

US expands war into Pakistan

Missile Strikes to be Intensified

By [Keith Jones](#)

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The head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and Richard Holbrooke, the US Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, visited Islamabad Monday and Tuesday to press Pakistani authorities to intensify their efforts to staunch the anti-American insurgency in the country's Pashtun-speaking Afghan borderlands.

Unveiled by US President Barack Obama late last month, Washington's new strategy to pacify Afghanistan calls for a dramatic escalation of the war—US troop strength in Afghanistan is to almost double from 38,000 to 68,000—and for the war's further expansion in Pakistan, both through coordinated action with Islamabad and unilateral US strikes inside Pakistan.

Since 2004, the Pakistani military has repeatedly mounted anti-insurgency operations in the historically autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), suffering some 1,500 fatalities, provoking widespread popular anger over its wanton indifference to civilian casualties, and triggering a growing humanitarian crisis. More than half a million FATA residents have been rendered refugees.

In Bajur, the site of heavy fighting last fall, the military flattened whole villages. According to a recent BBC report, there is growing anger among refugees over the government's failure to provide them with assistance to rebuild their homes. Teacher Abdul Haleem, who is now living at a refugee camp near Peshawar that used to house Afghans displaced by the civil war of the 1980s, told the BBC, "They've destroyed the whole village, the whole market. There are no hospitals, no schools, no teachers in Bajur. They're all here."

But the US political and military elite is adamant that Pakistan act more aggressively to quell the insurgency, charging that FATA and neighboring parts of Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province have become a "safe-haven" for anti-US forces. In recent days, top US officials including Holbrooke and General David Petraeus, the head of the Pentagon's Central Command, have publicly charged that elements within Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the ISI, are continuing to consort with the Taliban and other anti-US Islamic insurgents.

In the midst of Holbrooke's and Mullen's visit to Islamabad, the New York Times, no doubt at the behest of the Obama administration, published a report meant to underline Washington's determination to wage war in Pakistan. Titled "More drone attacks in Pakistan Planned," the report cited "senior administration officials" as saying that the US intends "to step up its use of drones to strike militants in Pakistan's tribal areas."

Since last August, US forces have carried out at least 35 drone missile strikes inside

Pakistan, killing more than 340 people, many, if not most of them, civilians. The most recent attack came on the morning of April 4 in North Waziristan. Local officials said women and children were among the 13 dead.

Tuesday's Times article also reported that the Obama administration is considering broadening "the missile strikes to Baluchistan," repeating a claim made in an earlier Times report.

US officials claim the drone missile strikes in FATA have caused some leaders of the anti-US insurgency to flee to Quetta, Baluchistan's capital. The implication is that if Pakistani authorities don't soon act to apprehend or kill these insurgents, the US will begin mounting drone attacks in and around Quetta, a city of well over a million people.

The drone attacks very much exemplify the servile relationship that exists between Washington and Islamabad and are seen as such by ordinary Pakistanis. Having for the better part of a decade sustained the dictator General Pervez Musharraf in power, because he was providing vital support to the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, Washington now brazenly asserts the right to violate Pakistani sovereignty at will and rain down death on impoverished villagers.

Such is the popular feeling, all sections of the Pakistani political elite have been compelled to condemn the drone attacks. Aftab Ahmad Sherpao, interior minister during much of Musharraf's rule, recently told the Times that only about 1 to 2 percent of Pakistanis support the US's policy toward their country: "A cross-section of people is dead set against the Americans. Another section is not happy, but not vocal."

A spokesman for the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has said the FATA-based pro-Taliban group will mount two suicide bombings a week until the US ceases its drone attacks. Pakistani authorities have blamed TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud for a series of devastating attacks in the heart of Pakistan's major cities, including the December 2007 assassination of Pakistan People's Party leader Benazir Bhutto. Mehsud has denied most of these claims, but he did claim authorship of last week's attack on a police academy in Lahore and a paramilitary camp in Islamabad.

Popular sentiment notwithstanding, it is an open secret that the Pakistani government tolerates the drone attacks, albeit grudgingly, as necessary to sustain the reactionary, client-patron partnership between the Pakistani military and the Pentagon that has for decades been at the heart of the Pakistani elite's geo-political strategy. Indeed, it has been all but conclusively established that many of the drone attacks are launched from a CIA base located within Pakistan.

Speaking at a press conference Tuesday alongside Holbrooke and Mullen, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said, "We did talk about drones and let me be very frank, there is a gap between us and them [the US officials]. I want to bridge that gap.

"My view is that [the drone attacks] are working to the advantage of the extremists."

Qureshi said the two sides "agree to disagree on this." In other words, the US will continue to carry out unilaterally military strikes inside Pakistan, a violation of international law that is tantamount to an act of war.

