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U.S. aiding Pakistani military offensive

U.S. drones are providing intelligence and surveillance video in support of Pakistan's offensive in South Waziristan, the first time Islamabad has accepted such help for major military operations.

By Julian E. Barnes and Greg Miller

October 23, 2009

The U.S. military is providing intelligence and surveillance video from unmanned aircraft to the Pakistani army to assist in its week-old offensive in South Waziristan, marking the deepest American involvement yet in a Pakistani military campaign, officials said.

The assistance includes imagery from armed Predator drones that Defense officials say are being used exclusively for intelligence gathering in the offensive.

Providing such information fills gaps in the Islamabad government's spying arsenal, officials said, and helps show how the Obama administration intends to intensify pressure on insurgents in Pakistan as the administration overhauls the U.S. military strategy in neighboring Afghanistan.

The cooperation also reflects a significant shift for Pakistan, which had previously resisted U.S. offers to deploy Predators in support of its military operations.

Recent militant attacks have shaken the Pakistani government, convincing officials of the need for help in taking on militants.

Early today, police said, a suicide bomber killed six people in an attack near a military complex in northern Pakistan.

On Thursday, gunmen opened fire on a Pakistani army jeep in Islamabad, the capital, killing a senior officer and his driver.

The current offensive, marked by heavy fighting, is seen as crucial for both the U.S. and Pakistan. South Waziristan is the base for Pakistani militants who have mounted a string of attacks across the country, and it is an important refuge for Al Qaeda.

"We are coordinating with the Pakistanis," said a senior U.S. military official, one of several who confirmed the operations on condition of anonymity. "And we do provide Predator support when requested."

For months the United States and Pakistan have been sharing information from Predator flights in the volatile border regions, but until now the Pakistanis had not accepted help for their major military operations. Islamabad turned down American surveillance and targeting aid during the offensive in the Swat district that began in May.

The use of military drones for intelligence gathering in Pakistan is separate from the ongoing Predator attack campaign being carried out in that country by the CIA. Over the last 18 months, missile strikes from CIA-operated drones have killed at least 13 senior Al Qaeda or Taliban operatives in Pakistan's tribal zone.

U.S. assistance is deeply controversial in Pakistan, which wants to avoid the appearance that it is dependent on the American government or military.

The two governments have had difficulty in sharing some information in the past. American officers have accused Pakistani officials of tipping off targets about upcoming strikes. But a senior U.S. Defense official said that in the Waziristan offensive, U.S. and Pakistani interests are closely intertwined.

"The Pakistanis are getting more and more serious about the militant threat," said the official.

"You are going to see more sharing as trust develops and assurance develops that they are using the information for effective operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban."

A Pakistani military official acknowledged the intelligence cooperation, saying the U.S. was helping to provide a "composite picture" of the enemy and the terrain in which it is embedded.

The Pakistani official and a senior U.S. official both said that the offensive followed high-level talks between the two nations' military leaders.

Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, had

flown to Islamabad to work out coordination on the border and intelligence-sharing issues before the Pakistani military campaign began, the Pakistani official said.

Similarly, Pakistani officers, including the commander of the nation's air force, have held meetings with Navy Adm. Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other U.S. officials in Washington in recent weeks.

White House deliberations over McChrystal's recommendation to send reportedly 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan have received heavy attention in recent weeks, but the Obama administration also has examined how to provide more effective assistance to Pakistan.

The administration is moving toward rebalancing its focus between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Vice President Joe Biden and other key civilian and military leaders have argued that Pakistan receives insufficient U.S. attention and resources.

The Pakistani offensive is principally aimed at a militant group that has carried out the recent series of deadly attacks in the country, and was formerly led by Pakistani Taliban chief Baitullah Mahsud, killed by a CIA drone airstrike in August.

U.S. officials have pressed Pakistan to expand its military campaign to other Taliban groups and hope the Pakistanis will next take aim at North Waziristan, used as a haven by Afghanistan's Taliban factions.

The Pakistani military official said there was "no discrimination" when it comes to which Taliban groups to pursue.

Still, U.S. officials said they have seen no indication that the latest campaign has targeted, or will target, militants linked to Afghan Taliban leaders such as Mullah Mohammed Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Some defense analysts said it was crucial for the Pakistanis to consolidate their gains in South Waziristan before moving on to other territory.

"We would like them to extend the offensive," said Stephen Biddle, a military historian and defense analyst. "But we would also like them to hold what they clear. It might or might not be a good call for them to add territorial goals, when it is most important for them to hold what they take."

Frederick Kagan, a defense analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, argued that helping the Pakistanis retake South Waziristan is vital both to the stability of Pakistan and to the U.S. campaign against Al Qaeda.

"It is conceivable that we could look back at this South Waziristan operation as a turning point in the war against Al Qaeda," Kagan said. "This has been the safe haven for these guys."

American officials said the new cooperation has developed partly because the U.S. has broadened its outreach to Pakistani officials beyond Ashfaq Kayani, the Pakistani army chief of staff.

The U.S. believes that if it can get Islamabad to accept more help, the Pakistani offensive will be more effective.

Right after the Swat operation, Pakistani leaders talked of an offensive in Waziristan, but it did not happen then. The military's munitions needed replenishing, analysts said.

Previous offensives by the military against insurgents in Waziristan did not last. After operations in 2003 and 2004 came cease-fires that allowed Taliban forces to regroup.

Pakistani leaders have been accused of downplaying the militant threat, but the Pakistani official described a new level of resolve. "There is a national urgency to do away with this militancy once and for all," the official said.

Pakistan has superior human intelligence on the ground, where its powerful Inter-Services Intelligence has cultivated networks of informants among militant groups. But the government has a limited ability to intercept cellphone calls and other transmissions.

"Any type of imagery would be of use to the Pakistanis, either from Predator or other means," said another senior U.S. Defense official.

In particular, the official said, Pakistan has sought intelligence "on locations of the enemy, resupply routes, resupply activity . . . in real time."

Military experts said the Predator surveillance video could help ground units target militants and gain better awareness of the threats around them.

"The drones are not wonder weapons," said Biddle, the military historian.

"But in this situation, a relatively conventional ground offensive, the Pakistanis want the ability to see over the hill, and in that, U.S. drones can be a lot of help."