

**Obama's AfPak Strategy: implication for Pakistan's security and prospects of cooperation on counter-terrorism.**

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**President Barack H. Obama assumed the Presidency of the United States when the situation in Afghanistan had gone from bad to worse and the neighbouring Pakistan was faced with mounting challenge of militancy. As the UN Secretary-General's report on Afghanistan for the year 2008, noted:**

**The year“2008 ended as the most violent year in Afghanistan since 2001, with 31 per cent more incidents than in 2007. The second half of 2008 saw an average of 857 incidents per month, against 685 per month during the first six months. A mild winter has provided an environment for high levels of violence that**

traditionally sees a decrease in hostilities. Specifically, there were 42 per cent more incidents in December 2008 than in December 2007, and 75 per cent more in January 2009 than in January 2008.<sup>1</sup>

In Pakistan, too, the year 2008 saw an unprecedented escalation of violence resulting from bomb blasts and suicide attacks targeting army and police personnel, security installations and military convoys. According to a report, there were 61 suicide attacks in the country during 2008, killing 889 persons. Another report put the number of suicide attacks in Pakistan at 66 and the number of casualties at 965. The north-western region of Pakistan comprising North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along a long and difficult border with Afghanistan was the hub of terrorist activities, accounting for 53 of these suicide attacks.<sup>2</sup> During a period of 14 months ending on the last day of February 2009, there were 1841 incidents of terrorism, including suicide attacks in Pakistan in which 13 95 lives were lost.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the fast deteriorating situation in the region, President Obama ordered the dispatch of 17000 troops as part of planned military surge to stem the rising tide of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. It was announced that more troops would be sent to Afghanistan. In a meeting with Vice-President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates it was decided to review America's policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan and devise a new strategy with focus on Pakistan, not merely as an adjunct to war in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the President appointed a seasoned senior diplomat

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, A/63/751-S/2009, *The Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, Sixty-third Session, released on 10 March, 2009, p.5

<sup>2</sup> Islamabad, Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), [www.crss.pk](http://www.crss.pk)

<sup>3</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 20 April 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad) 3 February 2009

Richard Holbrook as his special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrook, after meeting Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul arrived in Islamabad on February 10 and held “frank, candid and straightforward” talks with Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership, including President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Quereshi and Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani. He also met Opposition leaders, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain of Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) and Mian Mohammad Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Lahore. The focus of these discussions was the issue of Al Qaeda safe havens in the tribal areas of Pakistan, which Holbrooke described as threat to the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Although India had been excluded from his mission, Holbrooke, after concluding his discussions with Pakistani authorities in Islamabad, visited New Delhi where he held talks with Indian leaders on situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal areas.

The discussions held by Holbrooke in Kabul, Islamabad and New Delhi were part of a thorough review of US policies towards Pakistan and Afghanistan to evolve what President Obama called during his press conference in Washington on 10 February “a regional approach on terrorism in South Asia.”<sup>6</sup> Based on a regional approach, Obama’s AfPak strategy makes a number of recommendations, which include tripling economic assistance to Pakistan, building of troop strength in Afghanistan through military surge, strengthening and expanding of Afghan National Army (ANA) and police by sending 4000 trainers in addition to 17000 troops already announced, establishing a contact group of NATO countries, India, China, Iran,

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<sup>5</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 11 February 2009

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Russia and Central Asian Republics. From Pakistan's perspective, the proposed military surge and plan for the establishment of a large contact group of neighbouring states of Afghanistan are of particular concern because of their serious implications for the security and stability of Pakistan and peace in the region. These concerns have the potential of affecting Pakistan's efforts on cooperation with the United States in countering terrorism represented by Al Qaeda and Taliban.

### **Implications of military surge**

Under the planned military surge, the United States will by the year's end have more than 68000 troops in Afghanistan. Most of these troops will be deployed in the south eastern part of the country, which is Taliban stronghold and has common border with the Balochistan province of Pakistan. Following the announcement of strategy, US Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen warned that the arrival of extra troops in Afghanistan would increase violence there. "I look forward to a very active year. I want to be clear that my expectations are as we add more troops, the violence level in Afghanistan is going to go up."<sup>7</sup> What Admiral Mullen meant was that the fighting in Afghanistan, particularly, in the southeastern region along border with Balochistan would intensify. The intensification of clashes would have a spill over effect on Pakistan; and being geographically contiguous, the province of Balochistan would witness the arrival of a large number of people from Afghanistan, and among them might also be militant Taliban being pushed back by

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<sup>7</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 15 April 2009

