

Don't-ask-don't-tell Policy: Pakistan and U.S. Have Tacit Deal On Airstrikes

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Global Research, November 17, 2008

Washington Post 16 November 2008

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The United States and Pakistan reached tacit agreement in September on a don't-ask-don't-tell policy that allows unmanned Predator aircraft to attack suspected terrorist targets in rugged western Pakistan, according to senior officials in both countries. In recent months, the U.S. drones have fired missiles at Pakistani soil at an average rate of once every four or five days.

The officials described the deal as one in which the U.S. government refuses to publicly acknowledge the attacks while Pakistan's government continues to complain noisily about the politically sensitive strikes.

The arrangement coincided with a suspension of ground assaults into Pakistan by helicopter-borne U.S. commandos. Pakistani President [Asif Ali Zardari](#) said in an interview last week that he was aware of no ground attacks since one on Sept. 3 that his government vigorously protested.

Officials described the attacks, using new technology and improved intelligence, as a significant improvement in the fight against Pakistan-based [al-Qaeda](#) and [Taliban](#) forces. Officials confirmed the deaths of at least three senior al-Qaeda figures in strikes last month.

Zardari said that he receives "no prior notice" of the airstrikes and that he disapproves of them. But he said he gives the Americans "the benefit of the doubt" that their intention is to target the Afghan side of the ill-defined, mountainous border of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), even if that is not where the missiles land.

Civilian deaths remain a problem, Zardari said. "If the damage is women and children, then the sensitivity of its effect increases," he said. The U.S. "point of view," he said, is that the attacks are "good for everybody. Our point of view is that it is not good for our position of winning the hearts and minds of people."

A senior Pakistani official said that although the attacks contribute to widespread public anger in Pakistan, anti-Americanism there is closely associated with [President Bush](#). Citing a potentially more favorable popular view of President-elect [Barack Obama](#), he said that "maybe with a new administration, public opinion will be more pro-American and we can start acknowledging" more cooperation.

The official, one of several who discussed the sensitive military and intelligence relationship only on the condition of anonymity, said the U.S.-Pakistani understanding over the airstrikes is "the smart middle way for the moment." Contrasting Zardari with his predecessor, retired Gen. [Pervez Musharraf](#), the official said Musharraf "gave lip service but not effective

support” to the Americans. “This government is delivering but not taking the credit.”

From December to August, when Musharraf stepped down, there were six U.S. Predator attacks in Pakistan. Since then, there have been at least 19. The most recent occurred early Friday, when local officials and witnesses said at least 11 people, including six foreign fighters, were killed. The attack, in North Waziristan, one of the seven FATA regions, demolished a compound owned by Amir Gul, a Taliban commander said to have ties to al-Qaeda.

Pakistan’s self-praise is not entirely echoed by U.S. officials, who remain suspicious of ties between Pakistan’s intelligence service and FATA-based extremists. But the Bush administration has muted its criticism of Pakistan. In a speech to the Atlantic Council last week, [CIA Director Michael V. Hayden](#) effusively praised Pakistan’s recent military operations, including “tough fighting against hardened militants” in the northern FATA region of Bajaur.

“Throughout the FATA,” Hayden said, “al-Qaeda and its allies are feeling less secure today than they did two, three or six months ago. It has become difficult for them to ignore significant losses in their ranks.” Hayden acknowledged, however, that al-Qaeda remains a “determined, adaptive enemy,” operating from a “safe haven” in the tribal areas.

Along with the stepped-up Predator attacks, Bush administration strategy includes showering Pakistan’s new leaders with close, personal attention. Zardari met with Bush during the [U.N. General Assembly](#) in September, and senior military and intelligence officials have exchanged near-constant visits over the past few months.

Pakistan’s new intelligence chief, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, traveled to Washington in late October, and [Gen. David H. Petraeus](#), installed on Oct. 31 as head of the [U.S. Central Command](#), visited Islamabad on his third day in office. On Wednesday, Hayden flew to New York for a secret visit with Zardari, who was attending a [U.N.](#) conference.

Zardari spoke over the telephone with [Sen. John F. Kerry \(D-Mass.\)](#), a conversation Pakistani officials said they considered an initial contact with the incoming Obama administration. Although Kerry has been mentioned as a possible secretary of state, the officials said he indicated that he expects to continue in the Senate, where he is in line to take over [Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#)’s position as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Despite improved relations with the Bush administration, Zardari said, “we think we need a new dialogue, and we’re hoping that the new government will . . . understand that Pakistan has done more than they recognize” and is a victim of the same insurgency the United States is fighting. Pakistan hopes that a \$7.6 billion loan from the [International Monetary Fund](#), announced yesterday, will spark new international investment and aid.

Pakistan, whose military has received more than \$10 billion in direct U.S. payments since 2001, also wants the United States to provide sophisticated weapons to its armed forces, Zardari said. Rather than using U.S. Predator-fired missiles against Pakistani territory, he asked, why not give Pakistan its own [Predators](#)? “Give them to us. . . . we are your allies,” he said.

Last month, officials confirmed, Predator strikes in the FATA killed Khalid Habib, described as

al-Qaeda's No. 4 official, and senior operatives Abu Jihad al-Masri and Abu Hassan al-Rimi. Three other senior al-Qaeda figures — explosives expert Abu Khabab al-Masri, Abu Sulayman al-Jazairi and senior commander Abu Laith al-Libi — were killed during the first nine months of the year.

Current and former U.S. counterterrorism officials said improved intelligence has been an important factor in the increased tempo and precision of the Predator strikes. Over the past year, they said, the United States has been able to improve its network of informants in the border region while also fielding new hardware that allows close tracking of the movements of suspected militants.

The missiles are fired from unmanned aircraft by the CIA. But the drones are only part of a diverse network of machines and software used by the agency to spot terrorism suspects and follow their movements, the officials said. The equipment, much of which remains highly classified, includes an array of powerful sensors mounted on satellites, airplanes, blimps and drones of every size and shape.

Before 2002, the [CIA](#) had no experience in using the Predator as a weapon. But in recent years — and especially in the past 12 months — spy agencies have honed their skills at tracking and killing single individuals using aerial vehicles operated by technicians hundreds or thousands of miles away. James R. Clapper Jr., [the Pentagon's](#) chief intelligence officer, said the new brand of warfare has “gotten very laserlike and very precise.”

“It's having the ability, once you know who you're after, to study and watch very steadily and consistently — persistently,” Clapper told a recent gathering of intelligence professionals and contractors in Nashville. “And then, at the appropriate juncture, with due regard for reducing collateral casualties or damage, going after that individual.”

Two former senior intelligence officials familiar with the use of the Predator in Pakistan said the rift between Islamabad and Washington over the unilateral attacks was always less than it seemed.

“By killing al-Qaeda, you're helping [Pakistan's military](#) and you're disrupting attacks that could be carried out in Karachi and elsewhere,” said one official, speaking on the condition of anonymity. Pakistan's new acquiescence coincided with the new government there and a sharp increase in domestic terrorist attacks, including the September bombing of the [Marriott hotel](#) in Islamabad.

“The attacks inside Pakistan have changed minds,” the official said. “These guys are worried, as they should be.”

Staff writer Colum Lynch at the United Nations contributed to this report.

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