

WHERE IS THE MORAL RECTITUDE WHEN POLITICAL RETALIATION DRONE STRIKE HITS SETTLED AREA, MISSES TARGET?

Early this morning, just hours after the US had assured Pakistan that drone strikes would be curtailed if Pakistan is able to restart peace talks with the Taliban (after the US disrupted them with a drone strike), John Brennan lashed out with one of his signature rage drone strikes that seems more calculated as political retaliation than careful targeting. Earlier documentation of political retaliation strikes can be seen [here](#) and [here](#).

Here is how Dawn described the assurance from the US late on Wednesday:

The United States has promised that it will not carry out any drone strikes in Pakistan during any peace talks with Taliban militants in the future, the Prime Minister's Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz said Wednesday.

Briefing a session of the Senate's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs in Islamabad, Aziz said a team of government negotiators was prepared to hold talks with former Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Hakimullah Mehsud on Nov 2, the day after he was killed in a US drone strike in North Waziristan.

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Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan had told reporters last week that the process of peace talks could not be

taken forward unless drone attacks on Pakistani soil are halted.

Nisar had said that the drone attack that killed Mehsud 'sabotaged' the government's efforts to strike peace with anti-state militants.

Bill Roggio, writing in Long War Journal, is convinced that the Haqqani network's leader was the target of today's strike:

The US launched a drone strike at a seminary in Pakistan's settled district of Hangu, killing eight people in what appears to have been an attempt to kill Sirajuddin Haqqani, the operations commander of the Taliban and al Qaeda-linked Haqqani Network.

But see that bit about the strike being in "Pakistan's settled district"? One of the many unwritten "rules" of US drone strikes in Pakistan is that they are restricted to the FATA, or Federally Administered Tribal Area, of Pakistan where Pakistani security or military personnel have little to no freedom of movement. In fact, the ability of drones to enter these otherwise forbidden territories is touted as one of their main justifications for use.

Just over a week ago, the chief fundraiser for the Haqqani network was killed near Islamabad. That killing involved a gunman, though, not a drone. If Nasiruddin Haqqani could be taken out by a gunman near Islamabad, why couldn't Sirajuddin also have been taken out by a gunman in Hangu rather than missed in a drone strike?

Various reports on this drone strike place the death toll at anywhere from three to eight and say that either three or four missiles were fired into the seminary. The seminary appeared to be frequented by Haqqani network fighters. From the Express Tribune:

Another Haqqani source said the seminary

was an important rest point for members fighting in Afghanistan's restive Khost province.

"The seminary served as a base for the network where militants fighting across the border came to stay and rest, as the Haqqani seminaries in the tribal areas were targeted by drones," the source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

An intelligence source told Reuters separately that Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of Taliban-linked Haqqani network, was spotted at the seminary two days earlier.

It appears that there have been no other drone strikes outside the tribal areas since March of 2009. Roggio notes that all three of the others were in the Bannu district.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province now is governed by former cricket star Imran Khan's PTI party. Khan already was highly agitated by the drone killing of Hakimullah Mehsud and its impact on the planned peace talks with the TTP. It seems entirely possible that striking in Khan's province was a deliberate act by Brennan in retaliation for Khan's rhetoric after the Hakimullah Mehsud killing. But by striking out with such rage, and especially by missing his target in a strike in a highly populated area, Brennan seems to have set himself up for a huge blowback. Khan is now ratcheting up his rhetoric considerably:

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan placed responsibility for today's drone strike on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his press conference in Islamabad on Thursday, *Express News* reported.

He invited the people of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) to join the rally on Saturday against the first drone strike in K-P, in which five people were killed

and another three others were injured in Tal area of Hangu.

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He told Nawaz not to “play on both sides of the wicket,” adding that he should give up his “dual policy” of telling the US one thing and Pakistan another.

“If the prime minister strictly told [America] that drone attacks must stop, they would never conduct such attacks,” he said.

“If they attacked Hangu then what will stop them from attacking any other place if they suspect terrorist activity there?” the PTI chairman added, stressing that America could strike based on suspected terrorist attacks, not certain ones.

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“Are we America’s tissue, that they just use us and then throw us away?” Imran exclaimed.

Khan’s rally on Saturday is aimed at closing NATO transportation routes through his province. If he were to succeed, that would leave only the Southern route, through the Chaman crossing, for NATO convoys that are bringing fuel into Afghanistan and shuttling equipment out of the country as US troops are drawn down.

The spin from the US will be that the strike took out the Haqqani network’s spiritual advisor, so it was a success. But by giving Imran Khan and his province a rallying point, the cost may turn out to be huge.

Meanwhile, Brennan appears to be successful in his ongoing efforts to prevent peace talks at all costs.