American forces. The province of Balochistan is already in turbulence. A low intensity insurgency is raging in the Baloch areas of the province with daily incidents of bomb blasts and rocket firing. The increase in violence in the neighbouring Afghanistan would further destabilize Pakistan's mineral rich and strategically important province with a heavy influx of the militants. Balochistan may have its own problems, which no doubt are serious and merit urgent attention. But the province has so far been spared by the influence of Taliban due to the peculiar Baloch culture, which rejects *Wahabi* Islam. Even Pashtun areas of Balochistan are free from the Taliban influence. Taliban have no political or tribal base in Balochistan. The JUI (F) dominated provincial government (2002-2008) under Musharraf tried to promote Talibanization by supporting the establishment of madrassas (religious schools) along RCD Highway, but it could not succeed. But Taliban influx under American military strategy can tilt the balance and transform Balochistan from a secular region into a hotbed of religious extremism. Pakistan's COAS General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani had also expressed his concerns over destabilizing effect of the deployment of new American troops in Afghanistan's southeastern region on Balochistan. But Obama Administration seems determined to press on with heavy reliance not only on military surge but continue with deadly drones attacks on militants both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Agreeing with Admiral Mike Mullen, a senior military official, while talking to reporters in Washington hinted at the escalation of fighting in Afghanistan under Obama's strategy, saying that next 12 to 18 months were critical to the success of America's new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy. It clearly means that the year 2009 and 2010 are

going to witness lot of fighting in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the American forces forcing the former to retreat into the Pakistani territories in face of intense pressure by the latter. Admiral Mullen also repeated his warning last month that with the intensification of fighting in Afghanistan due to surge of US troops, there was possibility that new militant would enter into Pakistan from the neighbouring country i.e. Afghanistan. He is reported to have said in Washington that the Obama Administration had no option but to push the Taliban harder in Afghanistan despite the possible negative impact of such a drive on Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> It is not only Balochistan that is most likely to feel the spill over impact of military surge in Afghanistan, NWFP, which is already facing the problem of sheltering and feeding over two million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) due to military operation in Swat and Malakand Division is also likely to be affected by the presence of large number of foreign troops in Afghanistan under the planned military surge. Indicating this possibility, United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) for Swat IDPs, has recently said that the situation, which is already extremely fluid in terms of size and speed of the arrival and suffering of the IDPs “may reach peak in September partly due to surge in international military presence in Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup> Official briefings on the military operation in Malakand have confirmed that the militants from Afghanistan and FATA were joining the Taliban battling with the security forces in Swat. Both military and political leadership of Pakistan have hinted that the military operation in Swat may prolong and it can be extended to other areas under Taliban control,

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<sup>8</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 24 May 2009

<sup>9</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 23 May 2009

like South Waziristan, where clashes between militants and security forces have already started, forcing a large number of people to flee from their homes. The Government of Pakistan is apprehensive about the negative fall out of military surge in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Quereshi had told Holbrook on his first visit to Pakistan in February that military surge might have implications for Pakistan. He had said that it must be accompanied by civilian surge, which he had earlier described as a battle for the hearts and minds of the people, while addressing the 45<sup>th</sup> Security Conference in Munich.<sup>10</sup> In a recent statement, Prime Minister Gilani also expressed Pakistan's concern on the proposed military surge in Afghanistan, saying that it will increase Taliban infiltration into Pakistan. The Prime Minister also said that US officials have been informed about Pakistan's concerns.<sup>11</sup>

Pakistan is so seriously concerned about the impact of military surge in Afghanistan on its security and stability that General David Petraeus, Commander US CENTCOM had to make a secret visit to Islamabad recently to allay Pakistan's fears. He is, however, reported to have told Pakistani authorities that Obama Administration had no other option but enhance the American military presence in Afghanistan, but he promised that the US would try to keep this negative impact at minimum possible level.<sup>12</sup>

### **Prospects of Pak-US cooperation against terrorism**

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<sup>10</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 09 February 2009

<sup>11</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 31 May, 2009

<sup>12</sup> *Dawn* (Islamabad), 29 May 2009

The Obama Administration has made it clear that the success of its strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan depends upon Pakistan's cooperation in eliminating the safe havens the Americans insist Al Qaeda has established in the mountainous areas of north western regions of Pakistan. The American and the officials insist that Al Qaeda is using these safe havens for planning another attack on the United States. As President Obama, while announcing on March 27 "a comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," said:

