

US-Pakistan summit fails to paper over growing strategic rift

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Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and US President Barack Obama issued a lengthy joint statement at the conclusion of their October 22 White House meeting. The statement reaffirmed the importance of the countries' decades-old strategic partnership, with Obama declaring Pakistan a "key" US "counterterrorism partner."

However, neither the statement, nor the announcement just prior to the Obama-Sharif meeting that the US is ready to sell Pakistan an additional eight F-16 fighter jets, could paper over the ever-widening rift between Washington and Islamabad.

For months, Pakistani authorities have been issuing increasingly alarmed warnings that the US has upset the balance of power in South Asia through its military-strategic embrace of India, Pakistan's arch-rival.

The "US can maintain whatever kind of relations it desires with India," declared a manifestly frustrated Pakistani Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz just days before Sharif's departure for Washington. "But at a time when there are tensions between India and Pakistan, at least it should not increase the conventional and strategic imbalance so that becomes a threat to the region,"

Keen to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda, above all its drive to militarily isolate and encircle China, Washington has lavished one "favour" upon another on New Delhi. These include the right to purchase the Pentagon's most advanced weapons, a program to co-develop and manufacture advanced-weapons systems, support for India becoming a major Indian Ocean power, and, under the Indo-US nuclear accord, access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel (thereby enabling India to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons-development.)

Islamabad has warned that in the absence of any US steps to shore up Pakistan's weakened position, it has no choice but to build up its military-strategic forces. On the eve of Sharif's visit to the White House, Pakistan Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry boasted about Pakistan's recent development of "tactical" or battlefield nuclear weapons, declaring them pivotal to Islamabad's plans to counter the strategic gap that has opened up between South Asia's two nuclear-armed states.

The Obama administration has brushed aside Pakistan's concerns about the highly destabilizing impact of its drive to

make India the southwestern pillar of a US-led, anti-China military-strategic alliance.

According to news reports, Obama focused his meeting with Sharif on the US demand that Islamabad intensify its military campaign against the Taliban and allied Islamist groups in Pakistan.

Since June 2014, the Pakistani military has been mounting a major offensive, involving tens of thousands of troops, across wide swathes of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Within days of the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, close to a million people were rendered refugees. Of these, only a small fraction have as yet been able to return to their homes, in part because of the scorched-earth and carpet-bombing methods employed by the Pakistani military. Islamabad claims its offensive has killed some 3,000 "terrorists" at the cost of 350 soldiers.

Operation Zarb-i-Azb has been closely coordinated with Washington. Nevertheless, the Obama administration and Pentagon officials complain that Islamabad has targeted the Pakistani allies of the Taliban, while ignoring other groups, especially the Haqqani Network, that focus their efforts on fighting the US occupation forces in Afghanistan and the US-installed government in Kabul.

Frictions between the US and Pakistan over the Pakistani military's relations with sections of the Taliban are longstanding. These relations, whose roots lie in the joint CIA-Pakistani intelligence operation to foment and arm Islamist opposition to Kabul's pro-Soviet government of the late 1970s and 1980s, have been maintained as a means of ensuring that Islamabad can play a major role in any Afghan "peace settlement" and thereby limit India's influence in Afghanistan. The US has a similar two-faced relationship with al-Qaeda.

If Washington and Islamabad are increasingly at odds over the Haqqani Network, it is because the Obama's administration's Afghan policy is in a shambles. One week before his meeting with Sharif, Obama announced that the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was being halted and that a 10,000-strong US occupation force will now remain in Afghanistan through the end of his presidency in January 2017.

The strained character of Pakistani-US relations is

underscored by an October 15 Associated Press report which, citing US official sources, said that the Oct. 3 US attack on a hospital in Kunduz—a war crime that killed more than 30 people—was aimed at killing a Pakistani intelligence agent who was helping “to coordinate Taliban activity.”

