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The US Edges Closer to Invading Pakistan

by Eric Margolis

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This writer has been warning for years that US and NATO efforts to defeat resistance to Western occupation by Afghanistan's fierce Pashtun tribes would eventually lead to spreading the conflict into neighboring Pakistan, a nation of 175 million.

We've seen it all before in Vietnam. It was then called, "mission creep."

The focus of the Afghan War is clearly shifting south into Pakistan, drawing that nation and the United States forces ever closer to a direct confrontation. This grim development was as predictable as it was inevitable.

This week's fevered warnings from Washington of supposedly imminent terrorist attacks in Europe may be aimed at justifying intensifying US military operations against Pakistan. If attacks do come in Europe, they will most likely be linked to anti-French militant groups in North Africa and the Sahara – nothing at all to do with Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Last week, Pakistan temporarily closed the main US/NATO supply route from Karachi to the Afghan border at Torkham after the killing of three Pakistani soldiers by US helicopter gunships. Three US/NATO fuel supply convoys were burned by anti-American militants.

Eighty percent of the supplies of the US-led forces in Afghanistan come up this long, difficult route. Along the way, the US pays large bribes to Pakistani officials, local warlords, and to Taliban. The cost of a gallon of gas delivered to US units in Afghanistan has risen to \$800.

US helicopter gunships have staged at least four attacks on Pakistan this past week alone, in addition to the mounting number of strikes by CIA drones that are inflicting heavy casualties on civilians and tribal militants alike. US Special Forces and CIA-run Afghan mercenaries are also increasingly active along Pakistan's northwest frontier.

Pakistan's feeble, discredited government has long closed its eyes to CIA's drone attacks. Washington does not even seek permission for the raids or give advance warning to Islamabad. Pakistan's media claims over 90% of the casualties in US air raids are civilians.

The failing government in Islamabad is caught between two fires. Pakistanis are furious and humiliated by the American attacks. Each new assault further undermines the inept, US-installed Zardari government. Even Interior Minister Rehman Malik, the government's strongman, protested last week's US attacks.

But Pakistan is on the edge of economic collapse after its devastating floods. Islamabad is now totally reliant on \$2 billion annual US aid, plus tens of millions more "black" payments from CIA. Washington has given Islamabad \$10 billion since 2001, most of which goes to renting 140,000 Pakistani troops to support the US-led Afghan war. CIA also has 3,000 mercenaries operating inside Pakistan.

As Osama bin Laden just pointed out in a new audio tape, the Muslim nations have been derelict in coming to Pakistan's aid. He blamed the massive flooding in Pakistan on global warming.

An influential former Pakistani chief of staff, Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, just demanded Pakistan's air force shoot down US drones and helicopters violating his nation's sovereignty. His sentiments are widely shared in Pakistan's increasingly angry military.

Pakistan's senior generals are being blasted as "American stooges" by some of the media and are losing respect among Pakistanis. A video this week of the execution of six civilians by army troops has further damaged the army's good name.

However, Washington's view is very different. Pakistan is increasingly branded insubordinate, ungrateful for billions in aid, and a potential enemy of US regional interests. Many Americans consider Pakistan more of a foe than ally. The limited US financial response to Pakistan's flood was a sign of that nation's poor repute in North America.

Fears are growing in Washington and in Europe that the nine-year Afghan War may be lost. American popular opinion has turned against the war. The Pentagon fears a failure in

Afghanistan will humiliate the US military and undermine America's international power. In short, just what happened to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

America's foreign policy establishment is venting its anger and frustration over the failing Afghan War by lashing out at Pakistan and, as well, the US-installed Karzai regime in Kabul.

Pakistan's President, Asif Ali Zardari, is seen in Washington as hopeless and incompetent. Full US attention is now on Pakistan's military, the de facto government, and its respected but embattled commander, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, whose tenure was just extended under US pressure. Kayani is still regarded as an "asset" by Washington. But like Zardari, he is caught between American demands and outraged Pakistanis – plus concerns about the threat from India and Delhi's machinations in Afghanistan. The recent upsurge of violence in Indian-ruled Kashmir has intensified these dangerous tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

The neoconservatives in Washington and their media allies again claim Pakistan is a grave threat to US interests and to Israel. Pakistan must be declawed and dismembered, insist the neocons. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is reportedly being targeted for seizure or elimination by US Special Forces.

There is also talk in Washington of dividing Afghanistan into Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek mini-states, as the US has done in Iraq. Could Pakistan be next for this divide and conquer treatment? Little states are easier to rule or intimidate than big ones. Many Pakistanis believe the United States is bent on dismembering their nation. Some polls show Pakistanis now regard the United States as a greater enemy than India.

Now that America is in full mid-term election frenzy, expect more calls for tougher US military action in "AfPak." Already unpopular politicians are terrified of being branded "soft on terrorism" and failing to maximally support US military campaigns. Flag waving replaces sober thought.

If polls are right and Republicans achieve a major win, it's likely there will be more and deeper US air and land attacks into Pakistan. The Pentagon is convinced it can still defeat resistance by Taliban and its allies "if only we can go after their sanctuaries in Pakistan," as one general told me.

Where have we heard this before? Why in Cambodia and Laos, that's where, during the Vietnam War. Frustrated US commanders expanded the war into Cambodia and Laos to go after Communist base camps. The war spread; these two small nations were largely destroyed, but the war was ultimately lost.

Victory in war is achieved by concentration of forces, not spreading them ever thinner and wider.

But our imperial generals seem determined to blunder into a nation of 175 million hostile people without any clear strategy. Unable to subdue the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, they are now attacking the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan. America does not need more enemies.