

Pakistani prime minister holds talks in Washington

Sampath Perera
26 October 2013

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif concluded a four-day visit to Washington on Wednesday, holding bilateral discussions with President Barack Obama. He agreed to deepen Pakistan's collaboration with the United States, particularly on Washington's bid to negotiate a deal in Kabul for a long-term US occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan.

Washington faces a deepening crisis in Afghanistan ahead of elections and a partial troop drawdown, both scheduled for next year. It regards Pakistan as pivotal to the success of its plans to crush resistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the US occupation, and to maintain a pliant puppet regime in Kabul.

On the day of the Sharif-Obama talks, an editorial in the London-based *Financial Times* stressed that it would be a "mistake" to consider Sharif's visit as "routine." It demanded that Obama "make it clear that the US will not tolerate any Pakistani attempt to sabotage next year's presidential election in Afghanistan ... He should also reject Mr Sharif's plea for the US to offer itself as a mediator in the festering Kashmir dispute with India."

US priorities for Sharif's visit were visible from his schedule, which was dominated by meetings with US defence officials. Secretary of State John Kerry greeted him alongside Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, National Security Advisor Susan Rice and CIA Director John Brennan at the State Department on his arrival Sunday. He then met Deputy Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey. Before meeting Obama, he also met Vice President Joe Biden.

The 90-minute, one-on-one meeting between Obama and Sharif was followed by a press briefing and the issuing of a joint statement. Few details emerged, however, about the content of the discussions.

The central feature of Sharif's visit was the attempt by both US and Pakistani officials to downplay the criminal US drone war in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington has launched some 376 drone strikes in Pakistan, killing at least 2,500 people, including 926 who were confirmed to be civilians. However, the word "drone" did not appear in the final joint statement issued by Sharif and Obama.

Two recent reports—"*Will I be Next?*" *US Drone Strikes in Pakistan* by Amnesty International, and "*Between a Drone and Al Qaeda*": *The Civilian Cost of US Targeted Killings in Yemen* by Human Rights Watch—detailed the carnage unleashed by drones on civilians (see: "Reports document US slaughter of civilians in drone strikes"). In a report last Friday, Ben Emmerson, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, concluded that drone attacks violate international law.

White House officials summarily dismissed the reports, however, saying that they would continue their campaign of drone murder. While acknowledging that US drone strikes "have resulted in civilian casualties," White House Press Secretary Jay Carney declared Tuesday that drones "are precise, they are lawful and they are effective."

Washington's endorsement of the drone killing of innocent civilians as the result of "precise" strikes only underscores that the United States is deliberately killing civilians, apparently in an effort to terrorize the Pakistani people into submission.

The meeting also highlighted the complicity of the Pakistani army and government in the US drone strikes in Pakistan. Mass anger over drone killings and the broader AfPak war played a major role in the humiliating defeat of the former ruling Pakistan People's Party, which lost power in elections in May.

Sharif made a pro-forma declaration that he had “brought up the issues of drones” in his meetings with US officials, “emphasizing the need for an end to such strikes.” As the *New York Times* reported, however, Sharif spoke these words “in a tone so soft that reporters in the room strained to hear him.” The *Dawn*, a leading English-language daily in Pakistan, described Sharif’s remarks as an “obligatory statement.”

The day after Sharif’s visit, however, the *Washington Post* published an article detailing extensive briefings and agreements between the CIA and Pakistani officials on US drone strikes inside Pakistan, from late 2007 to 2011. The documents reportedly show that the CIA worked with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to select targets for drone killings, and also informed Pakistani authorities about so-called “signature” strikes.

In these strikes, people are killed only because their behaviour somehow resembles that of a target, so that US officials murder them based on purely circumstantial evidence.

Clearly the protestations from various governments in Islamabad against CIA killings in Pakistan are made in bad faith, aimed only to prevent popular opposition to the AfPak war from turning against the Pakistani military and its alliance with the CIA.

The *Post* concluded, “Despite repeatedly denouncing the CIA’s drone campaign, top officials in Pakistan’s government have for years secretly endorsed the program and routinely received classified briefings on strikes and casualty counts ... Pakistan’s tacit approval of the drone program has been one of the more poorly kept national security secrets in Washington and Islamabad.”

Apart from the usual formalities, the joint statement issued by Obama and Sharif consisted mainly of US demands on Islamabad. On Afghanistan, it “reaffirmed that a peaceful, stable, independent, and united Afghanistan is in the interest of the region,” as well as the United States’ and Pakistan’s commitment to “the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process.”

The statement also stressed “the important role of countries in the region in supporting Afghanistan’s progress toward stability and prosperity.” Washington thus signalled its desire for India to play an influential role in Afghanistan, where it already works with Kabul

on economic and defence matters, raising concern in Pakistan.

The deep divide in Kabul was revealed when US Special Forces snatched Latifullah Mehsud, a leader of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), from an Afghan government convoy. The Afghan government was reportedly trying to recruit him to launch peace talks.

The joint statement was also silent on the Sharif government’s own attempt to strike a deal with the TTP, speaking instead of the “fight against terrorism and extremism.”

In a further rebuff to Pakistani demands, the joint statement made no mention of a US attempt to resolve the protracted India-Pakistan standoff over the province of Kashmir. Before the meeting, Sharif had said he would ask Washington to intervene in the Kashmir dispute, which the United States has repeatedly refused to do, and which India opposes. Instead, Obama called on Sharif and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to begin resolving “all outstanding territorial and other disputes.”

Tensions between the United States and Pakistan have remained high in recent months, including over the disputed Kashmir border region, but Islamabad is heavily dependent on the US economically. Sharif’s government barely avoided defaulting on its debts, obtaining a bailout from the US-led International Monetary Fund.

Pakistan’s priority is to avert a full-blown economic crisis. The US agreed to release \$US322 million in Coalition Support Funds (CSF) on Friday and announced plans to release about \$1.6 billion to Pakistan in the coming year. Kerry said the relationship “could not be more important,” after discussions with Sharif.

Pakistan is under enormous pressure from the IMF to carry out drastic social cuts, from privatization to massive subsidy cuts to tax increases, which will further devastate the living standards of Pakistani workers and the toiling masses.



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