

Obama expands US military intervention in Pakistan

By [Barry Grey](#)

Global Research, February 23, 2009

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 23 February 2009

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The Obama administration is significantly expanding the US military role in Pakistan beyond that pursued by the Bush administration, directly employing US military force against anti-government Pakistani guerrillas involved only marginally, if at all, in attacks on US forces in neighboring Afghanistan, according to a recent article in the New York Times.

The article, entitled “Obama Expands Missile Strikes Inside Pakistan” and authored by Mark Mazzetti and White House correspondent David E. Sanger, cites two separate missile strikes inside Pakistan carried out February 14 and February 16 as evidence that “the Obama administration has expanded the covert war run by the Central Intelligence Agency inside Pakistan, attacking a militant network seeking to topple the Pakistani government.”

The Times reports that the strikes, carried out by drone aircraft, are the first to target alleged training camps run by Baitullah Mehsud, an Islamist insurgent leader identified early last year by both American and Pakistani officials as the orchestrator of the assassination of then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the wife of Pakistan’s current president and Pakistan People’s Party leader Asif Ali Zardari.

“Under President Bush,” the article states, “the United States frequently attacked militants from Al Qaeda and the Taliban involved in cross-border attacks in Afghanistan, but had stopped short of raids aimed at Mr. Mehsud and his followers, who have played less of a direct role in attacks on American troops.”

As the article indicates, the missile strikes on Mehsud’s forces represent a qualitative expansion of the US war in the region, with the American military now directly intervening into internal Pakistani conflicts to bolster Washington’s client regime in Islamabad.

The strikes against Mehsud came in the same week that Obama announced a major military escalation in Afghanistan, ordering an additional 17,000 US troops into the country. They also came within days of talks in Pakistan between top political, military and intelligence officials there and Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke also met with officials in Afghanistan and India.

The Times notes that in a telephone interview last Friday, Holbrooke declined to comment on the strikes against Mehsud, and that the White House and the CIA similarly refused to comment.

The newspaper reports that Bush had included Mehsud’s name “in a classified list of military leaders whom the CIA and American commandos were authorized to capture or kill.” It says the February 14 strike was aimed “specifically” at Mehsud, but failed to kill him. The February 16 raid, it states, targeted a camp run by a top aide to Mehsud. Earlier reports said

each of the strikes killed 30 people.

The article continues: "For months, Pakistani military and intelligence officials have complained about Washington's refusal to strike at Baitullah Mehsud, even while CIA drones struck at Qaeda figures and leaders of the network run by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a militant leader believed responsible for a campaign of violence against American troops in Afghanistan."

The article suggests that the US has initiated attacks on Mehsud and his followers, in part, to induce the Pakistani regime to intensify its military operations against Taliban, Al Qaeda and other Islamist insurgent groups based in Pakistani tribal regions on the border with Afghanistan. "By striking at the Mehsud network," it states, "the United States may be seeking to demonstrate to Mr. Zardari that the new administration is willing to go after the insurgents of greatest concern to the Pakistani leader."

It then alludes to the deteriorating military and security situation of the Pakistani regime, which faces growing insurgencies in tribal regions that border on Afghanistan as well as the Taliban takeover of the Swat Valley in the more settled North West Frontier Province, and suggests that "American officials may also be prompted by growing concern that the militant attacks are increasingly putting the civilian government of Pakistan, a nation with nuclear weapons, at risk."

The Times article also states that the US is continuing to carry out Special Forces operations on the ground inside Pakistan, in addition to its stepped-up missile attacks. Last September, US Special Forces troops attacked a Pakistani village in South Waziristan, part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the Pakistani northwest border region with Afghanistan, killing between 15 and 20 people, including women and children.

That assault, the first clear case of an attack by US ground troops inside Pakistani territory, evoked condemnations from the government in Islamabad. According to the February 21 Times article however, "American Special Operations troops based in Afghanistan have also carried out a number of operations into Pakistan's tribal areas since early September, when a commando raid that killed a number of militants was publicly condemned by Pakistani officials. According to a senior American military official, the commando missions since September have been primarily to gather intelligence."

Additional evidence of a major extension of the US war into Pakistan is the revelation that at least some of the US drones used to fire missiles into Pakistani border regions, killing scores of civilians are inflaming local anger, are operating from a base inside Pakistan itself. Earlier this month, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, spoke of the existence of the base at a Senate hearing. The Pakistani government has denied the existence of the base, but the London Times and the Pakistani News have both published Google Earth images of three drones parked at the Shamsi air field in southwestern Pakistan.

Obama has made it clear that his administration's response to the growth of insurgent Afghan forces and the worsening security situation facing the US and its puppet regime in Afghanistan, as well as the growing strength of anti-US and anti-government insurgents in Pakistan, is an expansion of American military violence both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The White House and the military are treating both countries as part of a single military

theater.

The administration is conducting a review of its strategy in the region, which is to be completed by the beginning of April. This week, the US is hosting a high-level conference in Washington on the Afghan-Pakistan border region, which will be attended by Gates, Holbrooke, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Pakistan is sending its foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, its army chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and the head of its military intelligence service, Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha. Afghanistan is sending foreign minister Rangeen Dadfar Spanta.

However, Obama, Gates and the military chiefs have already outlined a policy shift away from any pretense of democratic reform or “nation-building” in favor of a more concentrated focus on counter-insurgency operations aimed at wiping out popular resistance in both Afghanistan and Pakistan to US neo-colonial aims.

One issue to be discussed at the Washington conference this week is US concerns over a cease-fire agreement announced last week by the Pakistani government with Taliban insurgents in the Swat Valley.

As indicated by the actions taken in the five weeks since Obama’s inauguration, the US in embarked on a military escalation that will involve an even greater toll in Afghan and Pakistani lives as well as US casualties. So far, 26 American soldiers and 13 from other “coalition” countries have been killed in Afghanistan this year, almost twice as many as in the first two months of 2008, according to the web site iCasualties.org.

Last Wednesday, the day after Obama announced the dispatch of 17,000 additional US troops to Afghanistan, the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, held a press conference in which he called for 10,000 more troops beyond the 17,000 ordered so far by Obama. McKiernan said the additional troops did not represent a “temporary force uplift” but part of an expanded war that will continue for at least “three to four to five years.” Some foreign policy analysts are predicting that US troop levels in the region will eventually rise to 100,000.

In 2001, Washington used the 9/11 attacks as a pretext to put into action long-developed plans to conquer Afghanistan and use it as a base to establish US hegemony in Central Asia, home to some of the richest deposits of oil and natural gas in the world. The inevitable result was a military disaster and the destabilization of the entire region.

Now, in pursuit of the same imperialist aims, the Obama administration is launching a major escalation that will only further destabilize the region, intensify tensions with rival power such as China and Russia, and cause untold death and destruction. There is a growing danger of a military conflagration throughout Central Asia and beyond.

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