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US's \$1bn Islamabad home is its castle

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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ISLAMABAD - The ambitious US\$1 billion plan of the [United States](#) to expand its presence in [Pakistan's](#) capital city of Islamabad underscores [Washington's](#) resolve to consolidate its presence in the region, particularly in pursuit of the endgame in the "war on terror".

This marks the beginning of direct American handling of "war and peace" diplomacy in the region, following the forging of a seamless relationship between the Pakistani military establishment and the US military. (See [Pakistan-US plan falls into place](#) Asia Times Online, July 24, 2009.)

Standing in the way are Pakistan's restive tribal areas and the seemingly never-ending - and escalating - Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan's Pashtun provinces.

According to reports, the US will spend \$405 million on the reconstruction and refurbishment of its main embassy building in the diplomatic enclave of the capital; \$111 million for a new complex to accommodate 330 personnel; and \$197 million to construct about 250 housing units.

For this purpose, the US Embassy has acquired about 7.2 hectares of land at what is widely considered a mark-down price of 1 billion rupees (US\$12 million), courtesy of the state-run Capital Development Authority. A Turkish firm has already built a 153-room compound for the embassy.

The fortress-like embassy will eventually accommodate close to 1,000 additional personnel being sent to Islamabad as part of the US administration's decision to significantly raise its profile in the country. The new staffers will augment the current 750-strong American contingent already based in Pakistan; this against a sanctioned strength of 350.

"What appears to be more alarming is that this staff surge will include 350 [US] marines. Additionally, the Americans are pressuring Islamabad to allow the import of hundreds of

Dyncorp armored personnel carriers," reported Pakistan's largest English-language daily Dawn.

A spokesman for the US Embassy in Islamabad, Richard W Snelsire, told Asia Times Online that the US was "redoing" the embassy compound as it was 40 years old. He said this was also largely because US aid to Pakistan had tripled to US\$1.5 billion a year and therefore additional staff were needed. Snelsire dismissed the report of armored vehicles being used at the embassy and also said the notion of 350 marines being stationed there was "fictitious".

The point can't be denied, though, that the embassy is undergoing massive expansion, and one cannot easily assume all of the new staff will be pencil-pushers.

Indeed, since the last few months of 2008, the Americans have quietly been working on extending their physical footprint in the country.

During this period, about 300 American officials landed at Tarbella, the brigade headquarters of Pakistan's Special Operation Task Force approximately 20 kilometers from Islamabad. They were officially designated as a "training advisory group", according to documents seen by Asia Times Online. (See [The gloves are off in Pakistan](#) Asia Times Online, September 23, 2008.)

Investigations by Asia Times Online indicate that this was no simple training program. According to sources directly handling the project, the US bought a huge plot of land at Tarbella, several square kilometers. Twenty large containers were then sent there. They were handled by the Americans, who did not allow any Pakistani officials to inspect them. Given the size of the containers, sources familiar with such shipments believe they carried special arms and ammunition and even possibly tanks and armored vehicles - and certainly nothing to do with any training program.

These developments at Tarbella and now the bigger facility in the heart of Islamabad are reminiscent of American policy in the Middle East, where the Jordanian capital of Amman was turned into a hub for the US's handling of Iraq, Syria and Palestine.

Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the biggest embassy in the world was built in Baghdad. The facility not only provided logistical support to US troops in Iraq, it helped tackle Palestinian jihadi outfits in Jordan and worked to reduce their influence in Syria and Lebanon. It also helped reduce the influence of Iraqi resistance groups based in Jordan and tried to form closer relationships between [Israel](#) and Arab countries.

In Pakistan, after Islamabad sided with the US following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the US Central Intelligence Agency established low-key facilities in cities such as Islamabad, Karachi, Quetta and Peshawar. In recent years, increasing numbers of unmanned Predator drones have used Pakistan as a base for attacks against militants inside the country and in Afghanistan.

Contacts close to the top decision-makers in Pakistan tell Asia Times Online that the improved US Embassy will significantly and publicly step up Washington's involvement in the country and beyond.

The immediate targets are the Taliban and al-Qaeda. There is talk that once again the idea of

peace dialogue will be explored with them in the border areas of Pakistan near the Afghan border.

Apart from the troubles in Afghanistan, where this month foreign forces are being killed in record numbers, Pakistan's tribal areas have to be "tamed" if the US is to further its regional aims.

In the meantime, infrastructure work necessary to realize these aims is already underway - Pakistan, Afghanistan and some Central Asian republics - notably Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - are building communication links such as roads and railways to enhance regional trade.

It is envisaged that regional economic powerhouse [India](#), at a later stage, will be a part of this trade loop through Pakistan. After some frosty years between Islamabad and [Delhi](#), the US is actively working to get them to resolve their differences, the chief of which is over divided Kashmir.

But first, the war that won't go away in Afghanistan and which has now taken root in Pakistan.

The US and its allies might be thinking of striking deals with some of the Taliban, but leader Mullah Omar is having none of it. He has ordered that all backchannel talks with the Americans through Saudi Arabia and other contacts be severed and that the war against foreign troops be accelerated. (See [Taliban will let guns do their talking](#) Asia Times Online, July 14, 2009.)

There has also been a strategic switch in the militant camps of the North Waziristan tribal area where previously Tajik fighters were trained to fight in Afghanistan. They are now returning home, via [Turkey](#), and the Taliban are desperately trying to capture the western Afghan province of Herat to open direct access to the Central Asian states through Turkmenistan.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has abandoned the jihadi assets it built to take on India by closing training camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Many of these fighters are now in the hands of al-Qaeda and there is all likelihood, confirmed by analysts privy to the Pakistani establishment as well as by militants, that if India enters in the grand American game, al-Qaeda will activate these cells for operations in India.

"At the moment, India does not have any direct role in Afghanistan, but if it tries to play one by sending its troops or any other support to the American war, it will be the beginning of Ghazwa-e-Hind [the war on India promised by the Prophet Mohammad as part of the end of the time battles]," retired Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, former head of the ISI, said in a recent television interview.

As much as the US wants to expand its war efforts, inter-connected jihadi and militants groups are already thinking beyond their traditional boundaries to meet the challenge.