Pakistan continues to halt the supply of US forces occupying Afghanistan

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Tensions between Washington and Islamabad continue to run high weeks after US helicopters and war planes attacked two Pakistani military posts near the Afghan border, killing two dozen Pakistani soldiers. This brazen attack sparked tremendous outrage among ordinary Pakistanis, forcing Islamabad to take retaliatory measures against the US, including suspending land shipments of material to the US-NATO forces occupying Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military has described the deadly Nov. 26 air strike as a "deliberate act of aggression" by US forces. While US President Barack Obama eventually called Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari to "offer his condolences" over the attack, Washington has thus far refused to apologize for the deadly air strike.

The wrangle over the air strike—which is only the latest US violation of Pakistani sovereignty—comes as the country's elite is mired in another political crisis, this one sparked by the so-called "memogate" scandal. Last month Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, resigned after it was claimed that he had authored a memo on behalf of President Zardari that offered to change the leadership of Pakistan's national security apparatus and give the US carte blanche to mount military operations inside Pakistan if Washington would intervene to prevent the military from mounting a coup against the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led civilian government. Haqqani has denied any knowledge of the memo, which was reportedly conveyed to the then head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, shortly after the US mounted an illegal raid deep inside Pakistan to summarily execute Osama Bin Laden. (See, "Pakistani elite plunged into crisis over reputed secret offer to US")

Both Zardari's sudden Dec. 5 departure for the United Arab Emirates and his return to Pakistan this Monday have been attributed by many in both the Pakistani and international media to attempts by the military to sideline, if not oust, Zardari. The *New York Times*, for example, said Zardari had rushed back to Pakistan "after weeks of growing concerns by his supporters that the military has been moving to strengthen its role in the country's governance," so he could be in the country when Pakistan's Supreme Court began hearings into the "memogate" affair.

Zardari and the PPP have dismissed these claims, saying that the president went to the UAE to seek medical treatment, after suffering what appeared to be a heart attack, and has now returned because his doctors have declared him fit to do so.

Last Thursday, Pakistan's embassy in Washington invited journalists to a briefing at which senior Pakistani officials showed maps and images to support Islamabad's claim that the US strike on the Pakistani military posts was intentional. An embassy official said that NATO forces could not have mistaken the military posts for bases belonging to Islamist militants since they stood on high ground and had structures.

"It's in plain view on the top of a barren ridge, a place that terrorists perhaps would not be inclined to use as a hideout," an official who asked that his name not be used told the *Express Tribune*. The official refused to speculate on US motivations for a deliberate attack on Pakistani troops. "It's something which just doesn't make any sense to me given the kind of coordination mechanism we have, the kind of information-sharing we have, given the fact that these locations are mutually known to both sides," he said.

NATO has launched its own inquiry into the incident, but Islamabad has refused to cooperate with that investigation. At the briefing in Washington last week, acting Ambassador Iffat Gardezi told the *Christian Science Monitor* that the Pakistani public would not tolerate any sign of their officials' cooperating with NATO so soon after the deadly attack. "This is the fourth incident [of NATO attacking Pakistani forces] in the recent past," said Gardezi. "There were joint inquiries before and nothing happened after that. The entire population is against any cooperation at this time—they want an apology."

Workers and toilers across the country were infuriated by the air strike, which was seen as exemplifying Washington's indifference to Pakistani lives and the arrogance and bullying that has historically characterized the US's relationship with Pakistan. Newspapers printed lengthy interviews with the relatives of the soldiers killed during the attack, and their funerals were shown on television.

Dawn, Pakistan's most influential English-language daily, recently carried a report titled "Pakistan truckers back NATO supply route blockade" based on interviews with truckers who have been employed to carry supplies for the US-NATO occupation forces from the port of Karachi to Afghanistan.

"We risk our lives and take these supplies to Afghanistan for NATO, and in return they are killing our soldiers," one trucker told the *Dawn*. Said another, "I would rather die of hunger than carry these shipments."

Although it is now almost four weeks since the US attack, there continue to be large-scale protest rallies and demonstrations denouncing the Nov. 26 US raid.

Last Sunday, tens of thousands of people gathered at the Minar-e-Pakistan monument in Lahore to condemn NATO and the US for the deadly air strike. Rightwing Islamist groups and political parties organized the rally, which was attended by more than 30,000 people including many youth. Protestors chanted anti-US slogans and demanded that Pakistan break off relations with Washington. "We will not allow Pakistan to become a colony of the US," Liaqat Baloch,

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a top leader of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) party, said during the rally. A smaller rally was held in Peshawar the same day.

