

US threatens wider war in Pakistan

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The week-old standoff between Washington and Islamabad over US military attacks inside Pakistan and the blocking of a vital NATO supply line in retaliation underscores the growing threat that the nine-year-old war in Afghanistan is spiralling out of control.

A dramatic escalation of US attacks on Pakistan set the stage for the sharp deterioration in relations over the past week. September saw 22 missile strikes by CIA drones against Pakistani targets, a record number since the attacks began.

The Pakistani government and intelligence services have tolerated and collaborated in the drone attacks, but the US military carried out a qualitative escalation of the assault on Pakistan last week, staging a series of cross-border raids by US helicopter gunships based inside Afghanistan.

While the first of these raids claimed the lives of scores of Pakistanis described by Washington as “militants”—and by residents of the area as local tribesmen—the last killed three members of the Pakistani military’s Frontier Corps and blew to pieces a border post.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top US military commander in Afghanistan, defended this attack as an act of “self defense.” It was nothing of the sort. The US military sent its attack helicopters across the border hunting for targets. If there was any act of self defense, it was by the Frontier Corpsmen, who apparently fired shots to warn the helicopter that it had crossed the border in violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty.

In retaliation, the Pakistani government ordered the closure of a vital supply route for fuel and equipment bound for the US-led occupation forces inside Afghanistan. Now in its seventh day, the closure of the border crossing at Torkham has left hundreds of fuel tankers and container trucks stranded on the road from the Pakistani port of Karachi to the Khyber Pass.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban, an alliance of tribal-based

militias hostile to the US occupation of Afghanistan and the Pakistani regime’s complicity with Washington, claimed responsibility for a string of attacks on the stalled NATO convoys. On Monday, attackers burned 20 trucks with Molotov cocktails near Islamabad, killing six people, while another two trucks were ambushed in Baluchistan, where a second border crossing has remained open. This follows the burning of 24 trucks and fuel tankers Friday in the south of Pakistan.

A spokesman for the Pakistani Foreign Office, Abdul Basit, said that the border crossing would be reopened only after “public anger eases” in relation to the US attacks. He attributed the attacks on the NATO convoys to “the reaction of the Pakistani masses.” The statement made clear that Pakistani government and military have lent their tacit support to the attacks as means of retaliation.

The US military incursions and stepped up CIA strikes against Pakistan have apparently been carried out as a means of pressuring the Pakistani government to launch a long-sought military offensive in North Waziristan to root out the so-called Haqqani network, an armed opposition group that operates on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Islamabad had refused to launch the offensive, citing the devastation wrought by the massive flooding of the country and its deployment of tens of thousands of soldiers in relief operations. At the same time, the Pakistani military and its intelligence service, the ISI, have deep ties with the Haqqani network and see it as an asset in defending Pakistani interests inside Afghanistan. Last June, it was reported that top Pakistani officials were engaged in an attempt to mediate a power-sharing arrangement between the network and the US-backed government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

It is likely that the recent revelations in the Bob

Woodward book *Obama's Wars* have played a role in the ratcheting up of tensions between Washington and Islamabad.

The book quotes Obama as declaring in an Oval Office meeting last November, "We need to make clear to people that the cancer is in Pakistan." The objective of the US military intervention in Afghanistan, he added, was to ensure that "the cancer doesn't spread there."

It also recounts US threats made last May to carry out a massive bombing campaign against targets inside Pakistan in the event of a successful terrorist attack on US soil that could be traced back to that country. And it quotes CIA Director Leon Panetta as insisting that the drone attacks were not an adequate means of attacking anti-US forces inside Pakistan.

"We can't do this without some boots on the ground," Panetta is quoted as saying. "They could be Pakistani boots or they can be our boots, but we got to have some boots on the ground." The implication is clear. If the Pakistani military fails to do Washington's bidding, the American military will intervene.

While most of this was already known to Pakistan's military and intelligence, it has now been widely reported in Pakistan, stoking popular anger against US arrogance and further discrediting the government in Islamabad as a servile puppet of Washington.

For decades, the Pakistani military has acted as Washington's mercenary servant, called upon repeatedly to defend US interests – including in its collaboration with the CIA and Islamist elements like Osama bin Laden in the US-orchestrated war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It has also served as an instrument for upholding stability inside Pakistan, including through the imposition of a series of military dictatorships, from that of Ayub Khan in the 1950s to the rule of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who was forced out just two years ago.

Now, however, these two roles are increasingly in conflict, with the war in Afghanistan and Islamabad's complicity serving to radically destabilize the situation in Pakistan itself.

Moreover, the Pakistani bourgeoisie and military see their strategic interests in the region frustrated at every turn by US imperialism's military pursuit of hegemony in oil-rich Central Asia.

This US strategy has led to a "global strategic

partnership" with Pakistan's regional rival, India, including an Indo-US nuclear treaty that essentially legitimizes India's development of nuclear weapons, while exempting it from restrictions under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

At the same time, a key US aim is countering the regional influence of China, which has considerable and long-standing interests in Pakistan. While facilitating India's nuclear aims, Washington has attempted to block China's plans to build two nuclear reactors for Pakistan. Washington has also viewed with growing hostility China's attempt to develop naval and commercial port facilities in Pakistan. The US has likewise worked to stymie a pipeline project between Pakistan and Iran.

Meanwhile, Washington has sought to exploit the most devastating floods in Pakistan's history as a means of further squeezing the Pakistani bourgeoisie, demanding economic structural "reforms" that would further US capitalist interests in return for a pittance of aid.

The attempt to further these aims and to untangle the complex geo-political relations in the region in its favor by unleashing bombs and missiles on Pakistan underscores the increasing desperation gripping the US war in Afghanistan and the reckless and incendiary character of Washington's policy.

Following the strategy dictated by his generals, Obama, just like his predecessor in the White House, is attempting to exploit US military superiority to offset American capitalism's long-term economic decline. This course is producing regional and global instability that threatens to drag the people of Pakistan and the entire world into a far bloodier conflagration.

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