

Obama ramps up pressure on Pakistan

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11 October 2011

At a press conference last Thursday, President Obama made his clearest warning yet that Pakistan had to do more to crack down on Islamist insurgents. While ruling out any immediate aid cut-off, he declared: “There is no doubt that we’re not going to feel comfortable with a long-term strategic relationship with Pakistan if we don’t think they’re mindful of our interests as well.”

Obama’s remarks follow weeks of mounting US pressure on Pakistan, including accusations by US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen in late September that the Haqqani network inside Pakistan’s border area with Afghanistan acted as “a veritable arm” of Pakistan’s spy agency—the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Mullen alleged that the Haqqani network was responsible for high-profile attacks against targets in Kabul.

Obama reiterated Mullen’s accusations, declaring: “There is no doubt that there are some connections that the Pakistani military and intelligence services have with certain individuals that we find troubling.” He added that the Pakistanis “see their security interests threatened by an independent Afghanistan in part because they think it will ally itself to India, and Pakistan considers India their mortal enemy.”

Islamabad’s concerns that India is gaining in Afghanistan at Pakistan’s expense were heightened last week when Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with New Delhi, strengthening India’s already substantial presence in Afghanistan. The deal, which was undoubtedly signed with Washington’s tacit approval, will facilitate long-term Indian military and financial assistance to Afghanistan as well as enabling the exploitation of Afghan natural resources by Indian corporations.

The Indian press welcomed the bolstering of India’s position as the Obama administration prepares to wind down the US military presence in Afghanistan and hands over security tasks to the Afghan military. A *Deccan Herald*

editorial declared that the deal had “assured India a key role in the unfolding endgame in Afghanistan,” but warned that it was “still too early to pop the champagne corks.” It noted that India had been influential in Kabul in the 1980s under the Soviet-backed regime until its defeat at the hands of Pakistani-backed mujaheddin fighters. The newspaper urged New Delhi to work more closely with Russia, Iran and Tajikistan to shore up its position “in the uncertain Afghan endgame.”

An editorial in the right-wing *New Indian Express* also openly voiced Indian strategic considerations behind the agreement, stating: “Though the joint communiqué issued by the two countries says that pact is not directed against any country, the political importance of the SPA is loud and clear. It not only formalises a bigger role for India in Pakistan but also puts on notice Pakistan. It is also a positive response to the growing China-Pakistan nexus and makes clear that India is determined to remain a player in Afghanistan even after the United States abandons the region.”

These comments underscore the degree to which the protracted US-led war in Afghanistan has transformed the country into a hornet’s nest of political intrigue and profoundly destabilised the entire region. As the US has increased its pressure on Pakistan and encouraged Indian influence in Afghanistan, Islamabad has been compelled to strengthen its longstanding ties with Beijing. China, Russia and Iran also have their own competing interests in Afghanistan.

The US has no intention of “abandoning the region.” As it reduces its military involvement in Afghanistan, Washington is seeking to transform the country into a strategic base to pursue its economic and strategic interests in South and Central Asia. In heightening pressure on Pakistan, the US is intent on undermining China’s growing role in the region. Obama last week encouraged “Pakistan to realise that a peaceful approach towards India would be in everyone’s interests.”

As far as Washington is concerned, the best possible outcome would be for Pakistan to end its decades-long rivalry with India, distance itself from longstanding ties with China and eventually join the US and India in countering Chinese influence in South and Central Asia. While not spelling out all the strategic implications, Obama made clear that Pakistan's "reorientation is something that we're continuing to work on; it's not easy."

The Obama administration is applying considerable pressure, both publicly and privately, to the Pakistani government and military to accede to the US agenda. The *New York Times* last week reported an unpublicised high-level meeting in the United Arab Emirates on October 1-2. White House national security adviser Thomas Donilon and Obama's top adviser on Pakistan, Douglas Lute, met with Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kaylani, reportedly over US demands for military action against the Haqqani network.

US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper last week expressed optimism about Pakistani cooperation after its security forces arrested five key Al Qaeda suspects at the CIA's request. US-Pakistani relations deteriorated markedly after the US Special Forces raid deep inside Pakistani territory in May that killed Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. "It had reached its nadir, but now it's going in the other direction," Clapper told the Associated Press. "They are doing things to cooperate and be helpful."

Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Marc Grossman is in the region for talks. During a Toto TV interview in Kabul on Sunday, Grossman appealed for Pakistan to collaborate with Afghanistan and the US in dealing with "extremism and terrorism." He said: "One of the things that is happening between Pakistan and the United States is we're trying to have a conversation about how to get our interests shared and then act on them together."

Washington's ability to entice Pakistan to end all support for the Haqqani network is limited however, precisely because Islamabad views such groups as its only lever in the so-called Afghan endgame. Obama cautiously noted: "Pakistan has been ambivalent about some of our goals [in Afghanistan]... and have hedged their bets." As a result, Pakistan was "having interactions with some of the unsavoury characters who they think might end up regaining power in Afghanistan after coalition forces have left."

Mounting US pressure on Pakistan is compelling

Islamabad to look for support from China. While Beijing regards Pakistan as a useful counterweight to Indian and US involvement in Afghanistan and the region, the Chinese regime has its own concerns. It fears the potential spread of Islamic fundamentalism in its western province of Xinjiang. In August, the *China Daily* reported accusations by local Xinjiang authorities that a Uighur separatist leader responsible for a terrorist attack had been trained in Pakistan. Islamabad quickly offered reassurances that it would deal with any Uighur extremists on its soil.

China also has substantial economic interests in Afghanistan that are threatened by continuing instability. In the same week that Karzai signed the strategic agreement with India, it was revealed that the China National Petroleum Corporation had the rights to explore and develop oil fields in Afghanistan's Amu Darya basin, with estimated reserves of 80 million barrels of crude oil. Last month the state-owned Metallurgical Corporation of China and the Jiangxi Copper Company won the contract for a \$4.39 billion project to develop a huge copper mine southeast of Kabul.

As many commentators have noted, Afghanistan has become the focus of a new Great Game—a reference to the great power rivalry between Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century for the domination of Central Asia. The twenty-first century version is far more dangerous and complex as it has drawn in all the regional powers, along with the United States and the European powers. As the Obama administration applies pressure to an unstable Pakistan to "reorient" its entire strategic policy, Washington is recklessly playing with fire in one of the world's flashpoints for conflict between the major powers.



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