

OBAMA, GILANI MEET IN SEOUL WHILE ALLEN UNDERMINES TALKS



ISAF Commander John Allen

In Seoul today for an international nuclear security summit, President Obama met with Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani. The meeting was viewed by many as an opportunity to bring the two nations closer together while the parliament in Pakistan reviews how to move forward in re-establishing cooperation between the two countries in counterterrorism efforts. Remarkably, ISAF Commander General John Allen appears to be doing his best to undermine these talks, appearing at the Brookings Institution yesterday to reprise divisive remarks delivered by Admiral Michael Mullen just before he retired as Chair of the Joint Chiefs last September.

As a reminder, here is the remark from Mullen that set off a firestorm in Pakistan last year:

In a scathing and unprecedented public condemnation of Pakistan, Admiral Mike Mullen said the country's main intelligence agency ISI was actively supporting Haqqani network militants blamed for an assault on the US embassy

in Kabul last week.

The Haqqani network is probably the most dangerous faction in the Afghan Taliban and founded by a CIA asset turned al Qaeda ally. During the 1980s, the CIA funneled arms and cash to the Haqqanis to counter Soviet forces.

“The Haqqani Network, for one, acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency,” Mullen told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

That comment dominated US-Pakistan relations until the US attack that killed 24 Pakistani troops at a border station in November overshadowed it and relations between the two countries reached a new low. Now, as the countries work toward re-establishing better relations, Allen ham-handedly re-runs Mullen’s remark by claiming he won’t mention it:

“In this forum I can’t really speculate on why the ISI does anything with respect to the Haqqanis. I don’t think we should be surprised that they have a relationship, that relationship with the ISI and a number of these organisations goes back a very long time,” he said.

But he added that the fact these relationships exist are not of particular surprise. “We shouldn’t be surprised that they have a relationship, I would not speculate on what specific operational support they have or whether they are an actual arm. I would just say that the relationship potentially is unhelpful.”

No, General Allen “would not speculate” on “whether” the Haqqani “are an actual arm” of ISI, but he’ll sure put it out there for us to consider again, and at a very sensitive time in negotiations.

As for the Obama-Gilani meeting, it appears to have been brief and symbolic rather than substantive. From Obama:

“There have been times – I think we should be candid – over the last several months where those relations have had periods of strains,” Obama told reporters as the meeting opened.

“But I welcome the fact that the parliament of Pakistan is reviewing, after some extensive study, the nature of this relationship.

“I think it’s important to get it right. I think it’s important for us to have candid dialogue, to work through these issues.”

From Gilani:

Gilani said: “We are committed to fighting against extremism. We want stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“We want to work together with you,” he told Obama.

It seems likely that Pakistan will impose a tax on US war supplies being transported through their country to Afghanistan in order to re-open the supply lines. A bigger sticking point, though, remains the issue of drone strikes. Pakistan views them as an imposition on their sovereignty, but the US is determined not to stop them or even to provide Pakistan with advance warning of targets or locations. Allen’s reprise of Mullen’s accusation will only make the drone issue negotiation harder, so look for yet another delay in any agreement being announced.