

Destabilizing Pakistan, America Plays with Fire

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With the Obama administration preparing a major military escalation across South Asia, the corrupt ruling elites perched in their palaces in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi have demonstrated their contempt for the Pakistani people. Unable, and unwilling, to solve the deep-seated structural problems facing their nation—unemployment, lack of security, rampant crime and corruption, the lack of public education, the absence of health care, free expression and the right to be left alone to live in peace—like the Musharraf clique, the Zardari administration has cut a deal with the imperialist overlords who now threaten destruction on a planetary scale. Caught between the jihadi Frankenstein and the American Draculas waiting in the wings, it is the people of South Asia who will pay a steep price as the Pentagon and their corporatist masters seek a “solution” to what Washington insiders have dubbed the “Af-Pak” problem.

CIA Predators Strike from Pakistan

As the United States ramps-up regional military operations, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), the chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, dropped a bombshell when she revealed that CIA Predator drones are flown from an airbase in Pakistan, the *Los Angeles Times* [reported](#).

Expressing surprise at Pakistan's opposition to missile strikes launched in that country's borderlands with Afghanistan, Feinstein said “As I understand it, these are flown out of a Pakistani base.”

If true, this latest revelation will only serve to destabilize the civilian government of Pakistan Peoples Party President Asif Ali Zardari.

As if to underscore Feinstein's disclosure, *The Guardian* [reported](#) February 16 that “A US missile strike against suspected militants in a tribal area of Pakistan killed 30 people today, as Islamabad announced a peace deal with extremists in another region that includes the imposition of Islamic law.”

The latest strike allegedly targeted a home used by a “Taliban commander close to the Afghan border.” This was the fourth Predator missile attack on Pakistan since Obama became President.

Monday's attack followed a strike on February 14. *The New York Times* [reported](#) that two Hellfire missiles fired from CIA Predators struck a compound in South Waziristan killing upwards of 32 people.

According to reports, the target was alleged to be a safe house where Baitullah Mehsud, a

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) “emir” and his henchmen often gathered. *The New York Times*, citing a Pakistani “intelligence official” claimed that “Arab and Uzbek” foreign fighters allied with the Taliban and Osama bin Laden’s Afghan-Arab database of disposable Western intelligence assets were among those killed.

Caught between the pincers of U.S. imperialism and a home-grown Islamist insurgency with ties to the Afghan Taliban, Washington’s “former” allies, al-Qaeda, and elements of its own Army and intelligence services, the Zardari government is in full crisis mode.

The disclosure by Feinstein came during testimony February 12 before the Committee by U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Dennis C. Blair.

While the CIA refused to comment and DNI Blair did not respond to her statement, unnamed “U.S. intelligence officials” described the senator’s remarks as “accurate.” Feinstein’s spokesperson, Philip J. LaVelle, claimed the senator’s comment “was based solely on previous news reports that Predators were operated from bases near Islamabad,” the *L. A. Times* reported.

Pakistani officials were quick to discredit Feinstein’s remarks. Defense Minister Ahmad Mukhtar told [Daily Times](#), “We do have the facilities from where they can fly, but they are not being flown from Pakistani territory. They are being flown from Afghanistan.”

The revelations will not sit well with elements within the military and intelligence establishment that continue to favorably view terrorist proxies such as Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) or for that matter the TTP.

As I previously [reported](#), on January 23 twenty-two people, including 8 or 10 alleged members of al-Qaeda, the rest civilians, were killed when CIA Predator drones slammed into houses in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Despite an escalating campaign that saw some 30 CIA Predator strikes in the latter half of 2008, American officials conceded that the CIA had failed to kill “senior al-Qaeda commanders.”

Feinstein’s remarks are certain to enflame tensions against Pakistan’s civilian government. But with a history of destabilizing civilian regimes viewed as “problematic” to wider geopolitical goals—the U.S. after all, was complicit in the Army and ISI’s “soft coups” against Bhutto twice during the 1990s—this may be Washington’s intent.

The symbolism of the Predator attacks couldn’t be clearer: most of the CIA missile strikes were launched since September when the Zardari administration took power. If this is the case, the United States is playing with fire and most assuredly will get burned, along with millions of South Asia’s people caught in the cross-fire.

