

## THE NEW OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND ITS POLICY ON PAKISTAN

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The swearing in of a new president and a new administration in the United States has ushered in a process of policy reassessments in all major areas of interest to US policy makers. The following is a brief analysis of possible trends and trajectory of Obama administration's new security strategy for Pakistan.

### **Pakistan**

Although the defining slogan for the Obama election campaign was "change" yet early evidence suggests that the overall thrust of the new Obama administrations policy on Pakistan is most likely going to be a continuation of the broad Bush era Objectives. Where there is "Change" it is only present in terms of added emphasis on certain elements of the old policy.

Some of the defining elements of Bush era policies on Pakistan were as follows: The Bush administration had sought to address Pakistan within a regional context; had provided both economic and military assistance; and used multilateral as well as unilateral tools. For example, the outgoing administration had authorized 750 million USD in aid for FATA under its Sustainable Development Plan. It had also sought to promote initiatives under the Friends of Pakistan Group and other multilateral bodies, many of which were also involved Afghanistan. When we examine what the Obama presidency wants to do, we find that the strategy under consideration represents a change of emphasis but not a fundamentally new approach to Pakistan.

There are certain constants in the US security strategy for Pakistan which are not likely to be changed with the change in the Presidents office. In the post 9/11 security environment, there have been four main Pakistan specific strategic objectives which are of enduring importance for US policymakers: And these are:

1. The elimination of Al Qaeda.
2. The denial of sanctuaries to Taliban and to neutralize their ability to mount cross border attacks on US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.
3. To provide economic and military aid to Pakistan.
4. Assure the security of Pakistan's nuclear assets.

The main difference between what has gone before under the Bush administration and what is expected from the Obama Presidency is tactical: the real change is evident in the strategies designed, the resources allocated and emphasis placed on the achievement of the goals. In all the four policy sectors new strategies and tactical plans are likely to be initiated in order to bring the situation in Pakistan in line with the US strategic interests in the region.

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## **1. The elimination of Al Qaeda network in the FATA area.**

There is a sustained and broad consensus in US policymaking centres that the number one threat to US security remains the threat of a terrorist strike by Al Qaeda on US territory. Furthermore, it is believed that there is a great likelihood that such an attack would emerge from the Al Qaeda sanctuaries in the border regions of Pakistan. Not discounting the real danger of a terrorist strike on the US homeland, this broad consensus is underpinned by certain domestic political determinants which have an immense importance for US policy makers. When the threat from Al Qaeda is resurrected, it becomes far easier for every US administration domestically, to sell the ever mounting costs of War in remote Afghanistan, to the congress and the American public. The consistent media coverage in the US press regarding the names and identities of the Al Qaeda operatives allegedly eliminated in Drone strikes helps to create an image of effectiveness and tangible success in a campaign, which has so far suffered serious setbacks.

- During his election campaign President Obama had indicated that he was ready to take the pursuit of al Qaeda to the next level and would order unilateral military actions in Pakistan if U.S. policy makers had "actionable intelligence". Although Obama's statement produced some controversy when issued, subsequent developments have made it clear that this was far from an original plan as the Bush administration had already decided to put into practice this position. The most controversial element of the new Bush strategy was the use of U.S. Special Operations Forces in a ground mission inside Pakistan. Subsequently, however, due to strong Pakistani resistance, the US administration reverted back to aerial drone attacks.
- The twin US Drone missile strikes on January 23rd 2009, which struck targets in North and South Waziristan were the first strikes ordered by President Obama since coming into the office. These strikes clearly indicate a continuation of the highly unpopular Bush era policy of eliminating Al Qaeda operatives in the tribal belt of Pakistan through UAV or drone attacks.
- There is some indication that one tactical variation that the Obama administration would like to test is the potential of joint operations in full coordination with the Pakistani military. An example of such cooperation on a limited scale was evident recently in a sting operation carried out in the Khyber agency in which local law enforcement agencies, the FC and CIA operatives jointly acted to apprehend Foreign Al Qaeda elements and their local sympathisers.
- In order to build and expand such a cooperation, whereby the Pakistani military and the US forces are in a position to mount joint operations on a more decisive scale, there has to be enhanced and preferably institutionalized linkages between the command and control of the Pakistan military and the CENTCOM. Various proposals are being floated around to this end: one of them focuses on declaring FATA (Federally Administrated Tribal Areas) part of the Afghan War Theater. This would in effect mean that CENTCOM will be able to operate and coordinate joint operations with the Pakistan Army. It is suggested that by establishing better liaison with CENTCOM and NATO the Pakistan army can have a greater input in targeting and regularizing UAV attacks in the FATA area.

