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Three US special forces soldiers were killed in northwest Pakistan this week, confirming that the US military is more deeply engaged on the ground in Pakistan than previously acknowledged by the White House and Pentagon (see " [The Secret US War in Pakistan](#) [1]," November 23, 2009). The soldiers died Wednesday in Lower Dir when their convoy was hit by a car bomber in what appeared to be a targeted strike against the Americans. According to CENTCOM, the US soldiers were in the country on a mission to train the Pakistani Frontier Corps, a federal paramilitary force run by Pakistan's Interior Ministry that patrols the country's volatile border with Afghanistan. A Pakistani journalist who witnessed the attack said that some of the US soldiers were dressed in civilian clothes and had been identified by their Pakistani handlers as journalists. The

New

York Times

estimates that there are sixty to a hundred such US special forces "trainers" in Pakistan. Capt. Jack Hanzlik, a spokesman for the United States Central Command said there are about 200 US military personnel in Pakistan.

While the deaths of the soldiers has sparked impassioned discussion in Pakistan about the extent of the US military presence, the Pentagon has emphasized that the US soldiers were in Pakistan on a training mission at the invitation of the Pakistani government, saying they were not engaged in direct combat.

But the geography of Wednesday's attack--in the northwest of the country in an area where the US has no on-the-ground aid presence and where Pakistani forces have struggled against the Taliban and other insurgents--reveals just how close to the epicenter of the action in Pakistan the US military is. According to CENTCOM, the soldiers were not members of Delta Force or the Green Berets, instead classifying them as "civil affairs" trainers. Officially, CENTCOM describes this mission as part of an expanding "partnership with the Pakistani military and Frontier Corps," providing "increased US military assistance for helicopters to provide air mobility, night vision equipment, and training and equipment--specifically for Pakistani Special Operations Forces and their Frontier Corps to make them a more effective counter-insurgency force."

In military parlance, these above-board US "training" forces operating under an unclassified mandate are "white" forces, while operatives working for the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) would be classified as working on "black" operations, sometimes referred to as Special Mission Units. Since 2006, JSOC teams have operated in Pakistan in pursuit of "high-value" targets.

"What we're seeing is the expansion of 'white' Special Operations Forces into Pakistan," says a former member of CENTCOM and US Special Forces with extensive experience in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. "As Vietnam, Somalia and the Balkans taught us, that is almost always a precursor to expanded military operations." The former CENTCOM employee spoke to *The Nation* on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the Pakistan operations. He characterized the US military's role with the Pakistani Frontier Corps as "training in offensive operations," but rejected the idea that at this stage these US trainers would cross the line to engage in direct combat against Taliban forces. That does not mean, he says, that US military forces are not fighting in Pakistan. "Any firefights in Pakistan would be between JSOC forces versus whoever they were chasing," he said. "I would bet my life on that."

What has gone largely unmentioned in the media coverage of the deaths of the three US soldiers in Pakistan is the role private contractors are playing. While the *New York Times* reported that "The Americans' involvement in training Frontier Corps recruits in development assistance was little known until Wednesday's attack,"

The Nation

first reported on that program--and the US involvement in training the Frontier Corps--last December. A former Blackwater executive told

The Nation

that Blackwater was training and advising the Frontier Corps, working on a subcontract with Kestral Logistics, a Pakistani firm. The presence of the Blackwater personnel in Pakistan was shrouded from the public, the former executive said, because they worked on a subcontract with Kestral for the Pakistani government. At times, he said, Blackwater forces cross the line from trainers or advisers and actually participated in raids. "That gives the Pakistani government the cover to say, 'Hey, no, we don't have any Westerners doing this. It's all local and our people are doing it,'" said the former executive. "But it gets them the expertise that Westerners provide for [counterterrorism]-related work." After the US soldiers were killed on Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility and said the dead men worked for Blackwater. "We know the movement of US Marines and Blackwater guys," said Taliban spokesperson Azim Tariq. "And we have prepared suicide bombers to go after them." The United States dismissed the claim about Blackwater as "propaganda and disinformation."

