

WITH US-PAKISTAN RELATIONS NEARING TIPPING POINT AGAIN, WATCH THE BORDER CROSSINGS

When NATO forces killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November of 2011, Pakistan retaliated by closing both of its border crossings into Afghanistan. They remained closed until then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued an apology in July of 2012. Perhaps because that action by Pakistan stands out as one of the few times Pakistan has had a bit of an advantage in dealing with the US, Imran Khan, whose PTI political party controls the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, has called for the closing of the Khyber Crossing in retaliation for the drone strike that killed Hakimullah Mehsud. Khan blames the strike for derailing for now the budding peace talks between Pakistan's government and the Pakistan Taliban.

Yesterday, Khan provided a bit of room for maneuvering, and gave until November 20 for US drone strikes to end in Pakistan before closing the crossing:

Taking yet another staunch stance, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan on Monday announced to extend the deadline for blocking NATO supply lines across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KP) for 15 days in respect of Moharram, asking the US administration to stop drone strikes inside Pakistan or deal with the blockade of supply lines.

In passionate speech in the NA, Khan said the KP government would suspend the supply line on November 20, urging Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to seek guarantee from America that no drone strike would

jeopardise future peace talks with the Taliban.

Some PML-N leaders, however, termed the change in mood of Khan and the postponement of deadline to cut NATO supply line a result of backchannel contacts with Khan by Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan. They said Nisar had saved Khan and his party's government from a head-on clash and tensions would decline as peace talks may soon be "back on track".

So while there may be a cooling off period before closing the Khyber Crossing, there are a number of incidents to report in the vicinity of the southern crossing at Chaman. First, Pakistan Today noted that a US drone crossed into Pakistani air space at the crossing on Monday:

An American drone violated Pakistan's airspace by 300 meters on Monday. Security sources said the drone, controlled from US base of the Afghan Qarahag district, entered Pakistani airspace at 6am and returned after flying over the city for five hours.

This is far from the tribal area where US drones hover nonstop. The article went on to state that the last time a drone had crossed the border at this location was three weeks ago.

Ah, but it appears that the drone missed its likely target by a day. There was a suicide bombing from the Afghan side of the crossing today:

At least four people were killed Tuesday when a suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into an Afghan security checkpost near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border-crossing at Chaman, Afghan police said.

The explosion occurred near Wesh Mandi

area on the Afghan side of the border, injuring over a dozen other people, Afghan police officials said.

“The strength of the blast smashed window panes and glasses of nearby shops and houses,” said a low-level Afghan official, who requested not to be named.

Security was beefed up and the border crossing was shut down for all kinds of traffic following the incident.

The article does also note that security on the Pakistan side of the border is on alert in preparation for responses to the drone strike that killed Hakimullah Mehsud. But that security has to spread over an extended region. In a repeat of a very common occurrence, two trucks transporting fuel to Afghanistan were attacked and burned yesterday. Security forces did kill three men who carried out the attack, but one truck driver was seriously wounded. This attack took place about 180 miles away from the Chaman Crossing on the primary route used to transport fuel from Karachi where it arrives in Pakistan to the Kandahar region in southern Afghanistan.

Both crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan appear to be at risk for further incidents, given the strong reaction that has been generated in Pakistan over the drone strike last week. There are two more tidbits about that strike that stand out to me from this article by AFP that was picked up by most of the Pakistani outlets I scanned this morning. The article discusses the opulent house at which Hakimullah Mehsud was killed. First, we have this:

Militant sources said the property in the North Waziristan tribal area was bought for Mehsud nearly a year ago for \$120,000, a huge sum by Pakistani standards, by close aide Latif Mehsud, who was captured by the US in Afghanistan last month.

That bit of information tends to support my suspicion that the grabbing of Latif Mehsud from Afghan security forces may have played a huge role in the US learning Hakimullah Mehsud's location.

The second bit of information again puts Pakistan's military in a bad light:

With the Pakistan army headquarters for restive North Waziristan just a kilometre away, locals thought of Mehsud's compound as the "safest" place in a dangerous area.

Its proximity to a major military base recalls the hideout of Osama bin Laden in the town of Abbottabad, on the doorstep of Pakistan's elite military academy.

Will there be an investigation of how the army missed such an important compound only a kilometer away from their local headquarters?

At any rate, whether that investigation takes place or not, keep an eye on both border crossings. Traffic is very heavy right now in both directions. Huge amounts of equipment are being shipped out of Afghanistan as troops are being drawn down but massive fuel needs persist, so convoys moving both directions remain targets.