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Obama does his Bush impression

By Pepe Escobar
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The "lasting commitment" Washington war-time summit/photo-op between [United States President](#) Barack Obama and the AfPak twins, "Af" President Hamid Karzai and "Pak" President Asif Ali Zardari was far from being an urgent meeting to discuss ways to prevent the end of civilization as we know it. It has been all about the meticulous rebranding of the Pentagon's "Long War".

In Obama's own words, the "lasting commitment" is above all to "defeat al-Qaeda". As an afterthought, the president added, "But also to support the democratically elected, sovereign governments of both Pakistan and Afghanistan." To have George W Bush's man in Kabul and former premier Benazir Bhutto's widow defined as "sovereign", one would be excused for believing Bush is still in the White House.

In yet another deployment of his impeccable democratic credentials, Karzai has just picked as one of his vice [presidential](#) running mates none other than former Jamiat-e-Islami top commander and former first vice president Mohammad Fahim, a suspected drug warlord and armed militia-friendly veteran whom Human Rights Watch deplores as a systematic human-rights abuser. Faheem is Tajik; Karzai is Pashtun (from a minor tribe). Karzai badly needs the Tajiks to win a second presidential term in August.

Possibly moved by the obligatory "deep regret" expressed by Secretary of State Hillary [Clinton](#), Karzai refrained from throwing a tantrum in Washington concerning the latest "precise" US air strike in ultra-remote Farah province in western Afghanistan which, according to local sources, may have incinerated over 100 Afghans, 70% of them women and children. Context is key: it was the inept, corrupt, dysfunctional Karzai administration - monopolized by warlords and bandits - which made so much easier the return of the Taliban in full force.

Obama's opium war

By now it's clear that the upcoming, Pentagon-enabled, summer surge in the "Af" section of

Obama's war in AfPak will be deployed essentially as Obama's new opium war. In a spicy historic reversal, the British Empire (which practically annexed Afghanistan) wanted the Chinese to be hooked on its opium, while now the American empire wants Afghans to stop cultivating it.

The strategy boils down to devastating the Pashtun-cultivated poppy fields in southern Helmand province - the opium capital of the world. In practice, this will be yet another indiscriminate war against Pashtun peasants, who have been cultivating poppies for centuries. Needless to say, thousands will migrate to the anti-occupation rainbow coalition/motley crew branded as "Taliban".

Destroying the only source of income for scores of poor Afghans means, in Pentagon spin, "to cut off the Taliban's main source of money", which also happens to be the "main source of money" for a collection of wily, US-friendly warlords who will not resign themselves to being left blowing in the wind.

The strategy is also oblivious to the fact that the Taliban themselves receive scores of funding from pious Gulf petro-monarchy millionaires as well as from sections in Saudi Arabia - the same Saudi Arabia that Pentagon supremo [Robert Gates](#) is now actively courting to ... abandon the Taliban. Since the Obama inauguration in January, Washington's heavy pressure over Islamabad has been relentless: forget about your enemy India, we want you to fight "our" war against the Taliban and "al-Qaeda".

Thus, expect any Pashtun opium farmer or peasant who brandishes his ax, dagger, matchlock or rusty Lee-Enfield rifle at the ultra-high tech incoming US troops to be branded a "terrorist". Welcome to yet one more chapter of the indeed long Pentagon war against the world's poorest.

You're finished because I said so

As for the "Pak" component of AfPak, it is pure counter-insurgency (COIN). As such, His Master's Voice has got to be Central Command commander and surging General David "I'm always positioning myself for 2012" Petraeus.

Enter the Pentagon's relentless PR campaign. Last week, Gates warned the US Senate [Appropriations Committee](#) that without the approval of a US\$400 million-worth Pakistan Counter-insurgency Capability Fund (itself part of a humongous, extra \$83.5 billion Obama wants to continue prosecuting his wars), and under the "unique authority" of Petraeus, the Pakistani government itself could collapse. The State Department was in tune: Clinton said Pakistan might collapse within six months.

Anyone is excused for believing this tactic - just gimme the money and shut up - is still Bush "war on terror" territory; that's because it is (the same extraordinary powers, with the State Department duly bypassed, just as with the Bush administration). The final song, of course, remains the same: the Pentagon running the show, very tight with the Pakistani army.

