

Obama administration seeks extraordinary military powers in Pakistan

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The Obama administration is increasingly treating its growing intervention in Pakistan as a separate counter-insurgency war for which it is demanding the same kind of extraordinary military powers obtained by the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This was the main message delivered by Pentagon officials on Capitol Hill over the last few days, together with increasingly dire warnings that without immediate and unconditional US military funding for Pakistan, the government could collapse.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned Congress Thursday that unless it quickly approved some \$400 million requested by the Pentagon for a new Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund the Pakistani military would run out of funding within weeks for its operations against insurgents in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and other areas of western Pakistan.

In his testimony, Gates also revealed that, even after the planned closure of the Guantanamo detention center, the US government may still imprison up to 100 of the inmates without charges or trials. The administration asked Congress for \$50 million to build prison facilities in the US for detainees it claims are dangerous but cannot be tried, principally because the supposed evidence against them was extracted through torture.

The proposed \$400 million in military aid for Pakistan is part of an \$83.5 billion supplemental funding bill requested by Obama, the vast majority of which goes to pay for continuing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Speaking before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Gates said that the Pentagon was requesting that full control of the military aid be vested with Gen. David Petraeus, the chief of the US military's Central Command. He claimed that the Pentagon needed "this unique authority for the unique and urgent circumstances we face in Pakistan—for dealing with a challenge that simultaneously requires wartime and peacetime capabilities."

Some members of Congress have balked at the demand, which echoes the heavy-handed tactics of the Bush administration in demanding immediate passage of military funding for Iraq and Afghanistan with no strings attached.

As the Washington Post pointed out Friday: "Lawmakers in the House and Senate have voiced concerns about creating the new Pakistan military funding stream through the Pentagon. Traditionally such military aid flows through the State Department and is subject to Foreign Assistance Act restrictions."

The \$400 million is part of a \$3 billion, five-year aid package that would see another \$700 million in military assistance go to Pakistan in fiscal year 2010.

The military aid program envisions a major expansion of US training of Pakistani security forces, beyond the 70 US special operations troops whom Islamabad has quietly allowed to train elements of the Frontier Corps and Pakistani special forces units. Pakistani officers and troops would be trained outside the country. In addition, Washington would supply extensive new military hardware, including helicopters, night-vision goggles and small arms.

Under US law, the State Department is supposed to oversee military aid programs and ensure that they are carried out in accordance with US foreign policy and legal restrictions on such aid. An exception is made when the US is at war, the grounds claimed by the Bush administration in bypassing civilian authorities in implementing similar programs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Post quoted Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell as saying that the use of similar arguments in Pakistan involved “walking a pretty fine line.” He continued: “This is not a war zone for the US military. But given the urgency of the situation, we need similar authorities in order to help Pakistan train and equip its troops for counterinsurgency operations ASAP.”

General Petraeus made the same point somewhat more forcefully in a letter to the House Armed Services Committee in which he warned of a potential government collapse in Pakistan.

He claimed that US “progress” in Iraq and Afghanistan had been achieved because “these funds are immediately available and commanders have been able to rapidly adjust to changing conditions on the ground.” He said that the same free hand for the military was needed in Pakistan, “where a growing insurgency threatens the country’s very existence and has a direct and deadly impact on US and coalition forces operating in Afghanistan.”

Privately, Petraeus has reportedly been telling members of congress and the administration that if the Pakistani military does not succeed in suppressing the insurgency in two weeks, the government may fall.

Citing anonymous sources who it says are “familiar with the discussions,” Fox News reports that Petraeus indicated that the US military was evaluating the Pakistani campaign against the militants in the northwest of the country “before determining the United States’ next course of action.”

The report added that Petraeus expressed the view that the Pakistani army could survive the fall of the government of President Ali Zardari and that the army, led by Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, is “superior” to the civilian government.

This statement echoed the position indicated by President Barack Obama at the Wednesday evening press conference marking his first 100 days in office. Obama said he was confident that Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal would remain secure, “Primarily, initially, because the Pakistani army, I think, recognizes the hazards of those weapons falling into the wrong hands.” He added, “We’ve got strong military-to-military consultation and cooperation.”

In contrast, the American president described Zardari’s government as “very fragile” and lacking “the capacity to deliver basic services” or “gain the support and the loyalty of their

people.”

Obama concluded by saying of Pakistan, “We want to respect their sovereignty, but we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure that Pakistan is stable and that you don’t end up having a nuclear-armed militant state.”

When a reporter tried to ask whether that meant the US military could intervene to secure nuclear weapons, Obama refused to “engage in hypotheticals.”

The remarks by Obama and Petraeus suggest strongly that Washington is relying first and foremost on the Pentagon’s relationship with the Pakistani military, and that it could, in the event of the deepening of the present crisis, support the return of a military dictatorship. It has been less than nine months since the last military strongman, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, relinquished power to a civilian government after a decade of military rule.

This may also explain, at least in part, the determination of the Pentagon, the White House and the State Department to ensure that military aid flows through the military and not by way of normal State Department channels, which are subject to the Foreign Assistance Act. Among the act’s restrictions is a prohibition on granting military aid to “a country whose duly elected head of government was deposed by decree or military coup.”

Implicit in Obama’s statement about wanting “to respect their sovereignty, but...” is the threat of direct US military intervention.

It is becoming apparent that Obama, who owes his election in no small part to the opposition of broad layers of the US population to the militarist policies of the Bush administration, is not only continuing both of the wars initiated under Bush, but is preparing a third.

In an article entitled “Now, US Sees Pakistan as a Cause Distinct from Afghanistan,” the New York Times Friday noted that the original strategy advanced by the Obama administration was to carry out military attacks in the Pakistani border area to deny safe havens for insurgents and further a “surge” in Afghanistan that is to see a doubling of US troops over the next several months.

That strategy, the Times notes, has been “utterly scrambled by the Taliban offensive in western Pakistan.” Now Washington’s primary objective is “preventing further gains in Pakistan by an Islamic militant insurgency that has claimed territory just 60 miles from Islamabad.”

In an article published April 16, Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah of the New York Times provided an account of the intense class tensions that have fueled the insurgency. The forces described as the Taliban, they wrote, had succeeded in gaining control of the Swat Valley as the result of a “class revolt” stemming from “profound fissures between a small group of wealthy landlords and their landless tenants.”

According to this report, the Islamist militants organized and armed the landless peasants in a campaign to drive out the region’s wealthy landlords, who also were the government officials and leaders of the established political parties. In addition to imposing Islamic law over Swat, a region of 1.3 million people, the Islamists carried out a measure of “economic redistribution.”

The Times quoted an unnamed senior Pakistani official as saying, "This was a bloody revolution in Swat. I wouldn't be surprised if it sweeps the established order of Pakistan."

The Obama administration is now intervening to prop up that "established order" of feudal land relations, vast social inequality and military domination over the government. This will involve the suppression of not merely a handful of "terrorists," but an insurgency with broad-based popular support, which is fueled in large measure by US military attacks on civilians on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Having intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003 with the aim of asserting American hegemony over the strategically vital and oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, American imperialism has succeeded only in spreading instability and creating the conditions for new and even more bloody wars.

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