IS SHARIF MAKING A PLAY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM FUNDS US CUT FROM AFGHANISTAN BUDGET?

Back in early November, the US carried out one of its most controversial drone strikes in Pakistan, killing TTP head Hakimullah Mehsud just hours before peace talks between the TTP and Pakistan were to begin. This move by the US seems to have pushed the TTP in a more radicalized direction, resulting in many new attacks. Pakistan's government has responded to these attacks with counterattacks, effectively putting an end to prospects for restarting the talks.

Today, we see Sharif's government vowing to take on another radical Sunni group, this time in Balochistan:

> The government has finally decided to launch an operation against the feared Sunni terrorist outfit, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and other militant groups involved in fomenting unrest in Balochistan.
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> The decision was taken in a meeting attended by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar, Balochistan Chief Minister Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, the Quetta corps commander, the Balochistan inspector general (IG) police and the Frontier Corps IG.
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> Dr Baloch was made in-charge of the operation against Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.
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> It is important to mention that the decision to launch an operation against terrorists was taken following an attack on Shias in Mastung that killed 29

> pilgrims on Tuesday.

Significant government resources were brought in quickly after the attack on the bus:

> The Government of Balochistan has suspended buses carrying pilgrims from travelling through the province to neighbouring Iran due to security concerns after a suicide attack killed 28 pilgrims in Mastung this week.
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> A 700 km highway connecting Quetta and Iran, home to many Shia pilgrimage sites, has seen dozens of suicide and roadside bomb attacks.
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> “We have temporarily suspended the movement of buses on the highway until the security situation improves,” a senior official of the Balochistan government told Reuters on Friday.
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> The provincial government then arranged C-130 flights to ferry 301 Shia pilgrims from Dalbandin town in Chagai district to Quetta International Airport for fear of more attacks on the pilgrims on Taftan-Quetta Highway. The pilgrims had entered Pakistan via Iran border in Taftan Town on Wednesday.
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> “The pilgrims were stopped in Taftan and barred from travelling by passenger buses. They were later shifted to Dalbandin under tight security,” another official said.
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> FC and Levies personnel escorted the pilgrims from Taftan to Dalbandin.

Although the C-130 flights were provided by the provincial government, the Frontier Corps is under the control of Pakistan’s army and so there appears to be national coordination in this response, as is also indicated by Nisar being mentioned in the Pakistan Today article quoted above (Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif,

although not mentioned in the article, is in the accompanying photo).

Almost under the radar, we get word that talks begin in Washington, DC tomorrow on the "strategic" relationship between Pakistan and the US. It appears that counterterrorism is high on the list of topics under discussion:

> National Security and Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz has arrived in Washington to lead Pakistan-U.S. Strategic Dialogue with Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday, as the two countries look to finalize a blueprint aimed at bolstering future relationship. The top-level Pakistani delegation includes Minister for Defense, Water and Power Khawaja Muhammad Asif and senior officials. The American interlocutors will include senior level representatives from the Department of Energy, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, USAID, US Trade Representative and from the Treasury. The officials will work to "put together a blueprint of where we can take this relationship over the course of the next six months to a year," a State Department official said ahead of the revived ministerial dialogue that will focus on wide-ranging economic, energy and security areas.
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> Meanwhile, a report in the American media saw the dialogue as offering an opportunity for the United States and Pakistan to start a new chapter in their relationship, affected by years of Afghan war controversies.
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> The Voice of America noted that the war in Afghanistan strained the bilateral relationship. But now the U.S. is drawing down its troops from Afghanistan, and Secretary of State John Kerry says it's time to resume a strategic dialogue. The broadcast

> service also quoted a statement of John Kerry in which he said the U.S. is committed to a long-term relationship with Pakistan.

Although the diplomatic sources for this article went to great lengths to claim that this move is unrelated to Afghanistan and the dwindling likelihood of Afghanistan signing the Bilateral Security Agreement that will keep US troops in Afghanistan beyond the end of this year, recent developments seem to me to point to a direct connection. Note also that this article mentions Sharif's trip to Washington in October, which happens to be just before the drone strike that started this whole sequence of events.

We see relations between the US and Karzai's government now falling to the level of arguments over fabricated information appearing in Afghanistan's investigation into civilian deaths in a US air strike at the same time that 40% of the Pentagon's request for military and development funds in Afghanistan being cut with no howling whatsoever from the usual sources in the Pentagon or from Congressional war hawks.

With billions in US funds suddenly freed up, is Sharif making a play for that money to be shifted from Afghanistan to fund Pakistan's new-found enthusiasm for attacking terrorists? If so, this would represent a complete about-face for Sharif after he was elected primarily on a platform of starting peace talks with the TTP. For me, the tell for whether this is indeed taking place will be if Lindsey Graham and/or Dana Rohrabacher suddenly start(s) saying nice things about Pakistan and their commitment to fighting terrorists after years of blaming Pakistan for sheltering and supporting them.