

FALLOUT FROM NATO ATTACK ON PAKISTANI BORDER POSTS CONTINUES: AFGHANISTAN AT CENTER OF CONFLICT

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXKtehgB-Cw>[/youtube]

While a great deal of the attention on the effects of Saturday's NATO attack on two (or three) Pakistani border posts that killed at least 24 Pakistani soldiers centers on US-Pakistan relations, the importance of these developments on relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan should not be overlooked. Most reports on the incident suggest that Afghan soldiers in the border region were responsible for calling in the air attack. While NATO and Afghan accounts claim that the Afghan forces were under fire from the Pakistani border outposts, the Pakistani military insists that the attacks were unprovoked. It should be noted that an Afghan group of investigators had arrived in Islamabad on Thursday before the incident on Saturday. This group was in Pakistan to investigate Pakistani ties to the militant group that killed former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani on September 20 when he was starting peace talks with the Taliban.

The Attack

The Washington Post account of the attack has this key passage on the background situation:

The poorly patrolled and ill-marked border is the central sore point in Pakistan's relations with both the United States and Afghanistan. American military officials say al-Qaeda and

Afghan Taliban fighters live on the Pakistani side and cross the border to attack U.S. troops – with the knowledge of and help from Pakistani intelligence. Pakistan says the homegrown militants its army is fighting in the restive tribal areas can easily find refuge in eastern Afghanistan, which borders Mohmand, and that CIA drone strikes in the region inspire militants.

The Saturday airstrike came one day after [Commander of US forces General John] Allen met with [Pakistan's Army head General Ashfaq] Kayani to discuss border security.

That Friday meeting between Allen and Kayani certainly makes the subsequent events on Saturday hard to understand. Only one day after discussing border security at the highest levels, we see a massive communications breakdown at a critical moment:

Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, a Pakistani military spokesman, stopped short of that characterization [describing the attack as a US offensive action], but he said the strike was “inexplicable.” In an interview, he said the two border posts are clearly marked and their locations are known to Afghan and coalition forces. No militant or military firing preceded the NATO assault, nor did coalition troops inform Pakistan that they were receiving fire from the Pakistani side, as is procedure, Abbas said.

Once the strike began, Abbas said, soldiers notified their commanders in the nearby city of Peshawar, who told officials at military headquarters in Rawalpindi, who then informed two trilateral border coordination centers located at the Torkham pass and the border of Pakistan's North Waziristan

region.

“But somehow it continued,” Abbas said of the firing. “Our side believes there is no possibility of confusion. The post location is not where a Taliban would take position.”

The Express Tribune carries more of Abbas’ remarks:

“There is no reason for the fire to be initiated from our area,” he said, adding that Mohmand Agency has been cleared of militancy and that the army has regained control of the area.

“We have cleared the area and lost 70 officers in the operation already. Now we have to face the brunt of Nato from the other side?”

/snip/

Abbas told the *Guardian* that the firing lasted for over an hour, and that Isaf made “no attempt” to contact the Pakistani side.

“This was a visible, well-made post, on top of ridges, made of concrete. Militants don’t operate from mountaintops, from concrete structures.”

So if border security had just been discussed one day earlier by the highest ranking officers on both sides, how is it possible one side could fire on the other for over an hour, especially when the side receiving fire made an immediate report to the other side? And why would NATO think insurgent forces would be on a mountaintop, firing from established bases? NATO’s upcoming investigation has to answer these questions if they are to maintain any credibility with Pakistan.

Effect on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

From the BBC story on the Afghan delegation that arrived in Islamabad on Thursday:

Mr Rabbani had been leading Afghan efforts to negotiate with the Taliban and the Afghan government has said it believes forces in Pakistan were behind the suicide attack that killed him on 20 September.

Earlier this month Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to jointly investigate his murder in what was seen as a warming of relations between the two countries.

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Afghan officials say that they were finally granted visas to travel to Pakistan after a delay of nearly three months.

It is of course universally understood that an agreement with the Taliban is essential to achieving a stable Afghanistan after US troops leave. That is what makes the killing of Rabbani just as he started negotiations so important and why it stands out to me that the border incident would flare up while the team investigating Rabbani's death was in Pakistan. And it appears that this crisis has indeed derailed the process of developing an agreement with the Haqqani Network (and presumably the Taliban, as the Haqqani Network stated earlier that they would only participate in negotiations if the Taliban were included):

Pakistani officials also warned that the attack will have "huge implications" for the Afghan endgame.

When Secretary Clinton led a delegation last month to Islamabad, authorities in Pakistan had agreed with the US to convince certain insurgent groups, including the Haqqani network, to enter the meaningful talks for seeking a peaceful end in Afghanistan.

"That process has now come to a halt,"
said the official.

But not only is that peace process halted, there now is talk of outright hostilities breaking out between Pakistan and Afghanistan. From CNN:

Pakistan Taliban spokesman Ihsanullah Ihsan said in a phone call to CNN that America will infringe on Pakistan's sovereignty and continue operations on Pakistani soil in the coming days.

Ihsan said Pakistan must respond in kind to the NATO attacks, and he warned that the Pakistani Taliban will continue their jihad as long as Pakistan remains an ally of the United States.

In Kabul, meanwhile, a senior adviser to Afghan president Hamid Karzai said Afghanistan and Pakistan may be on a course toward military conflict.

Ashraf Ghani said the link between Pakistan and the assassination of a former Afghan president had united his country "against interference."

It would appear that the US now is stuck with two key allies careening toward war with one another despite recent strong diplomatic efforts (which were also disrupted by the Husain Haqqani memogate scandal). Will the US have the courage to announce that financial and military aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan is dependent on their cooperation with one another and that steps taken by either side toward war would make the flow of assistance stop? That may be the only way to avoid a war between Pakistan and Afghanistan once the US leaves.