

Pakistan warns US “unilateralism” could have “serious consequences”

Keith Jones
10 May 2011

In a televised address before Pakistan’s parliament Monday, Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani denounced the illegal unilateral US military operation that resulted in the summary execution of Osama bin Laden, then warned that Pakistan reserves the right to “retaliate with full force” to any future violation of its national sovereignty.

“No one,” proclaimed Gilani, “should underestimate the resolve and capability of our nation and armed forces to defend our sacred homeland.”

To underline his assertion that “unilateralism runs the inherent risk of serious consequences,” Gilani revealed that Pakistan’s armed forces had scrambled F-16 fighter jets on learning of the US raid on Abbottabad early on the morning of May 2. But the action came too late to intercept the US forces.

Gilani rejected criticism of the Pakistani military and its intelligence wing, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), for having failed to apprehend Bin Laden. He lauded the ISI as a “national asset” and affirmed that Pakistan’s military-security forces have done more to interdict Al Qaeda than those of any other country in the world.

“Allegations of complicity or incompetence are absurd,” declared Pakistan’s prime minister. “We emphatically reject such accusations.”

In the face of widespread assertions from the US media and political leadership that elements of Pakistan’s military-intelligence apparatus must have been aware of Bin Laden’s presence in a military cantonment only 35 miles from the country’s capital, Gilani noted that the US itself had a record of failure and complicity in regard to Bin Laden.

The Al Qaeda leader, he recalled, had escaped in December 2001 when US military had him surrounded in Tora Bora in Afghanistan.

“Yes, there has been an intelligence failure,” conceded Gilani. But “It is not only ours but all of the intelligence agencies in the world. The al-Qaeda chief, along with other al-Qaeda operatives...managed to elude global intelligence agencies for a long time.”

Gilani also pointed to the US’s promotion of Islamicist elements, Bin Laden among them, as part of its drive to transform Afghanistan into a Cold War killing field and thereby undermine the Soviet Union.

“Collectively,” said Gilani, “we must acknowledge facts and see

our faces in the mirror of history. Pakistan alone cannot be held to account for flawed policies and blunders of others.

“We did not invite Osama bin Laden to Pakistan or even to Afghanistan.”

Gilani, who heads a shaky Pakistan Peoples’ Party-led coalition government, claimed that intelligence from the ISI had helped the US to find Bin Laden using its “superior technological assets.”

Although Gilani’s speech was a sharply worded riposte to Washington, he made clear that Pakistan’s elite remains committed to its decades-long military-strategic partnership with the US—a partnership that has been disastrous for the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan alike. “We have,” asserted Gilani, “a strategic partnership that we believe is in our mutual interest.”

For the past decade Pakistan has provided pivotal logistical support to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan. Three-quarters of the food and fuel that feed the US war machine in Afghanistan travel by land from Karachi, Pakistan’s southern port metropolis, to Afghanistan. Moreover, at the US’s behest, Pakistan has mounted a vicious counterinsurgency war against pro-Taliban militia in the country’s northwest Pashtun-speaking tribal belt that has forced hundreds of thousands of poor villagers from their homes.

Gilani’s speech was a response to diverse pressures. There is deep popular hostility to the US for its colonial-style treatment of the Pakistani people, including Washington’s support for a succession of military dictators in Islamabad, a mercenary relationship with Pakistan’s armed forces, the occupation of Afghanistan, and ongoing and ever-widening violations of Pakistani sovereignty. The US routinely mounts predator drone strikes inside Pakistan, summarily executing alleged Islamicist militants and with willful disregard for civilian life.

The May 2 raid on Abbottabad was acutely embarrassing for Pakistan’s armed forces, which justifies its massive budget and a veto over foreign and military policy with the claim that it is the country’s most powerful and best-organized institution. Without detection, US forces were able to carry out a 45-minute military operation and in a military cantonment that lies very close to both the country’s capital, Islamabad, and the site of its military headquarters, Rawalpindi.

Moreover, in the raid’s aftermath, India’s military was quick to boast that it has the means to stage a similar operation against Pakistan. “I would like to say only this,” Indian Army chief General V.K. Singh told reporters May 4, “if such a chance comes,

then all the three arms (of the military) are competent to do this.”

India’s current Congress Party-led government was quick to reject a call from the official opposition, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, to reconsider its recent decision to resume peace negotiations with Pakistan. But the comments of the Indian Army chief, and similar remarks from the head of the air force, were duly noted in Islamabad. The Pakistani Foreign Minister and military bluntly warned New Delhi that any violation of Pakistani sovereignty risks unleashing a war between the nuclear-armed rivals.

