

Pakistani, NATO forces clash amid rising US-Pakistani tensions

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Two Pakistani soldiers were injured Tuesday when Pakistani ground troops were fired on by NATO helicopters that had crossed into Pakistani airspace over North Waziristan. NATO denied that its helicopters entered into Pakistan, but did concede that they fired into North Waziristan after coming under attack.

The Pakistani army said it has lodged a “strong protest” with NATO, while making clear that it stood by the troops’ action to oppose this latest violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

Yesterday’s border clash came amid the deepest crisis in US-Pakistani relations since the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. At the time, Washington threatened to bomb Pakistan “back into the Stone Age” if it did not break relations with the Taliban regime in Kabul and provide logistical support for the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The current crisis was provoked by the unilateral May 2 raid the US mounted in Abbottabad, deep inside Pakistan, to assassinate Osama bin Laden. The operation included plans to attack Pakistan’s military if it tried to oppose this violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

Last weekend, Pakistan’s parliament unanimously passed a resolution denouncing both the May 2 raid and the ongoing US campaign of Predator drone strikes inside Pakistan, warning that Pakistan would resist future encroachments on its sovereignty.

The resolution was passed the day after an 11-hour closed door session of parliament, at which Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, the head of Pakistan’s main military intelligence agency, the ISI, gave a lengthy presentation on the May 2 raid and US-Pakistani relations. Pasha was flanked by the military brass, including the head of the armed forces, General Ashfaq Parvaz Kayani.

Parliamentarians who attended the closed-door session said Pasha reported he recently had had a “shouting match” with CIA boss Leon Panetta.

Pasha denied that there is, or ever has been, any formal agreement between Pakistan’s military and the US allowing the CIA to carry out Predator drone strikes in Pakistan. However, he is said to have conceded that most of the strikes are launched from a CIA-controlled Pakistani air base. Under questioning, he also said that Pakistan’s US-supplied F-16 jets could shoot down the drones.

Pasha reportedly bitterly attacked the US, with which the Pakistani elite has a six decades long military-strategic partnership, for repeatedly and invariably betraying Pakistan.

As for the illegal mission that led to the killing of Bin Laden, Pasha characterized it as a “sting operation,” aimed at discrediting and humiliating Pakistan.

He made clear that the raid had raised the risks of a military confrontation with India. He took note of the Indian military’s boasts that it can mount an Abbottabad-type raid in Pakistan. According to *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most influential daily, Pasha then said that “a contingency plan was in place and targets inside India had already been identified. ‘We have also carried out rehearsal for it’.”

The US has used the Bin Laden affair—the revelation that Bin Laden lived in Pakistan, including for several years in the garrison city of Abbottabad—to pressure Islamabad to escalate the counter-insurgency war it has waged in Pakistan’s Pashtun tribal areas for the past seven years. This aims to help suppress opposition to the US occupation of Afghanistan. The war has caused thousands of civilian deaths through carpet-bombing and shelling, forced hundreds of thousands from their homes, and helped further entrench the power of Pakistan’s military-security forces.

On May 12 the *New York Times* wrote that after “the May 2 raid that killed Bin Laden in Pakistan, American officials say they now have greater leverage to force Pakistani cooperation in hunting down Taliban and Al- Qaeda leaders, so the United States can end the war in Afghanistan.”

Senator John Kerry visited Pakistan this past Monday, bringing a series of demands from the Obama administration—backed up by threats, including of possible cuts to the \$3 billion in annual civilian and military aid the US provides Pakistan. Kerry was also reportedly mandated to convey assurances that Islamabad would be included in any negotiations to include sections of Taliban into the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul, and that Washington will ensure that India's role in Afghanistan is limited.

Kerry spoke of “profound” consequences if the US-Pakistan rift is not bridged. On his return to the US, Kerry said Pakistan's leaders had agreed to act on some of the Obama administration's demands, but that he could not say what this entailed. “Some of” these things, said Kerry, “are very important to us strategically, but they are not appropriate to discuss publicly.”

Kerry also made clear that the US will maintain or even escalate pressure on Islamabad. “This relationship,” he declared, “will not be measured by words or by communiqués after meetings like the ones that I engaged in. It will only be measured by actions”.

He said that Pakistan's leaders had agreed to “concrete,” “precise,” “measurable” steps that “are in many cases joint”—i.e. involve closer cooperation between US and Pakistani forces. “We will know precisely what is happening with them in very, very short order.”

The US has long pressed Pakistan's military to invade North Waziristan, home to the Haqqani network—a Taliban-aligned Islamist militia with longstanding ties to Pakistani security forces, and formerly to the CIA. US officials have also discussed plans to extend Predator drone strikes beyond these areas, and specifically to mount attacks around Quetta. A city of almost a million people, Quetta is reportedly home to the Taliban leadership-in-exile.

In the two weeks since the Abbottabad raid, Washington has brazenly ignored Pakistani complaints about the legality of the drone strikes. Not only have they insisted that the attacks will continue, but the CIA has increased their frequency.

Unquestionably the US has many ways to pressure Islamabad. Not least of these is the country's desperate need for further financial support from the IMF. Although the Pakistani military criticizes the US, it knows that its position and privileges are bound up with its decades-long mercenary relationship with US imperialism.

However, the Pakistani elite also finds its geopolitical

position undermined by US strategy in Asia. Under US pressure, Islamabad had to abandon the Taliban regime in Kabul, which had been a Pakistani proxy regime, thus opening the door for arch-rival India to increase its influence in Afghanistan.

More broadly, the US's forging of a “global strategic” partnership with India, with a view to containing China, has altered the balance of power between Pakistan and India, the two main rival, nuclear-armed South Asian states. The US has fashioned a unique position within the world nuclear regulatory framework for India, giving it access to civilian nuclear technology so it can concentrate its nuclear program on weapons development. Meanwhile, Washington treats Pakistan as a nuclear pariah, also blocking the energy-starved country from building a pipeline to transport Iranian natural gas.

In response to US pressure, Pakistani officials point to continuing US dependence on Pakistan as the conduit for three-quarters of the supplies for the US-NATO war machine in Afghanistan.

Pakistani leaders are also promoting the close, longstanding ties between Islamabad and Beijing. Pakistani government officials have repeatedly called China Pakistan's “all-weather” and “best” friend, while noting that Beijing was virtually alone in the world in criticizing the US's raid on Abbottabad as a flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty.

On Tuesday, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani began a 4-day visit to China. Last week, Nawaf Sharif, the leader of the principal opposition party, also praised China: “At this crucial juncture of history, I cannot say anybody is standing with Pakistan except for China.”

Neither Washington nor Islamabad is seeking to break the reactionary partnership between US imperialism and the Pakistani military. However, as the US recklessly presses forward with its war to subjugate Afghanistan and establish a beachhead in oil-rich Central Asia, and to counter a rising China by courting India, events can easily spin out of control.



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