
Are pictures of the U.S. "stealth helicopter" a national security concern?

By [phillipswarts](#) | May 25, 2011

WASHINGTON—While the SEAL Team Six raid that killed Osama bin Laden is being touted as a near-flawless execution of a military plan, there was one part that went awry:

The helicopter.

One of the helicopters used in the assault went down; forcing the SEALs to destroy the chopper. But a large chunk of the tail remained relatively intact.

In the days following the raid, pictures of the unusual looking helicopter tail were posted across the internet and broadcast on TV. Supposedly from a Black Hawk helicopter, the tail instead looked like a heavily modified version, possibly including alterations to reduce rotor noise and a special surface coating to avoid radar detection.

There was concern in some circles that Pakistan would ship the tail section off to its increasingly close ally China for study, or that foreign nations

would be able to glean lots of information from the pictures themselves.

But according to Benjamin Friedman, a homeland security expert, the pictures of the tail section are not a massive breach of top-secret information.

“I suppose they’re not overjoyed that pictures surfaced and that engineers who specialize in this sort of thing might be able to glean some useful things from the details,” said Friedman, an expert at the CATO Institute, a conservative think-tank.

But it’s no great revelation what modifications would make a helicopter stealthier, Friedman said.

“I don’t think the Chinese would be shocked to see the way the tail was reconfigured,” he said.

According to some experts, the worst damage has already been done.

“The real reveal isn’t necessarily in the nuts and bolts of the thing but really in the fact that such a thing even exists,” said Roger Connor, a helicopter specialist at the National Air and Space Museum. “Light has been shed on a program that nobody wanted light put on.”

Connor points to the F-117 Nighthawk that went down in action over Yugoslavia in 1999. Before that incident, it was largely believed that the U.S. had developed a stealth airplane. Before the bin Laden raid, however, there was little direct knowledge of a stealth helicopter.

“It was not a well known fact that there was a stealth version of this helicopter that was in service,” agreed Steven Aftergood, an expert on secrecy policy at the Federation of American Scientists. “That secret has been entirely compromised.”

Pakistan has agreed to return the tail section to the U.S., in a gesture it hopes will reduce the tension between the two nations that has grown since the raid.

Aftergood said any information gained from the pictures isn't as important as what's already been revealed.

“The features that could be discerned in a photograph do not compare to the magnitude of the secret of the helicopter's existence, which has been thoroughly exposed,” he said.

But, Aftergood said, the situation could have been worse if the craft did go to a foreign nation.

“With the hardware in hand, other nations, whether the Chinese or others, would be in a better position to attempt to replicate the technology for themselves or to defeat its stealth features on the battlefield,” he said.

Connor said studying the tail wouldn't have done much good.

“The value of reverse engineering something like this is highly questionable,” he said. “Nobody is going to go out and build fleets of stealth helicopters.”

He said stealth helicopters have a very specific niche; a role not needed in most nations.

“This is a highly specialized tool, and one that's only pulled out for very special occasions,” Connor said.

As for studying the helicopter to discern how to detect it, Connor said there are existing ways to try to detect stealth aircraft, and he suspects little new information would have been able to be gleaned from the wreckage. Stealth technology has “never been a magic bullet,” he said.

The Pentagon has remained mute on the subject since the raid, and Lt. Col. Elizabeth Robbins, a Department of Defense spokeswoman, said the military had no comment about the helicopter.

Full details have yet to be released about why the helicopter went down, but it's generally thought the craft was unable to generate enough lift within bin Laden's walled compound and had to forcibly set down.

The modifications to a helicopter to make it stealthier would affect its performance, making it more difficult to fly, said Connor.

One such modification, he said, would be extra weight from added stealth systems.

"Helicopters are not machines that like to be made stealthy," Connor said.

Given the unruly performance of the craft, Connor said it was "an extraordinary feat of airmanship" from the pilots that all helicopters in the raid performed as well as they did.

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