

US again threatening to take military action inside Pakistan

Vilani Peris, Ali Ismail

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The crisis in relations between the US and Pakistan has deepened following the Pakistani army's refusal to take action against the Haqqani network, a militant group based in the country's northwest tribal areas that the Obama administration has blamed for a series of bold attacks against US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Tensions between the two countries have been running high since late September, when Admiral Mike Mullen, the outgoing Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed that the Haqqani network serves as a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's principal intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency or ISI.

A day-long conference hosted by Turkey on Wednesday was intended to bridge the widening divide between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan's US-sponsored government, but the meeting failed to produce a breakthrough.

The continuing crisis in US-Pakistan relations stems from the strategic dilemma facing the Pakistani ruling elite. At Washington's behest, Pakistan has waged a ruthless counterinsurgency operation against Taliban-aligned militants based in the Afghan border region, displacing over a million Pashtuns in the process. Pakistan remains the linchpin of the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, but the Pakistani elite now fears its strategic and geopolitical interests are being undermined by an increasingly aggressive US.

Islamabad has been under pressure to accept more of the burden of the Afghan war ever since the US-led invasion and occupation of the country a decade ago. While mass opposition to the war is destabilizing the Pakistani state, Washington continues to bully Pakistan into stepping up its counterinsurgency operations and is demanding that Pakistan launch a new offensive in North Waziristan.

The US has angered the Pakistani elite by courting arch-rival India as a major strategic partner and by encouraging New Delhi to serve as a key ally of the Karzai government in Afghanistan. With Washington now threatening to launch a unilateral attack inside Pakistani territory, and Islamabad threatening to retaliate, the volatile situation in the country could end up spinning out of control and lead to a wider conflagration in the region.

On Wednesday, Turkey hosted a conference in Istanbul that brought together 14 countries including Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to secure an agreement for the establishment of a regional security and integration mechanism similar to Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The real aim of the conference was to pressure regional states into an agreement that would facilitate US domination over the region.

However, the US plan for the conference was doomed from the start due to the differing interests and agenda of the participating countries. According to the *Asia Times*, "China, Iran, Pakistan and most of the

Central Asian countries demurred on the US proposal for a new regional security architecture." Pakistan, China and Iran also joined forces to oppose US plans to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, an unnamed Pakistani diplomat told the *Express Tribune*.

While Karzai recently claimed that Afghanistan would support Pakistan should the country find itself at war with the US, his statement was merely an unconvincing attempt to reassure the Pakistani elite. During the conference, Karzai took a snipe at Islamabad, declaring, "Terrorist networks are by far the major threat to Afghanistan's security. They continue to have sanctuaries outside of our border from where they conduct their merciless campaign of destruction."

The crisis in US-Pakistan relations escalated when the Pakistani army ruled out a military strike against the Haqqani network in September and warned it had the means to respond to any US military incursion into Pakistan. The Obama administration has stepped up pressure on Pakistan in recent weeks and has made it clear to Islamabad that its relationship with the US is in jeopardy. Washington is seeking to punish Pakistan in several ways for failing to take action against Haqqani militants. These include suspending about one-third of promised military aid, providing little in aid to the millions ravaged by this year's floods in Sind and Baluchistan, and refusing to intervene with the IMF to help Islamabad secure a new loan.

The Haqqani network, led by the elderly Jalaluddin Haqqani, has reportedly maintained its headquarters in the Miran Shah District of North Waziristan for over three decades. Over the years, the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus has maintained close ties with the Haqqani network and other Islamist groups. However, the US demand to crush this group is hypocritical. During the 1980s, the CIA provided the Haqqanis with arms and cash to counter the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Last month, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was forced to admit the US had recently been in contact with the Haqqani network. A secret meeting held between US officials and Ibrahim Haqqani, brother of Jalaluddin Haqqani, was first reported by the Associated Press in August. The meeting had been discreetly arranged by Pakistan's intelligence chief, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, and took place in a Persian Gulf kingdom.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently concluded a two-day visit to Pakistan together with an unusually high profile delegation. She was joined by CIA head David Petraeus and the newly appointed chief of the US military, Martin Dempsey. Clinton delivered a stern warning to Pakistan and demanded it execute military operations against the Haqqani network.

Before arriving in Pakistan on October 20, Clinton made a brief stop

in Kabul where she met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In Afghanistan, Clinton told reporters that the US “must send a clear, unequivocal message to the government and people of Pakistan that they must be part of the solution, and that means ridding their own country of terrorists who kill their own people and who cross the border to kill people in Afghanistan.” She added that those who allow safe havens for militants would pay “a very big price.” The *New York Times* stated that Clinton’s threats were the “starkest warning yet to Pakistan” issued by the Obama administration.

