

# US-Pakistani relations remain on the boil

## A new understanding?

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During an impromptu visit to Islamabad this week, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, reputedly gave Pakistan's government and military assurances that the US will respect Pakistan's sovereignty. But only hours later the US staged another predator-drone attack inside Pakistan, killing at least six people in a South Waziristan village.

Pakistani Prime Minister Raza Gilani denounced the drone strike, which Pakistani authorities insist was mounted without their having been warned, let alone giving it their sanction.

Mullen's visit was described as an attempt to "defuse tension"—a euphemism for the crisis in US-Pakistani relations provoked by the unprecedented September 3 US military raid on Pakistan and the subsequent revelation that George W. Bush signed a presidential order in mid-July authorizing US Special Operations forces to carry out missions in Pakistan without Islamabad's permission.

In the days following the September 3 raid Pakistan's parliament unanimously passed a motion calling for any further attacks to be repelled by force and members of the Pakistani top brass, including Pakistan military chief General Ashfaq Kayani, pledged future US incursions would be resisted.

On Monday, gunfire from Pakistani forces reportedly forced two US military helicopters that were attempting to cross into Pakistan—very near the site of Wednesday's drone strike and the September 3 raid—to turn back.

A Reuters report cited a Pakistani security official as saying, "The US choppers came into Pakistan by just 100 to 150 meters at Angor Adda. Even then our troops did not spare them, opened fire on them and they turned away."

The US and Pakistani governments have emphatically denied such an encounter took place. The official Pakistani military account is that US choppers did come under fire, but from local tribesmen, not Pakistani military forces and that the choppers never entered into Pakistani air space. "Like others," Major Murad Khan, told the *Dawn*, "our forces stationed in the region also heard firing but where it came from and what was the target, we have no idea."

This is belied by other reports. The governor of the nearby North-West Frontier Province, Owais Ahmed Ghani, said forthrightly in a television interview broadcast Tuesday, "My political administration has reported that an incursion took place. In the reaction, people and law enforcing officials took part."

The day after the thwarted US incursion into Pakistan, Major-General Athar Abbas, the head of the military's press liaison branch (ISPR), told Associated Press that in the event of an attempt by US forces to cross into Pakistan, "The orders are clear. ... [If] there is a very significant detection, which is very definite, no ambiguity, across the border, on ground or in the air: open fire."

Mullen flew Tuesday from Baghdad to Islamabad—his fifth visit to Pakistan in the 11 months since he became US military chief. According to the *New York Times*, the decision that Mullen should visit Pakistan was made only after he had left for Iraq, strongly suggesting it was a response to Monday's incident.

A US embassy statement claimed that "the conversations" Mullen had with Pakistani government and military leaders "were extremely frank, positive and constructive."

### An act of war

The September 3 attack and the presidential order constitute nothing less than an act of war. They underscore that Washington arrogates to itself the unbridled right to militarily intervene anywhere in the world—state sovereignty and international law be damned.

If they have elicited little political and press comment in the US, it is because there is a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington in favor of the US intensifying the war in Afghanistan and extending it into Pakistan's border region. Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama has repeatedly said he would be prepared to order unilateral US military strikes in Pakistan.

The US and many of its NATO allies have latched on to the argument that Pakistan is serving as a "safe-haven" for Afghan insurgency under conditions where the US-imposed government in Kabul is increasingly isolated and discredited.

The reality is the US occupation of Afghanistan has given rise to an insurgency in Pakistan's border regions, whose local populace have never recognized the British colonial-imposed border. This insurgency is fueled by outrage over the US intervention in Afghanistan, chronic socioeconomic backwardness and Islamabad's traditional indifference toward the region, and last but not least the brutal methods the Pakistani military have employed at Washington's behest in trying to stamp out support for the Afghan insurgency. These methods have included carpet-bombing, "disappearances" and colonial-style collective punishments.

In recent weeks, hundreds of people have been killed as the Pakistani military seeks to exert greater control in FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Area. Tens of thousands have fled the region, swelling the refugee population in FATA, which is home to little more than 3.5 million people, to over 300,000.

Mounted just days before Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chairperson Asif Ali Zardari was set to be officially sworn in as president, replacing the ex-army chief and dictator Pervez Musharraf, the

September 3 US raid roiled the Pakistani elite.

