

Pakistan war fuels international tensions

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Global Research, May 12, 2009

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 11 May 2009

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Comments by China's ambassador in Islamabad last Thursday highlight the reckless character of the Obama administration's escalating intervention in Pakistan. By pressuring Islamabad to wage an all-out military offensive against Islamic insurgents in the Swat Valley and neighbouring districts, Washington is not only destabilising Pakistan but raising tensions in a highly volatile area.

Speaking to Pakistani business leaders, Chinese ambassador Luo Zhaohui pointedly voiced concern about the growth of "outside influence" in the region. He singled out the US in particular, saying that China was worried about US policies and the presence of a large number of foreign troops in neighbouring Afghanistan. While reiterating China's support for "the fight against terror," Luo declared that US strategies needed some "corrective measures". He added, "These are issues of serious concern for China."

Luo's unusually blunt remarks came just one day after US President Obama spoke to his Chinese counterpart, President Hu Jintao. While a number of issues were discussed, the escalating war in Pakistan was clearly high on the agenda. This first publicised phone call between the two men came as Obama met with the Afghan and Pakistani presidents over US strategy in the two countries. While Hu reportedly offered his cooperation, Luo's comments express China's underlying fears over growing US influence in South Asia.

Last week's tripartite summit in Washington signalled a major upsurge in military violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Under intense pressure from the US, the Pakistani army has launched a large-scale offensive against militants in the Swat Valley in which hundreds have already died and hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee. The summit, however, involved more than discussions on military cooperation, outlining comprehensive plans for the closer economic and strategic integration of the two countries into an American sphere of influence.

China, which has longstanding ties with Pakistan, is obviously disturbed by these developments. As Ambassador Luo told his business audience, more than 60 Chinese companies are involved in 122 projects in Pakistan. He noted the "close liaison" with Pakistan over the security of over 10,000 Chinese engineers and technical experts in the country. In fact, Beijing has previously insisted on reprisals over the abduction and killing of Chinese citizens by Pakistani militants as well as military action against Islamic Uighur separatists from western China taking refuge in Pakistan.

More fundamentally, Beijing regards Islamabad as a crucial partner in its own regional strategy. China devoted considerable resources to building up Pakistan as a counterweight to India after the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. Pakistan is the largest purchaser of Chinese

arms and, according to the Pentagon, accounted for 36 percent of China's military exports between 2003 and 2007. Chinese technical assistance was critical to Pakistan's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs.

In return, China received the green light to build a major naval/commercial port facility at Gwadar, a coastal town in Baluchistan. The port is the linchpin of Beijing's "string of pearls" strategy to establish access for its expanding navy to a series of ports along key sea routes across the Indian Ocean—above all, to protect oil and gas supplies from the Middle East and Africa. For its part, the US, which regards China as a rising economic and strategic rival, is determined to maintain its military, including naval, predominance.

US-China tensions over Pakistan only highlight the deeply destabilising role of Washington's aggressive intervention, firstly in subjugating Afghanistan, and now in seeking to bring Pakistan more directly under its sway. The escalating conflict in Pakistan is a direct product of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which the Bush administration forced Pakistan to support under the threat of becoming a military target itself. Widespread opposition inside Pakistan and Afghanistan to US actions has fuelled a growing insurgency that threatens not only the US occupation of Afghanistan, but a full-scale civil war in Pakistan.

US imperialism, under the Obama administration, is determined to exploit the very disasters it has created in order to advance its strategic interests throughout the broader region, especially in energy-rich Central Asia. By doing so, Washington is fundamentally altering the precarious strategic balance and threatening to draw the other major powers into the vortex.

China is not alone in its fear of US designs in Central Asia and the presence of large numbers of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US has been seeking to establish military alliances and economic ties with the newly established Central Asian Republics. Washington exploited its invasion of Afghanistan to establish military bases in Central Asia for the first time. Afghanistan and Pakistan also provided a potential alternate pipeline route to extract energy riches from the region. In response, China and Russia, which both regard the region as their backyard, came together in the Shanghai Cooperation Group to counter expanding American influence.

Neighbouring India is also watching events in Pakistan with trepidation. While quietly applauding Washington's pressure on Islamabad to wage war against "terrorism", New Delhi is concerned that Pakistan's closer incorporation under the American umbrella may lead to the downgrading of the US-Indian strategic partnership, which only developed in the late 1990s. The weakening of rival Pakistan, against which India has fought three wars, is no doubt welcomed in New Delhi. But its replacement by a US client state, or worse its collapse into chaos, would only confront the Indian establishment with new uncertainties.

The entire region remains a potential powder keg. The Cold War certainties that divided the world between the Soviet and Western blocs have been replaced by new tensions and rivalries. Tentative steps by India and Pakistan to resolve their longstanding disputes, especially over Kashmir, have all but stalled. Efforts by China and India to improve relations have moved slowly. Each continues to eye the other with suspicion and to intrigue at each other's expense in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma.

The most explosive ingredient in this volatile mixture is the attempt by US imperialism to use its military superiority to offset its long-term economic decline. Far from easing

tensions, the installation of the Obama administration marked an aggressive new turn in the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan aimed at advancing US ambitions. Last week's comments by China's ambassador are another sign that Washington's moves will not go unopposed.

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