

US expands its drone war on Pakistan

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A US drone strike on a seminary in the Hangu district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province killed at least six people Thursday, including several civilians.

The three-missile attack was only the second-ever US drone strike in Pakistan outside the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The previous such strike occurred in 2008.

Thursday's attack came just one day after Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's chief foreign policy advisor, Sartaj Aziz, had told a parliamentary committee that Washington had pledged that it would not mount further drone strikes while Islamabad was holding peace negotiations with the Pakistan-based allies of the Afghan Taliban.

Washington has denied Thursday's strike targeted a seminary and is boasting that it killed two senior leaders of the Haqqani Network—a Taliban ally reportedly responsible for several of the most daring and successful attacks on US and NATO occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistani officials have disputed Washington's account of what was, by any measure, a major escalation of the US's patently illegal practice of violating Pakistan's sovereignty so as to conduct summary executions. They have confirmed that some insurgents died, but report the killing of at least two seminary students, as well as the wounding of others.

"It has been consistently maintained that drone strikes are counterproductive, entail loss of innocent civilian lives and have human rights and humanitarian implications," said Pakistan's Foreign Ministry in a statement issued Thursday. "Such strikes also set dangerous precedents in inter-state relations."

This protest notwithstanding, high-level meetings of US and Pakistani officials—part of the countries' recently resumed Strategic Dialogue—proceeded Thursday without a hitch. In Islamabad the "Security, Strategic Stability and Nonproliferation Working

Group" discussed nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear energy, while in Washington the "Pakistan-US Defence Consultative Group" discussed US and Pakistani military operations to suppress the Afghan Taliban insurgency over the next 13 months as the US reduces its Afghan troop strength to ten thousand or less.

On Friday, Sharif and several of his aides adopted a more strident tone in opposing the US drone-strike campaign, but this was clearly intended as political cover for Islamabad's continuing close cooperation with Washington.

Opposition to the AfPak War and outrage over the drone strikes—which have killed thousands in FATA over the last five years and wrought untold psychological damage on villagers who experience buzzing drones hovering overhead daily—were a major factor in the rout of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government in last May's national election.

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said the US could not be trusted and suggested it was seeking to derail Islamabad's efforts to draw the Pakistani Taliban into formal peace negotiations. He added that he could not understand why Aziz would have publicly repeated "such fairy tales" as the US promise that it was suspending drone strikes.

Nisar Ali Khan had himself pledged a governmental review of Pakistan's relations with the US, in the aftermath of the November 1 US drone strike that killed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Hakimullah Mehsud. That strike threw into disarray a months' long government effort to persuade the Pakistan Taliban to enter talks.

Sharif, for his part, argued in a speech Friday that his government's opposition to US drone strikes was "genuine." He denied the government had any "double-standard" in respect to CIA and Pentagon drone strikes. "The government," said Sharif, "has always taken a forthright and genuine stance in condemning drone

attacks. We condemn these acts from the core of our heart.”

As proof, Pakistan’s Prime Minister noted that he had raised the issue with US President Barak Obama when he visited the White House last month.

Shortly after Sharif’s US visit, and in an obvious response to his complaints and to reports from a UN special rapporteur and human rights groups documenting widespread civilian deaths from US drone strikes, the *Washington Post* published leaked documents showing the Pakistani government and military have colluded in the US drone war from the outset. Not only have Pakistani authorities sanctioned such attacks, they have frequently helped identify targets.

In response to the November 1 drone strike and Obama’s insistence that the US reserves the right to launch drone missile strikes whenever it deems it in the “national interest,” the rightwing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party called earlier this month for protesters to prevent the US and NATO from using the Khyber Pass as of Saturday, November 23.

Led by former cricket star Imran Khan, the PTI is the third largest party in Pakistan’s parliament and leads the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Following Thursday’s drone attack, Khan and his PTI denounced the national government for its “muted” response and vowed to use their authority over Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to block what is one of the two US-NATO land supply routes through Pakistan.

“We will announce at the protest on Saturday,” said Khan, “that we will permanently block the supply route until they stop drone attacks. If it’s in our hands, we will block it today. Our powers are that we can tell them that NATO supplies can’t pass through our province.”

A spokesman for the PTI Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa pointed to the deep popular anger over the US drone strikes: “I don’t understand why a drone at this time,” said Sheraz Paracha. “This will further incite the people here.”

Khan and his PTI were also-rans in Pakistani politics until they began to speak out against US drone strikes little more than two years ago. The PTI’s ability to capitalize on the popular resentment over the drone strikes and Pakistan’s complicity in the AfPak War is entirely bound up with the political prostration of

Pakistan’s official “left”—a collection of Stalinist, Pabloite and other pseudo-left groups that have traditionally orbited around the PPP and continued to do so over the last five years as the PPP-led government gave its full support to the US occupation of Afghanistan and imposed IMF austerity.

For the past twelve years Pakistan has provided a lifeline to the US forces occupying Afghanistan. But NATO appears confident that the Sharif government will not allow the PTI to disrupt their supply routes and that Khan, who has himself repeatedly voiced his eagerness to have closer relations with Washington, means to stage little more than a publicity stunt.

“This protest,” said an e-mail issued by the joint command of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and obtained by Bloomberg News, “will be largely symbolic and likely not last more than one day. It should have minimal to no impact on ISAF’s supply mission.”



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