

Pakistan's parliament says future US raids should be repelled "with full force"

Today's presidential election

By Keith Jones
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Both houses of Pakistan's parliament voted unanimously Thursday in favor of a motion calling on the government to take military action to thwart armed incursions into Pakistan like Wednesday's US Special Operations forces raid in South Waziristan.

At least twenty villagers were killed when US forces staged a pre-dawn raid on a village near Angoor Adda.

The joint National Assembly and Senate motion urges "the government of Pakistan to take all necessary measures to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and repel such attacks in the future with full force."

The Bush administration has refused to admit that US forces, in what constitutes a gross violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and a major escalation of the US-NATO war in Afghanistan, mounted Wednesday's raid. But in off-the-record briefings unnamed Pentagon officials have confirmed the action, terming the wanton slaughter of Pakistani civilians a success.

Over the past nine months a consensus has emerged in the US elite in favor of a dramatic escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Toward this end the Pentagon recently initiated a "surge" in troop deployments to the Central Asian country.

This strategic change of focus has involved a ratcheting up of pressure on Islamabad to quell the rebellion that has erupted in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking border regions in opposition to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and the Pakistani government's associated attempts to bring the historically autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) under its control.

A parade of US politicians, including Democratic Party presidential nominee Barack Obama, retired generals, and foreign relations experts have all said that the US must be prepared to militarily intervene if the Pakistan government fails to rapidly pacify its border regions.

In fact, the Pakistani military has been involved in large-scale operations in the region for some five years. Its forays, which have involved the imposition of colonial-style collective punishments on tribes and villages, heavy civilian casualties, and disappearances, have only served to antagonize the populace and enflame the region.

An editorial in the Friday edition of the *Dawn*, Pakistan's leading English-language daily, warned that further unilateral US military action in Pakistan "will spell nothing but trouble for everyone," while conceding that Wednesday's helicopter raid is likely to be repeated. Said the *Dawn*, "All evidence of recent weeks points to the fact that the raid will not be the last of its kind: 'There's a potential to see more,' a 'senior US official' has told the *New York Times*."

On Friday, a US drone killed at least three children when it leveled a house in the North Waziristan village of Goorweck Baipali.

For several years and with much greater frequency this year, the US has staged drone attacks in Pakistan. Invariably Islamabad has protested these attacks, especially those that have resulted in heavy civilian casualties. But it is an open secret that the Pakistani government, led until only a half-year ago by the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, has effectively sanctioned such strikes. Indeed, earlier this year the *New York Times* reported that the CIA has a military base within Pakistan itself.

Nevertheless coming in the midst of the storm of protest over Wednesday's incursion by US troops into Pakistan, yesterday's drone attack clearly bore the message that, all the official protest emanating from Islamabad notwithstanding, the US asserts the right to violate Pakistani sovereignty at will.

Pakistan authorities, meanwhile, appear to have sent a message of their own. Citing "security concerns" Pakistan on Friday shut down the Torkham border crossing, which is the most important land conduit for oil and food destined for US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

The (Pakistan) *Daily Times* cites the Khyber Agency Political Agent Tariq Hayat as denying any connection between the border closure and the US incursion: "All Afghanistan-bound supplies for the International Security Assistance Force have been stopped as the [Torkham] highway is vulnerable. This decision has nothing to do with the situation in Waziristan or the US attacks."

Such denials, however, would be expected, as Pakistan seeks to convince the US to restore the pre-Wednesday terms of the US-Pakistani alliance.

Also on Friday, the chairman of Pakistan's Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Tariq Majid, told visiting German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung that "Pakistan reserves the right to appropriately retaliate in future" in response to cross-border strikes carried out by NATO forces in Afghanistan. Jung later told German reporters "I think it is important that Pakistan fights against militants in its territory on its own. We should not conduct military operations from the Afghan side. Pakistan's territorial integrity needs to be respected."

The Pakistani parliamentary motion threatening to repel a further US raid "with full force" is a gesture. But one that speaks to the depth of the popular opposition to the United States and the elite's apprehensions and resentments over Washington's bullying.

Benazir Bhutto's widower and Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

co-chairman, Asif Ali Zardari, who is poised to be chosen as the country's new president, has repeatedly pledged his support for the US "war on terror". He argues that the insurgency in Pakistan's border regions is destabilizing the Pakistani bourgeois state and that its suppression is, therefore, "our" war, not Washington's.