During her trip to Pakistan, Clinton said the country could “either be helping or hindering” efforts to find both a military and a political resolution to the war in Afghanistan. She warned that the US would no longer tolerate Pakistan’s refusal to take action against the Haqqani network and that Washington would act unilaterally if Pakistan fails to do so. Despite holding meetings with President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, and ISI chief Ahmed Shuja Pasha, Clinton failed to reach any agreement with Pakistan or resolve the underlying issues that divide the two countries.

Addressing members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence in a closed-door session, just two days prior to Clinton’s arrival in Pakistan, Chief of Army Staff Ashfaq Parvez Kayani reportedly said that the US would “have to think ten times” before launching a unilateral attack on Pakistan. Kayani insisted that Pakistan was not Iraq or Afghanistan and boasted about the country’s nuclear weapons capability. Recently, Kayani has warned that Pakistan would retaliate against any US military action on Pakistani territory.

Relations between Islamabad and Washington have been fraught with tension ever since the neo-colonial invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. After the US threatened to bomb Pakistan “back to the Stone Age” following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Musharraf dictatorship withdrew its support for the Afghan Taliban and provided crucial logistical and military support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The US is determined to force Pakistan into drastically escalating its own counterinsurgency war so as to make the Pakistani military bear the brunt of the casualties and thereby contain the mounting hostility to the war among ordinary Americans.

Washington’s bullying tactics and constant violations of Pakistani sovereignty have frustrated sections of the Pakistani elite. US-Pakistan relations soured last January when the CIA contractor Raymond Davis shot and killed two Pakistani youths in Lahore. The tremendous outrage caused by the killings forced Pakistan to detain Davis for weeks before finally giving in to US demands for his release. Relations with Washington deteriorated further after Osama bin Laden was summarily executed in Pakistan during a raid by US commandos on his compound in Abbottabad in May. The illegal raid was viewed by the Pakistani military as yet another gross violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

While the Pakistani elite remains economically and geopolitically dependent on the US, Washington’s aggressive drive to advance its interests has weakened Pakistan’s position in the region and is undermining the Pakistani bourgeoisie’s regional agenda. India, meanwhile, has built up a strong presence in Afghanistan and is continuing to gain influence in the strategically vital country. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) last month, increasing military and economic ties between the two countries. India will “stand by Afghanistan” when foreign troops withdraw from the country, Singh said at the time.

US Senator John Kerry recently reiterated Washington’s support for India’s growing power in Afghanistan.

Washington’s growing economic and strategic ties with New Delhi have caused resentment among the Pakistani ruling elite. For decades, the Pakistani bourgeoisie has viewed Afghanistan as necessary for “strategic depth” to counter Indian power in the region. But while encouraging India to serve as a key ally of the Karzai government, the US has obstructed Pakistan’s attempts to use its close ties with Afghan militant groups to bring about a “political settlement” in Afghanistan and thereby maintain its influence in the country. US President Barack Obama has pushed ahead with the Indo-US “global strategic partnership” launched under the Bush administration, encouraging New Delhi’s ambitions in Central Asia and globally. The Pakistani elite also feels threatened by India’s rapid economic growth—all the more so as Pakistan’s economy is mired in crisis.

While New Delhi is determined to increase its power in Afghanistan and weaken Pakistan’s position in the country and region, Washington’s increasingly explicit threats to launch a unilateral attack on Pakistan have caused some concern in India’s ruling circles. Indian External Affairs Minister S M Krishna recently warned of “devastating consequences” if the US and Pakistan do not heal their rift.

India’s ruling elite fears its interests and growing influence in Afghanistan may be jeopardized if US forces end up clashing with the Pakistani military or that an increasingly desperate and besieged Pakistan elite might flail out against India with unforeseeable consequences. “We think it is absolutely necessary to develop a dialogue with Pakistan because this country has a positive role to play in finding solution to Afghanistan,” said Krishna.

US policy in Afghanistan is part of its regional strategy which is aimed at countering China’s growing influence in Central Asia. To counter the US strategy of promoting Indian power in the region, Pakistan is increasingly looking to China to shore up its declining influence. “Islamabad is becoming more reliant than ever on its friendship with Beijing,” according to the latest report on Pakistan by the Congressional Research Service.

Washington’s accusations and threats against Pakistan have increased tension throughout the region. A clash of strategic interests between the two countries makes any resolution highly unlikely. A unilateral attack on Pakistan would not only be an act of war according to international law, it could spark clashes between US forces and the Pakistani military with unpredictable and potentially explosive consequences for the entire region.



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