

US escalates threats against Pakistan

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US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has warned Pakistani authorities that US-Pakistan relations will be imperiled unless Islamabad heeds Washington's admonitions and bloodily suppresses a growing Islamacist insurgency that has been fueled by the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Speaking Thursday at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune, Gates declared, "It is important that they not only recognize it [the threat], but take appropriate actions to deal with it." Action against the Islamacist militia, said Gates, is "central to our future partnership with the government in Islamabad."

Gates's remarks were part of a flurry of statements this week from Obama administration officials, Pentagon generals, and US Congressional leaders accusing Pakistan's government and military of appeasing the Taliban.

The immediate trigger for the ratcheting up of pressure on Islamabad was the Pakistani government's loss of control over the North-West Frontier Province district of Buner, which lies only 100 kilometers (70 miles) northwest of Islamabad, to four to five hundred Islamacist insurgents. But US officials, beginning with President Obama himself, have for months been pressing Pakistani authorities to do more to support the pacification of Afghanistan, claiming that Pakistan's border regions constitute a "safe-haven" for the Taliban and that if the US is to prevail in the Afghan war, it must be extended into Pakistan. A key concern for the Pentagon is the mounting number of attacks on the Pakistani supply routes that carry 80 percent of the food, fuel and arms consumed by the US occupation force in Afghanistan.

On Wednesday US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rebuked Pakistan's government for "abdicating to the Taliban and the extremists."

"(We) cannot underscore the seriousness of the existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan by the continuing advances now within hours of Islamabad that are being made by a loosely confederated group of terrorists and others who are seeking the overthrow of the Pakistani state," Clinton told the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee.

On Thursday morning, Obama held an emergency meeting attended by Clinton, Vice-President Joe Biden, and Richard Holbrooke, the US's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, to discuss US-Pakistan relations and recent developments in Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters following the meeting, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said the administration was "extremely concerned," adding that Pakistan "is something that takes a lot of the president's time." "What is happening in Pakistan and Afghanistan," said

Gibbs, “is the central foreign policy focus of this administration.”

Continuing a strategy of illegal, unilateral aggression begun under the Bush administration, Washington is regularly mounting drone missile strikes within Pakistan. Earlier this month, Holbrooke and the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, unsuccessfully pressed Islamabad to agree to joint operations with US forces inside Pakistan.

According to Holbrooke, Pakistan and not Afghanistan will now be at the top of the agenda when Obama hosts a trilateral summit of the presidents of the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan May 6-7. The summit, said Holbrooke, “was conceived in an atmosphere that has now changed significantly, and the focus is increasingly on Pakistan.

In recent weeks Obama administration insiders, Pentagon generals, and longtime strategists of US imperialism like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski have been making increasingly apocalyptic statements about Pakistan’s future. It has been repeatedly suggested that the nuclear-armed state of 170 million could soon break up along national-ethnic lines or fall in large part, if not wholly, under the control of anti-US Islamic fundamentalists.

Born of the reactionary, British imperialist-instigated communal partition of the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan is indeed beset by multiple, interconnected crises—crises that the rapacious policies of US imperialism are enormously exacerbating.

Determined to prevail in the Afghan war, so as to assert US dominance in oil-rich Central Asia, Washington is demanding that Islamabad subordinate its interests ever-more completely to those of the US. To the Pakistani elite this represents a double threat: the policies the US has imposed on Pakistan are highly unpopular, further discrediting a corrupt and fundamentally undemocratic political system and fueling social unrest; they also are at odds with important elements of Pakistan’s strategy for contending with arch-rival India.

The occupation of Afghanistan is rightly opposed by the majority of the Pakistani people as a predatory war—they only have to remember the Bush administration’s enthusiastic support for the dictator General Prevez Musharraf. Yet Washington is insisting that the Pakistani military place the country’s border regions under an ever-tighter military occupation. The brutal, colonial-style pacification methods the Pakistani military has employed in repeated offensives in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have only inflamed the local populace, stoked Pashtun nationalism, and caused serious rifts within the ranks of the army, many of whose soldiers are drawn from the Pashtun peasantry.

