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Can Pakistan force US to back off special ops and drone attacks?

Pakistan is trying to use the case of the CIA's Raymond Davis to limit US drone strikes and covert operations on its soil. But with its reliance on US aid, how much leverage does it really have?



A US Predator drone flies above Kandahar Air Field, southern Afghanistan, in this 2010 file photo. The United States has been carrying out drone strikes in neighboring Pakistan.

(Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP)

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Washington

The US counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan has long relied heavily on covert operations in neighboring Pakistan: US intelligence agents and Special Forces units working to find out which extremist groups were planning what actions, and American drones attacking the safe havens in northwest Pakistan from which the Taliban launch cross-border operations.

That strategy has been thrown for a loop by Pakistan's latest demands: that the CIA drastically reduce its numbers in the country and that the intensely unpopular drone strikes be reduced and henceforth only launched by a binational decision-making process.

Pakistan has made similar demands before, and this time around it may be using what it sees as an opportune moment to try to gain more influence over US operations – perhaps to nip what it sees as an increasingly “go-it-alone” US counterterrorist approach within Pakistani borders.

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But some regional experts say that, whatever its aims may be, Pakistan is now pushing the never-easy relationship with the US harder than ever before.

“Above all, what they're annoyed about and motivated by is the sense that they don't know what's going on in their own country,” says Marvin Weinbaum, a former Pakistan specialist at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. “If they've decided to

play harder ball now, it's because they feel they have some leverage to change a situation they don't like."

That "leverage" comes as a result of the case of Raymond Davis, the CIA security contractor who caused a national uproar in Pakistan in January when he killed two men he said were following him in Lahore – and who turned out to be Pakistani intelligence agents. Mr. Davis was arrested on murder charges and was only released after the US applied intense pressure.

"The Pakistanis took the heat [from the Pakistani public] for letting Davis go, and in effect they're now out for something in return," says Dr. Weinbaum, now a scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute (MEI) in Washington.

Pakistan is not demanding the CIA's complete departure from its territory, although it is calling for all US intelligence contractors to leave the country. Nor is Pakistan demanding an end to all drone strikes.

Still, the demands concerning US personnel alone – estimated by Pakistan experts to involve more than a third of American counterterrorist operatives in the country – could be enough to put US strategy in Afghanistan in something of a bind, regional analysts say.

"The Americans and Pakistanis have all along been working at cross purposes on Afghanistan, the two have very different end states of what they want to see in Afghanistan," says Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst who focuses on Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Cato Institute in Washington. "The reality is that the US is eradicating the very Taliban militants [in the country's northwest] that Pakistan is using for its own objectives."

More 'melodramatic episodes'

Despite the sudden surge in what Ms. Innocent calls "episodic tensions," no one foresees anything like a rupture between the two countries.

"Both countries will continue to need and rely on the other, but the underlying tensions mean we're still going to have these melodramatic episodes," says Innocent. She notes that Pakistan similarly annoyed US officials just last fall, when it closed NATO supply routes into Afghanistan over the killing of Pakistani soldiers by NATO airstrikes.

MEI's Weinbaum says that the kinds of demands the Pakistanis are making of the US – and perhaps more important, what they left out – suggest they know that with the Pakistani economy afflicted by a burgeoning population and high unemployment, their options for pressuring the United States are limited.

"Their ace in the hole remains the [NATO] transit routes, but that's the one thing they held back on," Weinbaum says. "They may feel they're in a bargaining position, but they also know they need the US and Western assistance."

Calling the current row "the most severe juncture I've seen in our relations," Weinbaum says the low point "comes at a bad time" because it falls just as Congress is showing an inclination to cut foreign assistance. The US is in the midst of a five-year, \$7.5 billion program to boost Pakistan's development and education levels.

'Not headed for a divorce'

Weinbaum agrees that the overriding interests of both countries mean "we're not headed for a divorce here." The US may make some concessions, he adds, but in the end it will maintain certain red lines.

Take the drones. Weinbaum says a lot of their missions have been joint intelligence operations, and that may increase – especially with elements of the Pakistani intelligence, the ISI, that have been helpful to the US. But he says the US will have to weigh the Pakistani desire "to know much more about what's going on" against the concerns over letting key intelligence fall into unfriendly Pakistani hands.

"In many instances we have good reason not share what we find. Things leak out ... to an ISI that isn't all on our side," he says, "and suddenly an operation isn't as successful as it might have been."

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