

US-Pakistani skirmish points to threat of wider war

Keith Jones
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Washington and Islamabad are seeking to downplay the significance of last Thursday's military clash between US and Pakistani armed forces on the Afghan-Pakistani border.

The skirmish is said to have lasted about five minutes and involved gun fire on both sides.

The clash underscores the high level of tension that exists between the two countries and their militaries under conditions where the Bush administration has declared Pakistan the "third front" in its purported war on terror and the US routinely mounts military strikes inside Pakistan.

Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR), the Pakistan military's media relations section, reported that two US helicopters "from the Afghanistan side crossed into Saidgai, Ghulam Khan Sector, North Waziristan. When the helicopters passed over our border post and were well within Pakistan territory, our security forces fired anticipatory warning shots."

A Pakistani government spokesman Akram Shaheedi, meanwhile, reiterated previous official statements affirming Pakistan's rights as a sovereign nation, including the right to self-defence. "It has been Pakistan's policy that we will not allow anyone to violate our sovereignty, and we will continue to defend our territorial sovereignty," said Shaheedi.

The Pentagon has denied that the helicopters crossed into Pakistan, saying they were well within Afghan territory. But unlike two previous occasions this month when Pakistani officials said they had prevented US forces from entering into Pakistan, the US military did concede that a clash between US and Pakistani forces had taken place.

US Central Command spokesman Rear Admiral Greg Smith said that when the helicopters were fired on, US ground forces fired back. Smith said their rounds were not meant to hit the Pakistani troops, but "to make certain that they realized they should stop shooting."

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, who visited the US last week to attend the 63rd UN General Assembly and meet with President George Bush, told the *Washington Post* in an interview Friday that Pakistan's armed forces had not fired at US forces, only launched flares.

This claim was flatly contradicted by the head of the US military. About the same time Zardari was being interviewed, Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters, "There was a cross-border fire incident yesterday."

He appealed for both sides not to "overreact to the hair-trigger tension we are all feeling. Now, more than ever, is a time for teamwork, for calm."

Mullen said he had received assurances from "the senior military leadership in Pakistan that there is ... no intent or plan to fire on (US) forces" when he made an impromptu visit to Islamabad September 16-17.

Mullen added that he is convinced that the Pakistani military is committed to working with Washington to stamp out the anti-US, Pashtun and neo-Taliban insurgency in north-west Pakistan and Afghanistan. "I am hard-pressed," said Mullen, "to see a set of circumstances where there would be any kind of sustained fight between two allies."

After US Special Operations forces mounted a ground attack inside

Pakistan, September 3, which killed more than twenty people, including many civilians, Pakistan's parliament unanimously passed a resolution urging that future US military incursions be repelled.

Subsequently, it was revealed that in mid-July US President George W. Bush had signed an executive order authorizing US Special Operations forces to carry out operations in Pakistan without Islamabad's permission—a flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty and one that under international law is tantamount to an act of war.

In response to the September 3rd raid and the Bush administration order, Pakistani military leaders issued a series of statements vowing to prevent manned US military operations inside Pakistan. (With the acquiescence of Pakistani authorities, the CIA has repeatedly carried out unmanned predator-drone strikes in Pakistan and reportedly even has a secret drone military-intelligence base inside the country.)

Toadying to Bush

Zardari's claim that the Pakistani military had shot flares, not live ammunition, was of a piece with his performance throughout his five-day US visit.

At every point, the co-chairperson of the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) and newly-minted Pakistani president sought to reassure the Bush administration and the US political and military establishment that Islamabad is determined to wage war on behalf of Washington and its Afghan client regime. The Pakistani president only pleaded with his US hosts to recognize that unilateral US military action in Pakistan makes that more difficult, as it stokes popular anger against Washington and the war.

Bush and the other US leaders whom Zardari met would not, however, make any commitment to uphold Pakistan's sovereignty.

As for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, he went out of his way in last Friday's debate with his Republican opponent, John McCain, to affirm his readiness to wage war in Pakistan, saying that Islamabad has "not done what needs to be done to get rid of" Taliban and Al Qaeda "safe havens" on its territory.

"If the United States," said Obama, "has Al Qaeda ... top-level [leaders] in our sights, and Pakistan is unwilling or unable to act, then we should take them out."

Appearing before reporters with Zardari at the conclusion of their talks Tuesday, Sept. 23, Bush turned to his Pakistani counterpart and said, "Your words have been very strong about Pakistan's sovereign right and sovereign duty to protect your country, and the United States wants to help."

Commenting on Bush's remarks, Pakistan's leading English language daily, *Dawn*, declared, " 'HELP' to Pakistan's sovereignty was all that President George Bush could promise ... Shorn of diplomatese, his remarks convey one obvious message to Pakistan: America makes no promise that attacks on FATA of the kind seen recently at Angoor Adda [the Sept. 3 raid] and elsewhere will not be repeated."

