

Following attack on army headquarters

Pakistan vows to mount new military offensive

Keith Jones
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Pakistan's army was forced to storm a section of its own national headquarters complex, situated in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, yesterday, to put an end to a day-long assault and hostage-taking by unidentified anti-government insurgents.

Military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas trumpeted the commando raid mounted by the army's elite Special Services Group as "highly successful," although it resulted in the deaths of three of the thirty-nine hostages and two soldiers. Four insurgents were also killed and one captured.

Ten people—four soldiers, a brigadier-general, a colonel, and four insurgents—had been killed the day before, when nine men stormed two checkpoints at the army headquarters complex. The men are reported to have been dressed in military uniforms and armed with grenades and automatic weapons and to have traveled in a van bearing military plates.

Guns blazing, the insurgents succeeded in storming through the first checkpoint they encountered, but were repelled by guards at the second. The surviving insurgents then found refuge in one of the complex's buildings, taking hostage the military and civilian personnel they found there. To its acute embarrassment, the Pakistani military initially claimed the insurgent attack was over, only to discover that one of its buildings had been seized and a large number of military and civilian personnel were being held at gunpoint.

Although no group has yet claimed responsibility for the audacious attack, Pakistani authorities have blamed it on Taliban-aligned militants and are vowing the military will soon strike back in South Waziristan. "All roads lead to South Waziristan," declared Interior Minister Rehman Malik, "Now the government has no other option but to launch an offensive."

For weeks, Pakistani government and Pentagon officials have been saying that a major military offensive is imminent in South Waziristan, a tribal agency that borders Afghanistan. The local Pashtun population there has long resisted government efforts to assert its authority and stamp out support for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

The *Dawn* cited one unnamed Pakistan official as saying that the offensive in South Waziristan will be the "mother of all battles," while a military spokesman said two divisions, or up to 28,000 troops, were poised to take part in the counter-insurgency campaign. Earlier this month, residents of the tribal agency were

reported to be fleeing the area in anticipation of the impending Pakistani military offensive.

Under heavy pressure from Washington, which claims that Pakistan is serving as a "safe haven" for the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani military carried out a major military operation in the Malakand Division of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) last spring. That offensive resulted in hundreds of deaths and caused two million people to flee from their homes. Many fleeing civilians reported that the Pakistani military strafed and bombarded indiscriminately, killing untold numbers of villagers and destroying homes and schools. With the return of much of the civilian population in recent weeks to the Swat Valley, the military has reportedly been conducting a campaign of assassinations against alleged Taliban collaborators.

In vowing retaliation for this weekend's attack, Malik left little to the imagination, referring to the Swat Valley example. Said Malik, "I want to give a message to the Taliban that what we did with you in Swat we will do the same to you there, too."

This weekend's attack was the third major terrorist incident in Pakistan in the past week. On Friday, a car-bomb exploded in a marketplace in Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP, killing 52 and injuring over 100. Four days earlier, a suicide bomb attack that the Taliban claimed responsibility for killed five aid workers at the UN's World Food Program office in Islamabad.

Washington will use the recent spate of attacks and especially the high-profile commando-style raid on the Pakistani army headquarters to ratchet up its longstanding demand that Islamabad do more to support the increasingly beleaguered US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters that terrorists are "increasingly threatening the authority of the [Pakistani] state."

With the complicity of the Pakistani government and military, US forces have launched dozens of drone missile strikes within Pakistan. But Washington has repeatedly pressed Islamabad to accept much more flagrant incursions on Pakistani sovereignty—to allow US troops to carry out "hot pursuit" missions and/or joint ground-operations within Pakistan.

To underscore its intention to make Pakistan a major front in the Afghan war and have the Pakistan military bear much of the brunt of the fighting, the Obama administration re-dubbed it the AfPak

war last winter as it was finalizing plans for an Afghan “troop surge.”

With Washington’s attempt to consolidate a puppet regime in Afghanistan once again in crisis—Obama’s Afghan commander General Stanley McChrystal has requested an additional 40,000 troops over and above the tens of thousands deployed as a result of the “surge”—the White House and Pentagon are again turning their attention to Pakistan.

