provoke intense opposition within the Pakistani military and the population more broadly. The president is already deeply unpopular due to the catastrophic state of the Pakistani economy. The value of the currency has plunged by 35 percent, triggering massive price rises for essential goods and services. Electricity and petrol prices have doubled in the past two years.

In a bid to stave off a move against him over long-standing corruption allegations, Zardari last month handed over control of the country's nuclear arsenal to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and is promising to give back other powers that were taken from the parliament during Musharraf's dictatorship. The extension of US strikes to Balochistan, however, may well be the final straw that leads to the fall of his administration, barely 15 months after it came to power.



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