For US domestic consumption purposes, Pentagon tactics are a mix of obfuscation and paranoia. For instance, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell says, about Pakistan, "This is not a war zone for the [US military](#)." But then Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - who's been to Pakistan twice in the past three weeks - says the Taliban in AfPak overall "threaten our national interests in the region and our safety here at home".

He was echoing both Clinton and Gates, who had said that the Taliban are an "existential threat" to Pakistan. Finally, Petraeus closes the scare tactics circle - stressing in a letter to the House Armed Services Committee that if the Pakistani Army does not prevail over the Taliban in two weeks, the Pakistani government may collapse.

That unveils the core of Pentagon's and David "COIN" Petraeus' thinking: they know that for long-term US designs what's best is yet another military dictatorship. Zardari's government is - rightfully - considered a sham (as Washington starts courting another dubious quantity, former premier Nawaz Sharif). Petraeus' "superior" man (his own word) couldn't be anyone but Army Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kiani.

And that's exactly how Obama put it in his 100-day press conference last week, stressing the "strong military-to-military consultation and cooperation" and reducing Zardari to smithereens ("very fragile" government, lacking "the capacity to deliver basic services" and without "the support and the loyalty of their people"). Judging by his body language, Obama must have repeated the same litany to Zardari yesterday, live in Washington.

The money quote still is Obama's appraisal of Pakistan: "We want to respect their sovereignty, but we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure that Pakistan is stable and that you don't end up having a nuclear-armed militant state."

Pakistani "sovereignty" is a joke; Pakistan is now openly being run from Washington. "We want to respect their sovereignty" does not mean "we" actually will. Obama and the Pentagon - which for all practical purposes treat Pakistan as a pitiful colony - would only be (relatively) comfortable with a new Pakistani military dictatorship. The fact that Pakistani [public opinion](#) overwhelmingly abhors the Taliban as much as it abhors yet another military dictatorship (see the recent, massive street demonstrations in favor of the Supreme Court justices) is dismissed as irrelevant.

The Swat class struggle

In this complex neo-colonial scenario Pakistan's "Talibanization" - the current craze in Washington - looks and feels more like a diversionary scare tactic. (Please see [The Myth of Talibanistan](#), Asia Times Online, May 1, 2009.) On the same topic, a report on the Pakistani daily Dawn about the specter of Talibanization of Karachi shows it has more to do with ethnic turbulence between Pashtuns and the Urdu-speaking, Indian-origin majority than about Karachi Pashtuns embracing the Taliban way.

The original Obama administration AfPak strategy, as everyone remembers, was essentially a drone war in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) coupled with a surge in Afghanistan. But the best and the brightest in Washington did not factor in an opportunist Taliban counter-surge.

The wily Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM - Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law), led by Sufi Muhammad, managed to regiment Swat valley landless peasants to fight for their rights and "economic redistribution" against the usual wealthy, greedy, feudal landlords who happened to double as local politicians and [government officials](#).

It's as if the very parochial Taliban had been paying attention to what goes on across South America ... Essentially, it was the appropriation of good old class struggle that led to the

Taliban getting the upper hand. Islamabad was finally forced to agree on establishing Nizam-e-Adl (Islamic jurisprudence) in the Swat valley. So what happened in Swat is that it moved beyond a - corrupt - state, and neo-colonial control. [Washington's](#) enemy suddenly swelled to part of the 1.3 million people in the area whose only means of protection are armed militias - what the West bundles up as "Taliban".

It's always crucial to remember that the "Taliban" have all sorts of agendas, from armed resistance to US occupation in Afghanistan to armed resistance to Pakistani army incursions. What they all want is basically the end of Washington's drone war, the end of [Pakistan's](#) support for the "war on terror" in AfPak, or at least for the inept, corrupt Pakistani state to leave them alone.

It's true that over the past few weeks Pakistani public opinion as a whole shot up to around 95% against the Taliban because Sufi Muhammad said democracy is an infidel thing; and because videos of Taliban floggings for the first time were all over Pakistani media.

But the solution is obviously not a war in Swat. It would be, for instance, a concerted, long-term government policy to defuse the network of at least 45,000 *madrassas* (seminaries) with nearly 2 million students all over the country. And to defuse anti-democratic, sectarian outfits like Lashkar-e Toiba and Sipah-e Sahaba.

