

WHILE NY TIMES AGITATES FOR RESUMPTION OF DRONE STRIKES, PEACE TALKS SET TO ADD AFGHANISTAN, HAQQANI NETWORK

Over the weekend, the New York Times published a piece whose headline seemed to cry out that drone strikes in Pakistan need to resume: "Lull in Strikes by U.S. Drones Aids Militants in Pakistan". In reading the article, it is difficult to find strong evidence for the claim that the lull in strikes has helped militant groups. While the article does note a slight uptick in some forms of violence, there have been no major attacks on US forces in Afghanistan as one would expect if the insurgent groups truly had gained significant additional strength and operational capability. An alternative reading of the lull in strikes, however, is that it has provided an important opening for negotiations aimed at ending hostilities in Afghanistan. Two very important developments on that front are now in place, as Afghanistan is sending a delegation to Qatar to visit the newly established Taliban office there and the Express Tribune reports that the US is ready for the Haqqani network to take part in the peace negotiations. In the meantime, the Express Tribune also reports that negotiations between Pakistan and the US have nearly reached the point that drone strikes will resume. If the strikes resume, will progress in the peace talks be slowed or halted?

The poor footing on which the Times bases its claim that insurgents have been aided by the suspension of drone attacks is given away in the opening sentence of the article:

A nearly two-month lull in American drone strikes in Pakistan has helped embolden Al Qaeda and several Pakistani militant factions to regroup, increase attacks against Pakistani security forces and threaten intensified strikes against allied forces in Afghanistan, American and Pakistani officials say.

Attacks on the US have not increased, we only have American and Pakistani officials saying that “intensified” strikes on NATO forces are possible or threatened. As for the increase in attacks on Pakistani security forces, we have this:

Other militant groups continue attacking Pakistani forces. Just last week, Taliban insurgents killed 15 security soldiers who had been kidnapped in retaliation for the death of a militant commander.

The spike in violence in the tribal areas – up nearly 10 percent in 2011 from the previous year, according to a new independent report – comes amid reports of negotiations between Pakistan’s government and some local Taliban factions, although the military denies that such talks are taking place.

So that’s it when it comes to documentation of the strengthening of militant groups: a 10% increase for the year in violence in tribal areas, when the drone “pause” has only been for the last two months or so, with earlier shorter pauses over the Raymond Davis incident and the killing of Osama bin Laden.

The article also notes that the drones have not stopped flying, it’s just that they are not launching missiles. Perhaps US intelligence personnel will take this opportunity to improve the quality of their intelligence so that fewer

innocent civilians will be at risk when missile strikes resume.

Meanwhile, we learn that the newly established office for the Taliban in Qatar is about to be visited by a delegation from Afghanistan's High Peace Council:

A senior member of Afghanistan's peace-making body will travel to Qatar soon to gather more details about plans for a Taliban political office in the Gulf nation, the High Peace Council's adviser on international affairs said on Monday.

The Taliban said in a surprise announcement last week they had reached a preliminary agreement to set up a political address in Qatar and asked for the release of prisoners held by the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay.

"We want to see the office with our own eyes and that's why someone from the High Peace Council will be travelling to Qatar soon," Mohammad Ismail Qasimyar, a leading member of President Hamid Karzai's High Peace Council, told Reuters.

"We want to see how big the office is and other details."

Since Afghanistan had not been included in the initial talks between the Taliban and the US that led to the opening of the Qatar office, a visit from Afghanistan's High Peace Council so soon after its opening is a very promising development.

Equally encouraging is the news today that the Haqqani Network also is likely to be taking part in the peace talks:

The US has taken Pakistan into confidence over the unprecedented development of allowing the Taliban a political office in Qatar to advance the Afghan reconciliation process, sources

revealed.

A senior Pakistani official stated that the Obama administration not only sought Pakistan's consent over the Taliban office but had also given a 'green light' to allow the deadliest Afghan insurgent group, the Haqqani network, to be a part of the reconciliation process.

The move by Washington was a clear deflection from its previous policy of keeping Islamabad at bay over its peace overtures with the Afghan Taliban.

"Yes, we were onboard," said the senior Pakistani official referring to the latest push by Washington to seek a political settlement of the Afghan conflict.

It would appear that all of the important parties for real negotiations aimed at ending hostilities in Afghanistan are moving toward the establishment of such negotiations. The governments of the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in concert with the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, all sitting down to negotiate a way forward for the region is a very promising prospect. My feeling is that this level of progress has been aided tremendously by the cessation of drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan. That hypothesis may well be tested soon, as there are some reports that the US and Pakistan may be nearing agreement on the ground rules for re-starting the attacks:

Sources told *The Express Tribune* on Sunday that both sides have almost agreed on 'fresh terms of engagements' to resume drone attacks against suspected al Qaeda members and their local facilitators hiding in the tribal areas, including North and South Waziristan.

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Officials said the resumption of drone strikes might be under new conditions. They added that Pakistani negotiators had convinced their American counterparts on at least a couple of conditions: First, the drone strikes should not be as frequent as they were in 2010 and 2011. And second, the CIA should narrow the stripe the aircraft were targeting under the approach known as 'box formation' in military terms.

"We don't want them to be that frequent ... it creates problems for us by invoking public anger," the official added, saying Pakistani authorities believed drones were 'strategically harmful but tactically advantageous'.

About the box approach, he added that the areas the Pakistani military had already claimed to have cleared must not be hit. "We want them to be within a smaller radius," the official explained.

If the significant recent peace talk progress has been a direct result of the interruption in drone strikes, it seems likely the resumption of strikes will slow or halt that progress. It's hard to imagine Taliban or Haqqani network leaders feeling comfortable at a negotiating table in Qatar speaking with parties they know will try to kill them once they return to their homes in Pakistan.