

NATO raid kills two dozen Pakistani soldiers

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Relations between the United States and Pakistan are near breaking point after a US airstrike early Saturday morning killed more than 25 Pakistani soldiers stationed at two army posts about 1.5 miles (2.5 kilometers) from the Afghan border.

Fighter planes and helicopter battleships reportedly carried out the attack on the army posts in Salala, a village in the Mohmand District of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

The air strikes have intensified the deep-rooted crisis in US-Pakistani relations—a crisis prompted in part by the US military's repeated bloody incursions into Pakistan in flagrant violation of international law.

Pakistan's military and government denounced Saturday's attack, terming it an unprovoked act of aggression. General Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani, the head of Pakistan's armed forces, led the prayers at a military funeral for 24 of the soldiers killed in the Salala attack.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani rushed back from a vacation to attend an emergency meeting of his cabinet's Defence Committee Saturday evening. The meeting ordered that the temporary halting of NATO supply shipments via Pakistan to Afghanistan imposed just hours after Saturday's air strike be made indefinite. It also demanded that US personnel vacate an airbase in Shamsi, Baluchistan from which the CIA has mounted predator drone strikes inside Pakistan.

Pakistan's government further announced that it will "revisit and undertake a complete review of all programmes, activities and co-operative arrangements with US/NATO/ISAF [ISAF—the NATO-led Afghan occupation force], including diplomatic, political, military and intelligence." In a telephone conversation yesterday, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Kher conveyed to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the "deep sense of rage felt across Pakistan." Kher called the attacks "totally unacceptable. They demonstrate complete disregard for international law and human life, and are in stark violation of Pakistani sovereignty." The popular reaction was even more visceral, reflecting deep

opposition to the violation of Pakistani sovereignty. Thousands demonstrated outside the US consulate in Karachi Sunday.

Pakistan also protested to Kabul demanding that Afghanistan cease allowing its territory to be used "against Pakistan." Pakistan's government has indicated it may boycott a major US-sponsored conference on Afghanistan being held in Bonn next week.

In an email interview, Maleeha Lodhi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US, told the New York Times: "The [US-Pakistani] relationship is on a much more slippery slope now. This is as close as you can get to a rupture."

US and NATO officials termed the strike regrettable. Clinton and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta issued a statement offering "deepest condolences" and emphasizing "the importance of the US-Pakistani partnership." While Washington has mounted a major effort to diversify NATO's supply-lines to Afghanistan, in view of the fraying of its relations with Islamabad, some 40 percent of all supplies for US-NATO forces fighting in Afghanistan continue to be shipped overland via Pakistan, either through the Khyber Pass or through the border crossing at Chaman.

Based on briefings from US and NATO officers, the BBC and the New York Times have claimed that US Special Forces operating inside Afghanistan called for the air strikes after coming under fire from the Pakistani side of the border.

The Pakistani military disputes that there was any firing from the vicinity of the twin Salala outposts, insisting that US and NATO forces were well aware of their location.

Stratfor, a firm specializing in security analysis with close ties to the US military-intelligence establishment, observed that the Pakistan military's Salala base is of "significant size." It added that its sources in Pakistan insist that the US and NATO had long been supplied with its coordinates and that the base had previously been visited by NATO personnel.

Clearly the Pentagon decided to strike inside

Pakistan—once again violating international law—with callous disregard for human life.

Relations between Pakistan—which Washington officially considers a “major” non-NATO ally—and the US have been in almost perpetual crisis since the beginning of the year.

The first flashpoint was the Raymond Davis affair, where the US bullied the Pakistani government into releasing without proper trial a CIA operative who had gunned down two Pakistani youth in a Lahore market.

Then in early May, the US military staged a raid deep inside Pakistan to summarily execute Osama bin Laden, under the express orders of US President Barack Obama. Washington then used bin Laden’s presence in a Pakistani town to ratchet up its demands for Pakistan to mount counter-insurgency attacks against the Taliban.

This summer the US Congress suspended about one-third of a military aid-economic development package to Pakistan, claiming Pakistan was not sufficiently pliant to US demands. In recent weeks, relations became even more tense. The outgoing head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, accused elements within Pakistani intelligence of having ties with the Haqqani network, a Taliban-allied militia blamed for several successful attacks on US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

In a further attempt to put the screws on Pakistan, Washington said it would not help Islamabad to obtain further IMF loans, although Pakistan’s economy is in desperate straits.

In pushing back against the US, Pakistan’s government and military—which has enjoyed a decades-long client-patron relationship with the Pentagon—are trying to appease a populace that is hostile to US foreign policy. There is deep anger over the Afghan war, incessant US bullying, US drone attacks that rain missiles on poor villagers, and the decades of semi-colonial bondage the US has helped to force on Pakistan by backing a succession of military dictatorships.

The Pakistani elite’s increasingly fractured relations with Washington are far more than simply an attempt to ventilate pressure from below, however.

The US attempt to transform Afghanistan into a beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia and its drive to contain and thwart China, Pakistan’s other major ally, are profoundly threatening the interests of the Pakistani ruling class. Largely at US prompting, Islamabad has become deeply immersed in Afghanistan over decades since it backed right-wing Islamist guerrillas against the Soviet-

backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war. Pakistan sought to use Afghanistan to provide it with an ally and “strategic depth” in its rivalry with India.

However, the US has not only compelled Pakistan to sever ties with many of its erstwhile Islamist allies, it has encouraged India to play an ever-increasing role in Afghanistan, including providing military-police training. Last month, Kabul and New Delhi signed a strategic partnership agreement.

Islamabad fears that the US is trying to sideline it in the reconfiguration of the stooge regime in Kabul. The reconfiguration is to be achieved, according to US plans, through the current Afghan war “surge” and—after they are demoralized by massive slaughter—“peace talks” with the insurgents.

Even more menacing from the standpoint of the Pakistani elite is the US’s aggressive courting of India as a counterweight to China. The US has negotiated for India a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime—a status it has pointedly refused to offer Pakistan—allowing it access to civilian nuclear trade. This will help New Delhi concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development. Washington is also encouraging India to play a major role in policing the Indian Ocean, offering it several advanced weapons systems.

In response, Pakistan has tried to strengthen ties with China, leading only to further conflict with Washington.

The deepening and explosive rift between the US and Pakistan exemplifies the incendiary role the US now plays in world politics.



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