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A Deadly U.S. Attack on Pakistani Soil

By Nate Hughes
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In the early hours of Nov. 26 on the Afghan-Pakistani border, what was almost certainly a flight of U.S. Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and an AC-130 gunship killed some two dozen Pakistani servicemen at two border outposts inside Pakistan. Details remain scarce, conflicting and disputed, but the incident was known to have taken place near the border of the Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar and the Mohmand agency of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The death toll inflicted by the United States against Pakistani servicemen is unprecedented, and while U.S. commanders and NATO leaders have expressed regret over the incident, the reaction from Pakistan has been severe.

Claims and Interests

The initial Pakistani narrative of the incident describes an unprovoked and aggressive attack on well-established outposts more than a mile inside Pakistani territory — outposts known to the Americans and ones that representatives of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had visited in the past. The attack supposedly lasted for some two hours despite distressed communications from the outpost to the Pakistani military's general headquarters in Rawalpindi.

The United States was quick to acknowledge that Pakistani troops were probably killed by attack aircraft providing close air support to a joint U.S.-Afghan patrol near the Kunar border, and while U.S. Marine Gen. James Mattis, the head of U.S. Central Command, promised a high-level

investigation, the United States and NATO seemed to be more interested in smoothing relations with Islamabad than endorsing or correcting initial reports about the specifics of the attack.

What has ensued has been a classic media storm of accusations, counteraccusations, theories and specifics provided by unnamed sources that all serve to obscure the truth as much as they clarify it. Meanwhile, no matter what actually happened, aggressive spin campaigns have been launched to shape perceptions of the incident for myriad interests. Given the longstanding tensions between Washington and Islamabad as well as a record of cross-border incidents, stakeholders will believe exactly what they want to believe about the Nov. 26 incident, and even an official investigation will have little bearing on their entrenched views.

The Framework

While statements and accusations have often referenced NATO and the ISAF, it is U.S. forces that operate in this part of the country, and this close to the border the unit involved was likely operating under the aegis of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (the U.S. command in Afghanistan) rather than under the multinational ISAF. Indeed, many American allies have also expressed frustration over the incident, convinced that it undermines ISAF operations in Afghanistan.

Reports indicate that a U.S. special operations team (likely a platoon-sized element, but at least a 12-man detachment) accompanied by Afghan commandos (generally a seven-man squad accompanies a U.S. platoon, but 25- to 30-man platoons sometimes accompany 12-man U.S. teams) were involved in an engagement and called for close air support. It now seems clear that both sides opened fire at some point. At least one unidentified senior Pakistani defense official told The Washington Post that it had been the Pakistanis who fired first, opening up with mortars and machine guns after sending up an illumination round. However, most Pakistani sources continue to deny this.

Given that Washington has been trying to smooth over already tense relations with Islamabad, such an aggressive attack taking place without provocation seems unlikely. In any event, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operated by the CIA essentially have free rein in Pakistani airspace over the border area and are often used for targeted assassinations, meaning that the involvement of attack helicopters rather than UAVs does lend credence to the close air support claim. (The principle of hot pursuit, which is understood and often exercised by U.S. patrols along the border, might also have been applied.)

The Border

The “border” between Afghanistan and Pakistan in this area is part of the Durand Line agreed upon between the Afghan monarch and the colonial authority of British India in 1893. Not only is the border poorly marked, it also divides extraordinarily rugged terrain and essentially bisects the Pashtun population. And from the British perspective, the agreement was intended to establish a broad buffer between British and Russian interests in Central Asia by establishing a line along the distant, outer frontier of British India. British priorities had little to do with the day-to-day realities of a fixed linear boundary, and to this day the specific border exists primarily on paper.

The border is characterized by a string of outposts — often little more than prepared fighting positions and some crude shelters that are difficult to distinguish between military, government or civilian structures — manned by the paramilitary Frontier Corps on the Pakistani side. These positions presumably are selected for their tactical value in monitoring and dominating the border, and the troops occupying those positions invariably know the general location of the border before them. Similarly, U.S. special operations teams are well trained and practiced in land navigation at night, regularly conduct operations in the area and are there to patrol that very border. Both sides know full well their general positions relative to the border.

A post-attack image of the Pakistani outpost involved in the Nov. 26 cross-border incident The point is that, whatever the specifics of the Nov. 26 incident, it appears largely consistent with and governed by the underlying tactical realities of the border. A small Pakistani outpost that perceives a threatening, armed entity will take advantage of its position and heavier weaponry in engaging the force rather than let it slip any closer — and this will be more true the smaller and more isolated the garrison. Under fire, a U.S. interdiction patrol (as distinct from a reconnaissance patrol, for which breaking contact is proscribed if feasible) will move quickly to advantageous terrain dictated by the direction of fire and the immediate geography around it, regardless of the border. If the situation dictates, the patrol may engage in hot pursuit across the border after being attacked.

The border is a highway for insurgents (both those who use Pakistan as a sanctuary for their fight in Afghanistan and those who are doing the reverse), other militants and supplies. That's why the border outposts are manned and U.S.-Afghan teams conduct patrols — to interdict both types of insurgents. But it also means that there are plenty of armed formations moving around at night, and from the perspective of both a Pakistani outpost and a U.S. patrol, none of them is friendly.

Close Air Support

Pakistani forces have regularly shelled targets on the Afghan side of the border, and on a number of occasions U.S. forces have killed Pakistani troops — in firefights, with artillery, with UAVs and with attack helicopters. Indeed, standard U.S. operating procedures allow Pakistani troops and militants alike to know the probable American response in a given tactical scenario — including what it takes to get close air support called in.