But he too has been forced to strongly condemn the US action for he cannot afford to entirely ignore the popular antipathy to Washington. Opinion polls conducted by right-wing US think tanks have repeatedly found that ordinary Pakistanis view the US as a far greater threat to Pakistan than terrorism or the Taliban. And with good reason. After years of staunchly supporting Musharraf's dictatorship, the US is now hell-bent on turning much of the country into a killing-field in order to secure its interests in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military has a decades-long intimate partnership with the US and has benefited handsomely from the billions Washington has paid Islamabad for its logistical support of the Afghan invasion and for providing the US security services with torture sites and other services.

But Washington's escalating demands are stoking resentments. There have been repeated reports of dissension and insubordination in the military over the pacification campaigns in the border areas, particularly among the Pashtun who are understandably perturbed at having to suppress people they view as their brethren. Both the ranks and officer corps of the Pakistani military contain a high percentage of Pashtun.

Wednesday's incursion undermines the military's claim to be the guarantor of the sovereignty of Pakistan—a claim that is at the heart of its ideological justification for laying claim to a massive share of the country's revenue and immense political power.

Moreover, like the rest of the Pakistani elite, the military is alarmed by American acquiescence, if not encouragement, of ever-closer ties between Hamid Karzai's Afghan government and India, Pakistan's historic rival. Last but not least, the Pakistani elite believes that by facilitating India's access to advanced nuclear technology, Washington is fundamentally altering the balance of power in South Asia in India's favor.

Today's presidential election

An electoral college comprised of the members of Pakistan's national and four provincial assemblies will today chose a successor to Musharraf, who resigned last month to avoid impeachment and possible criminal prosecution.

Overshadowing the elections are not just the crisis in US-Pakistani relations and the effective loss of government control over significant swathes of the country; Pakistan's economy is in a tailspin. Economic growth has fallen to a six-year low. Inflation is running at 25 percent, with food and energy prices spiking even higher. For close to a year there have been significant shortages of wheat flour, the staple of the Pakistani diet. The Pakistan rupee has depreciated against the US dollar by 40 percent since the beginning of the year and the country's currency reserves have fallen by well over a third to \$9.8 billion.

According to all observers, Zardari's election is a foregone conclusion. He is being supported by a wide array of parties, including groupings such as the MQM (which purports to represent those who migrated to Pakistan between 1947 and 1950 from north India) and the Islamicist JUI-F, that loyally supported Musharraf until the rout of his army-sponsored PML (Q) in last February's elections.

The two other candidates are former chief justice Saeed uz Saman and Mushahid Hussain Syed. They are being sponsored respectively

by Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim league (Nawaz) and the PML (Q).

On August 20, just two days after Musharraf's resignation and shortly after the PPP had announced that Zardari would be its party nominee for the presidency, Sharif withdrew his party's support to the PPP-led ruling coalition.

The PPP and PML (N) are longtime bitter rivals. The PML (N) repeatedly connived with the military and bureaucracy to oust PPP governments in the 1990s. Benazir Bhutto initially supported Musharraf's 1999 coup against then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif

Sharif justified his party's withdrawal of support to the PPP-led coalition with the claim that Zardari had reneged on a promise to present a "common candidate" for the presidency and by pointing to the government's failure to restore Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry and other judges illegally purged by Musharraf under a state of emergency last November.

The president has vast constitutional powers, including the right to sack the government and dissolve the National Assembly.

The PML (N) is now demanding that the PPP ministers in Punjab's PML (N)-led coalition government resign, raising the prospect of a clash between the federal government and the government of Punjab, the country's wealthiest province and home to a majority of its population.

The PPP and PML (N) are both parties of the bourgeois-landlord establishment. Although the PPP, whenever it has held office over the past two decades has imposed privatization, marketization and other right-wing austerity measures, it continues to posture as the party of the poor.

Sharif, an industrialist and avowed right-winger, owes his political career to the former dictator Zia-ul-Huq. That has prevented him trying to develop a popular following by portraying himself as a victim of Musharraf and by making calibrated appeals to popular anti-US sentiment.

Both parties claim to be champions of democracy. Their actions over the past 18 months of the unraveling of the Musharraf regime demonstrate, however, that they are determined to prevent the entry of the masses into political life, are beholden to the military, and in thrall to Washington and the other imperialist powers.

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