"The future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbour, Pakistan. In the nearly eight years since 9/11, al Qaeda and its extremist allies have moved across the border to the remote areas of the Pakistani frontier. They have used this mountainous terrain as a safe-haven to hide, train terrorists, communicate with followers, plot attacks, and send fighters to support the insurgency in Afghanistan. For the American people, this border region has become the most dangerous place in the world."<sup>13</sup>

The new strategy, therefore, assigns a crucial role to Pakistan for achieving its focused goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan. For this purpose, the Obama Administration is reaching out to Pakistan with a new approach based on establishing linkages with the people and their representative civilian government instead of one individual at the top as was the case under former president Pervez Musharraf. Addressing the people of Pakistan directly, President Obama said in his speech:

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<sup>13</sup> From the Text of President "Obama's Remarks on New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," *The New York Times*, 27 March 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/27/us/politics/27obama-text.html?...>



**“The United States has great respect for the Pakistani people. They have a rich history, and have struggled against long odds to sustain their democracy. The people of Pakistan want the same things that we want: an end to terror, access to basic services, the opportunity to live their dreams and the security that can only come with the rule of law. The single greatest threat to that future comes from al Qaeda and their extremist allies, and that is why we must stand together.”**

**Thus, new approach also seeks to convince the people of Pakistan that it is not only in the interest of the United States and Afghanistan to defeat Al Qaeda, the elimination of terrorism also serves the interests of Pakistani people. “The terrorists within Pakistani borders are not simply enemies of America or Afghanistan-they are a grave and urgent danger to the people of Pakistan,” said the US President in his remarks on the new strategy to fight al Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These American gestures to the Pakistani people were aimed to correct the pervasive perception among the people of Pakistan about the United States as an unreliable ally. The perception was based on the bitter experience of Pakistan’s alliance with the United States during the Cold War era of 50s and 60s and the decade of anti-Soviet war of resistance during 1980s. The bitter experience is also responsible for widely held view in Pakistan that the on-going war against terrorism is not Pakistani people’s war; it is the war imposed on Pakistan by the former military ruler Pervez Musharraf to perpetuate himself in power.**

**But things today stand differently following election of Obama as President of the United States and the induction of new government in Pakistan as a result of February 2008 parliamentary elections.**

**Unlike the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration realizes fully well that Pakistan's full cooperation against terrorism cannot be secured without winning the hearts and minds of Pakistani people. The Administration has, therefore, taken pains to explain to the people of Pakistan that the long term strategic partnership that Washington is seeking to establish with Pakistan is not just restricted to war against terrorism; the US intends to build a deeper, broader, long term strategic engagement with the people and not just the leaders of Pakistan.<sup>14</sup>**

**The United States has also made an unprecedented move to admit its past mistakes in dealing with Pakistan, and promised not to repeat these mistakes. "It is fair to say that that our policy towards Pakistan over the last 30 years has been incoherent. I don't know any other word," said US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodhan Clinton in Washington three weeks after the announcement of new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. While referring to American role in the region after the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, Clinton deplored the decision to abandon both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and asserted that President Obama was following a different policy. "What President Obama is doing is qualitatively different from any**

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<sup>14</sup> Statement issued by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on the introduction of Kerry-Lugar Bill in the Senate. See *Dawn* (Islamabad), 5 May 2009

thing done before. We support the elected government....It is a relationship very clear and honest to each other.”<sup>15</sup> President Obama in his speech, also, emphasized the new approach towards Pakistan. “To avoid the mistakes of the past,” he said,” we must make clear that our relationship with Pakistan is grounded in support for Pakistan’s democratic institutions and the Pakistani people. And to demonstrate through deeds as well as words a commitment that is enduring, we must stand for lasting opportunity.”<sup>16</sup>

The new approach towards Pakistan is also reflected in the new direction the American aid under the two bills moved in the Congress is proposed to be spent in Pakistan. The US economic assistance under these bills is being provided to support sustained economic and social development in Pakistan. As one prominent Pakistani economist has remarked:

“The theory behind this approach is simple. It is also correct. It has been concluded in Washington that the use of force alone will not eliminate extremism in places like Pakistan. The destructive ideology pursued by a segment of the population is attractive to the youth who have lost faith in their future. This has happened because they have not benefited from the economic growth that has taken place since most of the rewards were captured by a few.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dawn(Islamabad), 20 May 2009 (reporting from Washington)

<sup>16</sup> *President Obama’s Remarks on New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*, op cit

<sup>17</sup> Shahid Javed Burki, Obama’s Pakistan Plan, *Dawn* (Islamabad), 7 April 2009

