

Pakistan shuts key Afghan war supply-route

Keith Jones
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Pakistan shut down a pivotal US-NATO Afghan war supply route yesterday following a NATO attack on a Pakistani border post that killed three Pakistan Frontier Corps troops and injured three others.

Attack helicopters from the US-NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) twice strafed positions in Kurram, one of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Thursday morning, first about 5:30 AM and again some four hours later.

NATO officials have justified the attack on the Mandata Kandaho outpost as an act of “self-defence,” just as they did three helicopter attacks last weekend that killed more than 50 people.

According to a Pakistani military spokesman, the Frontier Guards at Mandata Kandaho had fired in the air to indicate to the ISAF helicopters that they had entered into Pakistan airspace: “Instead of heeding to the warning,” the helicopters fired “two missiles, destroying the post.”

Soon after yesterday’s attacks, Pakistan officials closed the crossing into Afghanistan at Torkham, north of Peshawar. By the end of the afternoon, the blockade had reportedly forced more than 150 NATO trucks and oil-tankers from the road.

Pakistan government and military officials have not publicly called the border closure retaliation for the violation of its national sovereignty and murder of its citizens. But on Tuesday, Pakistan’s military warned NATO leaders in Brussels that if NATO forces continue to mount military strikes inside Pakistan, Pakistan will no longer be “able to ensure the safety” of ISAF supply convoys.

While Pakistan’s government has for years tacitly accepted US drone attacks in FATA, it has strongly protested whenever US and NATO forces have crossed into Pakistan, including making thinly veiled threats of military retaliation.

This is hardly extraordinary. Under international law, cross-border attacks are tantamount to an act of war.

In commenting on Thursday’s developments, Pakistan Interior Minister Rehman Malik said, “We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies.”

Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Basit vowed Pakistan “will protect our sovereignty in all circumstances.” When asked how Pakistan might retaliate he said, “I leave it to your imagination.”

This latest crisis in US-Pakistani relations erupted one day after Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed to have reached a “decent understanding, with General Ashfaq Kiyani, the head of the Pakistan Army, about last weekend’s incursions into Pakistan and on a day that CIA director Leon Panetta was consulting with top Pakistani officials in Islamabad.

Following a meeting between Panetta and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, the president’s office said he had told the CIA director that “the government of Pakistan strongly disapproves any incident of violation of its sovereignty. Any violation of internationally agreed principles is counterproductive and unacceptable.”

Located in the Khyber Pass, the Torkham border-crossing is far and away the most important conduit for US-NATO supplies, with more than half of all the food and fuel used by US-NATO occupying forces in Afghanistan shipped via this route.

NATO officials have downplayed the closure, saying it will have no impact on the counter-insurgency war. Pakistan, for its part, has said nothing about when the blockade will be lifted. Previous such blockades have not lasted more than a few days.

The reality, nonetheless, is that nine years into the Afghan war, the US continues to remain highly dependent upon Pakistan’s logistical support in seeking to subjugate Afghanistan and establish a military-geopolitical beachhead in oil-rich Central Asia.

And the US-Pakistan relationship remains fraught with tensions—tensions that could at any time spin out of control.

Over the past decade, Washington has repeatedly placed intense pressure on Pakistan, using threats, including of military action, to bring Pakistan’s military-geo-political posture ever more closely in line with the US’s predatory interests.

According to Bob Woodward’s recently published *Obama’s War*, the US has told Islamabad that in the event of a terrorist attack on either the US or India that can be traced back to Pakistan, the Pentagon will mount a major bombing campaign against suspected terrorist camps. Significantly, Woodward conceded that the US is little concerned about whether such an attack will result in civilian casualties. “Some locations might be outdated, but there would be no concern, under the plan, for

who might be living there now. The retribution plan called for a brutal punishing attack on at least 150 or more associated camps.”

While incessantly demanding that Pakistan “do more” to support the US war in Afghanistan, even if this means plunging large parts of Pakistan into civil war, Washington has ruthlessly pressed forward with policies that further undermine Islamabad’s geo-political position. Thus the US has cemented a strategic partnership with Pakistan’s arch-rival India and sought to block several key Pakistani initiatives, including the building of a natural gas pipeline from Iran and obtaining nuclear reactors from China.

Pakistan has been devastated by floods since late July, with more than 20 million people, at least half of them children, affected. In terms of the numbers of persons displaced and in need of emergency food and medical aid, the UN has repeatedly described the Pakistan floods as the greatest humanitarian disaster in its 65-year history.

Yet during this period the US under President Barrack Obama has dramatically intensified drone attacks inside Pakistan, with more than 20 staged last month alone. The repeated violations of Pakistani sovereignty by NATO helicopters over the past week are clearly part of this new more aggressive posture.

An unnamed Pakistani military official told the *Washington Post* that the drone strikes and helicopter incursions are “pressure tactics” aimed at forcing Islamabad to mount a new military offensive to crush Taliban-aligned groups in North Waziristan.

Under conditions where the Afghan war is highly unpopular in both Europe and North America, Washington is anxious to have Pakistani troops do as much of the fighting and dying as possible.

The Pakistani military, it need be added, is infamous for its use of indiscriminate violence, including blanket bombing and collective punishments on villages and areas deemed supportive of the insurgency.

Last year, some two million people were displaced by Pakistani military operations in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former North West Frontier Province). A horrific example of the methods the Pakistan military used in this offensive, which was much praised by Washington, is given by a video that has surface on the Internet and which even US government officials have conceded is likely authentic, showing Pakistani troops summarily executing six young men.

The decades-long partnership between Washington and Islamabad and the Pentagon and the Pakistani military has proven disastrous for the Pakistani people.

The US has been the bulwark of a succession of military dictatorships that have brutally repressed the population. With the active encouragement of Washington, as part of its drive to undermine the Soviet Union by funding and arming the Afghan mujahedeen, Pakistan under General Zia actively promoted

Islamic fundamentalism, including the growth of Islamicist militias.

Little more than two years ago, the latest military regime—led by George W. Bush’s good friend General Pervez Musharraf—unraveled in the face of mass popular opposition.

But the US has continued to court and promote the military as Pakistan’s premier institution.

Bolstered by this support and exploiting popular anger over the manifest corruption and incompetence of the civilian government and its pursuit of US-sponsored IMF restructuring, Pakistan’s military is now reasserting itself ever more directly into day-to-day political decision-making.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* carried a report that asserted, “The Pakistani military, angered by the inept handling of the country’s devastating floods and alarmed by a collapse of the economy, is pushing for a shake-up of the elected government, and in the longer term, even the removal of President Asif Ali Zardari and his top lieutenants.”

It added “American officials, too say” that they are “increasingly disillusioned with Mr. Zardari.”

As in the past, both the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie and Washington are looking to the military to suppress popular unrest born of chronic hunger and poverty, ever-widening social inequality, landlordism and numerous other feudal vestiges, and opposition to Pakistan’s role as a mercenary for US imperialism.

Recent weeks have seen a mounting wave of protests over the lack of flood-relief, load-shedding and the government’s attempt to renege on promised public sector wage increases.

According to the *Times* article, “Of mounting concern to the Obama administration is the potential for serious unrest if the economy unspools further: inflation by some predictions will reach 25 percent in the coming period.”



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