Any dismounted American foot patrol that takes fire from both mortars and heavy machine guns is going to call for whatever fire support it can get. And given the frequency of incidents and the rugged terrain near the border, special operations teams operating near the border are likely to have a flight of Apaches close by ready to provide that support.

The forward-looking infrared sensor mounted on the nose of the AH-64 Apache is capable of remarkable resolution — sufficient to make out not only adult individuals but the shapes of weapons they may be carrying. But the history of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is also rife with incidents where aircrews, acting on the information available to them (and with the context of being called in to support friendly forces under fire), engaged targets only later to find that the activity or weaponry had not been as it appeared — a reporter with a long, telephoto lens on a

camera rather than a rocket launcher or children picking up pinecones instead of insurgents emplacing an improvised explosive device.

Particularly on the border, the pilot and gunner are making the same distinction Pakistani outposts and American patrols are likely to make in the area: Armed individuals and groups not known to be friendly are probably hostile. The position of friendly forces will be communicated by the air controller in contact with the aircrew and also generally by infrared strobes or other means. Though the air controller will indicate the immediate threat, any non-friendly position could quickly be judged hostile. Any unit firing or maneuvering with what appears to be weaponry may quickly be deemed hostile in the exigency of the moment and the uncertainty of the environment based on limited information. And while ISAF has tightened its rules of engagement and added additional oversight for close air support in Afghanistan in response to domestic outrage over collateral damage, there is still going to be an enormous difference between the restraint exercised in, say, Marjah, where a population-centered counterinsurgency campaign is actively under way, and an isolated special operations patrol near the Pakistani border in an area known to be frequented by militants.

The Big Picture

In a way, the Afghan-Pakistani border is a microcosm of the U.S.-Pakistani relationship. The U.S. patrols and the Pakistani outposts are there for entirely different and in some cases directly opposing reasons. The Pakistanis are spread thin in the FATA and are focusing their efforts on the Pakistani Taliban, which have their sights set on Islamabad. Not only are they less interested in confronting the Afghan Taliban as a matter of priority, but Pakistani national interest dictates maintaining a functional relationship with the Afghan Taliban as leverage in dealing with the United States and as a way to control Afghanistan as the United States and its allies begin to withdraw.

Hence, elements of the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate are actively engaged in supporting the Afghan Taliban and have in some cases come to see common cause with them — not only in supporting the Afghan Taliban but also in actively undermining U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and disrupting Pakistani cooperation with the United States. Indeed, the timing and magnitude of the Nov. 26 incident — which was entirely plausible under a number of scenarios — calls into question whether it may have been staged or intended to provoke the response it did. Some reports have indicated that the Taliban may have staged an initial attack intended to draw the Pakistani positions and the American patrol into a firefight with each other.

Whatever the case, factions that benefit from a greater division between Pakistan and the United States will be aided by the incident and subsequent public outcry — as will the Pakistani state, which is now holding its own cooperation hostage for better terms in its relationship with Washington.

Ultimately, however, there is a reason for the long, established history of cross-border incidents and skirmishes. The United States and Pakistan are playing very different games for very different ends on both sides of the border and in Afghanistan. They have different adversaries

and are playing on different timetables. The alliance is one of necessity but hobbled by incompatibility and near-term American imperatives in Afghanistan — lines of supply, political progress, counterterrorism efforts — clash directly with the long-term American interest in a strong Pakistani state able to manage its territory and keep its nuclear arsenal secure. The near-term demands Washington has made on Islamabad weaken the state and divide the country. Obviously, the Pakistani government intends to retain its strength and keep the country as unified as possible.

The reality is that as long as the political objectives that dictate U.S. and Pakistani military strategies and tactics are generally at odds, there will be tension and conflict. And as long as Pakistani and American forces are both patrolling a border that exists primarily on paper, they will be at odds. Tactically, this means armed groups with many divergent loyalties will be circling one another.

The Fallout

What actually happened early on Nov. 26 is increasingly irrelevant; it is merely a symptom of larger issues that remain unresolved, and the fallout has already taken shape. Pakistan is leveraging the incident for everything it can and is already demonstrating its displeasure (both for political leverage and to satisfy an enraged domestic populace) by doing the following: Closing the crucial border crossings at Torkham near the Khyber Pass and Chaman to the south Giving the CIA 15 days to vacate the Shamsi air base in Balochistan from which it conducts UAV operations (though Pakistani airspace reportedly remains open to such flights)

Reviewing its intelligence and military cooperation with the United States and NATO Boycotting the upcoming Dec. 5 Bonn conference on Afghanistan, though there are some hints already that it may reconsider; it is difficult to imagine what a conference on Afghanistan without Pakistan might achieve, but Islamabad would face other risks in not attending such a conference.

The larger question is whether the calculus for an alliance of necessity between the United States and Pakistan still holds. As the American and allied withdrawal from Afghanistan accelerates, without a political understanding between Washington, Islamabad, Kabul and the Afghan Taliban, there is little prospect of American and Pakistani interests coming into any closer alignment. The United States and its allies are moving for the exits while the Pakistanis try to ensure optimal circumstances surrounding the withdrawal and at the same time ensure maximum leverage to manage whatever ends up being left behind. The two countries still have numerous incentives to continue cooperation, but all the ingredients for cross-border incidents and skirmishes — as well as the opportunity to stage, provoke and exploit those incidents and skirmishes — remain firmly in place.