WikiLeaks cables fuel hostility to US role in Pakistan

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Diplomatic cables from the US Embassy in Islamabad released by WikiLeaks have exposed the criminal and duplicitous role played by both Washington and the Pakistani government, fueling popular anger against US operations in the country.

The Pakistani People's Party coalition government led by President Asif Ali Zardari has been among the most vociferous in its denunciations of WikiLeaks' release of the classified US documents, and for good reason.

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry described WikiLeaks as "irresponsible" in a statement issued Monday. A senior diplomat quoted in the *Washington Post* said that Pakistan was frustrated "over how the world's sole superpower can't keep its secrets and confidences and how that makes it so much more difficult to be America's friend."

For his part, the US ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, drafted a newspaper column published in both English and Urdu, which declared, "The United States deeply regrets the disclosure of any information that was intended to be confidential. And we condemn it."

The cables underscore the extremely tenuous relationship between Washington and a government that is supposedly a principal ally in its "war on terrorism." The cables indicate US mistrust and even contempt for Zardari and even greater suspicion toward the military and its secretive intelligence arm, the ISI.

A cable written last February by then US Ambassador Anne Patterson described Zardari and the civilian government as "weak, ineffectual and corrupt." She added, "Domestic politics is dominated by uncertainty about the fate of President Zardari."

Indeed, another cable cites a discussion between US Vice President Joe Biden and Zardari in early 2009 in which the Pakistani president expressed his concern that the "ISI director and [Gen. Ashfaq Parvez] Kayani will take me out."

The US government apparently knew more than it was sharing with Zardari. Another cable describes a conversation held during the same period in which General Kayani told Ambassador Patterson that he "might, however reluctantly," move to force Zardari from office.

Washington, which has over the years pursued its policies in Pakistan by backing a series of repressive military dictatorships, was apparently ambivalent over the threatened coup, viewing Zardari as a more pliant servant of US interests, while recognizing that the real power in Pakistan remained in the hands of the military.

Many of the cables expose Washington and Islamabad as partners in carrying out bloody crimes and deception against the Pakistani people.

As the US has stepped up its military operations in the region, dubbing its intervention the "Afpak war," the Zardari government has attempted to assuage popular anger by posing as an opponent of US violations of Pakistani sovereignty.

This has particularly been the case in relation to the drone missile attacks carried out by remotely controlled unmanned CIA aircraft in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan.

The Obama administration has sharply escalated these attacks, producing an ever-growing number of civilian casualties. Pakistani authorities acknowledged the deaths of some 700 civilians from drone missiles last year alone.

While Pakistani officials have routinely condemned the attacks, the cables make explicit the green light that the authorities in Islamabad gave for the CIA's slaughter from the air.

One of these cables contains a request from an Interior Ministry official, Rehman Malik, that the US "hold off" the attacks until after the Pakistani military completed an operation in the FATA region of Bajaur.

Another cites an even more cynical statement from the country's prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, who announced at a meeting, "I don't care if they do it as long as they get the right people. We'll protest in the National Assembly and then ignore it."

It was widely understood that this was the real position of the Pakistani government. But having it produced verbatim in the form of a US diplomatic cable can only further inflame the hatred that millions feel for both the politicians in Islamabad and their patrons in Washington.

The cables also confirm that US Special Operations troops are participating in combat in the tribal regions.

Formally, the Pakistani government has declared its unyielding opposition to any US ground troops fighting on Pakistani soil. But, as the cables make clear, it agreed to it in practice.

As the *Guardian* newspaper, citing the embassy cables, reports, "Small teams of US special forces have been secretly embedded with Pakistani military forces in the tribal belt, helping to hunt down Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters and co-ordinate drone attacks."

Cables from US representatives in Islamabad boasted of the Pakistani government's agreement to allow the US

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counterinsurgency troops to operate inside the country, describing it as a "sea change in thinking" on the part of the country's military. The embassy cautioned that the agreement had to remain secret, as it would be deeply unpopular with the Pakistani people, and its exposure could force the Pakistani military to shift its position.

