

# Pakistan Demands Veto on Drone Strikes

The U.S. commando raid that killed Osama bin Laden on May 2 aroused anger in Pakistan over unilateral American military actions. But bilateral tensions have been growing for years over U.S. drone strikes against Pakistani targets and have now reached a crisis stage, reports Gareth Porter for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

Pakistani civilian and military leaders are insisting on an effective veto over which targets U.S. drone strikes hit, according to well-informed Pakistani military sources.

The sources, who met with IPS on condition that they not be identified, said that such veto power over the conduct of the drone war is a central element in a new Pakistani demand for a formal government-to-government agreement on the terms under which the United States and Pakistan will cooperate against insurgents in Pakistan.

The basic government-to-government agreement now being demanded would be followed, the sources said, by more detailed agreements between U.S. and Pakistani military leaders and intelligence agencies.

The new Pakistani demand for equal say over drone strikes marks the culmination of a long evolution in the Pakistani military's attitude toward the drone war.

Initially supportive of strikes that were targeting Al-Qaeda leaders, senior Pakistani military leaders soon came to realize that the drone war carried serious risks for Pakistan's war against the Pakistani Taliban.

A key turning point in the attitude of the military was the unilateral U.S. decision to focus the drone war on those Pakistani insurgents who had already decided to make peace with the Pakistani government and who opposed the war being waged by Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban against the Pakistani military.

The Central Intelligence Agency was allowed to run the drone war almost completely unilaterally for years, according to former Pakistani military leaders and diplomats, and the Pakistani military has only mustered the political will to challenge the U.S. power to carry out drone strikes unilaterally in recent months.

Gen. Pervez Musharraf allowed the drone strikes from 2004 to 2007 in order to ensure political support from the George W. Bush administration, something

Musharraf had been denied during the Bill Clinton administration, according to Shamshad Ahmad, who was Pakistan's foreign secretary and then ambassador to the United Nations from 1997 to 2002.

"Those were the days when we felt that we had to work with the Americans on Al-Qaeda," recalled Gen. Asad Durrani, a former director general of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence agency (ISI), in an interview with IPS.

The choice of targets "usually was done by the U.S. unilaterally," said Durrani. Two Pakistani generals confirmed that point in a separate interview with IPS.

The Musharraf regime even went so far as to provide cover for the drone strikes, repeatedly asserting after strikes that the explosions had been caused by the victims themselves making home-made bombs.

But that effort at transparent deception by the U.S. and Musharraf quickly fell apart when drone strikes were based on faulty intelligence and killed large numbers of civilians rather than Al-Qaeda leaders.

The worst such strike was an Oct. 30, 2006, drone attack on a madrassa in Chenagai village in Bajaur agency, which killed 82 people. Musharraf, who was primarily concerned with avoiding the charge of complicity in U.S. attacks on Pakistani targets, ordered the Pakistani military to take complete responsibility for the incident.

The spokesman for the Pakistani military claimed "confirmed intelligence reports that 70 to 80 militants were hiding in a madrassa used as a terrorist training facility" and said the Pakistani military had fired missiles at the madrassa.

But eyewitnesses in the village identified U.S. drones as the source of the attack and said all the victims were simply local students of the madrassa. Local people compiled a complete list of the names and ages of all 80 victims, showing that 25 of the dead had been aged seven to 15, which was published in the Lahore daily The News International.

Senior military officers believed the CIA had other reasons for launching the strike in Bajaur. The day before the drone attack, tribal elders in Bajaur had held a public meeting to pledge their willingness to abide by a peace accord with the government, and the government had released nine tribesmen, including some militants.

Former ISI chief Durrani recalled that the strike "effectively sabotaged the chances for an agreement" in Bejaur. That was "a very clear message" from the CIA not to enter into any more such peace agreements, Durrani told IPS.

The Bejaur madrassa strike was a turning point for many officers. "So many of us went in and said this is stupid," Durrani recalled.

When Musharraf was pressured to step down as Army chief of staff, and was replaced by Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani in November 2007, the unilateral character of the CIA's drone war "pretty much continued," according to Gen. Jehanger Karamat, who was ambassador to the United States from 2004 to 2006 after having retired as Army chief of staff in 1998.

The CIA's drone war became more contentious in 2008, as the Bush administration concentrated the strikes on those who had made peace with the Pakistani government. Two-thirds of the drone strikes that year were on targets associated with Jalaluddin Haqqani and Mullah Nazeer, both of whom were involved in supporting Taliban forces in Afghanistan, but who opposed attacks on the Pakistani government.

Targeting the Haqqani network and his allies posed serious risks for Pakistan. When the Pakistani Army was fighting in South Waziristan, it had its logistic base in an area that was controlled by the Haqqani group, and it had been able to count on the security of that base.

Meanwhile, ISI had given the CIA accurate information on anti-Pakistan Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud's location on four occasions, but the U.S. had failed to target him, according to a May 2009 column by retired Pakistani Gen. Shaukat Qadir.

In 2009, more of the drone strikes – almost 40 percent of the total – focused on the Taliban under Mehsud, and Mehsud himself was killed, which tended to mollify the Pakistani military.

But that effect did not last long. In 2010, only three strikes were aimed at Mehsud's anti-Pakistan Taliban organization, while well over half the strikes were against Hafiz Gul Bahadur, an ally of Haqqani who had signed an agreement with the Pakistani government in September 2006 that he would not shelter any anti-Pakistani militants.

The Barack Obama administration had made a deliberate decision around mid-2010 that it didn't care if targeting the Haqqani network and other pro-Pakistani Taliban groups upset the Pakistanis, as the Wall Street Journal reported Oct. 23, 2010.

But two events caused Pakistani army chief Kayani to demand a fundamental change in U.S. policy toward the drone war.

The first was the arrest of CIA operative Raymond Davis on the charge of killing

two Pakistanis in cold blood in January, which was followed by intense U.S. pressure for his release.

The second was a drone strike on March 17, just one day after Davis was released, which was initially reported to have been an attack on a gathering of Haqqani network officials.

It turned out that the drone attack had killed dozens of tribal and sub-tribal elders who had gathered from all over North Waziristan to discuss an economic issue.

A former U.S. official admitted that the strike was carried out because the CIA was “angry” over the fact that Davis had been kept in prison for seven weeks. “It was retaliation for Davis,” the official said, according to an Aug. 2 Associated Press story.

That strike helped galvanize the Pakistani military leadership. ISI chief Shuja Pasha took it as a slap in the face, because he had personally intervened to get Davis out of jail. Kayani shocked the Americans by issuing the first denunciation of drone strikes by an Army chief.

When Pasha went to Washington in April, he took with him the first official Pakistani demand for an equal say in drone strike decisions.

**Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in 2006.**

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