

US-Pakistani relations worsen following accusations and threats from Washington

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The crisis in relations between the United States and Pakistan continues to escalate more than a week after chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) of supporting the Haqqani network. The Taliban-aligned militant group, based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, has carried out attacks against US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan. Despite intense pressure from Washington, the Pakistani army has refused to take action against the militant group, and warned that Pakistan would be forced to retaliate if American forces launch a unilateral military offensive in the country's northwest tribal areas.

While Pakistan continues to serve as the linchpin of the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, Washington's drive to advance its interests in the region is undermining the geopolitical agenda of the Pakistani elite. The US is determined to push as much of the fighting as possible onto Pakistan as it seeks to establish a strategic beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia by subjugating Afghanistan and further destabilizing the Pakistani state. US-Pakistani relations had barely recovered since US forces killed Osama bin Laden during a raid in Abbottabad last May.

The latest crisis began September 22, when Admiral Mullen publicly accused the ISI of actively supporting Haqqani network militants and "exporting" extremism to Afghanistan through proxies. "The Haqqani Network, for one, acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency," Mullen told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

The Haqqani network is considered one of the most dangerous factions of the Afghan Taliban. During the 1980s, the CIA funneled arms and cash to the Haqqanis to counter Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The network itself was founded by a former CIA asset turned Al Qaeda ally. Mullen claimed that the ISI assisted Haqqani militants in carrying out attacks against US forces earlier this month, including a truck bombing on a NATO base that wounded 77 Americans and a bold assault on the US Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul. According to Mullen, the Haqqani network also had ISI

backing for the attack on the InterContinental hotel in Kabul in June.

Admiral Mullen's blunt accusations followed several stern warnings from leading US officials in recent weeks over Pakistan's failure to take action against Haqqani militants. Days earlier, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta had told reporters that Washington would "put as much pressure as possible on the Pakistanis to exercise control from their side of the border." It is believed that Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani cancelled his trip to this year's UN General Assembly after President Barack Obama refused to meet with him in New York.

American officials have raised the possibility of unilateral US action if Pakistan fails to crack down on the Haqqani network in North Waziristan. "If they keep killing our troops that would not be something we would just sit idly by and watch," Mullen said of the insurgents.

At the same Senate hearing, Leon Panetta declared that the US had made clear to Pakistan that it would do whatever was necessary to protect American troops. "You know I haven't spelled that out for them, but I would be very surprised if they were surprised by what we did to fulfill that commitment," he said.

Last Sunday, US Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican—South Carolina), member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the US should consider military action against Pakistan if it continues to provide support attacks against US targets in Afghanistan. "The sovereign nation of Pakistan is engaging in hostile acts against the United States and our ally Afghanistan that must cease," said Graham during an interview with Fox News. "They're killing American soldiers. If they continue to embrace terrorism as a part of their national strategy, we're going to have to put all options on the table, including defending our troops," he added.

At a special meeting of top military commanders chaired by Pentagon favorite Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani

last weekend, the Pakistani military rejected the US's allegations and vowed to resist Washington's demands for an offensive in North Waziristan. "We have already conveyed to the US that Pakistan cannot go beyond what it has already done," an official told the *Express Tribune* on condition of anonymity.

While Pakistan's military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas acknowledged the military-intelligence apparatus's contact with the Haqqani network, he denied that Pakistan was supporting the militants. "Any intelligence agency would like to maintain contact with whatever opposition group, whatever terrorist organization ... for some positive outcome," Abbas told CNN.

According to the *Express Tribune*, during a trip to Washington earlier this week, ISI chief Lt. General Ahmed Shuja Pasha told his CIA counterpart chief General David Petraeus that Pakistan would be forced to retaliate if US forces attempted to launch a unilateral strike in the country's tribal areas.

At a closed-door meeting of Pakistan's Senate Standing Committee on Defence on Tuesday, a senior ISI official said the US was using Pakistan as a "scapegoat" for its own failure to suppress the insurgency in Afghanistan.

"We cannot be caught off guard this time," the official told lawmakers, in reference to the raid that led to the killing of bin Laden. "This time, we will give them a surprise if they [Americans] dare." Committee chair and former ISI chief Lt General (retired) Javed Ashraf Qazi confirmed that various politicians had voiced serious concern over Washington's increasingly belligerent threats, and insisted that Pakistan had the means to give a "befitting response" to any attempt by the US to invade the tribal areas.

The *Express Tribune* also reported Qazi's remarkable comment "that the US officials often lie for their own interests and criticised the US media for siding with its government in the propaganda against Pakistan."

In an interview with Al Jazeera earlier this week, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar rejected US allegations against the ISI, saying that it did not have links to the Haqqani network. She asserted that "this particular network, which [the US] continues to talk about, is a network which was the blue-eyed boy of the CIA itself for many years."

Washington is seeking to punish Pakistan for failing to strike at the Haqqani network. A US Senate committee recently voted to make \$1 billion in aid conditional on action against militant groups, including the Haqqani network. The bill must be

approved by the House and Senate. On September 21, the US informed Pakistani authorities that the draft legislation for the establishment of Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs) in the economically deprived Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas was unlikely to receive congressional approval this year.

The US is also punishing Islamabad by refusing to assist in Pakistan's effort to obtain a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Pakistani government has been told that the US "will not go out of their way to bail out the country" if it fails to qualify for a loan, a source told the *Dawn*.

Relations between Washington and Islamabad have been tense ever since the Bush administration bullied Pakistan into supporting its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, threatening to bomb the country unless it withdrew its support for the Taliban. The US has placed tremendous pressure on Pakistan over the years to accept more of the burden of the neo-colonial war. At Washington's behest, Pakistan has waged a brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the northwest tribal areas, and has used kidnappings, torture and extrajudicial killings to suppress Taliban-aligned militants and their sympathizers. Pakistan's participation in the war has only deepened since the coming to power of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government in 2008.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani ruling elite is increasingly resentful of Washington's growing economic and strategic ties with India. By aggressively courting India as a major strategic ally in the region, the US has altered the balance of power still more in India's favor. The Pakistani bourgeoisie is determined to secure a dominant position in Afghanistan so as to offset Indian power, but the US has encouraged Pakistan to serve as a key ally of the Karzai regime and has blocked efforts by the Pakistani elite to play a role in reconstituting the Afghan government through its links with the Taliban. While the US has backed Islamist forces in the past to advance its predatory interests in the region, including the Haqqani network, it now views these elements as a major threat to its interests.

The political and diplomatic brinkmanship on both sides notwithstanding, there is a danger that events could quickly spiral out of control.



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