“Winning” Through Capitulation: the TTP’s Long March to Power

Predator missile strikes and American threats aren’t the only problems plaguing Pakistan. A home-grown Islamist insurgency has been steadily gaining ground since 2007 and the latest moves by that government’s nominal secular leadership is cause for concern.

President Zardari [told](#) *CBS News’ “60 Minutes”* Sunday, “We are aware of the fact (the Taliban are) trying to take over the state of Pakistan. So, we’re fighting for the survival of Pakistan.” However, the government has responded by capitulating to the TTP’s demands in

NWFP's Malakand district that includes the Swat Valley.

A target of the CIA's February 14 missile strike, Baitullah Mehsud and Maulana Fazlullah, Pakistani veterans of America's anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, command a formidable army.

With links to elements within Pakistan's organized crime-tainted Inter Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and Army officers (serving and retired) who came to prominence during the reign of dictator General Zia ul-Haq, the TTP have been marching eastward from their redoubts in North and South Waziristan, the North-West Frontier Province and now threaten chaos within Pakistan's major population centers.

In the past year alone, TTP militants have launched more than 600 terrorist attacks, killing 2,000 people. Last September, a truck packed with explosives demolished the Marriott hotel in downtown Islamabad, killing 60 and injuring some 260 others. The political fallout was devastating to the Zardari administration when it emerged that the perpetrators were Pakistanis. With a reputation as a grifter—after all, Asif and Benazir had amassed some \$1.5 *billion* in assets after Bhutto's two terms in office—the Yankee overlords made it clear they had no confidence in his administration and would prefer another compliant military “Big Man” to rule the roost.

Since September, the situation has grown markedly worse. TTP and al-Qaeda fighters along with their Afghan Talib cousins, have virtually cut NATO's supply lines into Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass and now threaten Peshawar, the NWFP's capital, a sprawling city of three million people.

According to the latest reports in the Pakistani press, the TTP now control some eighty percent of the territory of the Swat Valley where Mehsud's local commander, Maulana Fazlullah has instituted a reign of terror under the banner of “Sharia Law.” The Pakistan military, according to local politicians, lawyers, teachers and residents under threat of death by the militants, has waged an ineffective and counterproductive campaign that has relied on punishing artillery barrages that kill and maim civilians.

While top political and military leaders have “vowed to crush militancy in the North Western parts of the country” according to [The Nation](#), it appears that the government's strategy for “winning” entails a complete capitulation to the TTP's demands, including the imposition of draconian religious strictures on the people of Swat that will be “administered” by the Taliban themselves!

Since the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) affair in 2007, the TTP has challenged the state's writ and has spread sectarian medievalism across Pakistan, launching terrorist strikes in major cities, bombing girls' schools, burning down video shops, executing “immoral” women and beheading secular and leftist opponents. Along with the carnage, organized crime and the drug traffic has markedly increased. *Dawn* [reported](#),

A high-level security meeting presided over jointly by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on Friday reviewed the situation in tribal areas and the NWFP and decided to continue the military operation in Swat till the establishment of government's writ. (Syed Irfan Raza, “Operation to go on till writ is restored: Jammers to block Maulana's radio,” Dawn, February 14, 2009)

Critics charge however, the government's rhetoric is no more than a band-aid over a

gangrenous wound. In a move designed to placate the jihadist Frankenstein and bolster charges of complicity levelled by secular critics, NWFP Information Minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain “has said that headway has been made towards implementation of Shariah regulation in Swat valley,” according to a [report](#) in *The News*.

Following these talks, *The News* [reported](#) February 15, the government had “finalized” a “five-point agreement,” one that negotiated the surrender of women’s and worker’s rights with Maulana Sufi Mohammed, the chief of the banned Tehrik Nifaz Shariat-i-Muhammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law, TNSM) and father-in-law of TTP “emir” Fazlullah.

On February 16, Amir Haider Khan Hoti, the NWFP’s Chief Minister announced that the Army will pull out of active operations in the Malakand district, which includes Swat Valley, after reaching an agreement that will see the imposition of Sharia law on the people-against their wishes.

While Hoti claims that the fundamentalists will “lay down their arms” as a result of the agreement, Pakistani critics believe that the organization will use the state’s climb-down to regroup and rearm, gathering strength to launch new operations aimed at the centers of power. Feebly, Hoti told [The News](#), “It is my hope that the armed people will disarm themselves, give up the path of violence and work for restoration of peace in Swat.”

