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Officials Admit Pakistanis Reject US Priorities

by Gareth Porter
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The advances of the Taliban insurgents beyond the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in recent weeks and the failure of the Pakistani military to counter them have brought a rare moment of truth for top national security officials of the Barack Obama administration.

Accustomed to making whatever assumptions are necessary to support ambitious administration policies in the Middle East, those officials have now been forced to face the reality that the Pakistani military leadership simply does not share the U.S. view that the radical Islamist threat should be its top national security priority and that the divergence is not going to change anytime soon.

U.S. officials have largely responded to the dawning realization with statements reflecting anger and peremptory demands, but at least one key policymaker — Defense Secretary Robert Gates — is hinting that there are strict limits on the U.S. power to change Pakistan's strategic assessment of its security interests.

The George W. Bush administration grimly sought to deny that divergence of security interests, assuming that the Pervez Musharraf regime had made a fundamental decision to side with the United States against its enemies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Obama administration inherited that premise, despite the considerable evidence to the contrary.

After the terrorist attacks in Mumbai last November and the rise in Pakistani-Indian tensions, it was clear that Pakistan was not interested in shifting its attention away from the threat from India to the Taliban.

Nevertheless, the top U.S. military leader, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, has been arguing for months that the Pakistanis were making a transition to refocus their resources on the Taliban, according to a source close to Mullen. Mullen had been told by his Pakistani counterpart, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani, that Pakistan was going to shift troops from the Indian front to deal with the Taliban.

But when the Pakistani army seemed unable or unwilling to resist the Taliban control of the Swat valley in April, those assurances suddenly began to ring hollow in Washington. During a trip to Pakistan in early April, Mullen himself was apparently shaken by the lack of determination on the part of the Pakistani government on the Swat valley. Mullen was "as grave as I have ever seen him," said the source close to the chairman.

The rhetoric from top administration officials quickly became nearly apocalyptic. On Apr. 24, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accused the Pakistani government of "abdicating to the Taliban" and warned that the deterioration of security in the country poses a "mortal threat" to the U.S. and the world.

In an interview with Fox News, Clinton invoked the threat of the Taliban getting control of the "the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan" and warned, "We can't even contemplate that. We cannot let this go any further..."

The same day, Gen. David Petraeus demanded that Pakistan reconfigure its military forces to deal with counterinsurgency operations rather than to continue its traditional focus on rival India.

Also on Apr. 24, however, Gates implied that the Pakistanis did not share the U.S. view of what their priorities should be.

"My hope is that there will be an increasing recognition on the part of the Pakistani government that the Taliban in Pakistan are in fact an existential threat to the democratic government of that country," said Gates, making it clear that no such recognition was yet apparent.

Then, on Apr. 30, Petraeus seemed to threaten dramatic changes in U.S. policy if the Pakistani government and military did not take more concrete action within two weeks.

The administration also continued to raise the issue of Pakistan's nuclear weapons being at risk. On May 4, National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones declared in an interview with BBC that if the Pakistanis were "not successful" in the fight against the Taliban, "obviously the nuclear question comes into view." He said Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the Taliban would be "the very, very worst case scenario."

But the effect of Obama administration heated rhetoric was to further distance the leadership of Pakistan's military from the strategic interests of the United States.

In a highly unusual public statement on Apr. 24, Army Chief of Staff Kayani "condemned pronouncement by outside powers raising doubts on the future of the country."

The next day, Chief of Air Staff Marshal Rao Qamar Suleman said the Pakistan Air Force would "continue to maintain its optimum readiness to undertake all types of missions against all internal and external threats." That was a clear reference to the threat from India, which the United States was trying to get Pakistan to downgrade.

Finally, after Petraeus's statement giving Pakistan two weeks to shape up or face some unspecified consequences, the military leadership held a meeting May 1, which the chairman of Pakistan's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Tariq Majeed, later said "took place against the

backdrop of widespread propaganda unleashed by the western media about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons."

That extraordinary series of statements indicated that the Pakistani military had no intention of caving in to overt pressure from Washington.

The negative effect of the administration's rhetoric did not escape Mullen, who has traveled to the country 11 times since becoming Joint Chiefs chairman in 2007. In an interview with David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* published May 3, Mullen said, "My experience is that knocking them hard isn't going to work. The harder we push, the further away they get."

Mullen's dismissal of the idea that tough words were going to move the Pakistanis in the direction desired by the administration were followed by a May 5 interview by Gates with CNN's Fareed Zakaria in which Gates talked openly about the conflict between Pakistani and U.S. priorities.

Responding to Zakaria's point that the Pakistani Army has thus far shifted only 6,000 troops from its border with India out of an army of about a half million, Gates acknowledged that the Pakistani strategic focus is overwhelmingly still on India.

"For 60 years Pakistan has regarded India as its existential threat, as the main enemy," he said. "And its forces are trained to deal with that threat. That's where it has the bulk of its army and the bulk of its military capability."

Gates also suggested that the Pakistanis were not particularly worried about the Islamist threat from the Pashtun region, because they count on the fact that the largest ethnic group, the Punjabis, "so outnumber the Pashtuns that they've always felt that if it really got serious, it was a problem they could take care of."

Having essentially explained that Pakistan has a completely different set of strategic interests from the United States, Gates repeated the standard administration line that "the movement of the Taliban so close to Islamabad was a real wake-up call for them."

Gates and other administration officials are certain to continue suggesting that the Pakistani government and military really do share the U.S. urgency now about the threat of Islamic radicalism. But for the first time they are questioning the basic premise of the whole "AfPak" strategy, which is that the United States can somehow induce Pakistan to fundamentally change its view of its strategic interests.