

ISAS Brief

No. 298 – 6 November 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Dilemma of Drones: Peace Prospects in Pieces

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

The recent US Drone attack that made bull's eye and killed the target, the Taliban chief in Pakistan, Hakimullah Mehsud, also caused a huge collateral damage. An unintended consequence was a return to the doldrums of the tricky and unstable US-Pakistan relations, which was slowly but surely being restored by painstaking efforts on the parts of both Washington and Islamabad. The newly-elected Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had travelled to the United States, and following his interaction with the American leadership, a thaw in the relations between the two sides was discernible. Sharif had just obtained the assurances of a US\$ 6.6 billion bail-out from the International Monetary Fund for his country's stalled economy. The US also committed itself to disburse US\$ 300 million to Pakistani hands, as a tranche of the US\$ 1.6 billion in military assistance promised but held back by the Congress.

Indeed the US and Pakistan were endeavouring to put behind them the soured relations that seemed to forever haunt the ties between these two formal allies, and make a fresh start, just on the eve of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 when bilateral cooperation would be critical.

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

It is not that Pakistani authorities are shedding any tears for the Taliban leader. He is no Florence Nightingale in their eyes. He has been responsible for many Pakistani deaths, some counts total 1,200 this year alone, and the Pakistanis had made no objection to the bounty of US\$ 5 million that the Americans had put on his head.

Row over Timing of Attack

But the problem was with the timing of the attack in North Waziristan. It came just when the Pakistani government was about to initiate a dialogue with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, as this loose assortment of extremist elements is called. The reaction from the Taliban was swift. It immediately called off the talks and vowed revenge. Their targets would not be confined to Americans, and the Pakistanis are well aware of this fact.

Unsurprisingly, the Pakistan Foreign Office called in the US Ambassador, Richard Olson, to register protest. Information Minister Pervez Rashid said that the US had “tried to attack the peace talks with this drone”, but he added, though it was uncertain how this would be done, “we would not let them fail”. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan was more strident: “[It] is not just the killing of one person, it is the death of all peace efforts”, he bemoaned, accusing the US of “scuttling the talks” and gravely warning that “every aspect of US-Pakistan relations would be reviewed”. Nawaz Sharif himself, just having urged restraint on US President Barack Obama with regard to drones during their talks at the White House, described such attacks as “counterproductive to [Pakistan’s] peace efforts”. The US response, to Pakistanis, must have seemed irritatingly routine.

“Negotiations with the TTP is an internal matter for Pakistan”, a US official said, adding: “More broadly, the US and Pakistan continue to have a vital, shared strategic interest in ending extremist violence so as to build a more prosperous, stable and peaceful region. We have an on-going dialogue with Pakistan regarding all aspects of the relationship and our shared interests, including security and counterterrorism cooperation, and we work together to address each other’s concerns”.

Impact on Pak-US Ties

It is this rosy picture of bilateral ties that stands threatened. Public opinion is important for Nawaz Sharif, and in Pakistan it is now swinging against America. The US and Pakistan would need close cooperation as the US troop draw-down from Afghanistan ensues, but this is now rendered difficult. Much will depend on the ultimate position of Imran Khan, whose Party, the Tehreek-e-Insaf, is in alliance with Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League and forms government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the province where the incident occurred and which borders Afghanistan. Imran Khan had always opposed drone strikes, and now has demanded that US access to Afghanistan through Pakistan be blocked (as was done when 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed in a fray with Americans two years ago). Should Imran Khan persist with

this position, he could create major problems for the United States as also Nawaz Sharif. For now he has said: “We will not let [NATO] supplies pass even if we have to sacrifice our government”. It may seem somewhat extreme, but Imran has been known to carry out his threats.

The head of the Taliban is like that of the hydra in the Greek legends: when one is cut off another quickly takes its place. Hakimullah himself was quickly chosen when his predecessor Baitullah Mehsud was killed, also by a drone attack, some years ago. This time round the Taliban seem to have temporarily agreed on Asmatullah Shaheen, the head of the executive council, as the interim leader. There may be a bit of a rift with regard to the choice of the permanent leader. Some Taliban groups support Mullah Fazlullah of Swat, the hard-liner whose followers shot the teenage girl Malala Yusufzai, and yet some others back Khan Said Sajna, seen as more of a moderate and more-pro-talks. But for all one knows, the difference may be like as between tweedledum and tweedledee.

Right now, both Islamabad and Washington are in bit of a quandary as to what to do. Their best bet is perhaps to hope and pray that this too shall pass! The government might be accused of doing a bit of ‘public posturing’, but the incident could have, in the eye of the public, turned a villain into a victim, and once again unleashed another spate of anti-Americanism in the Pakistani polity. That would bode ill for both sides.

.....