

US-NATO Agenda: The Destabilization of Pakistan.

By [Gary Leupp](#)

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So far the principle result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following the events of 9-11 has been the destabilization of Pakistan. That breakdown is peaking with the events in what AP calls the “Swat town” of Mingora—actually a city of 375,000 from which all but 20,000 have fled as government forces moved in, strafing it with gunships. We’re talking urban guerrilla warfare, house-to-house fighting, not on the Afghan border but 50 miles away in the Swat Valley. We’re talking about Pakistani troops fighting to reclaim the nearby Malam Jabba ski resort from the Tehreek-e-Taliban, who since last year have been using it as a training center and logistics base. We’re talking about two million people fleeing the fighting in the valley and 160,000 in government refugee camps.

And of course, “collateral damage”: As was reported in *The News* in Pakistan May 19:

Several persons, including women and children, were killed and a number of others sustained injuries when families fleeing the military operation in Swat’s Matta town were shelled while crossing a mountainous path to reach Karo Darra in Dir Upper on Monday, eyewitnesses and official sources said. Eyewitnesses, who escaped the attack or were able to reach Wari town of Dir Upper in injured condition, said they were targeted by gunship helicopters. However, police officials said they might have been hit by a stray shell. Local people said they saw some 12 to 14 bodies on a mountain on the Swat side but could not go near to retrieve them or help the injured for fear of another aerial attack.

What a nightmare scenario for Pakistan.

We’re talking about the Pakistani Army sometimes fighting over the last year to retake towns from Taliban forces in the Buner region of the North-West Frontier Province that are closer to the capital of Islamabad than the Afghan border. And while the Talibs apparently lack popular support, even among the Pashtuns (who are 15 % of the Pakistani population—26 million and 42% of the Afghan population—14 million) they have been able to inflict embarrassing defeats on the army.

Tehreek-i-Taliban leader Baitullah Mahsud, head of the militant forces in South Waziristan, established his credentials when his forces captured 300 Pakistani soldiers and traded them for about 30 imprisoned militants in the fall of 2007. Time and again the several (sometimes rival) “Taliban” forces, which did not exist before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan created them, have forced the government to negotiate terms. Most recently in February Islamabad agreed to the implementation of the Sharia in the Swat Valley in exchange for peace. The Taliban broke the agreement in April, or so the story goes, and the army claims it’s killed 1,100 militants since.

But curiously as of Sunday it claimed to have killed only 10 Taliban, while boasting of seizing (according to AP) “a spot nicknamed ‘bloody intersection’ because militants routinely dumped the mutilated bodies of their victims there.” On Monday I read of another four dead militants but the Taliban announced through a spokesman that they would maintain “aides” in place in the city, cease fire, and advise civilians to return. It appears most have retreated to other towns, including Buner and Daggar where fighting goes on now. This they can do under cover of the masses of refugees of course.

Now think of what has happened here. Whether or not this was Osama bin Laden’s conscious plan, the local, ethnically-based, ideological movement most receptive to his own (i.e., the Taliban, or more precisely, multiple talibans on the Pakistan side of the border) has flourished since the U.S. attack upon Afghanistan in response to the 9-11 attacks. The imperialist response to 9-11 inflamed Pashtunistan. The toppling of the Taliban itself aroused indignation among many Pakistani as well as Afghan Pashtuns. Some militants fleeing east met with the traditional Pashtunwali welcome, as they would under less stressful circumstances, and beyond that political sympathy.

The drone missile attacks, the civilian deaths, the contemptuous official denials, the repeated insults to national sovereignty, the connivance of the regime in power, have angered many, perhaps most, Pakistanis. While the Taliban has undergone a quiet resurgence in southern Afghanistan, leading U.S. generals to conclude that a military solution to the war is impossible, bands of religious “students” gathering around tribal leaders and warlords in Pakistan forming the umbrella “Movement of the Taliban” or Tehreek-e-Taliban under Mahsud have been able to generate this kind of chaos.

