

IS DAVID PETRAEUS LEAKING TO UNDERCUT THE PRESIDENT? OR IS SOMEONE FRAMING HIM?

The WaPo has the latest in seemingly yearly series of leaks of Top Secret cables designed to undercut the President's plan to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan sent a top-secret cable to Washington last month warning that the persistence of enemy havens in Pakistan was placing the success of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan in jeopardy, U.S. officials said.

The cable, written by Ryan C. Crocker, amounted to an admission that years of U.S. efforts to curtail insurgent activity in Pakistan by the lethal Haqqani network, a key Taliban ally, were failing.

The hints and feints the article offers about who leaked the memo provide ample entertainment for a Saturday afternoon.

Note the way the WaPo describes its sources inconsistently. It offers this quote from a senior defense official.

"The sanctuaries are a deal-killer for the [Afghan war] strategy," said a **senior defense official** who is familiar with the ongoing debate and who, like several officials in this story, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal deliberations. [my emphasis]

But then the WaPo suggests military leaders have motive to leak the cable, distinguishing between “defense” and “military” officials.

The cable, which was described by several officials familiar with its contents, could be used as ammunition by **senior military officials** who favor more aggressive action by the United States against the Haqqani havens in Pakistan. It also could buttress calls from **senior military officials** for a more gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan as the 2014 deadline for ending combat operations approaches.

These military officials have maintained for months that the strategy of targeting raids against Taliban leadership and building local Afghan governance is showing impressive results. [my emphasis]

Mind you, none of these military officials seem to be directly quoted here—at least not defined as military officials. The comment might just reflect the knowledge of Greg Jaffe, WaPo’s military writer. Though it would be consistent if a General or two leaked such a cable—after all, Stanley McChrystal is assumed to have leaked a similar cable during Obama’s Afghanistan review in 2009, for similar reason.

Yet I’m most interested in this quote, of someone whose affiliation was rather pointedly (given the description of defense and military sources) not identified.

“There’s no debate about the importance of going after Haqqani . . . and Taliban militants who launch attacks into Afghanistan,” one **U.S. official** said. “Support for this is universal.” [my emphasis]

The article also defaults to “US officials” elsewhere, though that could be because the

sources came from multiple agencies. Note, "US official" can be used to refer to members of Congress, as well as agency officials.

In any case should we assume these unmarked sources are intelligence ones—the beat of Greg Miller, the WaPo's intelligence writer and the other byline on the story?

Meanwhile, the article points a finger towards David Petraeus—possibly as the primary recipient of the cable—since he's so close to Ryan Crocker, the cable's author.

Officials familiar with the cable declined to name its primary recipient.

Crocker previously served as U.S. ambassador to Pakistan during the George W. Bush administration and was brought out of retirement by President Obama. Crocker also built close ties to the military and to David H. Petraeus, now CIA director, when Crocker was the ambassador to Iraq and Petraeus was the top general there.

As commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Petraeus frequently voiced deep concern about the Haqqani group's resilience.

Indeed, the most interesting game the article plays with sourcing implicates the CIA, too. The article rather ostentatiously notes that the cable was sent through CIA channels.

Because of the intended secrecy of that message, Crocker sent it through CIA channels rather than the usual State Department ones.

[snip]

The somewhat unusual mode of transmission for Crocker's cable suggests that its contents were particularly sensitive, U.S. officials said.

American ambassadors typically send messages to Washington through State Department communications networks. But U.S. officials said cables containing references to intelligence sources or highly classified threat data can be sent across CIA networks, which are more secure. The CIA declined to comment on the cable.

Yet even while the passage explains that in cases where cables include sources or highly classified threat data they'll use CIA networks, it doesn't directly say this cable was classified Top Secret.

It takes the rather clever comment of our Afghan Embassy spokesperson to make that explicit, a truly wonderful example of the non-denial confirmation.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul declined to comment on Crocker's cable. "As a policy, we don't comment as to the existence or substance of top-secret cables," an embassy spokesperson said.

All of which seems to suggest the description of the cable sent via CIA channels serves more to point at the CIA than to really communicate anything about the classification of the cable.

The signalling here seems to point to Petraeus, right?

But here's my favorite bit of the story.

A CIA drone strike in October was described at the time by Obama administration officials as the opening salvo in a more aggressive assault against the group's leadership in Pakistan. The missile attack killed Janbaz Zadran, described by CIA analysts as the main organizer of attacks against coalition targets in Kabul and southeast Afghanistan.

But the timing of Crocker's cable – sent more than two months after that CIA strike – suggests that U.S. officials in Kabul have yet to see a shift in momentum or measurable impact. The U.S. efforts have been hampered by the group's populated sanctuary, its close ties to Pakistan's intelligence service, and diplomatic ruptures that caused pauses in the CIA drone campaign.

It's my favorite for several reasons. First, it's the only acknowledgement that **this memo was probably written in mid-to-late December**, more than two months (but presumably less than three) after the Zadrán drone strike on October 13, 2011. That would mean the memo was written not long after the CIA halted its drone strikes in Pakistan—reported in the Long War Journal on December 12.

The passage is also rather disingenuous. The heightened attacks on the Haqqani network—a response to the September 13 attack on the US Embassy in Kabul mentioned, but not dated, elsewhere in the article—actually predated the October 13 drone strike. As the Long War Journal reviews, there was a September 27 raid in Paktia province and an October 4 air raid near Khost. But those were special forces strikes in Afghanistan, not CIA drone attacks in Pakistan.

Call me crazy, but this article—written about a memo that is now over two months old—seems to be about CIA drone strikes in Pakistan as much as it is the Haqqani network.

Which leads me to the carping—published the morning of David Petraeus testimony at the end of January—that the CIA Director wasn't letting CIA's drone cowboys strike as freely as they had previously.

Some officials close to the agency praise major espionage operations he has approved but say he has clashed with senior officers at the counter-terrorism

center, a powerful fiefdom inside the agency that helps run the covert drone war.

Those officers are frustrated by the drop-off in drone strikes in Pakistan, including an undeclared two-month moratorium that ended Jan. 11, according to several current and former U.S. officials. In interviews, one member of Congress and four senior aides from the House and Senate committees said they were upset as well.

So CTC and congressional aides were complaining that Petraeus reeled in the drone cowboys a month ago, and now someone is leaking a 2 month old memo—offering little proof of whether Crocker still feels the Haqqani needs to be targeted more now that Petraeus restarted the drone strikes—that seemingly implicates Petraeus.

And all of this, of course, comes at the same time (~~on a Saturday?!?~~ Update: The WaPo article came out yesterday) as two other pieces of news. First, the AP story reporting that civilian casualties from drone strikes in Pakistan have not been as high as Pakistanis think. Among the attacks it reports to have killed only militants is one from last August that targeted the Haqqani network.

An attack near Miran Shah before dawn on Aug. 10, 2011, was one of six on the AP's list in which villagers said no civilians died.

A drone fired missiles at a large brick compound, killing at least 20 Afghan and Pakistani Talibanfighters, said Sajjad Ali, a local driver. The compound hit was known as a rest house for militants run by the Haqqani network, an Afghan group focused on fighting foreign troops in Afghanistan, he said.

And, a report from the Hindu saying that Petraeus negotiated with ISI Lieutenant General Shuja Ahmad Pasha back in January before restarting drone strikes, in seeming contradiction to an al Jazeera interview with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani a few weeks ago.

In any case, at first blush, this appears to be another effort by the national security establishment to undercut the plans to withdraw from Afghanistan. But it seems to serve more as a demand—possibly coming from Congress—for more drone strikes targeting the Haqqanis.