

Obama, Bin Laden and the Pakistani crisis

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There was much more at stake in the execution of Osama Bin Laden than a presidential re-election in the United States. The most important element in the operation carried out by US commandos in Abbottabad, on May 2, 2011, was probably not the death of Osama Bin Laden – even if he remained an emblematic figure for Al-Qaeda – but the way in which he was killed. Washington does not want the Pakistani government to fall, nor does the latter want to break with the USA. But in deciding to intervene thus on foreign territory, Barack Obama played the sorcerer's apprentice.

In recent years, public opinion has become increasingly hostile to the growth of US military activities on the Pakistani side of the Afghan frontier – in particular the multiplication of pilotless plane (drone) attacks with their attendant civilian victims. Today the Pakistani political class can only condemn a flagrant and unprecedented violation of the country's national sovereignty, through an aerial intervention in an important urban centre. The civilian government could not however explain the presence of Bin Laden in a city which hosts the country's main military academy – except by admitting that it controlled neither the army nor the secret services.

The political crisis in Pakistan is all the sharper in that the Taliban question took on a new breadth in 2009 with the war in Swat (a valley in the North West). It acquired an internal dimension and was no longer only a border affair. Taliban groups formed beyond the Pashtu communities from which they had emerged, linking up with other Islamist and radical fundamentalist movements. The army's traditional double game (fighting and simultaneously supporting the Taliban) became singularly complicated. With the rise in power of fundamentalist pressure and the sectarian conflicts which accompany it, the fractures in the state risked spreading.

The Pakistani army also wishes to show that there will be no peace in Afghanistan without its agreement. Washington seeks a political solution involving the Taliban, but Pakistan has been kept out of these tentative pre-negotiations. Indeed, Islamabad cannot accept seeing a government in Kabul allied with India, "the hereditary enemy". The secret services can use their very close links with the Taliban to hinder the negotiations while the government can turn to China to check the USA and New Delhi. The Bin Laden affair is at the heart of a geopolitical game with multiple actors which affects the whole region.

In the event Pakistan is also paying the cost of the ideological rearmament of US imperialism. The extra-judicial execution of Bin Laden provided an opportunity in the USA to rehabilitate targeted assassinations (which had been banned by the courts), the prison at Guantanamo (which the candidate Obama had promised to close), the use of torture (according to the official version it was confessions forced from a Guantanamo detainee which put the CIA on Bin Laden's trail), great power nationalism and the universal "right" of intervention which Washington claims. The political operation was all the more effective inasmuch as it is led by a black Democratic president whose election had been hailed by numerous progressives. The time of illusions is very much over.

The action of the US commandos was an operation of war – but a war whose stakes go far beyond the spectacular production of an Obama-Bin Laden duel and the next presidential elections in the US. On a world scale, Washington has announced its bellicose intentions. In Asia, the geopolitical cards around the Afghan conflict are reshuffled. In Pakistan, a country whose people are paying the

biggest price in all this, the crisis deepens.

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