

President Bush authorises US ground operations inside Pakistan

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In a reckless and criminal attempt to suppress the growing insurgency in Afghanistan, President Bush has secretly authorised the use of US Special Forces against targets inside the border areas of Pakistan. The first publicly acknowledged operation took place on September 3 when helicopter-borne soldiers landed at a village in South Waziristan, attacked three compounds and slaughtered at least 20 people.

The assault provoked widespread outrage throughout Pakistan. According to yesterday's *New York Times*, more than 20 Navy Seals transported in helicopters and backed by an AC-130 gunship claimed to have killed "about two dozen Al Qaeda fighters". Pakistani officials, however, have produced a detailed list of the victims, which included at least six women and two children. All of the dead were local villagers; none were foreigners or "Al Qaeda fighters".

The raid, which was followed by three separate US missile strikes in North Waziristan over the past week, marked a definite shift in White House policy. American officials confirmed in yesterday's *New York Times* that President Bush signed a secret order in July to allow US Special Forces to carry out ground assaults in Pakistan without prior approval from the Pakistani government.

An unnamed senior US official told the newspaper: "The situation in the tribal areas is not tolerable. We have to be more assertive. Orders have been issued." The presidential decision is the culmination of a lengthy debate at the top levels of the Bush administration, during which bitter criticisms were made of the Pakistani government and military for failing to crack down on militant groups in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The *New York Times* cautiously noted: "It is unclear precisely what legal authorities the United States has invoked to conduct even limited ground operations in a friendly country." In fact, military attacks on the territory of any nation—allied or not—constitute an act of war. While a US official claimed that Islamabad had "privately assented to the general concept of limited ground operations," the Pakistani government has publicly opposed any intrusion by US troops and issued a formal protest over the September 3 operation.

The White House has refused to comment on the *New York Times* article. However, in a speech at the National Defence University on Tuesday, President Bush signalled the underlying shift in the US stance, declaring that parts of Pakistan, along with Iraq and Afghanistan, were "all theatres in the same overall struggle". He also announced a further build up of US troops in Afghanistan.

Both the BBC and the Associated Press have corroborated the *New York Times* story in

separate interviews with current and past American officials. A former intelligence official told the Associated Press that the Bush administration had also authorised conventional US ground troops to pursue insurgents across the border into Pakistan.

Another US official justified Bush's secret order by claiming that Pakistan's military intelligence agency—the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI)—had previously compromised US operations and may have assisted insurgent attacks inside Afghanistan. “This [the new order] is a reaction to that and it was sped up by the revelations about the penetration of the Pakistani intelligence services. It was decided that we had no choice but to free up the hands of our commanders,” the official told the Associated Press.

Whatever the actions of sections of the ISI, the basic cause of the rising insurgency inside Afghanistan is the brutal character of the US-led neo-colonial occupation of the country. Nearly seven years of air strikes and raids that have resulted in the death or detention of thousands of civilians have provoked fierce opposition, particularly among the Pashtun tribes that straddle the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Having laid waste to much of the south and east of Afghanistan, the Bush administration is launching a dangerous new war in neighbouring Pakistan.

The US wars in Afghanistan have already had a deeply destabilising impact on Pakistan. Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani military has dispatched some 120,000 troops to the border areas, where intense fighting has left many dead on both sides and forced up to 300,000 people to flee. Local tribes are both fearful and resentful at the growing number of US missile strikes in the FATA by CIA-controlled Predator drones, which have indiscriminately killed civilians including women and children.

Pakistani anger

The authorisation of unilateral US ground attacks inside Pakistan is profoundly embarrassing for the government and the military. Referring to last week's US raid, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, head of the Pakistani military, declared on Wednesday that “such like reckless actions only help the militants and further fuel the militancy in the area”. He flatly denied that there was any “agreement or understanding with the coalition forces whereby they are allowed to conduct operations on our side of the border”.

In a chilling warning of potential Pakistani-US clashes, General Kayani declared: “The sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country will be defended at all cost.” The fact that Kayani, who previously has been regarded as sympathetic to Washington, made such a threat is an indication of deep ruptures within the Pakistani military. The army's operations in the FATA have already provoked opposition in the officer caste, many of whom are ethnic Pashtuns sympathetic to the local tribes.

More broadly, there are deep concerns in the army hierarchy that Pakistan's backing for the US occupation of Afghanistan and more broadly the bogus “war on terrorism” has weakened the country's strategic position vis-à-vis India, its main regional rival. Following the September 11 attacks, Washington pressured former Pakistani strongman Pervez Musharraf to withdraw support from what was regarded as an important ally—the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Now Pakistan confronts a situation in Afghanistan where India has established close links with the US-backed puppet president Hamid Karzai. At the same time, the US has forged a closer strategic relationship with New Delhi, even as it has continued to berate

Islamabad for failing to do enough in the “war on terror”.

As far as the Pakistani military is concerned, US Special Forces operations inside Pakistani territory set a dangerous precedent for other powers, especially India, to do the same. The political establishment in New Delhi routinely brands separatist militias in Indian-controlled Kashmir as “terrorists”. The most chauvinistic elements have in the past called for Indian military action against “terrorist training camps” in Pakistani-held Kashmir. Amid rising unrest in Kashmir, there are undoubtedly fears in Islamabad that India may take advantage of the political turmoil in Pakistan and the virtual civil war along the border with Afghanistan.

Some commentators have speculated that Kayani’s unusually blunt comments were simply a shot across the bows of Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, who was formally installed in office the previous day. Zardari has repeatedly expressed his support for Washington’s “war on terror” and invited Afghan President Karzai to the swearing-in ceremony on Tuesday. At the same time, however, Zardari is acutely aware that most Pakistanis are opposed to the US occupation of Afghanistan and to US incursions. Following Kayani’s statement, Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani vowed yesterday to defend the country’s borders, adding: “I have the same opinion as that of the army chief on US measures and there is no disparity between our viewpoints.”

Whatever Kayani’s immediate motives, his statement reflects the depth of both anti-US sentiment among Pakistani population and the crisis in the military and political establishment. Pakistan remains heavily reliant on American financial and military aid, but the price has been deepening political turmoil, a weakened strategic position and an escalating war throughout the FATA region. By authorising the use of US troops inside Pakistan, the Bush administration is inflaming an already explosive situation. Having created two quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US is well on the way to producing a third.

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