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US takes the war into Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - The approval given to the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) by the administration of President Barack Obama to expand drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions is on face value a declaration of war by the US inside Pakistan. The move comes at a time when Pakistan is trying to win some breathing space to delay an all-out operation in North Waziristan, home to powerful militant groups and an al-Qaeda headquarters.

The CIA was given authority on Wednesday to expand strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles against low-level combatants, even if their identities are not known. Obama had previously said drone strikes were necessary to "take out high-level terrorist targets".

However, official figures show that more than 90% of the 500 people killed by drones since mid-2008 were lower-level fighters; in effect, the new approval simply legitimizes the current situation.

Federal lawyers backed the drone measure on the grounds of self-defense to counter threats militants pose to US troops in Afghanistan and the United States as a whole, according to authorities.

Army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani has developed close ties to the US military, and there is no doubting Pakistan's conviction in fighting militancy. Islamabad has opened theaters in all of the tribal regions except North Waziristan, as it fears a militant backlash across the country would be unmanageable.

The head of the US Central Command, General David Petraeus, visited Pakistan recently for talks with senior military officials to put the finishing touches to the operation in North

Waziristan. But the Pakistanis pointed out that given the rising number of casualties in South Waziristan, the army did not want to open another front for at least another few months.

This in part could explain the US's decision to expand drone operations, while North Waziristan has also been attracting world attention.

Focus on North Waziristan

The sequence of events began with the dramatic abduction in late March in North Waziristan of former Inter-Services Intelligence officials Khalid Khawaja and Colonel Ameer Sultan Tarrar, also known as "Colonel Imam". They were on a mission to broker a peace deal between the military and the militants.

Then this month the chief of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban - TTP), Hakimullah Mehsud, resurfaced after having been reported killed in a drone attack in January. A few days after this, the bullet-riddled body of Khawaja was found in North Waziristan.

Then this week, an American citizen of Pakistani origin, Faisal Shahzad, was arrested in New York in connection with a failed attempt to set off a car bomb in Times Square. He is reported to have said that he received training in North Waziristan. The TTP claimed responsibility for the incident and vowed attacks on US cities.

On Thursday morning, Colonel Imam, credited as being the founding father of the Taliban, was handed over by the so-called Asian Tigers to Afghan Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, again in North Waziristan. Also freed by the Punjabi militants was a journalist, Asad Qureshi, who had been on the peace mission.

The men were apparently freed after the intervention of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, whose delegation demanded that everyone needed to clarify where their allegiances lay.

In an attempt to speed up operations in North Waziristan, the US on Wednesday expedited a payment of US\$468 million for Pakistan from the Coalition Support Fund, which has been set up in recognition of Pakistan's contribution in the "war on terror". Pakistan has been paid approximately \$7.2 billion since 2001.

However, Islamabad went into overdrive to deflect attention from North Waziristan. The ambassador to the US, Professor Husain Haqqani, called Shahzad a disturbed man. He said it was premature to speculate on whether he had trained with any radical groups in Pakistan and that an investigation into his links to the country was ongoing.

The military chipped in too. Spokesman Major General Athar Abbas denied that any group was linked to the bombing and he refused to accept that Shahzad had ever visited North Waziristan. He also said an unspecified number of people had been questioned, but no one had been arrested or detained in Pakistan - contrary to media reports of several arrests. On Thursday, Shahzad's father, retired Air Vice-Marshal Baharul Haq, was taken into protective custody.

The plain fact cannot be missed: North Waziristan is the nerve center of the Afghan resistance and as long as Pakistan delays, the US will take matters into its own hands.