

US warns Pakistan of “severe consequences”

Peter Symonds
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The Obama administration has seized on the failed car bombing in New York’s Times Square on May 1 to insist that the Pakistani military step up its war on Islamic militants and extend its operations into North Waziristan. The US demand is being backed by thinly disguised warnings of economic reprisals and military intervention.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an explicit public threat during a CBS interview last Sunday. After accusing some Pakistani officials of knowing the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden and Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, she insisted on more Pakistani cooperation and warned: “We’ve made it very clear that if, heaven forbid, an attack like this that we can trace back to Pakistan were to have been successful, there would be very severe consequences.”

Speaking to ABC’s “This Week” on Sunday, Attorney General Eric Holder accused the Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban, of being behind the Times Square incident. He claimed that the Taliban directed the suspected bomber, Faisal Shahzad, a naturalised American citizen of Pakistani descent. Under interrogation, Shahzad has allegedly admitted training in Taliban camps in North Waziristan, although the amateurish character of the bombing attempt indicates otherwise. A Tehrik-e-Taliban spokesman has denied any involvement.

Publicly, the Obama administration has been cautious, not wanting to further destabilise the already fragile Pakistani government. Under US pressure, the Pakistani military has already launched major offensives over the past year into the Swat Valley, Bajaur and South Waziristan, in which thousands of civilians were killed and hundreds of thousands driven from their homes. In the Federally Administered Tribal

Areas (FATA) along the border with Afghanistan, US drone attacks have killed hundreds of civilians and reinforced anger toward what many Pakistanis regard as a US puppet government in Islamabad.

Behind closed doors, however, the “very severe consequences” have been spelled out in no uncertain terms. An article in the *New York Times* last Friday described “the new pressure from Washington” over the Times Square incident as “a sharp turnaround from the [previous] relatively polite encouragement”. “And it comes amid increasing debate within the administration about how to expand American military influence—and even boots-on-the-ground presence—on Pakistani soil,” the article added.

The *Times* reported that the US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, met with Pakistan’s military chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, on Friday to urge Pakistan to begin a military offensive into North Waziristan, which is part of the FATA territory. The Pakistani military has previously resisted such pressure, saying its forces were already overstretched. While McChrystal denied pressing Kayani, an American official explained to the *Times* that the Pakistani general was told: “We are saying you have got to go into North Waziristan.”

In an article on Sunday, the *Washington Post* described the debate in the Obama administration in similar terms, stating that some officials “see the Times Square incident as weighing in favor of a far more muscular and unilateral US policy. It would include a geographically expanded use of drone missile attacks in Pakistan and pressure for a stronger US military presence there.”

Such measures would be highly provocative and

deeply destabilising. At least 36 US drone attacks have taken place inside Pakistan so far this year, including two in the past week inside North Waziristan. The figure compares to 53 for all of last year and 30 during the final year of the Bush administration. In the latest strike yesterday, 12 missiles were fired at an alleged training camp, killing at least 14 people. More than 900 people, mostly civilians, have died in US drone strikes.

What the *Washington Post* article suggests is that US drone attacks would take place deeper inside Pakistan and beyond the FATA border areas. American military officials have previously described areas of Baluchistan, including the city of Quetta, as hotbeds of “terrorist” activity. As for “a stronger US military presence,” the Pakistani military has previously opposed any increase in US “trainers” and “advisers,” as well as the direct intrusion of US troops from Afghanistan in “hot pursuit” of Islamist fighters. An attack by US special forces on a village in South Waziristan and the death of civilians in September 2008 provoked widespread opposition in Pakistan.

According to the *Washington Post*, those Obama officials that oppose a more aggressive military policy insist that the Pakistan government has no option but to do Washington’s bidding. “Pakistan’s economy is on the verge of collapse, with gross domestic product falling from more than 8 percent growth in 2005 to under 3 percent last year. More than \$3.5 billion in US economic and military assistance is in the pipeline, and a nearly \$8 billion International Monetary Fund agreement and a \$3.5 billion World Bank financing package are pending.”

Whether directly through an increased US military presence or indirectly by compelling the Pakistani military to go on the offensive in North Waziristan and other areas, the Obama administration is drawing Pakistan into the broader American quagmire in the region. It is no accident that increased pressure on Islamabad comes as the US military is preparing to launch a major offensive to stamp its control over the southeastern Afghan city of Kandahar. The Times Square incident is simply a convenient pretext to demand parallel action on the Pakistani side of the border.

Under the banner of the “war on terrorism,” President Obama has escalated his so-called AfPak war, which, along with the occupation of Iraq, is aimed at securing American economic and strategic dominance in the key energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. In pursuing these reckless and predatory wars over the past eight years, the US has steadily undermined the economic and political stability of Pakistan and encroached on its national sovereignty, and exacerbated wider regional tensions, particularly with India.

The disaster unfolding in Pakistan, along with Afghanistan and Iraq, must be opposed through the demand for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from all three countries.

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