

Pakistani elite preparing to restore full cooperation with US in Afghan War

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27 January 2012

Pakistan's military released a sternly worded report Monday that vehemently rejected Washington's account of last November's lethal NATO air assault on two Pakistani border posts in the Mohmand tribal district. The NATO attack killed 24 Pakistani soldiers and plunged US-Pakistani relations into unprecedented crisis.

The Pakistan military report was made public one month after the Pentagon issued a report that defended the NATO airstrikes as legitimate "self defence," while conceding that US personnel had made mistakes that contributed to the Pakistani soldiers' deaths. These mistakes included giving a Pakistani army liaison officer the wrong coordinates of the impending NATO attack.

In its counter-report, the Pakistani military again rejected the US claim that Pakistani troops had provoked the NATO airstrikes by firing at US Special Operations and Afghan troops who were mounting a clandestine counter-insurgency operation just across the border in Afghanistan. The Pakistani army says its troops did open fire, but at "suspected militants" who were nowhere near the US-led forces. And the report charges, as Pakistani authorities have from the start, that it is "inconceivable" that the NATO forces did not know the location of the twin Pakistani border posts.

Despite the stern tone of the military's report and the tough-sounding rhetoric emanating from Islamabad and Rawalpindi in recent weeks, there are many indications that Pakistan's ruling elite is anxious to restore full and open cooperation with Washington, on which it remains economically and geopolitically dependent after more than six decades of "independence."

Last week, a Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokesman said the review of the country's relations with the US conducted by the Parliamentary Committee on National Security is now complete and that Islamabad is "looking forward to re-engaging with the US on issues of mutual interest and importance."

Separately, the *Dawn* reported, "diplomatic sources" have said Islamabad will soon reopen the Torkham and Chaman

border crossings with Afghanistan, which have remained closed to NATO supply convoys for the past ten weeks as a retaliatory measure for the NATO attack.

On Tuesday, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, met Cameron Munter, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, to discuss ways to mend relations between the two countries.

A major difficulty for Pakistan's elite is how to present the resumption of close cooperation with the US to a Pakistani populace that is outraged by Washington's systematic violation of Pakistani sovereignty and its attempts to force Pakistan to assume an even greater share of the burdens of the US's Afghan War.

This problem is further complicated by the bitter infighting within the Pakistan elite. No section of the elite wants to be seen as having taken the lead in resuming cooperation with Washington.

Pakistan was already seething with anti-US and anti-AfPak War sentiment prior to last November's deadly NATO attack. For broad sections of the Pakistani working class and toilers the slaughter of Pakistani troops only underscored the neo-colonial character of the US-Pakistan relationship. As they have done repeatedly in recent years, ordinary Pakistanis responded to the Nov. 26 NATO assault by taking to the streets in large numbers to protest against the US aggression in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

For the past decade, Islamabad—whether under the US-sponsored dictator General Pervez Musharraf or the current Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led government—has provided pivotal logistical support to the occupation of Afghanistan. Moreover, since 2004, at Washington's behest, Pakistan's military has waged a merciless counterinsurgency war in the country's northwest tribal areas with devastating consequences for the Pakistani people.

During the past seven years, over five million people have been displaced by the war in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and adjoining districts, says a recent report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Today, nearly one million of these remain

internal refugees. The displaced have held numerous demonstrations calling for an end to the war and demanding they be provided with adequate food and shelter.

The war has deepened the gulf between the bulk of the population and the bourgeois elite and, to the great concern of the military top brass, caused disaffection and even mutinies among rank-and-file soldiers. Yet the US has been unrelenting in its demands that Islamabad do more to help extract it from the morass that has become Afghanistan. This has included withholding flood relief and refusing to assist Pakistan in securing a new loan from the International Monetary Fund.

While the US has bullied and humiliated Pakistan, the Pakistani bourgeoisie is tied by a million threads to American and world imperialism. It is terrified of the politically destabilizing impact—above all on class relations—of a major rift, let alone a break, with the US.

It is expected that the Parliamentary Committee on National Security's report will soon be presented to a closed session of parliament for approval. Parliament's imprimatur will then be used to declare the Nov. 26 incident closed and to resume open cooperation with US under a supposedly new framework.

According to Fox News, "The main stipulations" set by Pakistan "will include no covert CIA or military operations on the ground in Pakistan, nor unauthorized incursions into its airspace."

Pakistan will resume its role as a major conduit for US-NATO supplies for the Afghan War, but with the proviso that Washington and its coalition partners pay increased transit fees.

The plan also reportedly calls for US military trainers to be invited back to Pakistan, possibly as early as April.

In truth, the Pakistani people will be kept in the dark, as they always have been, as to the real extent and character of the ties between Washington and Islamabad.

Notwithstanding the angry rhetoric from Pakistani civilian and military leaders over the past ten weeks, the US-Pakistan intelligence partnership has been fully operational, as was illustrated by a recent Reuters report. According to a Pakistani security source who spoke with Reuters, the drone attacks carried out by the US on January 10 and 12 in North Waziristan were joint operations that relied on Pakistani "spotters" on the ground.

For years, Pakistani officials have publicly criticized the US drone attacks while facilitating them and, in some cases, even requesting them. Indeed, one of the retaliatory measures imposed by Pakistan after last November's attack was to order CIA personnel to end their almost decade-long use of a Baluchistan air force base as a launching pad for the drone strikes.

The tremendous opposition to the AfPak war finds no expression on the ostensible left of Pakistani politics. The PPP is widely despised for escalating the war and for its big business economic "reforms." Pseudo-socialist groups such as The Struggle and the Labour Party Pakistan have refused to mount any struggle against the war as part of their general policy of subordinating the working class to the pro-imperialist PPP and confining it to trade union struggles.

Recently, former cricketer Imran Khan's party, the conservative-nationalist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, has organized large-scale popular protests against the drone strikes. Khan, who has long been identified with the Pakistani military, is seeking to block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class against the war.

An enormous political vacuum now exists in Pakistan, which some of the most reactionary elements are attempting to exploit. On Tuesday, 50,000 people joined a rally in Rawalpindi led by Islamists and other extreme right-wing forces to protest against Pakistan's close alliance with the US and steps toward improved relations with India.

Workers and toilers must not allow the Islamic fundamentalists, rightwingers like Khan, and their patrons in the military-intelligence establishment to monopolize and neuter the opposition to the war. The struggle against imperialist oppression must be linked with the fight for urgently needed democratic and socialist measures. The emergence of a working class-led movement in opposition to the AfPak War would not only undermine the appeal of the Islamists, it would serve as a powerful catalyst for the development of opposition to the war and imperialism among workers in the US and throughout the world.



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