

After bin Laden killing, US intensifies pressure on Pakistan

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The US assassination of Osama bin Laden has been immediately followed by intense pressure on Pakistan's government and military and intelligence establishment to cooperate more fully with the Obama administration in the AfPak war and the consolidation of a puppet regime in Afghanistan.

US officials have all but accused Pakistan's military intelligence agency—the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—of sheltering bin Laden in the garrison town of Abbottabad. Obama's counterterrorism adviser John Brennan declared on Tuesday that there were many unanswered questions about what Pakistani authorities knew about the bin Laden compound. “We need to understand what sort of network that bin Laden might have had in place,” he said.

In the background, there is the threat that the US could curtail or cut off billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan. At this stage, the Obama administration has not adopted such a nakedly confrontational approach. However, Washington remains completely unapologetic for openly flouting Pakistani sovereignty and keeping Islamabad in the dark as the US military carried out a political murder on its soil.

Bin Laden's assassination clearly stunned Pakistani authorities. Both Islamabad and Washington claimed that there had been no Pakistani involvement and that the government had only been informed after the event. In a comment in the *Washington Post*, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari stressed his “satisfaction that the source of the greatest evil of the new millennium has been silenced.” He defended Pakistan's support for the US “war on terror” and dismissed claims that the country had been protecting terrorists.

While Zardari made no mention of the US violation of Pakistani sovereignty, a foreign ministry statement took a tougher line, expressing “deep concerns and reservations about the manner in which the government of the United States carried out this operation without prior information or authorisation from the government of Pakistan.” It warned: “This event of unauthorised unilateral action cannot be taken as a rule.”

The Pakistani military maintained a stony silence for days after bin Laden's assassination. For months, relations with the Pentagon and US military commanders in Afghanistan have been deteriorating over American drone strikes, CIA activities inside Pakistan, and Pakistani fears that Washington plans to deny it a significant role in any future political settlement in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military has strongly opposed the intrusion of US ground forces into areas bordering Afghanistan in the past. It is undoubtedly deeply embarrassed by the ability of American helicopters and special forces to breach Pakistani defences and carry out the murder of bin Laden

in what is an army garrison town.

Pakistan army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani finally issued a statement yesterday, warning: “Any similar action violating the sovereignty of Pakistan will warrant a review on the level of military/intelligence cooperation with the United States.” Describing the US operation as a “misadventure,” he told reporters that the military would respond swiftly to any similar raid.

Issued after a meeting of the Pakistani high command, Kayani's statement also announced a decision to reduce American military personnel in Pakistan “to the minimum essential.” No details were given as to what US troops would be asked to leave.

Earlier on Thursday, Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir told a news conference that “there are red lines in Pakistan's cooperation with the US and other members of the international community, which should be observed.” In comments directed at Pakistan's regional rival India, he warned against any attempt to mimic the US raid. “That sort of misadventure or miscalculation would result in a terrible catastrophe,” he said.

The Obama administration had insisted that Islamabad has questions to answer about its knowledge of bin Laden's whereabouts. But it is Washington's dubious account of events that raises the real questions about the murder, including the timing of the US raid. While the CIA claims to have only known about the bin Laden residence since August, a Pakistani government statement insisted that the ISI had been sharing information with the CIA about “the target compound” since 2009.

Even if Washington's claims are accepted as good coin, the question remains: why did the Obama administration take months to act and why did it act now? An important element in what was obviously a carefully calculated decision was the frustration of the White House and the Pentagon at Islamabad's failure to further escalate the counter-insurgency war in Pakistan's northwest and its hostility to US military activities inside Pakistan. The blatant violation of Pakistani sovereignty in killing bin Laden has the character of an ultimatum: fall into line or face more such attacks.

US-Pakistani relations deteriorated sharply after the killing of two youth in a Lahore market by CIA contractor Raymond Davis in January. The ruling Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) was willing from the outset to accede to US demands to hand Davis over, but confronted widespread public outrage over the incident. The Obama administration finally bullied Islamabad into releasing Davis in mid-March, but relations between the two countries rapidly worsened after Washington resumed drone attacks on Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering

Afghanistan.

In backing Obama's AfPak war, the PPP-led government has lurched from one crisis to another as it has sought to precariously balance between US demands and the hostility of broad sections of the Pakistani masses to Washington's neo-colonial operations. Anger and opposition are particularly intense in the FATA region that has not only been subjected to CIA drone attacks, but also to Pakistani military offensives, carried out at the behest of Washington, in which thousands of civilians have been killed and colonial-style collective punishments imposed.

