

ONCE AGAIN, US RATCHETS UP RHETORIC AGAINST PAKISTAN

The pattern by now is all too familiar. Once again, the US is ratcheting up its rhetoric against Pakistan. Earlier instances included the “crisis” when the US killed three Pakistani soldiers and Pakistan responded by closing strategic border crossings. This was followed by the Raymond Davis fiasco. Then came exchanges of bluster over the US unilateral action that took out Osama bin Laden. Now, the target of US ire is the cozy relationship between the Haqqani network and Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the ISI.

Reporting for Reuters, Mark Hosenball and Susan Cornwell tell us this morning that some in the US intelligence community are now assigning a direct role for ISI in the Haqqani network attack on the US embassy in Kabul:

Some U.S. intelligence reporting alleges that Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) specifically directed, or urged, the Haqqani network to carry out an attack last week on the U.S. Embassy and a NATO headquarters in Kabul, according to two U.S. officials and a source familiar with recent U.S.-Pakistan official contacts.

The article informs us that the Senate Appropriations Committee has added to the pressure on Pakistan:

The Senate committee approved \$1 billion in aid to support counter-insurgency operations by Pakistan’s military, but voted to make this and any economic aid conditional on Islamabad cooperating with Washington against militant groups including the Haqqanis.

A series of high-level meetings between US and Pakistani officials also has taken place over

the last week to hammer home these allegations against Pakistan, despite this warning in the Reuters article:

However, U.S. officials cautioned that the information that Pakistan's spy agency was encouraging the militants was uncorroborated.

A series of articles on the website for Pakistan's Dawn news agency provides some perspective on the coverage of the issue in Pakistan. One article provides a forum for Interior Minister Rehman Malik after his meeting with FBI Director Robert Mueller yesterday:

Pakistan has promised action against the Haqqani network if the United States provides sufficient intelligence, but denied that the al Qaeda-linked Taliban faction was on Pakistani soil.

/snip/

The Haqqani network is probably the most dangerous faction in the Afghan Taliban and founded by a CIA asset turned al Qaeda ally.

"I have assured them (the United States) they are not on the Pakistani side (of the border with Afghanistan) but if there is intelligence which is provided by the US we will definitely take action," Interior Minister Rehman Malik said.

Malik spoke to reporters after talks with FBI director Robert Mueller late Wednesday. The minister said Pakistan and the United States were "resolving" together the "irritant" of the Haqqani group issue.

Another article provides comments from Pakistan's Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar:

Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar on Thursday said that US allegations over Pakistan's support to the Haqqani network were "baseless", DawnNews reported.

Speaking to DawnNews, Mr Mukhtar said that

the allegations levelled at Pakistan were contrary to the facts on the ground.

He further said that if the US had any information pertaining to the Haqqani network, then it should share that intelligence with Pakistan so the country's authorities could act on it.

Finally, we have an article describing a meeting between the head of ISI and David Petraeus, the new Director of the CIA:

The ISI chief, Gen Shuja Pasha, who left Washington for home on Tuesday night after a meeting with Gen David Petraeus, is believed to have heard directly from the CIA chief that the US wanted an immediate military operation against the network.

Gen Pasha also met another senior Obama administration official before leaving for home but both sides are declining to disclose the official's name.

"Yes, we heard their point of view but it does not mean that we are going to launch an operation tomorrow," said a senior Pakistani official aware of the proceedings of these meetings.

Interestingly, this same article goes on to mention that the US is now hinting there could have been a Haqqani (and thus, indirectly, ISI) role in the killing of former Afghan President Rabbani:

Based on current information, Admiral Mullen said he could not confirm that the Haqqanis were behind the death of Prof Rabbani, the senior Afghan official in charge of negotiating with the Taliban.

The usual pattern that has arisen from these rhetorical battles between the US and Pakistan is that once the rhetoric reaches a certain level, various planned high level meetings get called off, perhaps followed by some sort of concrete action such as when Pakistan closed

selected border crossings used to transport supplies to US troops in Afghanistan.

Eventually, however, new reasons to cooperate emerge, with the restoration of high level meetings producing a new-found resolve to work together.

Should the US be successful in attaching some sort of cooperation requirement for US funding to flow to Pakistan, look for some sort of token move by Pakistan that will provide even more heated rhetoric. The situation likely will then be resolved by Pakistan grudgingly cooperating in an action against the Haqqani network. The most important point to watch for in this current "crisis" will be to see just how high in the Haqqani network Pakistan is willing to go in sacrificing a part of it to the US in order to keep their seemingly endless supply of US funds flowing.

Update

The Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing today, and the US-Pakistan relationship was addressed in detail, along with the accusations of an ISI-Haqqani network relationship. From CNN.com:

"The Haqqani network, for one, acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's intelligence," Mullen said.

He said Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency supported the Haqqani insurgents who planned and executed the attack on the U.S. Embassy and other strikes in Afghanistan. In doing so, Mullen said, the agency is jeopardizing Pakistan's relations with the United States and Afghanistan. But he added that the solution is not to give up on Pakistan and said a flawed relationship is better than no relationship.

Panetta ascribed the attacks on the embassy and Kabul in general as a significant change in tactics by the insurgents:

“We judge this change in tactics to be a result of a shift in momentum in our favor and a sign of weakness in the insurgency,” Panetta said.

The ball is now in Pakistan’s court once again.