

# The assassination of Mullah Akhtar Mansour: Washington plays with fire in Eurasia's geopolitical tinderbox—Part Two

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7 June 2016

*This is the second in a two-part series. Part one was published on June 4.*

## American imperialism's permanent war in Central Asia

The May 21 killing of the Taliban's political leader, Mullah Mansour, by American Special Operations served notice: After four decades of covert operations and military violence, US imperialism is forging ahead with new and still bloodier crimes against the Afghan people and throughout Central Asia.

The summary execution of Mansour, hailed as a "milestone" by the sitting US president, has starkly demonstrated Washington's determination to press ahead with ever-more reckless acts of aggression, tossing firebombs into a Eurasian heartland that is riven with explosive and intertwined geopolitical conflicts.

The 2001 US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was the initial act in Washington's phony "war on terror"—an unending conflict the purpose of which has been to provide a pretext for a series of illegal wars in the greater Middle East, a huge build-up of US military forces worldwide and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home.

In invading Afghanistan, the US was seeking to establish a strategic beachhead in Central Asia—a region that US strategists had identified as pivotal both because of its oil, natural gas, and other resource riches, and because of its proximity to three major strategic rivals, China, Russia and Iran.

In dubbing the invasion of Afghanistan "the first of the wars of the 21st century" and subsequently arrogating, in the name of "preventive war," a US right to invade any country that could potentially "threaten" the US, George W. Bush effectively announced to the world that American imperialism would systematically use its military might to offset the erosion of its economic power and maintain, thereby, global hegemony.

Fifteen years on, and despite a massive bloodletting, the US has failed to crush Taliban resistance.

However, for the Pentagon, Afghanistan's strategic significance looms all the larger, because the erosion of the economic foundations of US hegemony has accelerated, as exemplified by the 2008 Wall Street financial collapse. In response, US imperialism has launched strategic offensives, including massive military deployments, directly challenging China and Russia, and has intensified its drive to secure unfettered dominance over the Middle East, the world's principal oil-exporting region.

The network of bases the US has established in Afghanistan during the

15 years of occupation, and the puppet government in Kabul which it defends, are prized by the Pentagon war planners as pivotal assets in pressuring and confronting Washington's main rivals for regional hegemony, China, Russia and Iran.

US aggression has blown up the Middle East, plunging much of the region into war and stoking Sunni-Shia conflict, destabilizing geopolitics and fueling militarism around the world. This is especially true in South Asia, a region riven by inter-state, nation-ethnic and communal conflicts, and with which Afghanistan is geographically, culturally and historically intertwined.

Washington has recruited India to be its premier strategic partner in South Asia, hoping to capitalize on India's historic rivalry with China (the two countries fought a border war in 1962 and the dispute remains unresolved). Even more importantly, the US aims to build up India as an economic and military-strategic counterweight to China. While by virtually any measure India is a poor country, its massive population makes it one of the world's largest economies. It possesses a huge nuclear weapon-armed military, and it is in the process of building a blue-water navy equipped with aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.

The burgeoning India-US global strategic partnership has rattled Pakistan, India's nuclear-armed rival, pushing it to seek an ever-deeper alliance with China, and has further ratcheted up tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi. The Indian elite, emboldened by the support and arms given it by Washington, is aggressively asserting its claim to be the regional hegemon.

Under the two-year-old BJP government, India has adopted an even more belligerent line against Pakistan, including strengthening military border installations in the disputed Kashmir region and authorizing the military to act more aggressively in instances of cross-border firing. The year 2015 saw months of cross-border clashes, far and away the most serious in a decade.

Mansour's killing has delivered a further blow to the ailing US-Pakistani alliance, which from the early 1950s through the 1990s served as the cornerstone of American hegemony in South Asia.

In murdering Mansour, Washington eliminated a Taliban leader known to have close ties to Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus and violated Islamabad's "red lines" against drone strikes in Baluchistan. It did so with the clear aim of demonstrating to the Pakistan government and military that the US expects them to take on even more of the burden in the Afghan war.

Pakistan's ruling elite fears and desperately wishes to avoid conflict with its longtime imperialist patrons in Washington. But the US's lavishing of weapons systems and geopolitical support on New Delhi (including negotiating for India a special status within the world civil nuclear regime) has overturned, as Pakistan has repeatedly warned, the

balance of power in the region.

