

ISAS Brief

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The Drone Drama and its Impact on Pak-US Relations

The US drone attack that killed the Taliban leader in Balochistan led to an immediate souring of US-Pakistan relations. But if any broken fences are not mended soon, the Taliban, who already occupy one-third of Afghanistan and were able to swiftly choose their next Emir keeping their unity intact, would have the most to gain.

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America's dramatic drone attack on 22 May 2016, carried out in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, succeeded in achieving its objective. The head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, by which the Taliban rather grandiosely describe their leader, Mullah Akhter Mansoor, was eliminated. For someone with so high a title, he seemed to have been almost absurdly vulnerable, travelling along a lonely road in a vehicle that was a perfect target. United States President Barack Obama himself announced the incident while on a foreign trip, and the US authorities thereafter took the position that Mansoor had been a stumbling block to the peace process.

The cheering in the American quarters that was expected to have resulted from the successful operation was severely muted. This was mainly for two reasons. One was the unhappy reactions in public of a key ally, Pakistan (the nature of the alliance, and often the behaviour of the allies

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towards each other, can be baffling to the uninitiated observer!). The other was the swift election by the Taliban *Shura* of Mansoor's successor giving credence to a simile in an earlier ISAS piece by the author comparing the Taliban, and other terrorist groups of the same ilk, with the *Lernean Hydra* of the Greek legend where the chopped head of a multi-headed sea monster regenerates instantaneously.

In a move that does not conform to the niceties of normal diplomatic protocol, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, David Hale, was put on the carpet (when a red one should have been rolled out for him as would have been wont on the occasion of a visit by a foreign envoy to the military headquarters of the host State!) by none other than the Pakistani Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif. Such tasks are better left to foreign ministries, one would have thought, but the generals may have concluded that in some situations, diplomacy is too important to be left to the diplomats.

Raheel Sharif had an important and strong message to deliver. It was also put out publicly by the Inter Services Public Relations department so that the Pakistani nation is aware of what had transpired. The contents were three-fold: One, the drone-attack was a violation of Pakistani sovereignty; two, it was detrimental to Pakistan-US ties, and three, it damaged peace efforts (ironically, one of the reasons for the killing of Mansoor was that he obstructed peace). Any communications on all three points would come under the foreign ministry domain, so the Army Chief's concerns were serious enough to overlook this aspect. Ambassador Hale's response was not made public, of course, but given his background of long service in the Middle East, including Lebanon, he is no stranger to difficult situations, and his response would have been doubtless interesting.

Protest against the US action came from the highest political levels, as well. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also described it as a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. At a time when he stands embattled over the accusations (if not directly levelled at him, but at least against his family) of dodging taxes by moving funds to Panama (the so-called Panama Papers Leak), the stance could also be directed at appealing to the patriotic urges of his nation, which actually can be rallied, usually against unpopular foreign entities.

The Interior Minister of Pakistan Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan also had strong words to say. To him the drone attack put Pakistan in a difficult situation, which is true. In simple, and clearly understandable logic, he argued that the killing of Mansoor would not advance the peace talks as "you cannot expect them (the Taliban) to come to talks after killing their leader". More

significantly, he challenged the US posture that Mansoor had opposed talks – an important justification for the strike – stating that if that were the case, the “Murree talks” (between the Taliban and the Afghan Government held last year in the hill-station by that name in Pakistan) would not have been possible. He observed that it was not right to attack the enemies of one’s country in foreign sovereign territories, stating that Pakistan also had such elements living in the West, implying (but not saying as much) that Pakistan had no intention to carry out similar attacks in those countries!

An additional problem was that the drone strike took place outside the tribal areas, in Balochistan proper, which Pakistan had indicated as a ‘no-no zone’ to the Americans. This is the province where the Chinese were also about to sink in a lot of resources under their US\$ 46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor schemes. It would be hugely discouraging for them if they were to perceive that this was a region where the Americans could conduct military operations with impunity, without Pakistan’s clearance. *The New York Times* at one stage had reported that US officials were saying that Islamabad was informed that Mansoor was being targeted, and that Pakistan had provided “some limited help” in tracking him down. Islamabad, of course, can take the position that the offer of “limited help” does not condone a drone attack in Balochistan. If it came to pass that Pakistan had “colluded” in the killing of Mansoor, a vengeful Taliban could wreak havoc in that country.

In the meantime the Taliban displayed immense maturity in their smooth and quick choice of Mansoor’s successor, who is Haibatullah Akhundzada, a low-profile figure whose domain is religious issues rather than war-fighting. The latter would likely be left to the two other more fiery aspirants, Siraj Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoob. The Kabul Government’s Chief Executive offered what was a “diplomatic recognition” of sorts by “inviting” the new leader Haibatullah “to peace”. Almost a simultaneous response which foreshadowed the future was a Taliban suicide attack near Kabul, killing ten court employees to avenge the execution of some Taliban insurgents. The Taliban control nearly a third of Afghanistan, and are in no mood to rein in their horses.

But if the fences between Pakistan and the US need mending, it is better to do so as quickly as possible. Of course this (the dip in relations) too shall pass, as other such lows have, but the timing is of some essence, if President Obama is to initiate at least a journey along the path to peace, before he leaves office, and who knows what happens later in Washington!

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