Pakistan was reportedly the focus of a White House Afghan “war council” meeting last Wednesday. Vice-President Joe Biden and others within the administration who are opposing McChrystal’s request for a massive increase in US troops are reportedly advocating a “Pakistan first” alternative. This would involve the US dramatically increasing unilateral drone strikes and US special forces raids inside Pakistan and pressing Islamabad to ratchet up its own military operations against the Taliban and associated Islamist militias.

Meanwhile within Pakistan’s elite, which for decades has served as a pliant proxy of US imperialist interests in Central and South Asia and the Middle East, there are growing resentments and frictions over Washington’s ever-escalating demands and pressure.

It has not gone unnoticed in Islamabad that, while the US has loudly protested the Pakistani government’s various attempts to reach accommodations with Taliban-aligned groups, Washington has repeatedly indicated that it is ultimately prepared to negotiate with elements in and around the Taliban.

Last week a meeting of the Pakistani military’s corps commanders raised “grave concerns” about some of the stipulations of the US’s “Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009,” and much of the press and the opposition, including Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), quickly joined in the criticism.

The Act provides for \$1.5 billion in annual US economic development assistance to Pakistan for the next five years. But for the money to flow, the US Secretary of State must every six months certify that Pakistan has met a series of conditions, including effectively deeming that Islamabad is doing the Washington’s bidding in the Afghan war.

What most provoked the military’s ire was a clause that suggests the US wants greater civilian government control over the military, including the appointment of senior officers—a measure that threatens the autonomy and vast privileges of the Pakistani officer corps.

Washington has for decades promoted the Pakistani military as the country’s central institution, lavishing it with arms and supporting a succession of military dictatorships, including that of General Pervez Musharraf, which only unraveled in 2008.

And the close relationship between the Pentagon and Pakistani military remains a pillar of US foreign policy.

Pakistani newspapers have suggested that some of the clauses to which the military has taken such offence were placed in the legislation at the urging of the Pakistani ambassador to the US. Certainly Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, whose popularity has plummeted due to his rightwing socio-economic policies and close identification with the predatory US war, initially strongly

supported the US legislation as written, hoping to use it to wrest more power for himself and his government.

Under the pressure of the military, however, Zardari has had to change tacks. According to press reports, he pledged at a meeting with the head of the Pakistani military, General Ashfaq Kayani, Saturday that his government will take up the officer corps’ concerns about the legislation with Washington.

What lies behind the controversial conditions attached to the Pakistani aid bill are US concerns that sections of the Pakistani security-intelligence apparatus are continuing to place their perception of Pakistan’s national interests, over those of Washington and Wall Street. In short, they continue to patronize the Taliban as a geo-political asset in Pakistan’s decades-long rivalry with India and are reluctant to pursue an all-out civil war inside Pakistan that could destabilize, and redound against, the state.

Wide sections of the Pakistani elite fear that the US is a “fair-weather friend,” whose long-term objective is to cement a strategic partnership with India at Islamabad’s expense. They are angered that the US has allowed India to play a major role in Afghan affairs. And they are incensed that the US has fundamentally changed the balance of power in the region under a nuclear accord that gives India access to advanced civilian nuclear technology, thereby allowing it to concentrate the resource of its indigenous nuclear program on nuclear weapons development.

India, for its part, fears that the Obama administration, in its pursuit of the Afghan war, is prioritizing its relations with Pakistan over those of India. In an attempt to disrupt this, it has taken a provocative stance, denouncing Pakistan as the principal source of international terrorism. New Delhi is demanding that, as a pre-condition for the resumption of the long-stalled Indo-Pakistani peace process, Islamabad show as much vigor in cracking down on Kashmiri insurgent groups as it has on the Islamist groups targeted by the US.

The US military-strategic thrust into Central and South Asia is resulting in an expanding war that is causing increasing ruin and suffering for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan and destabilizing the entire region, thereby sowing the seeds of still greater conflagrations.



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