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The US on a new mission in Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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NEW YORK - Pakistan has once again rejected United States President Barack Obama's AfPak approach that designates Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theater of operations. During an important visit to the US to attend a United Nations General Assembly meeting, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari said on Tuesday that the Taliban insurgency could not be defeated by "lumping" the two countries together.

Pakistan might protest, but the realities tell a different story. Washington cannot afford to let Pakistan slip any further into chaos. As it is, large swathes of the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan are already under the control of the Pakistani Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.

The US even views Pakistan as more vital than Afghanistan in winning the war against al-Qaeda, which has its headquarters along the Hindu Kush mountains that run through North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) up to southwestern Balochistan province. From here, al-Qaeda envisages wars in Pakistan, [Afghanistan](#) and India on the one side and in the Middle East and in North Africa on the other side.

Pakistan's military - spurred on by the US - has won impressive victories against militants in NWFP, but they still have a strong presence and sanctuaries in the tribal areas. The militants are down, but not out, and they are in a far better position than they were in [the years](#) after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001.

Washington is fully aware of the ground situation and realizes that it could escalate [out of control](#) at any time. This would be disastrous not only for Pakistan, but also for global security.

Simply put, whether Islamabad views itself as being "lumped" or not, Pakistan remains a critical element in the US's regional strategy to restore order in Afghanistan, and with it the region. For this, Pakistan is being rewarded.

On Tuesday, US AfPak envoy Richard Holbrooke met with Zardari and the emphasis of their talks was on the country's economic situation. Zardari had a separate meeting with [Central Intelligence Agency](#) director Leon Panetta to review "war on terror" strategies. Washington plans to continue to pump billions of dollars into Pakistan in various forms of aid, from counter-insurgency to anti-narcotics to humanitarian relief. Zardari has also called for the release of about US\$6 billion pledged to Pakistan at a Tokyo [conference](#) this year by international donors to help Pakistan tackle its economic crisis.

The harsh reality is that Pakistan will face a shortage of about 20 million tonnes of oil equivalent in five years, jumping to 100 million tonnes by 2025. Oil and gas reserves dropped by 9% and 10% respectively in 2008-09 compared to 2007-08, and with imports, such as from Qatar, in jeopardy, the country could face a serious energy shortage by as soon as next year.

However, the main problem is electricity. Power shortages have already sparked riots across the country this summer, and many more are expected next year, when the electricity shortfall could reach a record level of 7,000 megawatts. Further, the [Water and Power](#) Development Authority has warned that if steps such as the construction of dams are not taken, Pakistan will face a water shortage by the year 2012.

Much as Pakistan and the US are alarmed by these prospects, al-Qaeda sees opportunity. Recently, security agencies prevented an al-Qaeda strike on an oil installation in the southern port city of Karachi. Al-Qaeda sources have frequently told Asia Times Online that the group aims to exacerbate oil, water and electricity shortages and encourage riots.

Washington has adopted a dual approach to deal with Pakistan: financial assistance, and opening direct channels of communication with key players who are not part of the Pakistani establishment.

Show us the money

Despite its own financial crunch, Washington has kept the money flowing to Pakistan. During the current financial year 2009 (to end-September), the US has made appropriations under three different headings: the omnibus budget, the [bridge](#) supplementary budget, and more recently, a spring supplementary budget. In addition, the US Congress is considering an administration request for financial year 2010 which includes some Pakistan-specific appropriations.

During the current financial year, Pakistan will receive US\$3.02 billion in non-military and military assistance. However, \$700 million provided under the spring supplementary budget for Pakistan's Counter-insurgency Capability Fund (PCCF) is meant for the financial year of 2010 and will only become available at the end of this September. This year, Pakistan will get \$400 million for the PCCF, which is actually provided by the US [Department of Defense](#).

Tapping up people

It's clear that money alone won't prevent Pakistan from backsliding. Washington wants to open channels with people expected to play a major role in the country and who are not a part of the establishment.

For example, a week ago, the anti-Taliban, anti-establishment and extremely pro-Western

mayor of Karachi, Mustafa Kamal, was hosted in Washington by high-ranking officials of the [US State Department](#) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization - a rare moment for such a relatively low-ranking foreign dignitary.

This is especially so as Karachi does not share a border with Afghanistan or the trouble spots in the tribal areas. However, it is the largest port city and the financial artery of the country. It is governed by the anti-military, anti-Taliban and pro-India and pro-Western Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). The MQM has been victimized twice by military operations and it was officially accused by the Pakistan army in 1992 of being a separatist organization.

Recently, US [Secretary of State](#) Hillary Clinton hosted an *Iftar* dinner (breaking of the fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan) in honor of Muslims. She quoted Pashtun leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a political and spiritual leader known for his non-violent opposition to British Rule in India.

Born in what is now Pakistan, he was a life-time member of the Indian National Congress and became known as "Frontier Gandhi". Right up to his death in 1988, he was viewed in Pakistan as a traitor - he was refused burial in Pakistan and was instead laid to rest in the Afghan city of Jalalabad.

At a special US request, his grandson and the leader of Pakistan's Awami National Party (ANP), Asfandiyar Wali Khan, was included in Zardari's delegation to the US. The idea was that his proposals on strategic and financial matters for Pakistan's Pashtun areas could be considered. The ANP is a secular Pashtun political party.

Very much like the MQM, the ANP has over the years been accused of being separatist. Asfandiyar's father, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, was declared a traitor by a court in 1979 during General Zia ul-Haq's military regime.

The big news in the US is the leak of an "initial [assessment](#)" of the war in Afghanistan by General Stanley A McChrystal, the top commander in the war, with its blunt warning that "[f]ailure to provide adequate resources" is likely to result in "mission failure" in that country.

Quite clearly though, the Obama administration is just as concerned of failure in Pakistan, and is doing all it can to prevent this from happening.