

US admits partial blame in deaths of Pakistani soldiers, but defends airstrikes

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In a yet to be released report, the US military has grudgingly conceded its mistakes played a role in the November 25-26 NATO attack that killed 26 Pakistani soldiers stationed in Pakistan's Mohmand tribal agency. But the Pentagon and Obama administration continue to defend both the violation of Pakistani sovereignty and the deadly airstrikes themselves, claiming that the Pakistani soldiers had previously fired on a US-led special operations force.

In a statement issued Thursday, the Department of Defense said, "Given what information they had available to them at the time," the US forces "acted in self-defence and with appropriate force after being fired upon."

Last month's airstrikes—the latest in a series of flagrant US violations of Pakistani sovereignty—triggered mass protests inside Pakistan and forced the Pakistani government to take a series of retaliatory measures. These included halting all land shipments of food, fuel, and other supplies to the US-NATO troops occupying Afghanistan and forcing US personnel to evacuate an air base from which the CIA has launched Predator drone strikes on Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

During the past year, the US has developed alternate routes to supply its forces in Afghanistan so as to lessen Pakistan's leverage. Nevertheless, the ongoing blockade represents a serious disruption. The route through Pakistan remains the shortest and cheapest means of supplying the Afghan occupation force and is still the conduit for more than a quarter of all non-lethal provisions for the US-NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The findings of the US military's investigation into the November 26 events were not meant to be released this week. But after word of them leaked out in the *Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers, the findings were

summarized in a Pentagon statement and in off-the-record interviews accorded reporters from the *New York Times* and other leading dailies.

Contrary to Pakistani military and government officials, the US contends that the Pakistanis fired first and that US commanders in Afghanistan were never told of the location of the twin hilltop posts where the Pakistani troops were stationed.

The Pentagon does concede it supplied a Pakistani military liaison officer with the wrong coordinates for the impending air attack, coordinates that placed the attack nine miles from its true site. It also admits to not having informed Pakistan that it was mounting an operation along the Afghan-Pakistani border, reputedly because of concern that elements within Pakistan's military would forewarn the insurgents.

After the findings of the US investigation leaked out, the Pentagon tried to arrange for the head of its Central Command, General James Mattis, to visit Islamabad to brief the Pakistani military. However, Pakistani authorities said they were not ready to receive General Mattis—a clear signal of their anger over the investigation's conclusions and apprehension as to how it will be received by the Pakistani people.

Earlier Pakistani army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas had rejected the US findings, saying they were "short on facts." He promised "a detailed response ... when the formal report is received."

Pakistani government and military officials have repeatedly charged that US-NATO forces deliberately targeted the Pakistani troops. What is incontrovertible is that the US has repeatedly arrogated the right to mount cross-border raids and shower drone missiles on Pakistani villages.

Under Obama, Washington has systematically ratcheted up pressure on Pakistan, a "major non-NATO ally," to bear more of the brunt of the Afghan War.

Already, Pakistan has suffered more battlefield casualties fighting Taliban and Taliban-allied groups than the US or its NATO allies. The Pakistan military's counter-insurgency war, employing the barbaric techniques pioneered by Pakistan's former British colonial masters, has displaced more than a millions Pakistanis, flattened whole villages, and exacerbated national-ethnic tensions within the Pakistani state.

In recent months, the US has sought to bully Pakistan economically, offering only a derisory amount of aid after a second year of devastating flooding and reportedly informing Islamabad that it will not use its influence with the IMF to assist in obtaining a desperately needed loan.

For tens of millions of Pakistanis, last month's attack exemplifies Washington's historic indifference to the Pakistani people and readiness to use Pakistan as a proxy in its predatory geo-political maneuvers in Asia and the Middle East.

If relations between Islamabad and Washington are fraught, it is because the crisis-ridden Pakistani elite fears the socially destabilizing impact of its frontline role in what the Obama administration has renamed the AfPak War. A second factor is the Pakistani bourgeoisie's apprehensions over the US's assiduous courting of its historic rival India, which has included welcoming India's emergence as a key prop of the Afghan government.

The tensions between Washington and Islamabad have exacerbated the factional conflicts within Pakistan's establishment.

On Friday, Pakistan's military command issued a statement claiming that it has no designs on power and citing the head of Pakistan's armed forces, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, as saying that "speculations" of a military coup were "a bogey to divert the focus from the real issues." Kayani, the statement added, was adamant that "there can be no compromise on national security."

This statement from Pakistan's top brass was a not very subtle rejoinder to remarks made by Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani the day before warning that "conspiracies are being hatched here to pack up the elected government." Gilani also decried the military, long the dominant power in Pakistan, for acting like a "state within a state."

The current focus of tensions between the military and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led civilian government is the so-called "memo-gate" affair. Pakistan's ambassador to the US, Husain Haqqani, resigned last month after a US-Pakistani businessman claimed that, in the aftermath of

the US's summary execution of Osama Bin Laden through a raid deep inside Pakistan, Haqqani had him convey a secret offer to the US government on behalf of Pakistan President and PPP boss Asif Ali Zardari. The memo reputedly offered to give the US carte blanche to carry out military operations inside Pakistan and to place known US friends in the leadership of Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus if Washington would help forestall an imminent military coup.

Both Haqqani and Zardari have vehemently denied having any hand in such a memo. But the military has demanded it be investigated by the Supreme Court, claiming that the memo's authors were seeking to undermine the morale of the armed forces and implying that their actions were treasonous.

Although the veracity of the memo is in serious doubt, there is no question that Zardari and the PPP have sought to offset the pressure from the generals by appealing to Washington for support on the grounds that they would be even more pliant to US wishes, especially in the conduct of the Afghan war, than the Pentagon's longtime partner and satrap. But it is of course preposterous for the generals, who have directly ruled Pakistan with the US's support for much of the country's existence, to claim to be the defenders of the Pakistani people and their sovereignty.

The Pakistani military has for decades been the linchpin of the reactionary alliance between the Pakistani elite and US. This alliance remains central to the class strategy of all sections of the Pakistani bourgeoisie for profound social reasons: US imperialism is the bulwark of their brutal exploitation of Pakistan's workers and toilers.

The democratic and social aspirations of the Pakistan peoples will only be secured through a working class-led movement of all Pakistan's toilers directed against US imperialism and the entire Pakistani bourgeoisie.



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