More than a week on, the success of the US operation continues to excite the Indian elite to the undoubted consternation of the Pakistani military and political establishment. The *Indian Express*, one of India’s leading English dailies, has carried a column advocating that New Delhi follow the example of the US and carry out assassinations in Pakistan against those it accuses of organizing terrorist attacks against India—only the column suggested that this be best done through “hits” organized by India’s spy agency rather than military commando raids.

While directed at Washington and New Delhi, Gilani’s speech was clearly also aimed in part at reassuring the Pakistani military of his government’s steadfast support.

Bowing to the power of the high command, Gilani has placed the military in charge of investigating its failure to detect the US raid and named to head up the inquiry an officer said to be close to General Kiyani, the Chief of Pakistan’s Armed Services.

The US was quick to reject Gilani’s speech. While claiming to “completely understand Pakistani concerns,” White House spokesman Jay Carney defended the violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty, declaring “we make no apologies.”

In the eight days since the Abbottabad raid, US President Obama and other top administration officials have not only defended the commando raid and reveled in having “taken out” Bin Laden. They have repeatedly declared their readiness to mount more such actions inside Pakistan.

At the same time, Washington has come forward with a series of escalating demands on Pakistan, demanding it account for Bin Laden’s presence in Abbottabad and provide US interrogators with access to the three wives of Bin Laden who witnessed the commando raid.

The truth is that both the US and Pakistani national security apparatuses have lied repeatedly about Bin Laden and Al Qaeda—about their own roles respectively and the ties of Bin Laden to their mutual ally, Saudi Arabia.

The US government has never given any serious accounting for the security-intelligence failure that allowed the September 11, 2001 attacks—attacks which were seized upon to justify the launching of two wars of aggression aimed at securing US strategic dominance in oil-rich Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as to justify a massive build up of the repressive powers of the US state.

And the story the US put out about how Bin Laden met his death quickly proved to be a fabrication.

Relations between Islamabad and Washington and between the ISI and the CIA are fraught with tension. The US is charging the ISI with having leaked the name of the CIA station chief in

Islamabad to a Pakistan daily. Late last year a previous CIA station chief returned to the US due to death threats after his name became public. The US also blamed his “outing” on the ISI.

According to a report published on the *New York Times* website yesterday, there is now “a near adversarial relationship” between the ISI and the CIA. The article claims “The relationship between the new station chief and the head of the ISI, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, has been described as particularly acrimonious...” They reportedly first butted heads over the US’s insistence that Pakistan must give diplomatic immunity to a CIA operative, Raymond Davis, who gunned down two youths, likely ISI agents, in a Lahore market in January.

The assassinated Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda—which even according to US officials has only a hundred or so operatives in Pakistan and Afghanistan—are peripheral to the real issues in dispute between Washington and Islamabad.

With Afghanistan now well into spring, US and NATO forces are set to launch their “surge”—a massive bloodletting aimed at forcing the Taliban or parts of it into accepting a role in a reconfigured US-sponsored regime in Kabul. Washington is determined to force Pakistan to dramatically escalate its own counterinsurgency war so as to deny the Taliban “safe havens” in Pakistan and so as to make the Pakistani military bear the brunt of the casualties and thereby reduce the risk of the “surge” galvanizing opposition to the war in the US and other NATO countries.

The furor over Bin Laden’s presence in Pakistan is being used by the Pentagon and the Obama administration to force Islamabad to be more compliant with US strategy for the AfPak War.

The Pakistani elite, meanwhile, perceives itself to be in strategic peril. The US has apparently refused to take Islamabad into its confidence regarding its plans for a “political settlement” in Afghanistan, a country it has long seen as necessary to give it “strategic depth” in confronting India. Moreover, Obama has pressed ahead with the Indo-US “global strategic partnership” launched by George W. Bush, encouraging India’s ambitions in Central Asia and the Middle East.

And while the US has effectively recognized India as a nuclear-weapons state, as exemplified by the exemption Washington negotiated for India allowing it access to civilian nuclear technology and fuel, Pakistan’s nuclear program is viewed with grave suspicion by Washington.

Indeed, last week’s US’s raid on Abbottabad has only exacerbated the fears of Pakistan’s elite about the plans Washington reportedly has to militarily intervene in Pakistan so as to neutralize its nuclear weapons program should Islamicists threaten to take power in Islamabad or the Pakistani state unravel.



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