US military insists on right of “hot pursuit” inside Pakistan

Sarath Kumara
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Following a shoot-out involving the US military on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border on December 29, Washington is insisting that its troops continue to be permitted to cross into Pakistan in “hot pursuit” of alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters.

Details of the incident are hazy. According to media reports, a Pakistani Border Scout approached US soldiers patrolling for Al Qaeda members inside Afghanistan. When asked to return to the Pakistani side of the border, he allegedly turned and fired, wounding an American soldier. A firefight ensued during which US forces called in air strikes. An F-16 warplane dropped a 500-pound bomb on a deserted Islamic religious school, where the Pakistani border guard had fled. Two people were killed.

According to US military spokesman Major Stephen Clutter, it was not known whether the shooter was a Border Scout or a person just wearing the uniform. The US military claim that the clash, including the bombing of the school, occurred on the Afghan side of the border. Pakistani officials, however, insist that the bombed building was in the village of Burmol, in Pakistan’s South Waziristan province.

In an email response to a reporter’s question, Clutter declared that US soldiers have the Pakistani government’s permission to engage in “hot pursuit” across the border. “US forces acknowledge the internationally recognised boundaries of Afghanistan but may pursue attackers who attempt to escape into Pakistan to evade capture or retaliation,” he said.

Pakistan’s information minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed publicly denied that any permission had been given. “Absolutely not,” he said, “The Americans cannot cross the Pakistani border to chase what they say are vestiges of Taliban and Al Qaeda.” But senior Pakistani intelligence officials privately conceded that the US had been given tacit approval to pursue militants across the border.

Sensitive to growing anti-Washington sentiment inside Pakistan, Islamabad has tried to play down the incident. No details have been released about the two men who were killed or the circumstances that led to the clash. A Pakistani army spokesman said the clash was the first of its type. “The matter has since been resolved bilaterally, and a mechanism has been devised to prevent recurrence of such incidents,” he said.

At the same time, Pakistan has reassured Washington that US forces can proceed. According to a report in the *Dawn* newspaper on January 6, Pakistan’s military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and US Secretary of State Collin Powell “have agreed that hot pursuit of the Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters across the Pakistan-Afghan border will continue but quietly.”

Hostility to the US military is particularly strong in the tribal areas of Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan. An estimated five million people, predominantly Pashtuns, live in these regions and have strong ethnic ties to tribes in the south and east of Afghanistan. Historically these groups have been fiercely independent and have enjoyed a degree of political autonomy.

In December 2001, Pakistani troops, at the urging of Washington, poured into the tribal areas to seal the border to fleeing Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. Currently there are about 60,000-70,000 Pakistani troops along the Afghan border but the US military has called for a greater presence. A number of reports indicate that US Special Forces and the CIA have been engaged in covert operations inside Pakistani tribal areas, gathering information and possibly targetting suspects.

As a result of local animosity to US military actions,

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Islamic fundamentalist parties made major gains in Pakistan's national election last October. The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a six-party alliance, now holds power in the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan—the two provinces that border Afghanistan.

On January 1, the NWFP assembly passed a resolution condemning the border clash and air raid on the school. It accused Washington of violating Pakistan's sovereignty and demanded the national government "strongly protest" the incident to the Bush administration.

On January 3, several thousand people participated in anti-US demonstrations in Lahore, Multan, Quetta, Peshawar and other cities in Pakistan, condemning US preparations for war against Iraq. The MMA organised a rally in the NWFP city of Peshawar on the same day. MMA secretary-general, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, said: "We declare jihad against America that has stationed its forces in Pakistan to do away with our sovereignty."

There is, however, growing consternation among the Pakistani ruling elite at the political costs of Islamabad's support for the US "war on terrorism". Shireen Mazari, director general of the Institute of Strategic Studies, warned on January 8 that it was "imperative for Pakistan to not only assert the parameters of the cooperation very clearly but also to ensure that these parameters are respected by the US. Otherwise, incrementally, the US forces may present a direct threat to Pakistan's strategic assets."

A commentary in the *Dawn* newspaper on January 5 declared that US-Pakistan relations had already assumed a "tense dimension" and that "intemperate and arrogant assertions [by the US] can only further exacerbate it." A further editorial on January 12 urged the Pakistani regime to use the country's geographical position to extract concessions from Washington. "Situated in proximity to Central Asia and the Gulf region, Pakistan can contribute to peace and stability in a region where America has vital economic and geopolitical interests," the newspaper stated.

Musharraf is not in a strong position to bargain. Under pressure from Washington, he withdrew Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and backed the US invasion of Afghanistan. His administration allowed the US military to use several Pakistan military bases, gave authorisation for overflights and permitted the FBI to hunt down suspected Al Qaeda members in Pakistan.

In return, Pakistan received limited US financial aid as well as US-approved loans from the international donor agencies to prop up the country's failing economy. But Musharraf's compliance with Washington's dictates has left him increasingly isolated as anger against US policies continues to grow. Thomas Homer Dixon, an academic at the University of Toronto, commented in the *Washington Post* on January 5: "Pakistan balances on a knife's edge between simmering unease and total upheaval."

The Bush administration's imminent invasion of Iraq, which has already provoked widespread demonstrations in Pakistan, could well be the trigger that tips the balance in the direction of "total upheaval".

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