

US carries out fresh air strike in Pakistan

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US forces mounted a Predator drone missile attack Monday on a house in Mandata Raghzai, a village in Pakistan's South Waziristan region, killing as many as 20 people.

The Pentagon has refused to confirm the attack. But Pakistani officials have claimed most of those killed were militants from the Pakistani Taliban—the armed opposition that has developed in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking tribal belt to the US occupation of Afghanistan and the associated attempt of Pakistan's central government to exert greater authority over the country's historically autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The US military is now routinely violating Pakistani sovereignty, extending the Afghan War to its southern neighbor, and realizing, thereby, the strategic "vision" of Admiral Mike Mullen, the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, who has called for Afghanistan and Pakistan's border regions to be perceived as a single war-theater.

Four days before the strike on Mandata Raghzai, a US drone fired four missiles into a seminary in a village near Miramshah, North Waziristan, killing at least 10 people.

According to an article published on the New York Times' website Sunday evening and based on unattributed discussions with US and Pakistani officials, the US has mounted a minimum of 18 Predator missile strikes in FATA since August. Monday's attack would make the tally at least 19.

Many have slaughtered civilians. "The increasing attacks by US drones have caused anger and frustration among tribesmen," reported the Dawn October 24. The Dawn report cited a leaflet that quoted a tribal leader as saying jirga or tribal council members are "disappointed over intermittent drone attacks, resulting in the killing of innocent tribesmen."

US forces have also carried out at least one ground-assault within Pakistan. On September 3, helicopter-borne US commandos mounted a raid on Angoori Ada in South Waziristan, killing more than 20 people. The White House subsequently let it be known that in July US President George W. Bush had secretly authorized US Special Forces to carry out operations inside Pakistan without Islamabad's approval—an act that under international law is tantamount to a declaration of war.

The New York Times report claims that because of the "furious complaints" of Pakistani authorities over last month's military incursion, the Bush administration has "backed away" from ordering further ground raids. It has instead chosen to rely "on an intensifying campaign of airstrikes by the Central Intelligence Agency" to eliminate opponents of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Further light on the Bush administration's apparent decision to forego, at least for the

present, ground-operations in Pakistan is shed by an article that recently appeared in one of the US military's publications. The September 29 Air Force Times cites an unnamed US government official as saying:

"[The September 3 raid was] an opportunity to see how the new Pakistani government reacted. If they didn't do anything, [and] they were just kind of fairly passive, like [the longtime, US-supported dictator General Pervez] Musharraf was ... then we felt like, okay, we can slowly up the ante, we can do maybe some more of these ops. But the backlash that happened, and especially the backlash in the diplomatic channels, was pretty severe...

"Once the Pakistanis started talking about closing down our supply routes [to Afghanistan], and actually demonstrated they could do it, once they started talking about shooting American helicopters, we obviously had to take seriously that maybe this [strategy] was not going to be good enough. We can't sustain ourselves in Afghanistan without the Pakistani supply routes. At the end of the day, we had to not let our tactics get in the way of our strategy."

The Pakistani military was more strident in its opposition to the US's arrogation of the right to wage war in Pakistan than the country's new Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government, and this for several reasons. The US intrusion flagrantly contradicted the Pakistani military's claim "to be the defender of the nation," a claim it has used to legitimize its huge budget and immense political power. Second, the Pakistani military, which has recruited heavily from the Pashtun, is itself divided over the aims and tactics of the counter-insurgency war it is waging in FATA. And the military top brass, which has effectively controlled Pakistan's geo-political strategy for decades, is acutely concerned about the ever-growing Indo-US strategic partnership, including in Afghanistan.

That said, Islamabad's condemnation of the September 3 raid and the call of Pakistan's parliament for any future incursion to be repelled by force, reflected, albeit in a distorted form, popular sentiment. The US government is reviled by ordinary Pakistanis for its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, its decades-long bankrolling and arming of Musharraf and previous Pakistani dictators, and its callous use of Pakistan as a pawn in its world strategy.

Three further points need to be made about the New York Times article.

First, it strongly suggests that the Pakistani government and military, despite their condemnations of the US drone attacks, have an understanding with Washington. So as to forestall even more obtrusive US military intervention, Pakistani authorities will tacitly accept US missile attacks on the country's territory and the inevitable ensuing civilian casualties

Within Pakistan this understanding is an open secret.

Significantly the Times article and others that have appeared in the US's "newspaper of record" in recent months have made no reference to a Times article published at the beginning of the year that claimed that the CIA has a secret military base within Pakistan from which it is staging Predator attacks. Needless to say, if such a base exists it is with the sanction of the Pakistani military, which for decades has had a close partnership with Washington and been viewed by the US political and military establishment as the crux of the US-Pakistani relationship and the chief bulwark of the Pakistani state.

Also of note is the claim of the recent Times article that many within the Bush administration are continuing to press for the US to send troops into Pakistan. Reports the Times, "Within the government, advocates of the ground raids have argued that only by sending Special Operations forces into Pakistan can the United States successfully capture suspected operatives and interrogate them for information about top [al] Qaeda leaders."

In other words, the possibility of further ground raids and a new crisis in US-Pakistani relations remains live.

Both the Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates have made clear they would be ready to order US military action inside Pakistan. Democratic nominee Barack Obama has been especially bellicose in regards to Pakistan. In a bid to demonstrate that he has nothing to learn from John McCain about ruthlessly pursuing US imperialism's interests, Obama has repeatedly vowed that he would be ready to order, in flagrant violation of international law, unilateral military action in Pakistan.

Obama's strident rhetoric on Pakistan is a corollary to his promotion of the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan as the "good war." In reality the US military involvement in Afghanistan, which began in the late 1970s, is driven by Washington's and Wall Street's predatory interests, no less today than thirty years ago.

While Washington once armed Islamic fundamentalists with the aim of weakening the Soviet Union, today it invokes the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda to justify a drive to secure a US military-strategic beachhead in oil-rich Central Asia.

The third further point of note in the Times report is its claim that "privately, some American officials are wincing at" the brutality and indiscriminate character of the war the Pakistani military is waging to root out Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and other "foreign fighters" from the Bajaur Tribal Agency.

Launched three months ago under heavy US pressure, the Pakistani military offensive in Bajaur (one of FATA's seven component parts) has caused widespread civilian casualties. This is hardly surprising given that the military has routinely bombed and strafed villages from the air. According to an earlier Times report, the military has also threatened reprisals against tribes that do not form lashkars or militias to help fight the anti-US forces. "We were pressured by the government to take action," the Times cited a tribal leader as saying in an article published October 24. "They warned, 'If you don't take action you will be bombed'."

As many as 300,000 people have fled the area due to the fighting, but Pakistani authorities have done little to provide them with food and shelter.

The Times cites a senior US military officer as saying of the Pakistani military, "They don't have a concept of counter-insurgency operation. It's generally a heavy punch and then they leave."

If US military officers, who have waged an illegal war in Iraq that has resulted in the death of a million people, are "wincing" at what the Pakistani military is doing in Bajaur, one can only imagine the horrific and arbitrary character of the violence being inflicted, at the US's instigation, by Washington's decades' old partner—the Pakistani officers corps.

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