

New York Times reports US plans for military escalation in Pakistan

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In a front-page article citing unnamed US military and political officials, the *New York Times* reported Tuesday that the Obama administration is close to approving a major expansion of Special Operations ground raids into Pakistani regions bordering Afghanistan.

The newspaper acknowledged that such a move “would amount to the opening of a new front in the nine-year-old war, which has grown increasingly unpopular among Americans.”

The article, carrying the bylines of Mark Mazzetti in Washington and Dexter Filkins in Kabul, states that “senior American military commanders in Afghanistan” are pushing for the Obama administration to approve frequent ground raids into Pakistani tribal areas, where, according to Washington, Al Qaeda leaders have sanctuaries. The US also maintains that Taliban and other insurgent forces use the region—in particular, North Waziristan—as a staging area for attacks on US and NATO troops across the border in Afghanistan.

The *Times* elicited strong denials from NATO officials and the Pakistani ambassador to the United States.

US Navy Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, deputy chief of staff for communication for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—the official name of the US-led occupation force in Afghanistan—said in a statement from Kabul, “There is absolutely no truth to reporting in the *New York Times* that US forces are planning to conduct ground operations into Pakistan.” Smith went on to say that NATO “recognizes the sovereignty of Afghanistan and Pakistan to pursue insurgents and terrorists operating in their respective border areas.”

Ambassador Husain Haqqani told the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*: “Pakistani forces are capable of handling the militant threat within our borders and no foreign forces are allowed or required to operate inside our sovereign territory... We work with our allies,

especially the US, and appreciate their material support, but we will not accept foreign troops on our soil, a position that is well known.”

Referring to a visit last week to Islamabad by Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Haqqani continued: “Nothing discussed during his trip indicates the likelihood of ill-advised escalation or unilateral action by NATO troops beyond their mandate in Afghanistan.”

As of this writing, no official representing the Pentagon or the Obama administration has responded to the *Times* report.

It is an open secret that the US is conducting what the *Times* article calls “America's clandestine war in Pakistan,” but that war has largely consisted of missile attacks from CIA-operated pilotless drones carried out in border regions.

These attacks have killed thousands of Pakistanis, overwhelmingly civilians. They have been dramatically stepped up by the Obama administration. The *Times* article notes that since September, there have been over 50 such attacks in North Waziristan and elsewhere, compared to 60 over the preceding eight months.

Just last Friday, a series of drone missile attacks killed at least 54 people in Pakistan's Khyber tribal region near the Afghanistan border.

The Pakistani government officially opposes the drone attacks, but in practice collaborates with the CIA, providing intelligence on Taliban and other insurgents in the tribal regions who are targeted for elimination. The drone attacks arouse deep and broad anger within the Pakistani population against both the US and the Pakistani regime.

Pakistan has to date drawn the line on any significant incursion of US ground forces into the country, knowing that such a policy would have explosive and immensely destabilizing social and political consequences. The

regime has already been traumatized by the release last month, via WikiLeaks, of US diplomatic cables revealing that some US Special Forces troops are already being deployed alongside Pakistani forces in the tribal regions.

Pakistan strongly protested when the Bush administration sent American commandos on a raid into Pakistan in September of 2008, resulting in several Pakistani deaths. This past October, a US military helicopter crossed the border and killed three members of the Pakistani Frontier Corps. Pakistan responded by closing for 10 days a key border crossing for the US supply route into Afghanistan.

But Washington is relentlessly ratcheting up pressure on Pakistan to expand its military operations in the tribal regions, already involving over 100,000 Pakistani troops, to North Waziristan. US political and military officials have made clear their displeasure over Islamabad's refusal so far to set a date for an offensive in North Waziristan.

Announcing the results of the administration's review of the war in Afghanistan last Thursday, Obama referred to the document's implicit criticism of Pakistan for failing to clear out Taliban safe havens on its territory, saying "progress has not come fast enough." Washington, he added, "will continue to insist to Pakistani leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders must be dealt with."

Following his visit on Friday to Islamabad, Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen told reporters, "We want to solve it overnight. There is strategic impatience on the part of myself and others."

The *Times* article points to Pakistan's resistance to launching an offensive in North Waziristan as a driving force behind demands by US commanders for sanction to launch ground raids into Pakistan. Referring to last week's Afghanistan war review, it notes: "In announcing the results of a review of the strategy in Afghanistan, Obama administration officials said they were considering expanded American operations to deal with threats inside Pakistan. They offered no specifics."

At the Pentagon press conference held Thursday to discuss the review, Marine Gen. James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, raised the possibility of sending US troops across the border into Pakistan, calling such "unilateral action" an "absolute last measure."

According to the *Times* article, the proposal to expand US ground operations into Pakistan, "described by American officials in Washington and Afghanistan," focuses on capturing "militants" in Pakistan and bringing

them back to Afghanistan for interrogation. Military commanders are touting the "intelligence windfall" that would result from such interrogations—which would undoubtedly involve the use of torture.

"Now, American military officers appear confident," the newspaper writes, "that a shift in policy could allow for more routine incursions." The *Times* quotes one senior American officer as saying, "We've never been as close as we are now to getting the go-ahead to go across."

The article notes that the CIA is already operating six Afghan militias "that serve as a special operations force against insurgents throughout Afghanistan." It claims that such militias, i.e., death squads, operate around the cities of Kandahar, Kabul and Jalalabad and in the rural provinces of Khost and Kunar. A sixth, called the Paktika Defense Force, has, according to the *Times*, twice crossed the border and conducted operations in Pakistan.

The British *Telgraph*, which also ran a story on the push by American commanders for ground raids into Pakistan, noted that some analysts believe US officials are leaking such reports in order to increase the pressure on Pakistan to launch an offensive in North Waziristan.

The newspaper quoted Ahmed Rashid, described as "an expert on the Afghan Taliban," as saying: "This is a deliberate leak. The Americans have been talking about this for the last six months."

Whether Washington is about to approve expanded ground raids or is, for the present, using the threat of such a policy shift to blackmail the Pakistani regime into extending its offensive against internal opponents of the colonial war in Afghanistan, the basic thrust of US policy is to escalate the war. The inevitable result will be the destabilization of the entire region and a far wider military conflagration.



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