

IS JOHN BRENNAN SHAPING PAKISTAN'S NEW COUNTERTERRORISM PROGRAM?

There are now multiple reports (one of the earliest is here) that while the world was concentrating on a number of pressing developments in the Ukraine and elsewhere last week, John Brennan slipped into Pakistan to pay a quiet visit. The visit seems to me to cap a series of developments that have taken place over the last few months to put into place a counterterrorism program in Pakistan that seems modeled on the US plan. Almost exactly a month ago, I had wondered whether Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was making a play for US counterterrorism funds that would become available as the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan. Pakistan Today has a summary of the series of meetings that has brought us to this point:

After a nearly three-year long freeze Pak-US relations are on the mend once again. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Islamabad paved way for Nawaz Sharif's meeting with President Obama. In December, Pentagon Chief Chuck Hagel was in Pakistan where he also met the new COAS Gen Sharif. The prime minister's meeting with President Obama in October was followed by a flurry of visits by civilian and military leaders from both sides. Important federal ministers including Sartaj Aziz, Ahsan Iqbal, Khwaja Asif and Shahid Khqan Abbasi have made several trips to Washington to discuss energy, trade and security related issues. During the last four weeks CENTOM Commander General Lloyd J Austin visited Islamabad to hold

talks with COAS Gen Sharif and CJCSC Rashad Mahmood. Defence Secretary Asif Yasin Malik is currently in Washington leading a Pakistani delegation to hold military to military talks. Unconfirmed reports tell of CIA chief John Brennan having paid a clandestine visit to Rawalpindi to meet COAS Gen Sharif.

The article notes that security issues are driving the meetings:

The key factor is the concern for the security of the region after the US exits from Afghanistan. Washington wants to withdraw troops in an orderly manner and to ensure that the Afghanistan and Pakistan do not fall under the influence of Al Qaeda and other militant groups with global reach, threatening the US and its worldwide interests. After trying peaceful methods which failed, the PML-N government now seems to have realised the gravity of the situation and is inclined to take on the TTP and other militant groups. It knows however that it cannot deal with them on its own.

Oh, but that passage is so loaded with meaning. Recall that the talks between Pakistan's government and the TTP were just getting ready to get started when John Brennan called for the drone strike that took out TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud. That strike seems to have tipped the balance for the TTP and Pakistan's government to continue back and forth strikes rather than peace talks, with Pakistan now carrying out attacks on Taliban hideouts in the tribal areas using jet fighters. The latest attack, today, appears to have killed at least 30. But Pakistan can't take on the militants on its own, so the US has to step up with support, at least according to the prevailing thought.

But now we see that Pakistan's cabinet is

suddenly discussing a draft security policy only a few days after John Brennan's secret visit.

From Dawn:

Sources told DawnNews that in accordance with the policy, the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (Nacta) would be the focal organisation for national security, adding that the heads of the armed forces would be among members of Nacta.

The cabinet agreed that all decisions pertaining to anti-terror measures would be taken at the highest levels of authority.

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The policy also entails the formation of a joint intelligence directorate to make the exchange of information more effective on federal and provincial levels.

Moreover, the policy document notes that the total strength of 33 national security organisations, including the police and other civil armed forces, both at the federal as well as the provincial level, exceeded 600,000, which is more than the sixth largest standing army of the world i.e. Pakistan.

Gosh, I wonder where Pakistan could have gotten the idea for a National Counter-Terrorism Authority? Perhaps from the person who was the first director of the National Counterterrorism Center in US? That, of course, was John Brennan.

In an interesting article in The Nation, we get a description of Pakistan's complaint that Afghanistan is not attacking and perhaps even supporting TTP fighters who flee Pakistan's tribal areas into Afghanistan:

Pakistani side, during the meeting, pointed out that due to on-going

military operation in North Waziristan and elsewhere in the country, the TTP fighters are now moving towards Afghanistan, but coalition forces across the border have shown reluctance to attack those elements, sources said. Head of ISI is learnt to have asked CIA chief to help destroy militant sanctuaries located in Afghanistan, from where the Pakistani Taliban launch their attacks against Pakistan, source told The Nation.

According to sources, Pakistani intelligence expressed its grievances regarding lack of support from Afghan side to root out TTP operating out of their area. They stressed the need of close-cooperation and coordination between the authorities who are crushing Taliban inside Pakistan and Nato forces who have resources and presence very close to the Pak-Afghan border.

ISI chief made it clear before the visiting dignitary that they have information of hidden support from Afghan Army and intelligence for Pakistani Taliban and foreign elements behind-the-curtain terrorism incidents.

Missing from that account, however, is the other side of the coin that Brennan undoubtedly was describing to Pakistan. If the US is going to expand its funding support of Pakistan, look for that funding to be tied to a commitment from Pakistan to take on the Haqqani network and other Afghan Taliban figures who have taken refuge in Pakistan, most likely with ISI blessing and support. (In return, presumably, Brennan is most likely offering assurances that US and Afghan forces would attack any TTP who cross into Afghanistan.) That would fit with the Express Tribune's account of Brennan's visit:

The CIA chief also met Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Lt

General Zaheerul Islam where they discussed 'important intelligence matters', said another official.

Both sides were tight-lipped about the CIA chief's visit as nothing was said officially.

However, sources familiar with the development said his visit was part of the ongoing engagement process between the two countries to discuss key regional issues.

The visit of the CIA chief came at a time when the fragile peace process with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is unstable.

When asked whether the issue of possible operation in North Waziristan Agency was discussed with the CIA chief, Advisor to Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz told reporters on Monday that it was Pakistan's internal matter.

However, *The Express Tribune* has learnt that Pakistan has kept the US on board on the possible operation against the TTP in the tribal areas.

I'm betting that as soon as we get the first account of a Haqqani network figure killed by Pakistan's armed forces, the US will open the floodgates and Pakistan will find itself awash in counterterrorism funds. And a cute little clone of Brennan's National Counterterrorism Center will be fully funded in Islamabad.