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US strikes at Taliban's nerve center

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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KARACHI - When the chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke arrive in Pakistan on Monday, their meetings with top military officials will be framed by the contentious Predator drone attack on Wednesday in a Pakistan tribal area.

The high-powered US officials are due to meet with Pakistan Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the Staff Committee General Tariq Majeed. The talks had been scheduled to decide on a *modus operandi* for new joint military operations against militants and the hot pursuit by American forces - which has been restricted to al-Qaeda - of anti-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Pakistani militants.

Pakistan officials are now upset that the US has taken matters into its own hands by sending a pilotless Central Intelligence Agency drone to fire missiles into a suspected Taliban compound in Orakzai Agency close to the Afghan border, killing 12 people in the first such attack in the area.

Over the past year, drones have targeted al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, mostly in North and South Waziristan and Bajaur tribal agencies. Since last August, an estimated 34 attacks have killed about 340 people, many of them civilians.

Orakzai is a non-al-Qaeda area, and in the past few months it has become a regional hub for "AfPak" militant activities. Wednesday's attack has raised alarm bells in Pakistan that the US might be preparing for a major ground offensive in the area.

There are many areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan where militants of Arab, Pakistani and Afghan origin are gathered to carry out operations against NATO forces, but Orakzai Agency can truly be termed as the hub of AfPak militant activities.

It is the backyard of a militant group under the command of Anwarul Haq Mujahid. Mujahid

is the son of a legendary Afghan guerrilla leader against the Soviets in the 1980s, Moulvi Younus Khalis, and the chief of his own faction of the Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan. Mujahid also has two strongholds in the Afghan province of Nangarhar - Khogiani district, from where he hails, and the Tora Bora mountains, which border Orakzai Agency.

The Taliban carry out raids in Nangarhar and then disappear into the harsh terrain of Khogiani or the Tora Bora - from where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden escaped US forces in 2001. If American special forces carry out followup operations, the fighters slip into Orakzai Agency through Nawa Pass. In the past six months, the Taliban have increased their activities in Nangarhar, making Orakzai even more important as a refuge, and something the US clearly wants to end.

Orakzai is important for another reason. The Taliban chose it as a base from where to send fighters into Khyber Agency to attack NATO supply convoys. The Taliban don't have roots in Khyber Agency, where the people are mostly traders and being Sufi are not religiously like-minded with the Taliban, so the militants have been unable to set up bases.

The high-profile people who have been kidnapped by militants in Peshawar, capital of North-West Frontier Province, or from Khyber Agency, were immediately shifted to Orakzai, and then passed on to South Waziristan.

Wednesday's attack is a warning shot for the Taliban. If Khyber Agency is termed NATO's lifeline, through which 80% of its supplies pass, Orakzai is a lifeline for the Taliban's regional operations.

The Taliban understandably reacted angrily, "If any more drone attacks are carried out on Orakzai Agency, we will not spare any place in Pakistan. We will attack public gatherings, political meetings of any sort and government buildings," Abdul Hakeem Mehsud said in statement to the Pakistani media.