Islamabad's response has been on the one hand to accelerate its nuclear weapons program, including through the deployment of tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons, and, on the other, to strengthen its longstanding alliance with Beijing.

The killing of Mansour was clearly aimed at scuttling the efforts of the so-called Quad (the US, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan) to draw the Taliban into peace talks and broker a political settlement to the AfPak War.

With the US puppet regime in Kabul reeling from a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of the insurgency, the Pentagon evidently concluded that before any settlement acceptable to the US can be negotiated, the Taliban needs to be mauled and that this will require an expansion and intensification of the war. Based on this assessment, the generals then successfully pressured the White House for open-ended authority to kill Mansour.

There are well-grounded concerns in Washington that the Kabul government, which is despised by the Afghan population and faces surging violence, will collapse without new commitments of US ground troops and an intensified air war on both sides of the border. The past year saw the Taliban capture one of Afghanistan's largest cities, Kunduz, and stage terror attacks against the central government compound in Kabul. Predictably, the May 21 attack resulted in the elevation of a more hardline Taliban leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, who has already ordered a fresh wave of attacks against Afghan national forces.

In addition to the 10,000 US troops that remain in Afghanistan, an official figure that vastly underestimates the scale of the ongoing US-run counterinsurgency war, Washington is encouraging India's ambitions to develop its own military-security presence in Afghanistan.

In early June, while visiting Kabul to promote a \$290 million India-Afghan hydroelectric infrastructure project, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi confirmed that India is considering deploying military and security forces to Afghanistan.

The US's encouragement of an Indian presence in Afghanistan is also no doubt a hardball message to Islamabad. If Pakistan doesn't do the US's bidding, go after the Haqqani Network and otherwise intensify the anti-Taliban war, Washington will turn to its strategic rival.

The transformation of India into a US regional gendarme is among the most destabilizing factors within the broader Eurasian powder keg. It is pouring fuel on a series of bitter and interlocking conflicts between India and China, India and Pakistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan and, last but not least, the US and China, adding to them a further explosive dimension and amplifying the dangers of a regional and world war involving nuclear-armed states.

### **The US-India alliance and the sea change in South Asian politics**

Under the two-year-old Modi government, India has dramatically increased its integration into the US's anti-China "Pivot to Asia." This has included developing bilateral and trilateral military-security ties with Washington's most important regional allies, Japan and Australia, and parroting the US line on the South China dispute.

In April, India's government announced that it had approved in principle a US-India Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) that will enable the US military to use Indian ports and bases for resupply and repairs. In late May, amid the fanfare over Mansour's death, Indian naval forces began deploying to the South China Sea, where they will call on US regional allies, including the Philippines and Vietnam, and engage in a trilateral exercise with the US and Japanese navies off the Philippines.

As part of its strategic competition with both Pakistan and China, Modi traveled to Iran last month and signed a deal to develop the Arabian Sea Port of Chabahar as the hub of a transportation corridor via Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Underlining the significance of the agreement, which will enable India to better compete for the oil and other resources of Central Asia, Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani joined Modi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the May 23 signing ceremony in Tehran.

Hitherto, Pakistan has been able to frustrate Indian ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia by refusing to allow Indian-Afghan trade to cross its territory.

The Chabahar deal has "ominous and far-reaching implications" for Pakistan, Pakistani General Nadeem Lodhi warned at a military seminar last week. "We need to break out of this encircling move with help from friends," said Lodhi, warning that the Chabahar initiative will upset the timetables for the construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In a comment last Tuesday entitled, "Strategic Blowback," Pakistan's *Newsweek* warned that Afghanistan's government is "collaborating against Pakistan" in league with Washington and New Delhi, leaving "only China on Pakistan's side."

India's establishment has shot back with similarly bellicose statements in relation to the CPEC, which India's ex-foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal recently condemned as "a political and strategic provocation."

In reality, the Chinese government sought to deescalate China-India and Pakistan-India tensions in recent years, precisely because it feared that otherwise Washington would prove successful in its efforts to woo New Delhi and integrate it into its anti-China "pivot."

However, Chinese overtures, including to give India a prominent role in developing infrastructure linking South Asia to China and to West Asia, and from there to Europe, were rebuffed both by Modi and India's previous Congress Party-led government. Fearing China's growing economic reach, the Indian bourgeoisie has calculated that it can best get a leg up and realize its own great powers ambitions by encouraging Washington in its incendiary drive for world hegemony.