**What are, then, the prospects of Pakistan-US cooperation against extremism and terrorism represented by Al Qaeda and Taliban?**

**The new Government in Pakistan headed by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, has in a number of statements since its formation in March last year reiterated its commitment to continue cooperation with the United States and international community. But being an elected and representative government, it made it clear to the US from the very beginning that the new government would pursue its policy on terrorism under the guidance of the Parliament, which is a sovereign body.<sup>18</sup>**

**In pursuance of this pledge, Gilani's government has taken Parliament into confidence while taking all the important decisions regarding the issues of fighting against extremism and terrorism. In October last year, a special session of the Parliament discussed the issue of Taliban in FATA and Swat, approving broad outlines of a strategy in which the first priority was to be given to dialogue with the militants. The resolution also condemned the drone attacks on Pakistan and urged the government to take up this issue with the Obama Administration to put an end to these attacks as they were a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and caused civilian casualties. The government also moved to take on board even those political parties, which are not represented in the Parliament, like Jamaat-i-Islami, which opted to stay away from parliamentary elections last year. Recently, an All Parties Conference was convened to secure the support of political parties for the military**

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<sup>18</sup> Prime Minister Gilani's talks with visiting members of Bush Administration, Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher in Islamabad on 26 March, 2008. See Dawn (Islamabad), 27 March 2008.

operations launched against the militants in Swat and Malakand Division. The commitment and the resolve of the government to eliminate extremism and terrorism is clear; but it wants move in this direction through a national consensus and by taking all political forces on board. The efforts to achieve this objective have been successful considerably. The support from Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz- the second largest party- in the country is especially very helpful for the Zardari-Gilani Government. The majority of other parties, with the exception of a few like JI and Imran Khan's Tehrik Insaf, have endorsed government's action against militants in Swat. But the parliamentary oversight and the imperatives of national consensus on war against terrorism can also put some constraints on the ability of the government to freely exercise its options against terrorism, particularly under Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan for the following three main reasons:

The question of ownership of the war on terrorism is not yet fully resolved. There are still a considerably large number of people, who still believe that Pakistan is fighting America's war. But the number of such people is shrinking, due to the recent developments in Swat and the increase in the devastating suicide attacks in Lahore, Peshawar and Dera Ismail Khan. The clear and categorical stand of the government is also playing a helpful role in changing the hitherto held misperception on Taliban and terrorism. Prime Minister Gilani recently called the Taliban enemies of Pakistan. This has removed the ambiguity about the policy of the government towards Taliban created by the conflicting statements by

Musharraf regarding Taliban and their movement. The government has also mobilized religious *Ulema and Mmashaikh*, who enjoy considerable influence in society in support of its measures, including the military operation in Swat. The religious scholars and leaders have condemned the Taliban ideology and practices against democracy, constitutionalism and women as un-Islamic. The change in the perception will facilitate the government efforts to come harder on terrorists and Taliban.

But Obama Administration's insistence that Pakistan should end its 'obsession' with India and shift its focus from eastern border to western border to stabilize Afghanistan through ending Al Qaeda's safe havens in the FATA and denying the Taliban the use of its soil to mount attacks inside Afghanistan is likely meet resistance from Pakistan. The reasons are obvious. How Pakistan can shift its focus from its eastern border with India in view of unresolved status of outstanding bilateral disputes and the fact that Indian Western, Northern and Southern Commands are still deployed on border with Pakistan?<sup>19</sup> Indian reluctance to resume stalled peace talks despite repeated calls from Pakistan and urgings from international community, including the United States, Britain and China, is giving rise to doubts in the minds of Pakistan regarding Indian commitment and sincerity towards creating a peaceful environment on border with Pakistan. As long as India remains principal security threat to Pakistan, it is difficult to visualize Pakistan moving its focus away from its eastern border. The situation can, however, ease if

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<sup>19</sup> For more details, see Momin Iftikhar, AfPak Strategy and Indian Dimension, The News (International), <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print1.asp?id=177569>

**India accedes to Pakistan's call for the resumption of Composite Dialogue without any conditions, stops pressurizing Pakistan on the Mumbai terrorist issue and let the Pakistani legal process take its own course. A tangible movement on Kashmir under the resumed Composite Dialogue would lead to relaxation of tension on the eastern border after which it would be possible for Pakistan to focus on its Western border. A productive and result oriented Pakistan-India peace dialogue would not only enable Pakistan to play a facilitating role in the implementation of Obama's strategy, it would also pave the way for cooperation in counter-terrorism between the two neighbours.**