

The killing of Bin Laden and the threat of a wider war

Bill Van Auken
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Reports that the raid organized to kill Osama bin Laden included backup plans for a military confrontation with Pakistani forces underscore the highly reckless character of the entire operation.

According to a front-page story in Tuesday's *New York Times*, the special operations force sent into Pakistan to kill Bin Laden on May 1 was substantially beefed up on the orders of President Barack Obama, so as to provide it with the ability to "fight its way out" if confronted by Pakistani forces during or after the attack on the compound in Abbotabad. The city, 35 miles from the capital Islamabad, is a military cantonment and site of the country's premier military academy.

"No firepower option was off the table," a US official told the CNN television news network. The CNN report added that the US military had a number of warplanes flying "protective missions" in support of the raid, including "fixed wing fighter jets that would have provided firepower if the team came under opposition fire it could not handle."

All of this firepower was deemed necessary to carry out the raid without seeking the cooperation of the Pakistani government, military or intelligence. Obama was determined to make the killing of Bin Laden a unilateral operation for which his White House could claim undiluted credit.

US military and CIA officials characterized the mission as one of the most risky their agencies had ever attempted, while Obama himself, during an interview with the CBS News program "60 Minutes" on Sunday, described the intelligence placing Bin Laden inside the compound as only "55/45." Obama acknowledged that the compound could have been occupied by a "prince from Dubai," and that if the intelligence had proven faulty, "there would have been significant consequences."

The scale of these consequences now becomes more clear. The raid posed the threat of a military confrontation

between US and Pakistani troops deep inside Pakistani territory and adjacent to Pakistani military facilities. Such a clash would be roughly analogous to throwing a lighted match at a powder keg. Even without a direct engagement between US and Pakistani troops, the raid has sparked widespread popular anger in Pakistan, directed against both the United States and the country's own government.

The Pakistani government has been compelled to react accordingly, with Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani warning in a speech to the parliament that Pakistan would "retaliate with full force" to any future violation of its sovereignty. The comment was directed not just at Washington, but also at India, where the American raid sparked widespread calls for New Delhi to mount similar cross-border operations. Such attacks could bring the two nuclear-armed regional adversaries to the brink of war.

US Army Maj. Gen. John Campbell, the senior commander of American occupation forces in eastern Afghanistan, revealed on Tuesday that Pakistan's military had cut off all communications with the US and NATO for at least two days after the US kill operation against Bin Laden, though contact has since been restored. There were mounting concerns within the Pentagon that Pakistan could once again cut off the supply route from the port of Karachi to the Khyber Pass through which three quarters of the food, fuel, bullets and other basic necessities for the 140,000-strong US-led occupation force in Afghanistan must pass.

The cross-border raid to kill Bin Laden represents a qualitative escalation of the US military operations inside Pakistan that have taken place since Obama came to office and launched his "surge." In 2010, the US administration doubled the number of missile strikes by pilotless drones, which Pakistani human rights groups estimate have killed some 2,500 civilians.

While the Pakistani government and intelligence

services had collaborated in these attacks, over the past two months they have demanded both publicly and privately that they cease because of mounting popular anger, which is destabilizing the government in Islamabad. Yet they continue, with two more such attacks having been carried out since the killing of Bin Laden, the latest claiming at least five lives Tuesday in South Waziristan.

The escalation of US militarism against Pakistan threatens to inflame the entire region. Next week, Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani is to visit China, a country which Gilani referred to as an “all-weather friend” and a “source of inspiration” in the same speech in which he blasted the US military raid. Beijing has voiced support for Pakistan in the wake of the Bin Laden killing and no doubt sees the growing friction between Washington and Islamabad as an opportunity to advance its own strategic interests in the region.

According to US media reports, the Pakistani government last month urged the government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan to deny the US a continuing military presence in that country and orient instead toward Pakistan and China.

China brought Pakistan in as an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes Russia and three former Soviet Central Asian republics. Beijing has employed the SCO to advance its interests in the region, which center on control of energy supplies—the same strategic resources that induced the US to go to war for control of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, President Asif Ali Zardari today begins a three-day visit to Moscow, where he is to discuss with the Russian government mutual concerns, including regional security. Russia also opposes the establishment of permanent US military bases in Afghanistan, seeing them as a beachhead for exerting US control over the Caspian Basin and its energy reserves.

This is the tense international context in which the Obama administration carried out its unilateral raid to kill Bin Laden in Pakistan.

One of the many questions posed by this raid is, “Why now?” There have been no terror alerts either preceding or following the killing of Bin Laden. By most accounts, his Al Qaeda organization had become a spent force, largely irrelevant except to serve as the pretext for ongoing US military operations.

The absence even of claims of an imminent security threat from Bin Laden underscores the fact that the raid was ordered by the Obama White House largely because

of domestic concerns. The administration was shaken by the events earlier this year in Wisconsin, where tens of thousands of workers, inspired in part by the revolutionary events unfolding in Egypt, demonstrated every day for weeks on end to protest anti-worker legislation being pushed through by the governor and the state legislature.

Under conditions of a deepening economic crisis, with no prospect of a significant lessening of unemployment, with fuel and food prices soaring, and the federal government, the states and localities carrying out vicious and massively unpopular cuts in jobs, wages and social programs, the Obama administration could only anticipate a growth of social opposition.

The idea was that a successful operation to “take out” the Al Qaeda leader could be utilized to unleash a flood of militarist and jingoistic propaganda, with the aim of diverting and intimidating growing popular anger.

At the same time, it would allow Obama to recast himself as a “wartime president,” distancing himself from the promises of “change” made in his 2008 campaign and associating his administration ever more closely with the military, the intelligence agencies and with the most reactionary sections of the ruling elite, thereby providing the White House with a new socio-political base for launching attacks on the working class.

Within the framework of the US war in Afghanistan, the raid served another purpose: to ratchet up pressure on the Pakistani government and military to collaborate more directly and fully in the faltering attempt to suppress the growing resistance to American military occupation.

As with all such reckless adventures, often the most important results are the unintended consequences. In this case, they include the stoking up of tensions in a region where five nuclear-armed countries—the US, China, Russia, India and Pakistan—are competing for power and influence.

As the media-generated fog of patriotic triumphalism wears off, this operation may well be seen as one of a number of US actions in the region that are setting the stage for a far bloodier conflagration.

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