Zardari, for his part, lavished praise on Bush, who as US president has launched predatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, employed torture as an

instrument of state policy, and staunchly supported the now defrocked dictator General Pervez Musharraf in crushing the Pakistani people.

“As always,” said Zardari of Bush, “you prove to the world that your heart is in there for us Pakistanis. We respect your feelings ... And we bring to this the whole concept of your promise to the world of bringing democracy to Pakistan.”

Subsequently in his *Washington Post* interview, Zardari dismissed the September 3rd raid on the South Waziristan village of Angoor Addaas as a “one-off” incident. Needless to say, he made no mention of Bush’s secret presidential order authorizing Special Operations missions inside Pakistan

Desperate to please, he held out the possibility of joint US-Pakistani military operations. Zardari told the *Post*, the Pakistan “side of the border is my problem,” adding that if US forces need to enter Pakistan “we can have an understanding on that, but they haven’t asked for it.”

Like the Pakistani military leadership, Zardari’s basic thrust is that the job of pacifying Pakistan’s border region should be entrusted to the Pakistani military. Zardari said US military and intelligence services should relay their security concerns to Islamabad, “Let us know. We’ll do it for them.”

The Pakistani elite was rattled by the massive Sept. 20 bombing at Islamabad’s most prestigious hotel the Marriott. (See Marriott Hotel bombing: another sign of Pakistan’s deepening crisis)

According to a report prepared by the Pakistani Prime Minister’s Adviser on Interior, the target of the suicide bombing was Parliament House and the top leadership of the country. It was the heavy security mobilized on the occasion of Zardari’s first presidential address to parliament that caused the suicide bomber to change targets.

But privately it is conceded by the Pakistani establishment that the unraveling of the country’s economy is a potentially much greater threat. Last week Moody’s lowered Pakistan’s credit-rating to “negative” because of the risk of “missed repayments” and there is increasing concern the country could soon face a balance of payments crisis due to the rapid depletion of its foreign currency reserves.

A key goal of the visit of Zardari and his entourage was to seek emergency financial support—a vulnerability Washington is eager to exploit. Last Friday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband sponsored a meeting to establish an inter-state “Friends of Pakistan” to help arrange for an urgent injection of \$10 billion into Pakistan’s economy. Attending the meeting were representatives from the G-7 countries, Australia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The meeting reportedly agreed to tie financial aid to “economic reform,” that is privatization, and market-ization, and the further opening up of Pakistan’s economy to foreign capital. At the insistence of international financial institutions, Pakistan’s PPP-led coalition government has pledged to eliminate all energy subsidies by the end of the current fiscal year, and this under conditions where the inflation rate is already in excess of 25 percent.

Brutal Pakistani military offensive

In response to US pressure—including the threat of outright US invasion—the Pakistani military has been mounting a brutal offensive in the Bajur agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) since August.

On Friday, Frontier Corps Major-General Tariq Khan said that the military has killed as many as a thousand “militants” in Bajur since the beginning of September. He added that 62 Pakistani soldiers had been

killed and 112 wounded in the fighting. No mention was made of civilian casualties, but they are likely large, as the military has resorted to carpet bombing.

The United Nations reported Monday that 4,000 families—20,000 people in all—have crossed over from Bajur into Afghanistan’s Kunar Province to escape the fighting.

These new refugees are in addition to the more than 300,000 people who have been previously displaced by the fighting in FATA.

A report in Sunday’s *Dawn* gives a glimpse of the intensity of the fighting, “Troops backed by helicopter gunships and fighter jets have struggled to push forward in the face of bunkers, tunnel networks and organized defences ... Several blown-up tanks littered the roads during a recent trip for journalists arranged by the military. US-built Cobra gunships could be seen pounding insurgent positions with cannon.”

A military official told the AFP, “Pakistan’s army has never faced this level of resistance since it launched operations in the tribal areas (in 2003-4.)”

The growth in resistance is in response to the methods the Pakistani military has employed in FATA, including colonial style collective punishments and disappearances, and the growing disaffection with the corrupt and anti-democratic regime the US has imposed in Kabul.

The US is reported to have agreed last week to supply an unspecified additional number of Cobra attack helicopters to the Pakistani military.

There have been significant tensions between Islamabad and Washington over the provision of military equipment. According to press reports, the Pakistani military charges Washington with refusing to provide them with high-tech equipment useful for counter-insurgency operations. Instead it has sought to transform discussions about the Pakistani military’s equipment needs into discussions about deploying additional US military advisors to Pakistan. “When we ask for capability,” said an unnamed Pakistan military official, “they [the Americans] start talking about joint operations and training programs.”

Another official reportedly said, “They want to penetrate our systems and they think that we are too naïve to know what they did in Vietnam and Cambodia.”



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