

Drone attacks trigger fresh crisis in US-Pakistani relations

Keith Jones
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The US carried out drone missile attacks near the village of Angoor Adda in South Waziristan, on Wednesday—killing seven people, wounding half a dozen more, and sending a clear message to Pakistan’s government and people that it intends to continue violating Pakistani sovereignty and summarily executing people at will.

The Angoor Adda attacks came just two days after Pakistan’s military demanded a scaling back of US drone attacks, a sharp reduction in the US military-intelligence presence in Pakistan, and more information about US intelligence operations in the country.

Lt. General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, the head of Pakistan’s principal intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence directorate or ISI, reportedly pressed for a sharp reduction in the US military-intelligence “footprint” in Pakistan in nearly four hours of meetings Monday with CIA head Leon Panetta and Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

At the conclusion of the meetings, unnamed US officials said Washington had agreed to “talk further” about the concerns of the Pakistan military-intelligence apparatus. But they baldly reasserted the US’s prerogative to mount Predator drone attacks inside Pakistan and derided Pakistani claims that the missile strikes—which have increased many-fold under the Obama administration—have been targeting “Taliban foot soldiers” and killing large numbers of civilians.

CIA head “Panetta has an obligation to protect the American people,” declared one US official, “and he isn’t going to call an end to any operations that support that objective.”

Then came Wednesday’s drone missile attack, the twentieth such attack in 2011. “If the message was that business will continue as usual,” an unnamed “senior” Pakistani intelligence official told the *New York Times*, “it was a crude way of sending it.”

Pakistan’s foreign ministry denounced the drone strikes and claimed to have “taken up the matter with the US at all levels.” Interior Minister Rehman Malik, flatly contradicting US claims, said that the majority of the victims of US drone strikes—more than 900 people were killed last year—were civilians, including large numbers of women and children.

Earlier, in its report on ISI head Pasha’s meetings with Panetta and Mullen, the *Times* claimed that there had been a “near collapse of cooperation” between the US and Pakistan in recent weeks.

According to the *Times*, Pakistan Army Chief Ashfaq Kayani, long a Pentagon and Obama administration favorite, had personally demanded that the US curtail its military-intelligence presence in Pakistan by withdrawing all contract CIA employees, reducing the number of Special Forces personnel by more than a third, and recalling those CIA agents whose purpose in Pakistan had not been disclosed to the ISI. This was said to number about 335 people in all.

The CIA has denied that its Pakistani counterpart asked it to withdraw any personnel. “There were no ultimatums, no demands to withdraw tens or hundreds of Americans from Pakistan,” declared one unidentified US official. For his part, official CIA spokesman George Little insisted that the relationship between the CIA and ISI “remains on a solid footing.”

These claims are contradicted by a spate of recent press reports based on US and Pakistan intelligence sources that claim that the CIA has had to scale back its “unilateral” activities in Pakistan due to pressure from the military, ISI and civilian government.

Pakistan provides pivotal logistical and military support to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, serving as the conduit for the majority of the gasoline and other supplies used by the occupation forces. It is waging its own bloody counter-insurgency war against pro-Taliban forces in the country’s Pashtun-majority northwest.

Relations between Washington and Islamabad have been tense, however, throughout the Afghan war—ever since the Bush administration dragooned Pakistan into supporting it in September 2001, by threatening to “bomb” Pakistan “back to the Stone Age” if Islamabad did not withdraw its support for the Taliban.

Over the past decade the US has placed unrelenting pressure on Pakistan to accept more of the burden of the Afghan war. Meanwhile, the Pakistani elite has seethed with apprehension and resentment at the US’s burgeoning economic and strategic ties with its arch-rival, India.

US-Pakistani relations were rocked earlier this year by the Raymond Davis affair. A contract CIA employee, Davis gunned down two Pakistani youths in a Lahore market. The Obama administration insisted that Davis could not be prosecuted because he enjoyed diplomatic immunity, then bullied Pakistani authorities into securing his release.

The Davis affair caused a nationwide outcry in Pakistan because it epitomized the neo-colonial relationship that exists between Washington and Islamabad. From the get-go, the Pakistan Peoples' Party-led national government was determined to hand Davis over to the US, but it was constrained by the depth of popular anger.