It won't happen. And Washington does not care. What matters for the Pentagon is that the minute any sectarian outfit or bandit gang decides to collude with the Pentagon, it's not "Taliban" anymore; it magically morphs into a "Concerned Local Citizens" outfit. By the same token any form of resistance to foreign interference or Predator hell from above bombing is inevitably branded "Taliban".

Left to its own devices, the Pentagon solution for Swat would probably be some form of ethnic cleansing. Predictably, what Obama and the Pentagon are in fact doing - part of their cozying up with the Pakistani army - is to side with the feudal landlords and force a return to the classic Pakistani status quo of immense social inequality. Thus virtually every local who has not become a refugee (as many as 5000,000 already did, leading to a huge humanitarian crisis) has been duly branded a "terrorist". Locals are caught between a rock (the Taliban) and a hard place (the US-supported Pakistani military).

The Pentagon does not do "collateral damage". The only consideration is the US Army becoming partially exposed in neighboring Afghanistan. After all, the key AfPak equation for the Pentagon is how to re-supply US troops involved in OCO ("overseas contingency operations").

The Swat tragedy is bound to get bloodier. As Steve Clemons from The Washington Note blog has learned in a conference in [Doha](#), Obama and Petraeus are forcing the Pakistani army to crush Swat. Once again the imperial "fire on your own people" logic. Predictably, Zardari and the Pakistani army are still against it. But if they accept - that would be a tangible result from the Washington photo-op on Wednesday - the prize will be a lot of money and loads of precious helicopter gun ships.

Madmen on the loose

The Obama administration not only has rebranded the Bush "global war on terror" (GWOT) as the subtly Orwellian "overseas contingency operations" (OCO). The key component of

OCO - the AfPak front - is now being actively rebranded, and sold, not as an American war but a Pakistani war.

Zardari plays his pitiful bit part; alongside Obama, the Pentagon and the State Department, he has been convincing Pakistani public opinion to fight Washington's OCO, defending the Predator bombing of Pashtun civilians in Pakistani land. It ain't easy: at least 20% of Pakistani army soldiers are Pashtun - now forced to fight their own Pashtun cousins.

As for the "Af" element of AfPak, the war against occupation in Afghanistan has "disappeared" from the narrative to the benefit of this Pakistani "holy war" against Talibanization. What has not disappeared, of course, is US bombing of Afghan peasants (with attached Hillary "regrets") plus the Predator war in FATA.

The question is: How far will the Obama, the Pentagon and Zardari collusion go in terms of wiping out any form of resistance to the US occupation of Afghanistan and the drone war against Pashtun peasants in FATA?

The relentless warnings on the collapse of Pakistan may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Were it to happen, the balkanization of Pakistan would do wonders for the Pentagon's long-term strategy in the "arc of instability".

From a Pentagon dream scenario point of view, the balkanization of Pakistan would mean dismantling a "Terrorist Central" capable of contaminating other parts of the Muslim world, from [Indian Kashmir](#) to the Central Asian "stans". It would "free" [India](#) from its enemy Pakistan so India can work very closely with Washington as an effective counter power to the relentless rise of [China](#).

And most of all, this still has to do with the greatest prize - Balochistan, as we'll see in part 2 of this report on Friday. Desert Balochistan, in southwest Pakistan, is where Washington and Islamabad clash head on. From a Washington perspective, Balochistan has to be thrown into chaos. That's about the only way to stop the construction of the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, also known as the "peace pipeline", which would traverse Balochistan.

In a dream Washington scenario of balkanization of Pakistan, the US could swiftly take over Balochistan's immense natural wealth, and promote the strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan not to the benefit of the IPI pipeline, but the perennially troubled Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline - Caspian gas wealth flowing under US, and not Russian or Iranian, control.

As for the Taliban, whether in FATA or Swat or anywhere else, they are no threat to the US. Usman Khalid, secretary general of the Rifah party in Pakistan, has nailed it, "The population dread the Taliban-style rule but they dread being split into four countries and to go under Indian suzerainty even more. The Taliban appear to be the lesser evil just as they were in Afghanistan."

History once again does repeat itself as farce: in fact the only sticking point between the Taliban and Washington is still the same as in August 2001 - pipeline transit fees. Washington wouldn't give a damn about sharia law as long as the US could control pipelines crossing Afghanistan and Balochistan.

Yes, Pipelineistan rules. What's a few ragged Pashtun or Balochis in Washington's way when the New Great Game in Eurasia can offer so many opportunities?