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Capture of Taliban's No. 2 may signal shift in Pakistan strategy

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

The capture of the Taliban's top military commander in Pakistan could yield important intelligence on terrorism operations, but America's complex relationship with Pakistan could limit the rewards, experts said Tuesday.



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"This is a very significant setback" for the Taliban, said Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution, a think tank.



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Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's No. 2 leader, was captured in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, two Pakistani intelligence officers and a senior U.S. official told the Associated Press. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release such sensitive information.



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The White House declined to confirm Baradar's capture.

Riedel — a former CIA officer, National Security Council member and special assistant to Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush—said Baradar worked directly under the Afghan Taliban's founder and leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, and is described as a close associate of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.



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Riedel said Baradar served as the operational hub for the Taliban, meaning he could provide intelligence on funding, safe havens, transportation routes and the group's command structure.

American investigators might receive only snippets of information from Baradar, said James Phillips, an Afghanistan expert at the Heritage Foundation, a think tank.

Given Pakistan's history of harboring Taliban officials in their tribal region that borders Afghanistan, Baradar may know things that the Pakistanis don't want the Americans to learn, Phillips and Riedel said.

"It's very possible that the Pakistanis may be limiting the information that is extracted from (Baradar) in order to prevent the release of information that will be damaging to them," Phillips said.

Others say that however critical Baradar was to the Taliban's operation, the group is so decentralized that somebody will quickly replace him and carry on with its radical Islamist mission.

"I don't think we can pop the champagne corks just yet," said Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a think tank.

Phillips said the capture could represent a shift in the way Pakistan deals with the Taliban.

For years, Pakistani intelligence officials have not only accepted but assisted the group to help Pakistan's standing in the region, he said. That they assisted U.S. troops in the capture of Baradar could show that the Pakistanis are growing tired of the group's increasingly negative influence in their own country and will start confronting it more.

"I hope that Pakistan genuinely has had a change of heart," Phillips said.

Baradar's interrogation is further complicated by the different interrogation standards that American and Pakistani officials are limited to.

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President Obama banned the use of harsh interrogation techniques, including waterboarding, that were used during the [Bush administration](#). Pakistani officials don't have such limitations.

"Anything goes," Riedel said.

Whether Baradar gives up useful intelligence will be revealed in the weeks and months ahead, the experts say.


If Baradar talks, Riedel said, more Taliban leaders will be killed or captured, their supply lines will become clogged and their safe haven in Pakistan will become far less inviting.

The only true measure of Pakistan's intentions, Phillips said, is the capture of Omar, the Taliban leader.

"They know where he is," Phillips said. "They could do that any day of the week if they wanted to."

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