NWFP’s Information Minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain announced that “after successful negotiations, all un-Islamic laws related to the judicial system, those against the Koran and the Sunnah, would be subject to cancellation and considered null and void,” [according](#) to *The New York Times*.

Needless to say, like those conducted by their imperialist overlords, the agreement was negotiated behind the backs of the people affected by Taliban depredations. Following the announcement of the deal the *McClatchy Washington Bureau* [reported](#),

Many Pakistani Army and intelligence officers ... oppose using force against fellow Muslims, and some have ties to militant groups.

“This (new agreement) is definitely a surrender,” said Khadim Hussain of the Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy, a policy institute in Islamabad, the capital. “If you keep treating a community as something different from the rest of the country, it will isolate them.”

Javed Iqbal, a retired judge, speaking on Pakistani television, said: “It means that there is not one law in the country. It will disintegrate this way. If you concede to this, you will go on conceding.” (Saeed Shah, “Pakistani government makes deal with Islamic militants,” McClatchy Washington Bureau, February 15, 2009)

Human- and women’s rights activist and political commentator, Saba Gul Khattak, the author of *Inconvenient Facts: Military regimes and women’s political representation in Pakistan* [writes](#),

A host of other explanations tell us how the Taliban have managed to spread. For example, some middle ranking army officers and bureaucrats bitterly accuse their superiors of betrayal. They feel frustrated and demoralized by the perception that the Americans, in

cahoots with some in leadership positions, play double games, e.g. equipping select Taliban groups with sophisticated technologies that are effectively used against their attempts to restrain the activities of the Taliban. Many analysts blame the Musharraf government for deliberately looking away while the MMA encouraged right wing organizations to spread their operations. ...

These forebodings are augmented by stories of the Taliban's viciousness, their monopoly over the weapons of fear as they demonstrate their brutality by skinning people, slitting their throats and mutilating bodies, collapsing the difference between human beings and animals.

Meanwhile, the affected people continue to protest in a mute manner, bitter against the armed forces and political government for failing them; and, loathing the Taliban for dislodging them from their homes. Some even contend that the military and the Taliban are one and the same-the soldier who guards his security camp in the day wears a turban and becomes a Talib in the evening. ("Are Taliban Inevitable?," The News, February 16, 2009)

The fact is, most Pakistanis believe religion is a private matter and should be separate from the public sphere. But that doesn't inhibit the TTP and other jihadist outfits from imposing their sectarian will by force and now, with the complicity of the state.

While the Western media portray the country as a hot-bed of fundamentalist extremism, the Taliban-linked parties were shown the door in the 2008 national elections, installing "secular" parties busily negotiating their rights away. Closely associated with the venal Musharraf regime, the five-party alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which had garnered some 15% of the vote in 2002 and controlled the NWFP government suffered a devastating loss. As socialist critic and historian Tariq Ali wrote on the deadly embrace of Pakistani elites and their American neocolonial partners,

Back in the heart of Pakistan the most difficult and explosive issue remains social and economic inequality. This is not unrelated to the increase in the number of madrassas. If there were a half-decent state education system, poor families might not feel the need to hand over a son or kdaughter to the clerics in the hope that at least one child will be clothed, fed, and educated. Were there even the semblance of a health care system, many would be saved from illnesses contracted as a result of fatigue and poverty. No government since 1947 has done much to reduce inequality. ...

I spent my last day in Karachi with fishermen in a village near Korangi Creek. The government has signed away the mangroves where shellfish and lobsters flourish, and land is being reclaimed to build Diamond City, Sugar City, and other monstrosities on the Gulf model. The fishermen had been campaigning against these encroachments, but with little success. "We need a tsunami," one of them half joked. We talked about their living conditions. "All we dream of is schools for our children, medicines and clinics in our villages, clean water and electricity in our homes," one woman said. "Is that too much to ask for?" Nobody even mentioned religion. (The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power, New York: Scribner, 2008, p. 27)

Not that any this matters to the ruling class in Islamabad who "win" no matter what the cost to the victims of the Army and the jihadi Frankensteins for whom cutting a deal-or a throat-is just another day at the office.

