US assassination of Taliban leader signals escalation of Afghanistan-Pakistan war

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On Friday, US President Barack Obama ordered military drones operated by Special Operations soldiers to kill Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The emir of the Taliban had been extensively tracked by American and Afghan intelligence prior to being targeted by drone-fired missiles while riding in his vehicle in Pakistan's Baluchistan province Friday evening.

Mansour, whose remains have been transferred to Quetta for burial, maintained contacts with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and owned homes in Quetta and in Dubai with the ISI's knowledge, according to British and US media.

The American military establishment hailed the strike as a victory for "peace and stability" in Afghanistan. "This was considered a defensive strike," US Navy Captain Jeff Davis said Monday. According to the US Defense Department, Mansour's extra-judicial killing was legal on account of the "specific, imminent threats" the Taliban leader posed to US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

President Obama boasted that Mansour's demise was "an important milestone in our longstanding effort to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan." He thanked "our military and intelligence personnel" for "once again sending a clear message."

The strike was aimed at pressuring the Taliban into joining a "reconciliation process" with the US-backed Kabul government, Obama said. He added, "The Taliban should seize the opportunity to pursue the only real path for ending this long conflict—joining the Afghan government in a reconciliation process that leads to lasting peace and stability."

Mansour's death "eliminates one roadblock to peace in Afghanistan," US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said Monday. "This action sends a clear message to the world that we will continue to stand with our Afghan partners as they work to build a more stable, united, secure, and prosperous Afghanistan," Secretary of State John Kerry declared.

The US government is striving to maintain its grip over Afghanistan and Pakistan and control the entire Asian continent through military violence. The Obama administration has vastly escalated the US drone war in Pakistan, authorizing at least 350 strikes, a sevenfold increase over the George W. Bush administration.

The strike against Mansour marks a significant expansion of US war-making in South and Central Asia. It occurred in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan, which was previously off-limits to US strikes due to opposition from sections of the Pakistani state. Seventeen months after Obama proclaimed the "end of the US war in Afghanistan," Washington is carrying out yet another escalation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater.

In Afghanistan, the US is maintaining a permanent military occupation force of nearly 10,000 troops. Thousands of US combat troops are involved in a brutal "counterinsurgency" war against the Taliban and other armed factions. Current Pentagon plans envision a US presence that lasts for decades to come. Since January 2016, in the name of fighting Al Qaeda and Afghanistan's Islamic State faction, the Pentagon has re-launched offensive operations in Afghanistan, including commando and air attacks in Nangarhar Province.

Calls are mounting for even greater US involvement in Afghanistan. On Friday, retired Gen. David Petraeus called for less restrictive limits on US bombing raids in the country, lamenting that US forces have dropped only 300 bombs in Afghanistan as compared to 7,000 in Iraq and Syria.

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In a Monday evening posting on the newspaper's web site, the *Washington Post* editorial board demanded that Obama give the military a blank check to cancel any further reductions of US forces. The *Post* criticized Obama's "reluctance to provide adequate support to the Afghan military" and called for the White House to rubber-stamp the Pentagon's plans for open-ended war in Afghanistan.

The editorial demanded that Obama approve recommendations currently being drawn up by the new US commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, for "more airpower and an extended troop presence."

Washington is determined to expand its operations in Pakistan against the objections of significant sections of the Pakistani elite. Despite reassurances from the Pentagon that American and Pakistani forces collaborated throughout Friday's raid, Pakistan's foreign affairs chief, Syed Tariq Fatemi, denounced Mansour's killing as a "breach of the United Nations Charter."

To punish Islamabad for resisting expanded US operations on Pakistani soil, the US Congress recently withdrew support for a $700 million arms package that would have sent eight F-16 fighters to Pakistan. The House Armed Services Committee is debating measures to block another $450 million in military aid to Islamabad.

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