### **Pakistan as arena for the US-China conflict**

American imperialism's increasingly reckless course in Afghanistan and all Eurasia, including its recruitment of India into its anti-China alliance, is simultaneously transforming Pakistan into an arena of US-China conflict.

Pakistan's growing integration into China's geopolitical strategy is symbolized by Beijing's commitment of \$46 billion to build the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a commercial and transportation mega-project aimed at securing Chinese access to the Indian Ocean, East Africa and the Middle East.

The rail, road and pipeline corridor is to begin at the Gwadar port complex in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, which lies on the Arabian Sea near the mouth of the Gulf of Oman and extends to western China.

At its completion, the CPEC would enable China to circumvent, at least to a considerable degree, the US strategy to economically strangle China in the event of a war or war crisis by blockading Indian Ocean and South China Sea "chokepoints."

"Over the long run," noted a US Council on Foreign Relations report, "an overland link across Pakistan to the Arabian Sea could help alleviate the 'Malacca dilemma,' China's vulnerability to the fact that roughly 85 percent of its oil imports travel through the single chokepoint of the Strait

of Malacca.”

China’s CPEC initiative represents “a direct response to the US ‘Asia Pivot’ strategy,” echoes the Heritage Foundation, a Republican-aligned think tank. It is “China’s way of showing that it will extend its power and influence westward as the US does so eastward.”

“China,” continued the Foundation commentary, “likely assesses that, by tilting toward Pakistan, it can keep India tied down in South Asia and divert its military force and strategic capabilities away from China.”

That the US is working assiduously to use India to threaten China and to poison relations between New Delhi and Beijing is of course not mentioned by the Heritage Foundation.

The US strike on Mansour has rattled Pakistan’s establishment, as it has provided yet another demonstration of the scant regard Washington has for its “red lines” and strategic interests.

Significantly in speaking to the press on June 1, the head of Pakistan’s military, General Raheel Sharif, combined denunciation of the illegal US drone strike that killed Mansour with a vow that “the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will be completed at all cost.” “We are ready to pay any price to turn this long cherished dream into reality,” proclaimed Sharif.

Earlier this year, Islamabad announced the formation of a 10,000-strong Pakistani domestic military-security force specifically dedicated to defending the CPEC.

India has vigorously denounced the CPEC, which it deeply resents because of the shot in the arm it represents for Pakistan’s economy, citing the fact that it will pass through parts of Pakistan-held Kashmir that New Delhi claims are rightful Indian. Washington, by contrast, has not publicly opposed the CPEC, no doubt calculating that there are huge strategic and economic hurdles to overcome before it can be completed, including the fact that Baluchistan is the site of a decades-long ethno-nationalist insurgency.

For the moment Washington prefers to use other tactics to bring Pakistan to heel, everything from violations of Pakistan’s sovereignty like the Mansour assassination to playing on its deep ties to the military-intelligence establishment. Undoubtedly, promotion of the Baluchi separatist insurgency is being held in reserve. Indian intelligence, according to credible reports, is already assisting the Baluchi insurgents, who, for their part, have long sought US patronage.

The Pakistani ruling elite desperately hopes to maintain its partnership with Washington. But the objective logic of the US war drive, its increasingly openly anti-Chinese and anti-Russian focus, and its harnessing of New Delhi are inevitably forcing Islamabad to seek closer ties to Beijing, and thereby strengthening forces in Washington that view Pakistan as a US adversary.

For decades, Pakistan has geopolitically rested on the twin pillars of the United States and China, with the former playing the leading role. In the early 1970s, Pakistan served as the go-between in the US-China rapprochement and with the Maoist regime openly working with US imperialism to weaken the USSR, including in Afghanistan, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Washington-Beijing axis underpinned the Pakistani state.

But over the past decade, as the US has come into direct conflict with China and harnessed India to its anti-China agenda, Pakistan’s geostrategic foundations have been kicked from underneath it, throwing it into profound crisis and exacerbating tensions across Central and South Asia.

As the killing of Mansour, carried out with unconcealed contempt for a government that has long been a loyal US ally, has once again made clear, nothing will deter American imperialism from its present course, which is leading rapidly toward a general war between the most powerful states on the planet.



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