## **2. To deny sanctuary to Taliban and neutralize their ability to mount cross border attacks on US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.**

The corner stone of Obama's Afghanistan policy is the troop surge: US forces in Afghanistan are set to increase from the present 32,000 to around 55,000 approximately by middle of the current year. The increase in force levels is aimed at improving the fast deteriorating security environment in the South and Eastern border regions of Afghanistan. The troops surge is also expected to increase the vulnerability of the US forces; greater hostile encounters usually result in higher casualties-which are always unpopular in home countries.

There is a general consensus among US policymakers that no substantial gains can be made without addressing the Taliban and insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal Areas. So far, the peace deals made by the Pakistani army with the militants have reinforced and not uprooted these sanctuaries. According to US perceptions such deals have only prevented casualties among the Pakistani soldiers rather than eliminate sanctuaries. Moreover the US policymakers believe Pakistan so far has not acted against the Taliban leadership based in Quetta, Baluchistan. Crippling the Taliban leadership by attacking the 'Quetta shura' and weakening its influence over Taliban fighters in Southern Afghanistan, is likely to be an important element of the new US strategy on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The new critical element added to the equation is the growing capability of insurgents to virtually disrupt the two supply routes through Pakistan which supply 40% of fuel and 80% of all non fuel supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan. This has led to frantic efforts by NATO and the US to find alternate transit routes through the North via Russia and Central Asian states.

There are already certain indications as to how the Obama administration is likely to address this critical objective:

- There is a generalized perception that the Pakistan Army is the critical partner for the US and the primary kinetic force element which must be relied on to disrupt and destroy Taliban, insurgent sanctuaries and trans-border networks of support.
- There is also the view that the leadership of the Pakistani security establishment has not fully embraced the strategic objective of destroying all militant networks and has intermittently used militant groups as a tool of foreign policy. There is likely to be greater pressure on Pakistan's security establishment to use kinetic force based actions against the Afghan Taliban leadership based in and around Quetta. It is something the Pakistani establishment has so far stubbornly resisted.
- Various approaches are being suggested to wean the military off from such relationships.
- The first and the most important of these is the enhanced engagement with the Pakistan military. Greater efforts will be made to enhance long term cooperation: building capacity and equipping the Pakistani military and the paramilitary Frontier Corp to undertake Counterinsurgency operations against militants.