Over the past month, the tensions between the US and Pakistan have been increasingly evident. ISI chief General Ahmad Shuja Pasha flew to Washington to meet with CIA head Leon Panetta on April 11. Due to run for three days, the meeting broke up after one day amid media reports of sharp differences and grievances on both sides.

Pakistan reportedly demanded that the CIA curtail its drone attacks and cease using the Shamsi airbase in Baluchistan to mount these operations. It also called for the withdrawal of CIA contractors like Davis from Pakistan as well as all undisclosed CIA personnel and for a reduction in the presence of US special forces. The CIA simply denied that such demands had been made.

On April 20, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen flew to Pakistan for discussions with his counterpart General Kayani in Rawalpindi. Prior to the meeting, Mullen, in a move calculated to anger the Pakistani military, publicly accused the ISI of maintaining its relationship with the Haqqani network of insurgents involved in fighting the US-led occupation in Afghanistan. Kayani rejected the comments as "negative propaganda" by the United States.

The Haqqani militia is based in North Waziristan—the target of many of the recent drone attacks. For months, the US has been demanding that the Pakistani military mount a new offensive to drive Islamist fighters out of the area, but with no result. Following a further US drone attack in North Waziristan on April 22 that killed 25 villagers, the Pakistani government announced a temporary suspension of US-NATO shipments to Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass citing "safety concerns" due to an "anti-drone" protest called by right-wing and Islamacist parties with longstanding ties to the military.

On April 25, just a week before the assassination of bin Laden, US commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus made an unusual trip to Pakistan and met with General Kayani at the Chaklala Airbase. Details of the discussions have not been made public, but the *Dawn* newspaper described the talks as "short and crisp."

At a gathering at General Headquarters Rawalpindi last Saturday, General Kayani hinted that relations with the US were at breaking point and that Pakistan might be forced to forego vital US economic aid. He bluntly told those present that the country's "honour and integrity" should not be sacrificed to achieve prosperity.

Pakistani resistance to US demands is driven by a number of factors, not least of which is growing popular anger. However, there are also broader strategic concerns in Pakistan as the US has ramped up its "surge" in Afghanistan and announced that it intends to hand over security to Afghan forces in 2014. Washington has been negotiating with Kabul for the maintenance of major American military bases in Afghanistan into the indefinite future.

The Pakistani government and military are deeply concerned that their vital interests in Afghanistan have been ignored by the US. Worse still, Washington is strengthening its strategic relationship with India and encouraging Pakistan's rival to play a major economic and political role in Afghanistan—a country that Islamabad regards as a crucial rear base in the event of another war with India.

Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* both carried reports of a high-level meeting in Kabul on April 16 that would certainly have rung alarm bells in the White House. By these accounts, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, General Kayani and ISI chief Pasha made a strong pitch to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his officials to look to Pakistan and its ally China for a long-term strategic partnership, rather than the US.

As reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, Gilani bluntly told Karzai that "the Americans had failed them both" and that he should "forget about allowing a long-term US military presence in his country". The newspaper commented: "Pakistan's bid to cut the US out of Afghanistan's future is the clearest sign to date that, as the nearly 10-year war's endgame begins, tensions between Washington and Islamabad threaten to scuttle America's prospects of ending the conflict on its own terms."

While many aspects of the April 16 meeting are the subject of rumour and speculation, it is clear that the talks went ahead without American officials being present or briefed. As the *New York Times* reported, "To some extent, the Americans have been coaxing the Afghan and Pakistani leadership to talk to each other, but not at the cost of keeping the United States out of the loop, or of concocting solutions that are against American interests, American officials said."

The US "war on terror" was never directed primarily against Al Qaeda and bin Laden. He was simply a convenient pretext for the US to justify its neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq which were aimed at establishing American predominance over its European and Asian rivals in the key energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Since coming to office, the Obama administration made countering China's growing influence, particularly in Asia, a strategic priority. Any hint that Islamabad was acting as an envoy for Beijing in Kabul behind Washington's back would have been greeted with deep displeasure in the White House.

To what extent such considerations played into Obama's decision to eliminate bin Laden is at this stage unclear. It should be noted, however, that US Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan Marc Grossman was conveniently in Islamabad from Monday for scheduled trilateral talks between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his bland public statements, Grossman described Pakistan's response to bin Laden's killing as "very good" and declared that all three states had now come together and were committed to "full cooperation aimed at bringing peace and stability to the region."

While the ramifications of the bin Laden assassination are still unfolding, one thing is certain: far from bringing "peace and stability" to the region, it has heightened political instability in Pakistan, further inflamed regional tensions and compounded the danger of wider conflict.



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