

MIKE ROGERS THROWS TANTRUM OVER OBAMA'S DRONE POLICY

It seems that Mike Rogers lately is aiming to take over the Emptywheel blog. When he's not yapping about criminalizing journalism or dissembling about Congressional briefings on the Patriot Act renewal, he's putting out bloodthirsty endorsements of drone violence. When we last heard from him on the drone front, he was joining the mad rush to come up with the most damning indictment of Hakimullah Mehsud after the US disrupted Pakistan's plans to start peace talks the very next day with a Taliban group headed by Mehsud. Yesterday, Rogers used a hearing of his House Intelligence Committee as a venue in which to pitch a tantrum over the US daring to adjust its drone policy, leading to fewer strikes.

Now, almost exactly three months after the Mehsud drone strike, we see the prospect for peace talks between Pakistan and the Taliban disrupted again. As I mentioned yesterday, Taliban negotiators fear that Pakistan's government may be planning to scuttle the talks in order to launch an offensive against the Taliban in tribal areas, which might also play into a desire by Sharif's government to be in line for counterterrorism funds which the US might not be spending in Afghanistan.

The Washington Post has Rogers' tirade. First, there is news of a pause in drone strikes in Pakistan:

The Obama administration has sharply curtailed drone strikes in Pakistan after a request from the government there for restraint as it pursues peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban, according to U.S. officials.

"That's what they asked for, and we didn't tell them no," one U.S. official

said. The administration indicated that it will still carry out strikes against senior al-Qaeda targets, if they become available, and move to thwart any direct, imminent threat to U.S. persons.

Concern about Pakistani political sensitivities provides one explanation for the absence of strikes since December, the longest pause in the CIA's drone campaign since a six-week lull in 2011, after an errant U.S. air assault killed 24 Pakistani soldiers at a border post, triggering a diplomatic crisis.

Oooh, look! There's Marcy's favorite word again, "imminent". But this lull in drone strikes, coupled with the explanation offered in the Post, tells us that no suitable al Qaeda targets with credible plans against the US presented themselves in Pakistan's tribal areas for over a month. That didn't deter Rogers; he's upset that any potential targets aren't blasted immediately:

Disclosure of a pause in the drone campaign in Pakistan came as a senior Republican lawmaker assailed the Obama administration for tightening the guidelines under which lethal drone strikes are permitted.

Rep. Mike Rogers (Mich.), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said Tuesday that policy changes made by President Obama last year to the drone program "are an utter and complete failure, and they leave Americans' lives at risk."

Rogers cited the spread of al-Qaeda offshoots in Yemen, Syria and Africa, and said that "individuals who would have been previously removed from the battlefield by U.S. counterterrorism operations for attacking or plotting to

attack against U.S. interests remain free because of self-imposed red tape.”

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Asked after the hearing what people or countries he was referring to when he talked about “individuals” who “remain free,” Rogers said that “terrorists who are in the crosshairs and would be removed from the battlefield under the old policy are still in the crosshairs, but are still actively planning attacks because of the policy change.”

Rogers’ outburst was so extreme that even James Clapper walked it back later in the hearing, stating that Obama’s policies have not put the country at greater risk, but recall that Clapper also has been yapping similar claptrap lately about al Qaeda groups wanting to strike the US. Of course, the number of attacks by al Qaeda-associated groups that have led to loss of American lives inside the US since 9/11 is exactly zero (no, don’t try to claim an al Qaeda connection to Boston beyond “inspiration”, just don’t).

Hidden in the Post article is a tidbit that seems to fit the idea of more counterterrorism funds going to Pakistan’s government (emphasis added):

“The president has made clear that even as we aggressively pursue terrorist networks – through more targeted efforts and by building the capacity of our foreign partners – America must move off a war footing,” said White House spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden. “We will not be safer if people abroad believe we strike within their countries without regard for the consequence.”

Recall that one of the justifications for the use of drones, especially in Pakistan’s tribal areas, is that the region is not accessible for

conventional military action to take out the desired targets. If Pakistan does indeed take military action against factions it deems dangerous to its government, why wouldn't the US want to provide some extra funding to Pakistan so that targets the US would otherwise hit with drones are also hit? The stickler here, of course, is that those the US would target previously have been said to operate with the blessings, and possibly even the funding, of Pakistan's intelligence agency. In the end, it may well come down to Pakistan's price for giving up its support of those groups, along with whether Sharif can convince the ISI that a potential full US withdrawal from Afghanistan provides cover for winding down support for the groups attacking US forces. Lurking in the background of these thoughts is the search for a new home for the US drones that become homeless under the zero option for Afghanistan, but providing monetary and intelligence support for conventional military action by Pakistan's military would incite far less hatred of the US than a return to use of Pakistani bases for launching US drone strikes. Caitlin Hayden's statement fits very well with that reasoning.