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FREEDOM VIEW: More blood spilled on the wrong mission

THE POINT — NATO kills Pakistani troops mistaken for Taliban. U.S. should shift focus to al-Qaida.

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What a tragedy. Last weekend, NATO helicopter attacks against suspected insurgents in Pakistan inadvertently killed 28 troops of the Pakistani military. Although the two nations' relations are strained, Pakistan is a key ally in America's military operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan itself.

Pakistani Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, a military spokesman, said that NATO expressions of regret were not enough. He told BBC Urdu, which broadcasts in Pakistan's national language of Urdu, "We think this is not enough, and we do not accept it. Such raids have also been conducted in the past. Such attacks are unacceptable." He lamented that the new deaths bring to 72 the number of Pakistani troops killed, with 250 wounded, in such cross-border attacks in the past three years.

Pakistani students protest against NATO and United States in Lahore, Pakistan, Nov 29, 2011. Pakistani officials say the country will boycott an upcoming meeting in Germany on the future of Afghanistan to protest a deadly attack by U.S.-led forces on its troops. The situation is very difficult, Malou Innocent told us; she's a foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute and recently returned from a fact-finding mission to Afghanistan.

"The U.S.-Pakistani relationship is so complicated," she said. "It was thrown into disarray earlier when U.S. troops killed Osama bin Laden," the terrorist mastermind behind 9/11. Pakistani authorities remain upset that they were not notified before a Navy SEAL team helicoptered deep into Pakistan to kill the al-Qaida leader in May.

She said that U.S. and other NATO forces have maps showing where Pakistani military forces are based, and so avoid striking them. "But according to the United States, unconfirmed reports indicate that attacks on U.S. troops came from the base," sparking the NATO retaliation.

But the real problem, Ms. Innocent said, is the strategy used by the United States and other NATO countries. "We have lost focus of what we're fighting," she said. "There are only 150 al-Qaida members" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, she said. "They can be dealt with through intelligence sharing, not having more than 100,000 troops." Current NATO troop strength is 140,000, with just less than 100,000 being American.

She said it's a mistake to concentrate on fighting the Taliban, the indigenous insurgents who are the major focus of the NATO effort. "The question is: Will we start to focus on al-Qaida, or continue to focus on these regional jihadists [the Taliban] that pose no threat to the United States? We killed Osama bin Laden, yet this is the war that never ends."

Ever since the 9/11 attacks more than 10 years ago, we have favored using U.S. elite troops to go after bin Laden and other al-Qaida members. But we have opposed the sort of "nation building" that ends up being a quagmire. The Afghan war now, at 10 years old, is the longest in America's history, yet there's still no exit strategy.

Moreover, it doesn't make sense to strain relations even more with Pakistan, long a key ally in the region — despite many problems — and a nuclear power in its own right. With U.S. troops finally heading out of Iraq, it's also time to wind down the war in Afghanistan