



Pakistan: Washington Opens the Door for Overt Operations

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Summary

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Jan. 24 that the United States is “ready, willing and able” to conduct joint counter jihadist combat operations with Pakistani troops in northwestern Pakistan if Islamabad agrees to such an arrangement. While U.S. military and intelligence forces have been running limited ground and air operations on Pakistani soil, the very public move from covert to overt military operations could exacerbate the tensions within Pakistan.

Analysis

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Jan. 24 that the United States is “ready, willing and able” to conduct joint combat operations with Pakistani troops against jihadists in northwestern Pakistan if Islamabad agrees to such an arrangement. Speaking at a Pentagon press conference with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen, Gates said that, while Pakistan reserves the right to accept or decline the U.S. offer, Washington will “continue the dialog” on the matter. Gates added that the United States would send a very small contingent of troops and expressed surprise that the Pakistanis have not “fully thought through” how they want to deal with the jihadist insurgency. Mullen said that the security situation in Pakistan is changing, and that Islamabad’s decision on dealing with it “is a really important question for all of us.”

These remarks — the most direct yet from Washington about its willingness to have U.S. forces operating on Pakistani soil — came two days after Adm. William Fallon, head of the U.S. Central Command, flew to Islamabad to meet with Pakistan’s new army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani.

Covertly, U.S. military and intelligence forces have long been running limited-scale ground and air operations on Pakistani soil — with Islamabad’s permission, of course. This quiet

arrangement allowed Islamabad plausible deniability for some time. But as the volume of such operations increased gradually and the electronic media industry in Pakistan grew, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's government became unable to keep them a secret.

Stratfor was the first to predict U.S. military operations in Pakistan — as early as late 2003 and early 2004. But the issue of the United States sending troops into Pakistan has only gained traction in the global media over the past year or so. In the last several months, it has become the subject of discussion within Pakistan as well, a development that has somewhat removed the shock regarding the subject from the Pakistani national psyche. That said, the move from limited covert operations to a broader and overt U.S. military role (which is what Gates and others are laying the groundwork for with these latest statements) is bound to exacerbate the situation in the country.

Though Gates' comments, as well as those coming from others in U.S. President George W. Bush's administration, have been fine-tuned to include statements saying that U.S. action will be contingent upon Pakistan's willingness, the public perception in Pakistan is that the country's territorial sovereignty is about to go the way of Afghanistan and Iraq's. This explains the recent major surge in comments from Islamabad angrily rejecting the idea that the government would ever allow U.S. forces to operate in Pakistani territory. But the reality is that Islamabad can only go so far in refusing Washington, and many within the government and the country believe they need U.S. assistance to deal with the jihadists.

So, the discussion between the two sides is not about whether to allow U.S. forces to operate openly in the areas near the Afghan border, which are rife with insurgents, but about how to allow such operations with the least possible fallout. In other words, an overt U.S. military presence of sorts in the tribal badlands is likely a foregone conclusion, and the focus is on making it happen — which was probably what Fallon and Kayani discussed during their talks. The arrangement likely will be somewhere between Pakistan's insistence that the United States merely provide weapons and intelligence while its own forces do the heavy lifting and the United States' insistence that it should be allowed to put boots on the ground because a mix of clandestine efforts and the occasional "hot pursuit" are no longer doing the trick.

The United States is not about to get mixed up in stabilizing the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), but it now feels that it must be in a position to more heavily engage insurgent and jihadist forces in their safe-haven of Pakistan. This decision is partly informed by the improvement of the situation in Iraq and the deterioration found within Pakistan. As far as timing, the Pakistanis would not want to allow an enhanced phase of U.S. military involvement until a new government took office after the Feb. 18 elections. Because the outcome of the electoral process is uncertain, the plan could get complicated, to say the least.

More coordination, training and even joint operations with Pakistani forces could be in the works. It remains to be seen what future operations might look like; possibilities include everything from small teams of U.S. Special Forces operating alongside larger Pakistani paramilitary units or Pakistani interpreters and commanders accompanying U.S. units to

large blocking maneuvers by Pakistani forces to facilitate a major U.S. raid.

Ultimately, the Pentagon is clearing the way for larger-scale military operations (though they probably will not get too big) and more overt and heavier use of U.S. airpower. How the political arrangement — much less the situation on the ground — will play out remains to be seen. But any new geographic limit for operations Islamabad might arrange with Washington will not stop U.S. forces from going after targets any more than the Pakistani border has stopped them. Should the jihadists fleeing counterinsurgency operations seek shelter deeper in Pakistan to reflect a hypothetical new limit on U.S. operations, U.S. forces will move to follow. And because the jihadists' sphere of operations is not limited to FATA but stretches into the adjoining Pashtun areas in the North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan, military operations could extend into those regions as well.

Notably, in such a scenario, the cross-border problems would be pushed back into Pakistan. At the end of any operation, after a Taliban or jihadist stronghold was smashed, U.S. forces likely would be found dusting off and flying back to Afghanistan, leaving the Pakistanis to clean up and stabilize a situation complicated by public backlash and an assertive media.