A. Q. Khan's Rehabilitation: Placating the Army

The release of nuclear proliferator Dr. A. Q. Khan from house arrest earlier this month, lifting restrictions imposed in 2004 when the scandal surrounding Pakistan's illicit black market in nuclear technology first broke, is another sign that Zardari is in deep trouble at home. Khan's release was a political decision intended to shore-up support on the president's right flank.

Khan was released February 7 according to Defense Minister Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar "under an agreement" that was not disclosed. Intending to cut-off American criticism of the deal with Khan, *IPS* [reported](#) that

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has categorically stated that Khan stands relieved of his duties and had nothing to do with the country's nuclear-related policies.

"We have successfully broken the network that he had set up and today he has no say and has no access to any sensitive areas of Pakistan," Qureshi said. "A.Q. Khan is history." (Beena Sarwar, "Opening the A. Q. Khan Can of Worms," Inter Press Service, February 11, 2009)

Other Pakistanis however, are far more sceptical of the timing of Khan's rehabilitation.

"The disinformation is so extreme, it is shocking how the private television channels celebrated his release," one Karachi-based observer told IPS, asking not to be named. "How come people are not curious about how he made so much money and brought international disgrace upon the country? He should be in jail and tried for treason."

That is unlikely to happen, say observers, because at least some elements of the Pakistan army must have been involved in Khan's deals, without which they would not have been possible. (IPS, ibid.)

In a July 2008 interview, Khan described how a shipment of centrifuges from Pakistan to North Korea in 2000 was "supervised by the army during the rule of President Pervez Musharraf... the army had complete knowledge about it and the equipment," according to *IPS*.

While London and Washington accepted Musharraf's fairy-tale that Khan was a "rogue scientist" whose ring operated solely for its own profit, for *three decades* America turned a blind-eye to Pakistan's proliferation schemes and covered-up the deadly trade.

Indeed, for "reasons of state" successive U.S. administrations, stretching from Gerald R. Ford through George W. Bush, utilized the *same* shadowy intelligence and organized crime networks as did Khan, from the [Bank of Credit and Commerce International's](#) "Black Network" to Dawood Ibrahim's D-Company (an ISI asset used in last November's Mumbai terror attacks) as a sources of illicit funds for covert operations and as proxies to attack strategic targets of the United States.

Despite feeble expressions of "concern" from the U.S. State Department, like Islamabad, Washington *capos* echo the sentiments of Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi who said just after the High Court ruling, "as far we are concerned, we have said time and again, this chapter is closed."

While the Khan “chapter” may be “closed,” the crisis may be far worse than imagined. *Daily Times* [reported](#) February 4 that the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohammed ElBaradei “has said Pakistan’s nuclear weapons can fall into the hands of terrorists due to the prevailing instability in the South Asian country.” Instability, I might add, that the United States and their NATO partners seem hell-bent on spreading far and wide.

Why then, would the United States embark on such a deadly adventure? *If* Pakistan were pushed by internal and external forces to fly-apart, it would set the stage for the military occupation of the country by the U.S. and their partners under the guise of “peacekeeping” and “stability operations.”

Bordering Iran, Afghanistan, India and China, and occupying a strategic position south of the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, a balkanized Pakistan under the control of the United States would be a spear-tip aimed directly at resource-rich China, India and Russia. However mad such a scenario appears initially, particularly when the threat of catastrophic nuclear war *could* be one outcome, American brinksmanship cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The global capitalist economic crisis is accelerating and deepening; that much *is* certain. Attempts by financial mandarins in New York and Washington have failed to ameliorate the underlying contradictions plaguing the system as a whole; a crisis in classic Marxist terms partaking of *both* a crisis of overproduction and a falling rate of profit.

With financial systems on hair-trigger alert, and governments around the world seeking to balance the books on the backs of the people through massive cut-backs and the destruction of workers’ rights, America’s corporatist masters may not be looking towards Roosevelt’s New Deal as a model but rather to an updated, thoroughly technophilic 21st century *fascist* model first devised by Hitler and Mussolini—with great fanfare I might add, by political elites in the United States.

In this context, imperialist military adventurism in South Asia and the Middle East may very well be the opening act for new wars of conquest, with incalculable risks for the planet. The people of South Asia would be well-advised to heed Tariq Ali’s sage advice: *Empires old and new have no friends. They only have interests.*

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