During the 47 days that Davis was under arrest in Pakistan, the CIA refrained from mounting any drone attacks. But on March 17, the day after Davis' release, the CIA attacked a meeting of tribal elders in North Waziristan that had been convened with the support of Pakistani authorities, killing 39 people.

The attitude of Pakistan's military and government to the drone strikes, under the previous regime of the US-backed dictator general Pervez Musharraf as under the current PPP-led government, has always been two-faced.

While publicly deploring them, they have assured the US behind the scenes of their support and in some cases even provided the intelligence on which the missile strikes were based. Such pressure as they have brought to bear on the US to curtail the number of strikes or limit their "collateral damage" has been through staged denunciations and closed-door meetings. Never has any section of the Pakistani political or military establishment forthrightly challenged Washington's arrogation of the right to violate Pakistan's national sovereignty at will, its use of summary executions, or its wanton disregard for civilian life.

The Pakistani military's recent push back against Washington has two motivations.

First, it and the entire Pakistani elite fear the growing popular opposition to Islamabad's decades-long mercenary relationship with Washington and its leading role in the Afghan war. At Washington's behest, the Pakistani military has for the past seven years waged war over much of the country's northwest. In its drive to subjugate the historically autonomous, neglected, and impoverished Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Pakistani state has used carpet-bombing, "disappeared" large numbers of suspected government opponents, and imposed colonial-style collective punishments. Military offensives in FATA and the adjacent Swat Valley have chased several million people from their homes, many of whom have never been able to return.

Now with the end of the Afghan winter, the US-NATO forces, under Obama's "surge" strategy, are expected to take the offensive, giving rise to renewed demands for Pakistan to destroy Taliban "safe-havens" in northern Pakistan. Only last week, the White House delivered a report to Congress in which it decried Islamabad's lack of progress in subjugating the Taliban and Taliban-allied militias in its Afghan borderlands. "Despite the unprecedented and sustained deployment of over 147,000 forces," complained the White House report, "there remains no clear path to defeating the insurgency in Pakistan."

The Pakistani elite and above all the military are committed to their decades-long alliance with US imperialism. But to maintain what little popular legitimacy they have and so as to avert the brunt of the Afghan counter-insurgency war being thrust on the crisis-ridden

Pakistani state, they feel it necessary from time to time to be seen as standing up to Washington.

This brings us to the second reason that the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus is seeking to "draw red lines" for the CIA, Pentagon, and White House. The Pakistani elite finds itself hemmed in and threatened by Washington's aggressive drive to assert its predatory interests in Asia. On the one hand, the US is aggressively courting India, welcoming India's increasing involvement in Afghanistan and destabilizing the precarious "balance of terror" in South Asia by negotiating for New Delhi to have access to international civilian nuclear trade, thereby allowing it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development. On the other hand, the US is seeking to frustrate Pakistan's attempt to overcome its acute energy crisis by securing access to Iranian natural gas.

In its April 9 article on the tensions between the ISI and CIA, the *New York Times* claimed that a Pakistani military-intelligence official deeply involved in the conflict with the CIA had told it that, "The Pakistani Army firmly believes that Washington's real aim in Pakistan is to strip the nation of its prized nuclear arsenal." Previously ISI sources had claimed that Raymond Davis was involved in spying on Pakistan's nuclear program and that the recent sudden increase in CIA officers and operatives in the country was in part directed at its nuclear program.

It should be recalled that in November 2009, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported that the US has developed a plan to use rapid response forces to seize Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in the event that it feared they were about to fall into the hands of Islamist elements, including through a possible army mutiny. The US government denied the report.

In seeking to secure a strategic beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia by subjugating Afghanistan and by partnering with India to counter a rising China, US imperialism is destabilizing Pakistan and the entire region.

US officials have been determined to play down the significance of the current rift with the ISI and Pakistani military, but it exemplifies the huge and explosive tensions that underlie the Washington-Islamabad strategic axis. Moreover, as the *Dawn*, Pakistan's most influential English-language daily, noted in an April 13 editorial that criticized the ambivalences and ambiguities built into the US-Pakistani relationship, "The danger with trying to 'manage' tensions, as both sides seem to be doing, is that those tensions could unintentionally spin out of control."



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