Zardari was in effect being put on notice that the US will work with him, but only insofar he does its bidding and intensifies the counterinsurgency war in the country's border areas.

For years, Washington strongly backed the dictator Musharraf, calling him an indispensable ally in the "war on terror." Now that his regime has unraveled under the combined weight of popular opposition and economic crisis, Washington is ratcheting up the pressure, demanding that the new "democratic" government wage war on its behalf irrespective of the wishes and aspirations of its own people.

Opinion polls have repeatedly shown that Zardari and the PPP have already suffered a huge drop in popularity because of their subservience to the US in respect to the war and their long dalliance, at Washington's urging, with Musharraf.

As for the military, which has a decades-long intimate relationship with the Pentagon, the US incursions are a tremendous blow to its prestige and can only exacerbate tensions within its ranks over its role in the counterinsurgency war.

Many within the officer corps subscribe to a fierce Islamic Pakistani nationalism that was cultivated by General Zia ul-Huq, the dictator who with Washington's full-support ruled Pakistan from 1977 to 1988 and presided over the Pakistani military's emergence as the conduit for US and Saudi support for the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

Also, there is a strong Pashtun presence in the officers corps. Press reports suggest that this layer is particularly angered over having to suppress their own brethren—the Pashtun bestraddle the Pakistani-Afghan border—on the US's behalf.

For the military as a whole the US violations of Pakistani sovereignty constitute a challenge to its legitimacy. For decades the Pakistani military has sought to justify its claim to a massive budget and decisive share of political power on the grounds that it is the only institution able to uphold the integrity of Pakistan.

### **A new understanding?**

According to articles that have appeared in recent days in various well-connected newspapers, including the *Dawn*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, the intensity of the Pakistani military's opposition to Washington's bald assertion of a right to conduct manned military operations within Pakistan has given the Bush administration pause.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 3 raid, Pakistani authorities temporarily closed the most important land route for transporting supplies via Pakistan to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, citing vague security concerns.

British Law and Justice Secretary Jack Straw made reference to the issue during a visit to Islamabad. After claiming Britain supports Pakistani sovereignty, Straw, reports the Pakistani press, "expressed the hope that Pakistan would continue providing passage to NATO supply convoys through its territory on their way to Afghanistan."

If the press reports, which all cite unnamed sources, are correct, Washington has agreed—at least for the moment—not to stage further Special Operations incursions in Pakistani territory in return for increased "cooperation" in mounting offensive operations in FATA

and increased leeway to unleash predator drones.

It is an open secret that under Musharraf the CIA was given the right to stage drone missile strikes in Pakistan's border regions. Indeed, the *New York Times* reported earlier this year that the CIA has a drone base inside Pakistan.

"A senior Pakistani diplomat, who did not want to be identified," reported Friday's *Dawn*, said "while Pakistan would not allow US ground forces inside its territory, it would be more tolerant of US missile strikes ...

"The diplomat said that public perceptions of US military actions in FATA would, however, force Pakistani authorities to sometimes condemn air strikes as well."

Perhaps signaling such a deal, US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte said Thursday, "Unilateral actions are probably not a durable or a viable solution over a prolonged period of time. I think the best way forward for both of our countries is to try to deal with the situation in that border area on a cooperative basis."

Even if the Bush administration has drawn back from a reckless, flagrantly illegal policy of mounting large-scale raids into Pakistan, any patched-up agreement between Washington and Islamabad will be highly unstable.

The US-installed Afghan regime of Hamid Karzai is rapidly losing support, and both it and the US have a strong political and military interest in seeking to shunt as much of the burden of the war onto Pakistan as possible.

The US persists in making other demands likely to increase frictions between Pakistan's military and its civilian government, such as removing ultimate control over the principal intelligence agency, the ISI, from the military.

India, recognizing Pakistan's weakness and acting at least in part in concert with Washington, continues to ratchet up pressure on its archrival. In recent days, New Delhi has insinuated Pakistan had a role in a terrorist bombing in India's capital, stationed new fighter jets in Kashmir, and unilaterally reduced the flow of the Chenub River into the Pakistani Punjab.

Last but not least, anti-US sentiment—fuelled by the occupation of Afghanistan, the counterinsurgency war inside Pakistan war and the US's decades-long policy of sustaining military rule in Islamabad and using Pakistan as a pawn in its global imperialist strategy—continues only to grow.



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