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The myth of Talibanistan

By Pepe Escobar
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Apocalypse Now. Run for cover. The turbans are coming. This is the state of [Pakistan](#) today, according to the current hysteria disseminated by the Barack Obama administration and United States corporate media - from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to The New [York](#) Times. Even British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has said on the record that Pakistani Talibanistan is a threat to the security of [Britain](#).

But unlike St Petersburg in 1917 or [Tehran](#) in late 1978, Islamabad won't fall tomorrow to a turban revolution.

Pakistan is not an ungovernable [Somalia](#). The numbers tell the story. At least 55% of Pakistan's 170 million-strong population are Punjabis. There's no evidence they are about to embrace Talibanistan; they are essentially Shi'ites, Sufis or a mix of both. Around 50 million are Sindhis - faithful followers of the late Benazir Bhutto and her husband, now President Asif Ali Zardari's centrist and overwhelmingly secular Pakistan People's Party. Talibanistan fanatics in these two provinces - amounting to 85% of Pakistan's population, with a heavy concentration of the urban middle class - are an infinitesimal minority.

The Pakistan-based Taliban - subdivided in roughly three major groups, amounting to less than 10,000 fighters with no air force, no Predator drones, no tanks and no heavily weaponized vehicles - are concentrated in the Pashtun tribal areas, in some districts of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), and some very localized, small parts of Punjab.

To believe this rag-tag band could rout the well-equipped, very professional 550,000-strong Pakistani army, the sixth-largest military in the world, which has already met the Indian colossus in battle, is a ludicrous proposition.

Moreover, there's no evidence the Taliban, in Afghanistan or in Pakistan, have any capability to hit a target outside of "Af-Pak" (Afghanistan and Pakistan). That's mythical al-Qaeda's

privileged territory. As for the nuclear hysteria of the Taliban being able to crack the Pakistani army codes for the country's nuclear arsenal (most of the Taliban, by the way, are semi-literate), even Obama, at his 100-day news conference, stressed the nuclear arsenal was safe.

Of course, there's a smattering of junior Pashtun army officers who sympathize with the Taliban - as well as significant sections of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency. But the military institution itself is backed by none other than the American army - with which it has been closely intertwined since the 1970s. Zardari would be a fool to unleash a mass killing of Pakistani Pashtuns; on the contrary, Pashtuns can be very useful for Islamabad's own designs.

Zardari's government this week had to send in troops and the air force to deal with the Buner problem, in the Malakand district of NWFP, which shares a border with Kunar province in Afghanistan and thus is relatively close to US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops. They are fighting less than 500 members of the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan (TTP). But for the Pakistani army, the possibility of the area joining Talibanistan is a great asset - because this skyrockets Pakistani control of Pashtun southern Afghanistan, ever in accordance to the eternal "strategic depth" doctrine prevailing in Islamabad.

Bring me the head of Baitullah Mehsud

So if Islamabad is not burning tomorrow, why the hysteria? There are several reasons. To start with, what [Washington](#) - now under Obama's "Af-Pak" strategy - simply cannot stomach is real democracy and a true civilian government in Islamabad; these would be much more than a threat to "US interests" than the Taliban, whom the Bill Clinton administration was happily wining and dining in the late 1990s.

What Washington may certainly relish is yet another military coup - and sources tell [Asia Times Online](#) that former dictator General Pervez Musharraf (Busharraf as he was derisively referred to) is active behind the hysteria scene.

It's crucial to remember that every military coup in Pakistan has been conducted by the army chief of staff. So the man of the hour - and the next few hours, days and months - is discreet General Ashfaq Kiani, Benazir's former army secretary. He is very cozy with US military chief Admiral Mike Mullen, and definitely not a Taliban-hugger.

Moreover, there are canyons of the Pakistani military/security bureaucracy who would love nothing better than to extract even more US dollars from Washington to fight the Pashtun neo-Taliban that they are simultaneously arming to fight the Americans and NATO. It works. Washington is now under a counter-insurgency craze, with the Pentagon eager to teach such tactics to every Pakistani officer in sight.

What is never mentioned by US corporate media is the tremendous social problems Pakistan has to deal with because of the mess in the tribal areas. Islamabad believes that between the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and NWFP, at least 1 million people are now displaced (not to mention badly in need of food aid). FATA's population is around 3.5 million - overwhelmingly poor Pashtun peasants. And obviously war in FATA translates into insecurity and paranoia in the fabled capital of NWFP, Peshawar.

The myth of Talibanistan anyway is just a diversion, a cog in the slow-moving regional big wheel - which in itself is part of the new great game in Eurasia.

During a first stage - let's call it the branding of evil - Washington think-tanks and corporate media hammered non-stop on the "threat of al-Qaeda" to Pakistan and the US. FATA was branded as terrorist central - the most dangerous place in the world where "the terrorists" and an army of suicide bombers were trained and unleashed into Afghanistan to kill the "liberators" of US/NATO.

In the second stage, the new Obama administration accelerated the Predator "hell from above" drone war over Pashtun peasants. Now comes the stage where the soon over 100,000-strong US/NATO troops are depicted as the true liberators of the poor in Af-Pak (and not the "evil" Taliban) - an essential ploy in the new narrative to legitimize Obama's Af-Pak surge.

For all pieces to fall into place, a new uber-bogeyman is needed. And he is TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud, who, curiously, had never been hit by even a fake US drone until, in early March, he made official his allegiance to historic Taliban leader Mullah Omar, "The Shadow" himself, who is said to live undisturbed somewhere around Quetta, in Pakistani Balochistan.

Now there's a US\$5 million price on Baitullah's head. The Predators have duly hit the Mehsud family's South Waziristan bases. But - curiously and curiously - not once but twice, the ISI forwarded a detailed dossier of Baitullah's location directly to its cousin, the Central Intelligence Agency. But there was no drone hit.

And maybe there won't be - especially now that a bewildered Zardari government is starting to consider that the previous uber-bogeyman, a certain Osama bin Laden, is no more than a ghost. Drones can incinerate any single Pashtun wedding in sight. But international bogeymen of mystery - Osama, Baitullah, Mullah Omar - star players in the new OCO (overseas contingency operations), formerly GWOT ("global war on terror"), of course deserve star treatment.