Qureshi claimed that the US has agreed to abide by “certain red lines,” specifically that there will be no “foreign boots on Pakistani soil.” In fact, already last month Holbrooke and the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher made statements stipulating that there will not be a repeat of the US Special Forces’ raid mounted inside Pakistan last September. That raid provoked a crisis in US-Pakistani relations with the Pakistani military briefly closing down the principal Pakistani supply route for US forces in Afghanistan and demonstrably shooting at US helicopters when they passed over from Afghanistan into Pakistani air space.

The Pentagon clearly would like US forces in southern Afghanistan to have the option to cross into Pakistan. But the far more important objective for it and for Washington is to get Pakistan to coordinate military action with US forces in Afghanistan and to bear a large part of the fighting and the surge in casualties that will result from the intensification of the war in what the Obama administration now officially describes as a single war-theater embracing Afghanistan and Pakistan’s border regions.

The tensions that underlie the US-Pakistan relationship were given muted expression when Qureshi declared, “The bottom line is the question of trust.... We can only work together if we respect and trust each other.”

These remarks were clearly in reaction to the assertions of top US officials that sections of the ISI retain relations with the Taliban and like groups, believing them to be an important instrument of Pakistani geo-political strategy, and more generally US complaints that Islamabad has not given Washington good value for the more than \$10 billion in military aid and “war on terror payments” that the Bush administration funneled to the Musharraf regime.

A key element in the Obama administration’s Afghan war strategy is a redefinition of Washington’s relations with Islamabad. The Obama plan calls for Pakistan to be given \$1.5 billion per year in development aid for the next 5 years and close to \$3 billion in additional counter-insurgency aid over 5 years. The development aid constitutes less than \$10 per year per Pakistani, but it is far more than the US has ever offered Islamabad in non-military aid.

To the frustration of the Pakistani elite, the offer of aid comes with significant strings attached. Obama pointedly proclaimed that there will be “no blank checks” for Pakistan. The annual development money will be tied to as yet unspecified conditions meant to measure and judge, at least on an annual basis, that Pakistan is doing the US’s bidding in the Afghan-Pakistan war. The “Pakistani Counterinsurgency Capability Fund” will be subject to unprecedented Pentagon controls and US stipulations that the military aid cannot be used against India.

Islamabad has long complained that Washington has failed to supply the Pakistani military with advanced counter-insurgency equipment, including night vision glasses and attack helicopters.

In announcing its new Afghan War strategy, top Obama administration officials also made clear, to Islamabad’s chagrin, that the US has no intention of getting involved in the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir. In the run-up to last November’s US elections, Obama and several of his aides suggested that the US should take a more active role in resolving the Kashmir dispute, with the implied suggestion that placing pressure on India to make

concessions to Pakistan over Kashmir would be a quid pro quo for getting Pakistan to be even more supportive of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

India, being the larger and stronger power, has always insisted that the Kashmir dispute is a bilateral issue and vigorously opposed any suggestion of third party involvement. In recent months, New Delhi has made thwarting any possible US intervention in the Kashmir conflict a key priority. Through diplomatic channels it has strongly voiced its opposition directly to Washington. But India also seized on last November's Mumbai terrorist atrocity to press its claim that Pakistan is the nexus of world terrorism and that the Kashmir insurgency is simply a product of the machinations of the Pakistani military-security establishment.

Washington has gotten the message and is anxious to assuage India, which it has been courting for a decade as a potential Asian counterweight to a rising China. To appease New Delhi, Holbrooke's job description was changed at the last minute to Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, rather than Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Top US officials charged with briefing reporters on the Obama administration's new Afghan War strategy reiterated that the US will not get involved in resolving the Kashmir dispute. "We don't intend to get involved in that issue," declared US National Security Advisor General James Jones. "But we do intend to help both countries build more trust and confidence, so that Pakistan can address the issues that it confronts on the western side of the nation."

The reality is that Washington's drive to extend US influence in oil rich Central Asia through the conquest of Afghanistan and its attempt to make India a "global, strategic partner" are placing great pressure on the crisis-ridden Pakistani state.

Thirty years ago the US instigated Islamabad to mentor Islamic fundamentalist militias in Afghanistan as part of its reactionary drive against the Soviet Union and backed the Pakistani dictator and Islamic reactionary General Zia ul Haq to the hilt.

Today it demands that Pakistan crush the Taliban. This not only undercuts the Pakistani elite's attempt to maintain influence in Afghanistan under conditions where the government in Kabul, with US support, has developed extensive ties to India. It enflames Pashtun nationalist feeling on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border further feeding national-ethnic tensions within the Pakistani state, has caused fissures within the military, and has further discredited the government in the eyes of the Pakistani people by demonstrating it to be a US mercenary regime.

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