

NATO incursions of Pakistani airspace continues despite U.S. denials

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Despite Pakistan's clear-cut political stance adopted amid stern warnings and the subsequent U. S. written apology and denials, the NATO aircrafts continued breaching Pakistani airspace, raising wonders if these incursions are being used as a barometer for testing Pakistani tolerance to possibly advance further into the territory, a general fear creeping into the Pakistani policy.

Since September, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) gunship helicopters violated Pakistani airspace, defying the integrity and sovereignty of Pakistan for over half a dozen times in insurgency plagued northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and southwest Balochistan provinces bordering Afghanistan further fueling the rising anti-Americanism.

It all started on Sept. 27 when two NATO Apache helicopters killed 30 suspected insurgents within Pakistani territory in a rare manned pursuit. A NATO statement claimed that the insurgent had allegedly attacked a security post in eastern Khost province of Afghanistan. Later in the day, two Kiowa helicopters killed another four suspects.

A day earlier, in another possible violation six militants were killed in Pakistan's Kurram tribal agency. But the local sources claim was denied by an ISAF spokesman saying that it was "near the border" rather than inside Pakistan. An ISAF report stated in September that the helicopters were following its rules of engagement when they crossed into Pakistan.

However, Pakistani foreign office rejected the assertion saying that the United Nations mandate under which ISAF operates "terminate/finish" at the Afghanistan border and that there were no agreed "hot pursuit" rules.

Three paramilitary troops were killed and another three were wounded on September 30, in an "uncalled for" aggression on a security post in Kurram tribal area near Afghan border. Pakistan was quick to respond in line with general public sentiment by closing the gates at Pakistan-Afghanistan border at Torkham, one of the two supply routes to NATO forces into Afghanistan. Over a hundred NATO oil tankers and supply containers burned to ashes in different terrorist incidents during the 10-day blockade, which was lifted after a written apology submitted by NATO, Pentagon and the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad.

"Apology is fine. But no more incursions in future," commented Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik, adding "We have been given assurances that it will not happen again."

However, the "general public appeasing" official statements apparently failed to create the

needed stir as a NATO official in Brussels reportedly asserted authoritatively, “ISAF forces must and will retain the authority within their mandate to defend themselves in carrying out their mission.”

Two NATO helicopters Friday fired into the North Waziristan tribal area in northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border and injured three people who were later hospitalized, local sources told Xinhua.

Witnesses said two NATO helicopters were hovering for 10 minutes and fired at Lawra Mandi village of Datta Khel area in North Waziristan. The village is one kilometer to the border. However, it could not be confirmed officially.

Denying the incursion, a U.S. Embassy spokesman on Friday said that according to the ISAF, no NATO aircraft crossed the border into Pakistan.

“We are aware of a claim reporting a cross border incident that involved NATO aircraft in North Waziristan on Friday, November 26, “said the U.S. mission’s spokesman, adding “We refer questions concerning the integrity of Pakistani airspace to the Pakistan Air Force.”

Analysts believe that “there is deep understanding” among the governments and that such incursions are sometime unavoidable at volatile borders in warring situations. The incursions are likely to continue, local watchers speculate.

In the backdrop of intensified frequency of drone attacks and consistently mounting U.S. pressure on Pakistan to wage a full- scale military operation in the restive North Waziristan tribal agency, continued NATO incursions are seen with rising concern and suspicions of a physical shift over of NATO troops into Pakistani territory from Afghanistan.

The U.S. has planned to begin gradual withdrawal of over 150, 000 multinational troops from bordering Afghanistan beginning next year. Pakistan has so far consistently been resisting the U.S. pressure to keep its priorities straight and decide on its own about streamlining things within its territory.

The news of NATO incursions and possible U.S. intentions of expanding the unmanned drone strikes to Balochistan has already created an uproar supplementing the rising anti-Americanism that makes the tight-rope-walk of democratically elected Pakistani government far more challenging.

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