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Warzone Pakistan

Washington's impatience with Islamabad's approach to counter-terrorism has led to US operations straying deeper into Pakistan



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A US Predator drone of the type increasingly being used in attacks across the border into Pakistan. Photograph: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

Escalating US cross-border military incursions into Pakistan suggest the Obama administration has lost patience with Islamabad's failure to stop militants using the tribal areas as launchpads for attacks on Nato forces in Afghanistan and safe havens for training foreign-born terrorists.

As attacks involving American helicopter gunships and unmanned drones rise sharply, Washington's blunt message to Islamabad is: "If you can't or won't take care of the problem, we will." Last week, interior minister Rehman Malik offered a blunt riposte: "We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies."

The new strategy is high-risk. Public fury at the incursions, which caused the closure of a key Khyber Pass supply route, may further undermine Pakistan's civilian president, Asif Ali Zardari. It could alienate the Pakistani security apparatus and fuel jihadi recruitment. It is an embarrassment for Nato's allies, who have no control over US special forces or CIA operations. And it resurrects the dread prospect of a wider, regional war spreading outwards from Afghanistan.

But Barack Obama, egged on by his new Afghanistan commander, General David Petraeus, and under pressure to meet his self-imposed withdrawal schedule, appears determined to take the fight to the enemy – even if it means waging war inside another sovereign state.

Last month saw 22 cross-border CIA drone attacks on Taliban or al-Qaida-linked

militants, nearly double the previous monthly record, and three reported helicopter raids. One helicopter attack last Thursday killed three Pakistani soldiers. On Monday, eight supposed terrorists of German nationality were killed.

Obama's policy is rooted in an executive order signed by George Bush in July 2008 sanctioning secret cross-border counter-terrorist operations. In September that year US commandos launched a ground raid into Pakistan. The ensuing uproar meant that future ground operations mostly stopped. But aerial attacks using Predator and Reaper drones have steadily increased.

Anthony Cordesman, writing in the National Interest, said there were 35 drone attacks in 2008, 55 in 2009, and 77 in the first nine months of 2010, according to information collated by Long War Journal. But it was wrong to present the rise as a "massive bombing campaign" causing numerous civilian casualties, he said.

"This rise in strike numbers is a kind of 'surge' but it adds up to 175 strikes over the entire [Afghan] war, and of these strikes, 65% have been concentrated in North Waziristan, [in the tribal areas] where the Pakistani army has been unwilling or unable to act." Cordesman also said improved rules of engagement had reduced civilian casualties.

US reports say all but three of last month's cross-border operations were aimed at the Haqqani terrorist network in North Waziristan, which Nato blames for an upsurge in violence in adjacent east Afghanistan. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the network's leader, has close links to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency. The ISI supposedly hopes to use the network to manipulate events in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal – and is thus reluctant to act against it.

American officials say North Waziristan is also used by al-Qaida as a base for organising and planning terrorist operations overseas, such as the recently reported plots targeting Britain, France and Germany.

American concerns intensified last spring when it emerged that the failed Times Square bomber in New York had trained in Pakistan. Intelligence agencies say European-born would-be jihadis, frequently of Pakistani, Afghan or North African descent, receive training in the tribal areas. This is the context of Monday's attack on the German nationals.

Obama raised these issues in a letter to Zardari last November, warning that the US would be forced to act if Pakistan did not. The army made no move – and US patience finally snapped. "The CIA sought more resources, which the White House strongly supported ... The results speak for themselves," an unnamed official told the Washington Post.

The expansion of US operations inside Pakistan appears to break even an informal, officially disavowed agreement concerning so-called "flight boxes", which sets limits on the area of drone operations. But in its mania for killing real or imagined terrorists, anywhere and everywhere, Washington does not seem to care.

Nor do Pakistan's protests or worries about provoking a wider war cut much ice. "Fighting a war in Afghanistan that has given the enemy a sanctuary in Pakistan, and al-Qaida immunity in Pakistan, has little point," Cordesman said, indirectly answering Rehman Malik's question about allies or enemies. "More bluntly, if Pakistan cannot

provide at least enough co-operation to passively allow such strikes, it is not an ally, it is a major strategic liability."

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