The Army had been deployed before against Indian and Chinese forces. But the disproportionately Pashtun force had never confronted or been trained to confront fanatical Pashtun jihadis—particularly when the issue was the implementation of the Sharia. Not surprisingly it performed badly and Islamabad wound up cutting a deal in February to implement Islamic law in the Swat Valley. U.S. Defense Secretary Gates can criticize that judgment in stating, “We want to support [the Pakistanis]. We want to help them in any way we can. But it is important that they recognize the real threats to their country.” And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton can tell Congress, “I think the Pakistani government is basically abdicating to the Taliban and the extremists [by making a peace deal in Swat]. Changing paradigms and mindsets is not easy, but I do believe there is an increasing awareness of not just the Pakistani government but the Pakistani people that this insurgency coming closer and closer to major cities does pose such a threat.”

It’s easy to lecture about such things, to judge the actions of another government facing a crisis. But isn’t it obvious that what Clinton has since at least April been calling Pakistan’s “existential threat” wouldn’t be closing in on the cities of that country had the U.S. not responded to 9-11 with the knee-jerk bombing of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban? President Pervez Musharraf has recalled that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told him soon after 9-11 to “prepare to go back to the Stone Age” if he didn’t cooperate with the U.S. in the war on terrorism. The existential threat to Pakistan was the Bush administration!

The Bush administration pressured Musharraf to deploy the Pakistan Army in border provinces where it had never been deployed and where its very presence was perceived as a provocation. The result was the September 2005 “peace agreement” in which the

government agreed to halt military operations along the border and dismantle checkpoints in return for tribal leaders' commitment to end support for militancy and prevent cross-border incursions into Afghanistan. It was a face-saving defeat for the regime that drew U.S. criticism, as have all subsequent deals with the militants, which have in any case broken down, like the February deal in Swat.

The 2005 agreement followed the notorious Lal Masjid episode in Islamabad when the security forces stormed an important seminary and hotbed of Islamist activism. The khatib (prayer-leader) had been dismissed for issuing a fatwa stating no Pakistani Army officer could be given an Islamic burial if died fighting the Taliban, and then the mosque had risen up in general rebellion, sparking solidarity attacks on government forces by militants in North Waziristan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The government was forced to back down.

That's been the pattern ever since. Get tough on the "insurgents," with U.S. prodding, and funding, and threats of funding reduction and direct intervention. Then negotiate with tribal and religious leaders, recognizing locals' mistrust of outsiders, the Pakistani state, and its international backers which the mullahs may identify as U.S. imperialism and Zionism. And watch both carrot and stick policies fail as Pakistan's own homegrown Taliban insurgency swells alongside the recrudescing original next door.

Now, while the Pakistani Army is still struggling to take control of Mingora and the Taliban is regrouping, the insurgents have pulled off a brazen attack on the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) office compound in Lahore, in eastern Pakistan, on the border with India, killing about 30 and injuring 250. The irony here of course is that the Taliban was nurtured by the ISI in the 1990s and the attackers may well have known the location of ISI offices for that very reason.

Such terror has Bush's war on terror visited on Pakistan, with no end in sight. And Obama's war in "Af-Pak," reliant on a troop surge, more Predator drone attacks, and maybe some "divide and conquer" tactics, hold out little promise for relief. U.S. officials screw up their faces as if genuinely puzzled about while the Pakistanis aren't doing more—as if puzzled about why they don't understand that their existence is at stake. The fact is that they are the ones on the outside looking in, who do not understand that the interests of U.S. imperialism do not cause religious and national and ethnic sensibilities to disappear or make it possible for local leaders, even those on the imperialist payroll, to snap their fingers, crush local resistance and produce social peace. The interests of U.S. imperialism in this case, in the form of regime change in Afghanistan, and the way it was done, have antagonized much of the Pakistani population.

This is Washington's unwanted gift to Islamabad, for which Islamabad keeps getting paid and keeps paying.

Gary Leupp is Professor of History at Tufts University, and Adjunct Professor of Religion. He is the author of [Servants, Shophands and Laborers in in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan](#); [Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan](#); and [Interracial Intimacy in Japan: Western Men and Japanese Women, 1543-1900](#). He is also a contributor to CounterPunch's merciless chronicle of the wars on Iraq, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia, [Imperial Crusades](#).

He can be reached at: gleupp@granite.tufts.edu

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