

Afghanistan-Pakistan. The Drones Are Coming: New War on Civilians

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US President Barack Obama took the podium in a White House press conference and stood with an all-embellished confidence that often accompanies new presidents. He was flanked by two leaders whose apparent grandeur barely reflected their embattled situations on the ground: Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.

The meeting at the White House on 6 May was fashioned to give the impression that the new US administration is both “serious” and “committed” about resolving the crises plaguing Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are imprudently reduced to that of a Taliban resurgence in the former, and a Taliban- inspired militant encroachment in the latter. Obama declared the meeting “extraordinarily productive” as the three nations, he said, are joined by the common goal to “defeat Al-Qaeda and its extremist allies in Pakistan and Afghanistan “.

The skewed reading of reality didn’t cease there. “I am pleased that these two men, elected leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan , fully appreciate the seriousness of the threat that we face and have reaffirmed their commitment to confronting it,” Obama said. Both leaders listened solemnly as to reflect the level of their “seriousness”.

For a fleeting moment one did in fact hope that Obama would bring with him more than a new language; rather, an entirely new take on US foreign policy. That hope is already in tatters.

“Obama conveyed the right message last week by hosting Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari. The meeting at the White House reflected the close link between Pakistan and the anti-Taliban struggle in Afghanistan . Indeed, nests of Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other extremists sheltering on the Pakistani side of the border have become a grave threat to Pakistan itself,” opined a Boston Globe editorial. But the Globe also counselled: “As recent events suggest, US military strikes against militants in both countries inevitably provoke anger and indignation among civilians.”

This is as much as most US media — and of course, the US administration — are willing to concede as far as US responsibility in lethal wars, civil strife and militancy in both countries is concerned. In fact, if one is to delineate a major difference in the Bush and Obama administrations regarding Afghanistan , it’s the fact that Obama apologises when the number of innocent civilians killed by US air strikes is too harrowing to ignore. Another notable difference is that he has committed 17,000 additional troops to the already war-devastated country, promising more bloodshed.

"I wish to express my personal regret and certainly the sympathy of our administration on the loss of civilian life in Afghanistan," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in her public apology to the killing of over 100 civilians in two Afghan villages 4 May. The apology, however, was obliquely qualified by the US military in comments made by Tech Sergeant Chuck Marsh on 9 May: "Reports also indicate that Taliban fighters deliberately forced villagers into houses from which they then attacked ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] and Coalition forces," he said.

So, somehow, the US is still not responsible.

Now the war is flaring up in Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani families have fled the area, and the main town of Migora has been virtually emptied of its inhabitants. Reuters reported that, "Pakistani forces attacked Taliban fighters in the Swat Valley with artillery and helicopters after the United States called on the government to show its commitment to fighting militancy." One has to wonder who is giving the orders in this foolish war, anyway? Moreover, does Obama genuinely think that the Pakistani "Taliban" can be defeated using the exact approach that failed against the Taliban of Afghanistan?

The escalation in Pakistan is not entirely surprising, however, as US officials and media pundits have been adamant in advising the new administration that it was not Afghanistan that posed the greater threat to US interests, but Pakistan. It was similar to the attitude of neoconservatives in the Bush administration after its failure in Iraq. It was not Iraq that the US should have attacked, but Iran, they tirelessly parroted, hoping to generate yet another war.

What we are not told, however, is that unremitting US bombings of the utterly poor and neglected northern provinces of Pakistan have garnered untold animosity towards the US and its central government allies. It provoked, in some areas, total chaos and lawlessness, which in turn gave rise to the Pakistani "Taliban". History is repeating itself, but the US administration is taking no notice of the obvious pattern.

A Pakistan writer, Abd Al-Ghaffar Aziz, wrote for Al-Jazeera's Arabic website: "Since the US attack on Afghanistan, the province [of Balochistan] has been accused of supporting terrorism and harbouring the leaders of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Since then, US planes, especially drones, have been striking what it calls 'precious targets', resulting in the death of over 15,000 people." Aziz described the people of that region "like orphans without shelter, and without protection." Naturally, tribe leaders, militant groups and others moved to fill the gap.

If there is one outstanding similarity between the Afghanistan and Pakistan cases it is the fact the US is using the same flawed logic that responds to most delicate conflicts with bullets, whether those of its own or its allies. If the new administration is keenly interested in reversing the misfortunes of that region, it has to understand the uniqueness of every country and appreciate the untold harm inflicted on civilians by the US and other militaries. Only dialogue and truly respecting the sovereignty of Afghanistan and Pakistan can begin to stabilise the fractious situation.

There are an estimated one million Pakistanis already on the run in the northern and eastern parts of the country. They are threatened by fighting, hunger and all sorts of predators, including US drones circling overhead.

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