- Greater emphasis will be made to provide COIN training and create a new doctrine for COIN operations within Pakistan.
- It is suggested that Joint operations and close cooperation between the Pakistan's military and CENTCOM would also enable Pakistan to access resources and equipment directly from the CENTCOM without undergoing the lengthy bureaucratic processes.
- Certain informed quarters in the US have suggested that Pakistan consider signing a Status of Forces agreement (SOFA) that would regularize US military presence in Pakistan and lead to a long term military relationship between Pakistan military and the US. The SOFA agreement would cover the status of US military trainers, personnel and equipment on Pakistan territory.
- The other significant initiative is the regional approach. This approach seeks to adjust Pakistan's cost-benefit calculus by addressing its legitimate security interests in the context of both Afghanistan and India.
- Pakistan's concerns related to Afghanistan which are likely to be addressed include some progress towards the recognition of the Durand line, the anti Pakistan activities of the Indian consulates, anti Pakistan elements of the Northern alliance within the power circles in Afghanistan and the Afghan National Army.
- In India's context the focus is on seeking a long term solution to the Kashmir conflict which has largely informed and shaped Pakistan's security perceptions.
- The appointment of Richard Holbrooke as the US special coordinator for both Pakistan and Afghanistan bears testament to this quest for regional solutions to the problem of trans-border militancy in FATA. It is believed that strong Indian lobbying has prevented the inclusion of India and the Kashmir issue in the special envoys mandate.
- There are three facets of this regional approach:
  - a. Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations and treating the Pak-Afghan border zone as a seamless theater of operations.
  - b. the trilateral context where the concerns of Pakistan's security establishment are addressed with reference to India and Afghanistan both: this context addresses the long standing security fault lines within South Asia which have shaped the complex relationship and policies of Pakistan's military towards the Taliban and militants in the FATA region.
  - c. The third is the Broad Multilateral initiative where regional countries such as Iran, Russia and the Central Asian states and Pakistan's strategic partners such as China, Saudi Arabia, and UAE are brought on board to coax Pakistan into dedicating all its military and political energies in eradicating militant movements and disrupting trans-border support to the Taliban offensive inside Afghanistan.

### **3. Bring about a balance in Economic and military aid**

President Obama and his advisers have endorsed congressional efforts to provide a more equal balance between military and non-military aid to Pakistan. The Bush administration had provided approximately 11 billion USD in assistance to Pakistan since September 2001, including about 6 billion USD in "coalition support funds" that reimburse the Pakistani military for its contributions to Operation Enduring Freedom.

- The Obama administration is of the view that too much of this assistance has gone to the Pakistani Army and that the provision of aid has often proved insufficiently transparent. They want to make future American assistance more accountable by increasing U.S. oversight.
- The Biden Lugar bill recently offered legislation designed to shift this paradigm of Security centric relationship between Pakistan and the United States. This legislation titled "Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2008," introduced in July 15, 2008, aims to transform the relationship from what Vice president Biden terms "transactional" to a deeper, broader effort that connects the Pakistani population to America. Under this bill Pakistan will receive \$1.5 Billion a year, in non military aid, for the next five years extendable to fiscal year 2018.
- The non military aid is intended for the promotion of projects that promote just and democratic governance, including an independent judiciary, anti-corruption efforts at all levels of government and the legal system, and transparent accounting by all branches of government. The present administration is of the view that the overwhelmingly military nature of all previous U.S. aid packages has failed to effectively counter the long-term drivers of instability that plague the country.
- It is already evident that this non military economic aid does not come without some strings attached. Recent policy statements by secretary of State Hillary Clinton, indicate that this non military economic aid is tied up with the Pakistan military's performance in meeting the security objectives in the border regions of Afghanistan. It is a classic carrot and stick policy.
- The greater portion of this non military aid is designed to address economic, developmental and social roots of militancy and insurgency especially in the FATA region and undertake large scale infrastructural and economic generation projects.

### **4. Assure the security of Pakistan's nuclear assets**

The potential for the intersection of terrorism and nuclear weapons is arguably the greatest threat to American national, even global, security. The shadow of the Dr. Qadeer Khan episode still hangs over US perceptions regarding the safety of Pakistan's nuclear program. The degradation of the law and order situation within Pakistan, political fragmentation, rise of militancy and an apparent lack of consensus within the security establishment in Pakistan have raised fears in the US over the safety and security of nuclear materials and weapons in Pakistan.

- Enhancing command and control safeguards and ensuring the safety of Pakistan Nuclear assets remain a critical concern for the Obama administration.

- There is an enduring fear in Pakistan that under the guise of safety concerns the US hopes to neutralize Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. The challenge for Obama administration is to ensure reliable safe guards are in place without making the Pakistani establishment doubt their intentions.

The Obama administration is likely to assist, fund and institute improved systems of Command and control for Pakistan's nuclear assets. And increase surveillance and screening of personnel employed at Pakistan's nuclear installations.