Press reports suggest that Sharif and the other top Pakistani officials who visited Washington this month—Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz, Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry, and Pakistan intelligence chief Lieutenant General Rizwan Akhtar Malik—pushed back against the US demand that Islamabad expand Operation Zarb-i-Azb.

Speaking to the US Institute of Peace the day after his meeting with Obama, Sharif said in reference to the Obama administration’s stated request that Islamabad assist in getting the Taliban to join peace talks, “We cannot bring them to the table and kill them at the same time.” This prompted a quick rebuttal from an unnamed senior US official, who told Reuters, “‘kill or talk’ is not the choice. We believe Pakistani pressure on the Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, is key to forcing the Taliban leadership to question the viability of its military campaign to achieve their political goals.”

Islamabad has argued that the current offensive has already taxed the Pakistani military and that its forces are overstretched as they are facing continuous threats from India, including border clashes and subversion.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, India has adopted a belligerent stance toward Pakistan. All high-level talks between Indian and Pakistan have been scuttled and Indian military commanders have been instructed to act aggressively in the event of any cross-border firing or incursion by Kashmiri rebels.

During his Washington visit, Foreign Affairs Adviser Aziz handed over to US officials dossiers that Pakistan claims document Indian intelligence’s assistance to Baluchi separatists, the Pakistan Taliban, and anti-Pakistani groups in Karachi. However, in a not very subtle signal of the Obama administration’s attitude to these dossiers, US State Department officials wouldn’t even confirm having received them.

The Pakistani ruling class is anxious to maintain the close military-security partnership with the US that been a bulwark of its rule virtually since the establishment of the Pakistani state. But the US’s strategic embrace of India is leaving Islamabad increasingly reliant on China. In an abrupt turnaround, Pakistan has also patched up relations with Moscow over the past year and recently initiated military purchases from Russia.

Earlier this year, Beijing announced a \$46 billion investment in Pakistan to build an economic corridor, including rail, road and pipeline links, stretching from the Pakistani Arabian Sea port of Gwadar to western China. Were such a corridor to be built, it would provide an alternate means for China to access Mideast oil and otherwise undermine the Pentagon’s plans to

use Indian Ocean and South China Sea “chokepoints” to enforce an economic blockade on China in the event of a confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

The US has not publicly objected to the economic corridor scheme. But India has, on the grounds that it passes through parts of Kashmir that are now “occupied” by Pakistan but rightfully Indian.

While publicly silent on the economic corridor, Washington has raised increasing concerns over Pakistan’s nuclear program. In the run-up to the Sharif-Obama summit there were reports that Washington is ready to offer Pakistan membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, if it agrees to accept new restrictions on its nuclear program. This immediately prompted an angry reaction from New Delhi, which feared that the US might be offering a special deal for Pakistan akin to that it negotiated for India under the Indo-US nuclear accord. Obama administration officials were quick to deny that any such deal is now on offer for Islamabad.

In fact what the reports, which appeared first in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, indicated is that the US is anxious about Pakistan’s plan to deploy a newly-developed tactical nuclear weapon and is seeking a means to place limits on Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program.

All of this has only served to further increase US-Pakistani frictions, as it is viewed by the Pakistani military-security establishment as yet another attempt on the part of Washington to bolster India, if not a first step toward stripping Pakistan of its nuclear arsenal.

Washington’s drive for global hegemony—first its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan so as to give it a beachhead in Central Asia and now its aggressive drive to isolate and encircle China—have dangerously destabilized South Asia, above all relations between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

If anyone doubts this, they should carefully ponder the remarks Pakistani Foreign Secretary Chaudhry made at an October 20 Washington press conference. Chaudhry said that Pakistan has developed tactical nuclear weapons to “plug” a strategic gap that makes it thinkable for New Delhi to launch a conventional attack on Pakistan. In effect, Chaudhry declared that an Indian attack would trigger a Pakistani nuclear response, with untold consequences for the people of South Asia and the world.



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