Washington is also fully supporting IMF-dictated measures to “stabilize” the Pakistani economy, including the elimination of energy subsidies, social spending cuts, and privatization, which will only increase the suffering of the country’s toilers.

The US media is forced to concede that Washington is reviled by the Pakistani people, but of course they cannot and will not explain why: the US’s sponsorship of a succession of right-wing military dictatorships; its use of Pakistan as a pawn in its geo-political strategy, stretching back to the early days of the Cold War; its cynical manipulation of aid dollars, bullying and threats; and its relentless pressure for a large-scale counter-insurgency war in wide swathes of Pakistan.

Hillary Clinton in her testimony to the House Foreign Relations Committee last Wednesday

did make oblique reference to the grossly unequal social order that the US has helped sustain in Pakistan and that is helping fuel the anti-US and anti-government insurgency in the country's impoverished Afghan border region. "The government of Pakistan," said Clinton, "... must begin to deliver government services, otherwise they are going to lose out to those who show up and claim that they can solve people's problems ..."

Pakistani authorities initially played down the "Talibanization" of Buner. Only last week, the Pakistani National Assembly voted unanimously in favor of a "peace deal" with Islamacist militia, which for two years had fought intermittently with Pakistani security forces in the adjacent Swat Valley. Under this agreement, in six districts of the Malkand Division of the North-West Frontier Province, including Buner, a strict, Islamic fundamentalist form of sharia law is to be enforced. The agreement calls for the Islamacist militiamen in the Swat Valley to hand their weapons over to authorities. Instead many moved into Buner beginning this Wednesday, forcing local policemen to seek refuge in police stations, and taking control of an important shrine.

In response, the Pakistani government dispatched less than 150 Frontier Constabulary. The first contingent was forced to retreat after coming under fire in an ambush that killed two constables.

But by Thursday, in response to the US pressure, the government and military were vowing that they would not allow the writ of the Pakistani government to be challenged. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said that Swat Valley agreement would be reviewed if the challenges to the government's authority continued. "We reserve the right to go for other options if Talibanization continues," said Gilani.

Army chief General Ashfaq Kiyani vowed that the military "will not allow the militants to dictate terms to the government or impose their way of life on the civil society of Pakistan" and said the pause in army operations against the Islamacist militia was aimed at giving "reconciliatory forces a chance [and] must not be taken for a concession to the militants."

At the same time, Kiyani denounced the "pronouncements by outside powers raising doubts on [the] future of Pakistan."

The Pakistani Taliban said Friday that it was withdrawing from Buner, and Pakistani television broadcast video of them pulling out.

There are reports that the Pakistani military will, nevertheless, soon be ordered to disarm the pro-Taliban militia or drive it out of the Swat Valley.

Tensions between the US and Pakistani elite will, however, continue to boil. The Obama administration's "Afghan surge"—the near doubling to 65,000 of the US military in Afghanistan—will result in a massive escalation of the bloodletting in Afghanistan that will inevitably spill over into Pakistan and incite further opposition among the Pakistani people.

The Pakistani elite, meanwhile, bitterly resents the burgeoning strategic partnership between the US and India. This partnership has involved increasing sales of advanced military equipment to India and Washington's lifting of an international embargo on international civilian nuclear trade with India, which will allow India to concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

Obama administration officials have repeatedly demanded that Islamabad shift troops from

its eastern border with India to its Afghan border regions, while very publicly repudiating earlier suggestions that they might press India to make concessions to Pakistan over Kashmir.

To Islamabad's chagrin, India, with Washington's full support, has emerged as a key provider of economic aid and military training to the US-imposed Afghan government. In a statement that could only have enraged the Pakistani elite, Clinton asserted Wednesday that India has a pivotal role to play in assisting the US in Afghanistan and Pakistan. "The US," she told the House Foreign Relations Committee, "is advancing its relationship with India as part of a wide-ranging diplomatic agenda to meet today's daunting challenges topped by the situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

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