While the former CENTCOM employee said the US military's training mission in Pakistan (he is against using contractors for such missions) is in the "US interest," he cautioned that there is

growing concern within the military about what is perceived as the disproportionate and growing influence of JSOC's lethal "direct action" mentality on the broader Special Forces operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As *The Nation* reported in November, JSOC operates a parallel drone bombing campaign in Pakistan, carrying out targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, "snatch and grabs" of high-value targets and other sensitive action. JSOC, a military intelligence source told *The Nation*

, also operates several secret bases inside Pakistan. These actions are deeply classified and not subjected to any form of comprehensive oversight by Congress.

With General Stanley McChrystal, who commanded JSOC from 2003-2008, running the war, forces--and commanders--accustomed to operating in an unaccountable atmosphere now have unprecedented influence on overall US military operations, opening the door for an expansion of secretive, black operations done with little to no oversight. "The main thing to take away here is a recognition and acceptance of the paradigm shift that has occurred," says the former CENTCOM employee. "Everything is one echelon removed from before: where CIA was the darkest of the dark, now it is JSOC. Therefore, military forces have more leeway to do anything in support of future military objectives. The CIA used to have the ultimate freedom--now that freedom is in JSOC's hands, and the other elements of the military have been ordered to adapt."

The former CENTCOM member said that what is unfolding in Pakistan is part of the Bush-era philosophy, continued by the Obama administration, of "preparing the battlefield." He sketches out a pattern wherein "black" operations are followed by "white" operations and then conventional US forces. That "preparing the battlefield" justification was often used by the Bush administration to circumvent Congressional oversight of clandestine military operations, particularly when McChrystal was running JSOC. The CIA is legally required to brief the Intelligence committees on covert operations, while JSOC has traditionally operated outside the purview of Congressional oversight. "This allows the JSOC/Special Mission Units more freedom to expand or absorb traditionally CIA missions," he says. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Stephen Cambone "embraced this model--so have Obama and [Defense Secretary Robert] Gates--and it persists to this day." He added that "there is a deep, deep resentment" of the influence of JSOC within "the Special Forces community" under Admiral Eric Olson, commander of the Special Operations Command and Vice Admiral William McRaven, the current head of JSOC.

What is clear from Wednesday's attack on US soldiers in Pakistan is that the US military is becoming increasingly entrenched in the country. In late January in Washington DC, US and Pakistani military officials gathered under the umbrella of the "U.S.-Pakistan Land Forces Military Consultative Committee." According to notes from the meeting, they discussed

CENTCOM's operations in Pakistan aiming to "enhance both U.S. and Pakistan Army COIN [counterinsurgency] capabilities" and "potential US COIN Center/Pakistan Army interactions." Among the participants were representatives of the Special Operations Command, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs--Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell, the Office of Defense Representative--Pakistan and a Pakistan delegation led by Brigadier General Muhammad Azam Agha, Pakistan's Director of Military Training.

The United States does not publicly acknowledge US military operations in Pakistan. On CENTCOM's website, they are described in vague terms. "We will of course continue to target, disrupt, and pursue the leadership, bases, and support networks of Al Qaeda and other transnational extremist groups operating in the region," declares CENTCOM's Pakistan page. "We will do this aggressively and relentlessly."

Since President Obama's inauguration, the administration has downplayed the role of US military forces in Pakistan. In July, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke said bluntly, "People think that the US has troops in Pakistan, well, we don't." On Wednesday, after the US soldiers' deaths, his tune changed dramatically: "There's nothing secret about their presence," he said. One thing is certain: as the situation in Pakistan becomes more volatile and the US military presence in the country expands, it will become increasingly difficult for the Obama administration to downplay or deny the reality that a US war in Pakistan is already underway.

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