The widespread anger sparked by the US air strike has forced the Pakistani government to take a series of retaliatory measures against Washington, including sealing its Afghan border to NATO supply convoys, ordering US personnel to vacate an air base in Balochistan, and refusing to attend the recent Bonn conference on the future of Afghanistan.

In response to the attack on its military outposts, Pakistan immediately closed both of the supply routes used by NATO. The two supply routes, through Chaman (Balochistan) and Torkham (the Khyber Pass), account for more than a quarter of all the supplies for NATO forces in Afghanistan.

In an interview with the BBC on December 11, Pakistan Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said that the blocking of NATO convoys "may last weeks" and refused to rule out closing Pakistan's airspace to the US. Gilani said that the blockade would continue until Pakistan reaches an agreement with the US regarding new "rules of engagement" for its armed forces.

While NATO can use alternate routes, the routes through Pakistan are cheaper and more convenient. "It will be more expensive. It will be time-consuming but we have the time to do it," said the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey.

Following the air strike, Pakistan demanded the US military and Central Intelligence Agency vacate the Shamsi air base in Balochistan Province within 15 days. For many years the base has been used by the CIA to launch deadly drone attacks in the country's northwest tribal areas. On December 11, the Pakistan military confirmed that the last flight carrying US personnel and equipment had left the airbase.

US officials have downplayed the significance of the closing of the drone base, claiming that the majority of drone attacks have been launched from facilities in Afghanistan.

The US has long been demanding that Pakistan do more to support US military operations in Afghanistan, in particular by striking against the North Waziristan-based Haqqani network, a militia that the US claims continues to be patronized by elements within Pakistan's Inter-Services intelligence agency. Pakistan has replied by saying that its military is already overstretched due to on-going operations in other border areas and two years of massive Indus Valley flooding. Moreover there is massive popular hostility to Pakistan's armed forces acting as US mercenaries—hostility stoked by the brutal methods the Pakistani military has used against the Taliban and Taliban-allied groups, including colonial-style collective punishments, disappearances, and carpet-bombing.

The Pakistani military's counterinsurgency operations have displaced over a million people and destroyed the livelihoods of many small business owners, peasant farmers, and agricultural workers. On December 12, internally displaced people from Khyber Agency held a demonstration in Peshawar to demand an end to military operations in their area and financial assistance for their rehabilitation. The protesters chanted slogans against the killing of people and demanded the provision of food, tents, and other basic necessities.

The Pakistani military and elite are also alarmed by India's growing influence in Afghanistan and, more generally, by the US's aggressive courting of New Delhi as a partner in containing and, if necessary, confronting a rising China. Islamabad has ruled out any action against the Haqqani network and, at a recent conference in Istanbul, joined forces with China and Iran to oppose US plans to maintain a troop presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Despite Islamabad's angry response to the November 26 attack, Washington has refused to soften its stance toward Pakistan. Last week, the US Senate passed a bill that includes a $700 million freeze in aid to Pakistan. Politicians sponsoring the legislation charged Pakistan with refusing to do anything about the export of fertilizer from Pakistan to Afghanistan, fertilizer that is allegedly being used to make improvised explosive devices used in attacks on occupation forces in Afghanistan. The US has also let it be known that it will not use its influence with the IMF to assist Islamabad in securing a desperately needed loan.

Richard Haass, president of the US Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank with close relations to Washington, described the state of relations between the two countries: "For the foreseeable future, this relationship is going to have to become more of a transactional relationship, more of a performance-based relationship." The Council's Preventive Priorities Survey, which is conducted among select government officials, academics and experts, found "a U.S.-Pakistan military confrontation, triggered by a terror attack or U.S. counterterror operations" as one of the "contingencies that directly threaten" the US in 2012.

Recently, General John R. Allen, International Security Assistance Force Commander in Afghanistan, refused to guarantee that there will be no further cross-border attacks in flagrant violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. "You simply can't guarantee anything in war," Allen told the UAE-based *Khaleej Times*.

Despite the continuing tensions between the two countries and repeated crises, a complete breakdown of relations between Washington and Islamabad Pakistan remains unlikely. Indeed, earlier this week Pakistani military liaison officers returned to the "coordination centers" on the Afghan-Pakistan border that were established to facilitate cooperation between NATO and the Afghan and Pakistan militaries.

While the Pakistani ruling elite is undoubtedly frustrated by Washington's undermining of its geopolitical strategy and regional influence, it is bound to the US by its fear of the working class and oppressed masses. This includes its fear of the growing opposition to the AfPak War and to the reactionary Washington-Islamabad axis that has been the pivot of the geopolitical and class strategy of the Pakistani bourgeoisie for the past six decades.

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