

What is the United States preparing in Pakistan?

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Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari will undoubtedly come under renewed pressure to allow US military forces to wage war within Pakistan when he visits Washington this week for a trilateral summit meeting with President Obama and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai.

For weeks, the US political and military establishment and the American media have been mounting an increasingly shrill campaign to bully Islamabad into fully complying with US diktats in what Washington has redefined as the AfPak (Afghanistan-Pakistan) war theater.

At the US's behest, the Pakistani military has for the past 10 days been mounting a bloody offensive—including strafing by warplanes and heavy artillery—against Pakistani Taliban militia in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The offensive has caused large numbers of civilian casualties and forced tens of thousands of poor villagers to flee.

Between 600,000 and a million Pakistanis have been turned into refugees by the Pakistani state's drive to pacify the NWFP and the country's traditionally autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), so as to bolster the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The US ruling elite has welcomed the latest round of bloodletting, but it is far from satisfied. The flurry of threats, implicit and explicit, against Pakistan, its people and government has continued unabated in the run-up to Zardari's Washington visit.

At an April 29th press conference, Obama described Pakistan's civilian government as "very fragile" and not having "the capacity to deliver basic services" to its people, or to gain their "support and loyalty." But he praised the Pakistani military and the "strong" US-Pakistani "military consultation and cooperation."

Given Washington's pivotal role in sustaining a succession of military dictatorships in Islamabad, Obama's statement was widely interpreted both in Pakistan and within the US political establishment as signaling that Washington is considering sponsoring a military coup.

This was underscored by reports citing the chief of the US Central Command, General David Petraeus, as saying that if the Zardari government did not demonstrate over the next two weeks that it can crush the Taliban insurgency in the country's northwest, the US will have to determine its "next course of action." Petraeus went on to declare Pakistan's military "superior" to the country's civilian government.

Such was the outcry in Pakistan that State Department spokesman Robert Wood was forced to deny Friday that Islamabad faces a two-week "time frame." Nonetheless, he bluntly asserted that Washington expects Pakistan to make a "110 percent effort" in the fight against the Taliban, and not for "two days, two weeks, two months," but for the foreseeable

future.

Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, denounced the apprehensions voiced in the Pakistani press that less than nine months after the last US-backed dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, was forced to relinquish the Pakistani presidency, Washington is considering supporting a military-led government. "This is journalistic garbage ... journalistic gobbledygook," declared Holbrooke.

The evidence that the Obama administration is preparing some new crime in Pakistan so as to ratchet up its war in Central Asia is overwhelming.

With the transparent aim of intensifying the pressure on Zardari, the Obama administration, according to high-level administration officials cited last week in the Wall Street Journal and New York Times, is now courting his arch-rival, former prime minister and Pakistan Muslim League (N) leader Nawaz Sharif.

Obama, at his press conference last week, claimed that the US wants to respect Pakistani sovereignty. "But," he added, "we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure Pakistan is stable."

In other words, the US will violate Pakistan's sovereignty at will. Since last August, the US has mounted dozens of missile strikes within Pakistan and one Special Forces ground attack.

Last week, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that the Obama administration is asking the US Congress to give the Pentagon the same powers in relation to military aid to Pakistan that it has in respect to military assistance to the puppet governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under this "unique" arrangement, military aid to Pakistan would no longer flow through the State Department or be subject to Foreign Assistance Act restrictions, but rather be entirely controlled by the Pentagon.

Then there is the extraordinary lead article in yesterday's New York Times, headlined "Pakistan Strife Raises US Doubts on Nuclear Arms." Written by the newspaper's White House correspondent, David Sanger, the article has all the markings of a CIA or Pentagon put-up job, concocted with the aim of manipulating public opinion and justifying a major escalation of the US political and military intervention in Pakistan.

The article is based entirely on the statements of unnamed "senior American officials." It claims, notwithstanding Obama's statement of last week affirming confidence in the Pakistani military's control of the country's nuclear arsenal, that there is a real and growing threat that Taliban or Al Qaeda operatives could snatch a Pakistani nuclear weapon or infiltrate its nuclear facilities.

To explain how the Islamicists could circumvent the elaborate controls the Pakistani military, with US assistance, has placed over its nuclear arsenal, the article advances a thriller-type scenario. Islamicists would first trigger a confrontation between India and Pakistan, then seize a weapon when Pakistan seeks to move it closer to the border with its eastern neighbor.

The Times, it should be recalled, played a major role in seeking to mobilize US public opinion behind the invasion of Iraq. Front and center in this campaign was the lie that the Iraqi government was in league with Al Qaeda and might give them access to nuclear weapons

Saddam Hussein was supposedly developing.

That the Times's article was part of a coordinated campaign was underscored by an interview given to the BBC by Obama's national security adviser, Gen. James Jones, on Monday, the same day that the Times article appeared.

Jones singled out as the top US concern the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, and made a thinly veiled threat against the Pakistani government, saying, "If Pakistan doesn't continue in the direction that it presently is, and we're not successful there, then, obviously, the nuclear question comes into view."

He went on to say that Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the Taliban would be "the very, very worst case scenario" and added, choosing his words carefully but pointedly, "We're going to do anything we can within the construct of our bilateral relations and multilateral relations to make sure that doesn't happen."

The Obama administration and the Pentagon are clearly weighing their options in respect to Pakistan and its role in the US thrust for geo-political advantage in oil-rich Central Asia. One thing is certain: What they are preparing will lead to greater violence and suffering for the people of the region and will further subvert the democratic will and aspirations of the Pakistani people.

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