Just as significant are cables that prove that the Obama administration deliberately covered up for war crimes by the Pakistani military in the course of a military offensive that Washington had demanded be undertaken against the Taliban in the tribal region.

The US ambassador, Anne Patterson, wrote to Washington in September 2009, warning that "A growing body of evidence is lending credence to allegations of human rights abuses by Pakistan security forces."

She spelled out that members of Pakistan's regular army and the paramilitary frontier corps were responsible for summarily executing many hundreds of people detained in the course of the offensive. She added that as many as 5,000 "terrorist detainees" were at risk.

In response, Patterson proposed that Washington could offer human rights training and promote prison reform. However, she steadfastly opposed taking any actions to actually stop the killings.

The embassy "fully recognizes that there is little that USG [US government] can do to change the culture of revenge that underlies many of the extra-judicial killings," she wrote.

Patterson added, "Much of this is dependent on goodwill … that can easily erode if too much public criticism from USG officials over these incidents is forthcoming. For this reason, post advises that we avoid comment … and that efforts remain focused on dialogue and the assistance strategy."

Under US law, the government is required to cut off assistance to foreign militaries found to have engaged in human rights violations.

The Obama administration followed the ambassador's advice and covered up for the crimes of its ally as long as it could. Only last month, after a video surfaced providing incontrovertible evidence of summary executions of prisoners, did the US government announce plans to cut off aid to a few Pakistani military units.

This record of complicity and conspiracy notwithstanding, the cables also underscore the deep distrust that Washington feels for its client state in Pakistan.

This particularly emerges in relation to its nuclear program, which has been the focus of most of the media's coverage of the Pakistan cables.

One cable sent by the US embassy to Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, expresses concerns that "someone working in the government" at Pakistan's nuclear facilities "could gradually smuggle enough material out to make a weapon" to be used by terrorists.

Other cables expressed frustration over the Pakistani government's stalling on an agreement reached with the US to remove unused fuel from a research reactor. It cited concerns by the Pakistani Foreign Ministry that if the plan became public the media "would portray it as the United States taking Pakistan's nuclear weapons."

While no doubt Pakistan's ruling elite and military have built up a nuclear capacity for their own reactionary and predatory interests, it has also been pushed into an arms race largely by Washington's own policy in the region. In particular, the US has sought to strengthen Pakistan's regional rival, India, as a counterweight to China, giving New Delhi a pass for its defiance of the world nuclear regulatory regime and providing it with aid that allows it to turn its nuclear program to the buildup of weapons.

Similarly, a number of the cables express frustration over the Pakistani military's refusal to undertake an offensive against Afghan armed resistance groups taking refuge in Pakistan, particularly the Haqqani network and forces loyal to Gulbaddin Hekmatyar.

A cable written by Ambassador Patterson in February of last year praises Zardari for agreeing on the need to jointly combat the insurgency on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. She adds, however, "The military and the ISI have not yet made that leap; they still view India as their principal threat and Afghanistan as strategic depth in a possible conflict with India. They continue to provide overt or tacit support for proxy forces (including the Haqqani group, Commander Nazir, Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, and Lashkar-e-Taiba) as a foreign policy tool."

Under conditions in which Washington has poured billions of dollars worth of military aid into Pakistan, Patterson warned, "There is no chance that Pakistan will view enhanced assistance levels in any field as sufficient compensation for abandoning support for these groups."

The Taliban came to power in the 1990s with Pakistan's support, and Islamabad resists cutting off its ties to the movement out of fear that India will fill the vacuum, effectively encircling Pakistan.

The cables only underscore how much the US war, aimed at asserting hegemony over Central Asia's vast energy resources, has only succeeded in destabilizing the entire region and deepening potentially catastrophic tensions.

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