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## The mother of all cockfights

By Pepe Escobar  
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On one side, the most powerful man on Earth, who happens to carry a Muslim middle name. On the other, the largest tribal nation in the world, which happens to be Muslim. Welcome to the mother of all cockfights.

As it was leaked by [government](#) sources to the Pakistani daily The News, the success rate of the Barack Obama administration's "hell from above" Predator drone war over the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is a mere 6%. Of "60 Predator strikes between January 14, 2006, and April 8, 2009, only 10 hit their targets, killing 14 wanted al-Qaeda leaders" but most of all "killing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians". All of them Pashtuns.

Any sensible boss would fire those responsible for such a performance. Not Obama with the Pentagon - which is bound to continue with its only game in (Pashtun) town, based on amassing non-existent, on-the-ground intelligence; accumulating unbearable "collateral damage"; provoking a mass Pashtun rebellion against the discredited 650,000-strong Pakistani army; and ensuring the military's definitive public humiliation.

Last week, Pentagon supremo [Robert Gates](#) left no doubt the Pentagon's future lay with "expeditionary warfare" or "COIN operations", counter-insurgency operations (COIN) of which the "hell from above" Predator diplomacy is a superstar.

The strategy also includes replicating the Central Command chief General David Petraeus-coined "Sons of Iraq" COIN gambit - now renamed Afghan Public Protection Force, which will inevitably clash big time with the [Hamid Karzai](#) government in Kabul, just as Sunni Iraqis clash with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in [Baghdad](#).

Needless to say, this COIN-saturated "future" peopled with Predator and Reaper drones, special forces and high-tech ground and air sensors apply essentially to Muslim countries. British colonialism, in a pre-COIN past, used to call this "colonial warfare", or "little wars" against brown people.

### **Blame Albion's perfidy**

Obama's lofty team of strategic reviewers seems to have overlooked that it's because of occupying US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops that moderate Pashtun tribals support the Taliban or even join the Taliban. Obviously, Obama's strategic reviewers forgot to ask Pashtuns themselves about the new US "strategy".

It's now clear in Washington that the troika of special envoy Richard Holbrooke, Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton managed to sell to Obama a COIN-based Afghan nation-building scheme - which, if it sounds like a contradiction, that's because it is. Always keen on taking over the news cycle, Obama preferred to strut his catchy, alliterative triad ("disrupt, dismantle, defeat") which will in theory eliminate evil al-Qaeda from the war theater in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or AfPak.

### **Still, the fact remains: Obama's war in AfPak is a war against Pashtuns.**

Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Holbrooke, in an involuntary impersonation of Inspector Clouseau, admitted as much to CNN's *State of the Union* less than three weeks ago: The people we are fighting in [Afghanistan](#) and the people they are sheltering in western Pakistan pose a direct threat - those are the men of 9/11, the people that killed [former prime minister] Benazir Bhutto - and you can be sure that as we sit here today they are planning further attacks on the United States and our allies.

Holbrooke manages to muddle it all - merging Arab al-Qaeda with Pashtun Taliban, implying that the Pashtun Taliban were involved in 9/11 and also in the killing of Benazir (which some even claim was an inside Pakistan army/intelligence services job), not to mention the insinuation that Pashtuns are plotting to attack the US in a 9/11 replay. This newspeak is how the Washington establishment under Obama now sells an unwinnable war to US [public opinion](#).

What do Pashtuns have to say about it? According to Zar Ali Khan Musazai, chairman of the Pashtun Democratic Council, "Pashtun blood has turned cheaper than water in the area administered by Pakistan." He charges that what's happening is "the genocide of Pashtuns, which is inhuman and against international law".

But he also makes the crucial point that as the US and NATO are so fragile - to the extent that they cannot protect even their own military convoys and warehouses - nobody believes they "will protect Pashtuns from terrorism and the wrath of their mentors". He points out to the inevitable - "the day Pashtuns revolt and demand their historic home"; in sum, Pashtunistan.

The overwhelming majority of Pashtuns know how, in 1893, Henry Durand, a British colonial functionary, drew his now infamous line by crossing Pashtun tribal areas that Afghans considered their own territory. Now Obama's war at least is making sense of the term "AfPak". Pashtuns never accepted these artificial borders, nor did the Afghan state whenever it was not

subject to foreign interference.

Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line know the 3,300 kilometer-long AfPak border was one more classic "divide and rule" invention of the British Raj. They consider FATA and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) as occupied by Pakistan, or what they describe as "Pakistani-Punjabi forces" - who use these areas to foster the destabilization of Afghanistan. They routinely refer to "the Pakistani pro-terrorist establishment". And for them the "unification of Pashtuns with their motherland Afghanistan" is the only way out.

Compare this with the way the Pakistan military-intelligence establishment understands "destabilization". The establishment is totally interlinked with the neo-Taliban in Pakistan - and the "historic" Taliban who took power in Afghanistan in 1996 - as part of the "strategic depth" doctrine of fighting any possible Indian influence in Afghanistan. Their ultimate paranoia is Washington losing interest in Afghanistan - again - and thus leaving Pakistan at the mercy of Indian and Russian "encirclement".

Islamabad controls most of Pakistan - Sindh and Punjab provinces - with an iron fist. Pakistani police and army control most of NWFP. In "separatist" Balochistan there's only 5% of the total population. For Washington to believe that a small, rural, Pashtun tribal agglomeration of bands of a maximum of 30 fighters, with no [air force](#), no heavy artillery and no tanks, could take over a Pakistan with a 650,000-strong well-trained army is an absolutely ridiculous notion. And for Washington to believe - as Holbrooke implied - that a few Pashtun tribals and a few expat jihadis can take on Western civilization as a whole is also an absolutely ridiculous notion.

As for the Pakistan military, whenever they see the activities of the Balochistan Liberation Front or a road being built from Nimruz province in Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar, they see the hand of New Delhi. Hardcore paranoia as it may be, even senior Pakistan army officers believe in a concerted US-India plot to destabilize FATA and the country as a whole and then confiscate Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Obama's war on Pashtuns will only exacerbate this already volatile mix.

### **The prize**

The Obama administration's war on Pashtunistan may be just a digression. No amount of Washington spin disguises the fact Afghanistan is currently - and will continue to be - occupied by the US and NATO virtually indefinitely as a strategic peon in the New Great Game in Eurasia. It's always crucial to remember Obama's national security advisor, General Jim Jones, is a former NATO supreme commander (2003-2006) and a huge fan of NATO's non-stop expansion in Eurasia.

As reported by the Washington Post, the US Army is building no less than \$1.1 billion worth of military bases (about the annual budget of President Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul) and planning an extra \$1.3 billion in projects for 2009, according to Colonel Thomas E O'Donovan, commander of the US Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan District.

As for NATO, its mission will be to protect the projected, \$7.6 billion (and counting), perennially troubled TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and

Pakistan, if investors are foolish enough to give it the go-ahead.

As if public opinion mattered in the New Great Game in Eurasia, a recent BBC poll revealed that 73% of Afghans were against Obama's surge - or war against Pashtuns - and a majority supported a negotiated end to the war, even with a coalition government including the Taliban. "The Shadow" himself, the Pashtun Taliban leader Mullah Omar, through Saudi King Abdullah, advanced his plan: a timetable for withdrawal; a "national consensus government"; and the Taliban incorporated into the Afghan National Army.

The other alternative scenario is the one advanced by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - this insoluble problem not dealt with by NATO but debated and solved by Afghanistan's neighbors, SCO members China and Russia and SCO observers (and soon to be members) Iran, Pakistan and India.

Obama should know by now that Islamabad won't fight the neo-Taliban. The Inter-Services Intelligence supports them - as do different Pashtun layers of [the army](#). So Obama can pull a Donald Rumsfeld "stay the course", as the former US secretary of defense used to say. He can keep the anti-Pashtun surge going while getting rid of Karzai in Afghanistan and President Asif Ali Zardari in Pakistan (shades of Vietnam).

What he won't do - and the Pentagon won't allow - is to do a full Vietnam and let the last helicopter leave Bagram, because he does not want to go down as the president who lost the American empire of bases and the dream of prevailing in the New Great Game in Eurasia.

Meanwhile, it will be Predator hell from above raining over angry Pashtun tribals. Boing, boom, tschak. Boing, boom, tschak. (The Pentagon might consider hiring the legendary German band Kraftwerk to provide the soundtrack for the strikes; and why not release a videogame?) Countless more Pashtun wedding parties will be incinerated in the name of the brand new "overseas contingency operations", formerly the "global war on terror". Make no mistake: there will be blood - a lot of blood - in the mother of all cockfights.