

Pakistani PM warns against anti-US drone protests

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Bowing to intense pressure from Washington, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif warned on Friday that protests against US drone attacks would “isolate the country” internationally. His speech to a foreign ministry gathering in Islamabad came just two days after a CIA drone strike on Christmas Day killed four people in Pakistan’s North Waziristan that borders Afghanistan.

While Sharif did not name any party, the speech was directed at the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan, which has carried out protests since late November demanding an end to drone attacks. PTI supporters have already closed one of the two main routes used by NATO to supply its forces in Afghanistan. After the December 25 attack, protestors briefly blocked the other NATO supply route via Balochistan province. Khan’s posturing is aimed at exploiting the deep anger among Pakistanis, particularly along the border area, over the illegal US attacks.

In his speech, Sharif made clear that his government intends to rein in opposition to the drone strikes, in order to ensure ongoing US support. “Our effort is to transform the existing friendly ties into mutually beneficial partnerships. We live in a globalised world where no-one can afford isolation at any level,” he said.

Pakistan’s foreign ministry has quickly fallen into line. After the December 25 drone attack, it issued a pro-forma statement criticising the US action as a “violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”, adding that “these drone strikes must end.”

On Friday, however, foreign ministry spokesperson Tasneem Aslam echoed Sharif’s more moderate line. “Our foreign policy is not just on drones or our relations with one country,” she declared. She explained that foreign relations could not be seen

“through the narrow prism of any single issue.”

Obama administration has insisted that the US will continue its criminal drone attacks as it wishes. While there was only one strike in December, three took place in November in North Waziristan. The immediate trigger for the PTI protests on November 23 was an attack on a seminary in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Scores of drone strikes inside Pakistan have already killed thousands of civilians, including women and children, and traumatised the entire population in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan.

The US has made clear that it will not tolerate any obstruction to its drone war. In early December, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel met with Prime Minister Sharif and warned him against disrupting supplies to US forces. Sharif acquiesced but did not review what measures he would take to end the protests.

On December 21, the US Congress passed legislation linking the release of Coalition Support Fund (CSF) money to keeping the supply routes across Pakistan functioning. In 2013 the US allocated \$US1.65 billion to Pakistan in return for its support for the American-led occupation of Afghanistan. The amount has been reduced to \$1.5 billion for 2014. The legislation requires the US defence secretary certify that Pakistan has been taking action against Al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups and disrupting cross-border attacks on NATO and Afghan forces.

The previous Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)-led government lost the general election in May due to the mass opposition generated by its support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and tacit backing for CIA drone strikes, as well as towards its pro-business economic policies. The PPP retained support only in the party’s traditional bases in the rural areas of Sindh

Province.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Khan's PTI postured during the election as opponents of the US drone attacks. The PTI made significant gains by adopting a staunch anti-war and anti-drone pose, surging to become the third largest party in parliament—the second largest by vote count. It won control of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government. However, the PTI, like the PML-N, has repeatedly indicated its willingness to collaborate with the US.

Once in office, Sharif swiftly turned to Washington and also sought its backing for a desperately needed bailout from the International Monetary Fund for Pakistan's crisis-ridden economy. Soon after Sharif visited the White House in October, his government downplayed figures on drone casualties. Its vague calls for the regulation of drone attacks by the UN are a crude attempt to pacify mass opposition at home.

At the same time, the government has given the go-ahead for a military operation in North Waziristan, beginning on December 19 in Mir Ali, the area's second largest city. The purported target of the "intelligence-based military sting operation" was "foreign terrorists [fighting for Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan] holed up in a nearby compound," according to the military's statement.

The military used heavy artillery and helicopter gunships in attacks that lasted several days. While the military declared that the "security forces exercised utmost restraint", reports leaked from the scene described troops shooting at ordinary people and shelling houses and shops causing civilian casualties. A tribal elder told Reuters that at least 70 people were killed.

The operation could have been in retaliation for a suicide attack on a military checkpoint that killed five troops and wounded dozens. However, foreign and local media have suggested that the military operation was in preparation for a major offensive in the tribal region. The US has persistently demanded that the Pakistani military seize control of North Waziristan and wipe out the Haqqani Network, an Islamist militia fighting occupation forces across the border in Afghanistan.

Pakistan is being drawn further into the geo-political quagmire produced by a decade of the US-led war in

Afghanistan which is aimed at ensuring American hegemony in the energy rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. The Sharif government, like its predecessors, functions as an indentured servant to US imperialism, carrying out instructions in order to ensure the political and economic support needed to survive.



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