

PAKISTANI TROOPS SEIZE MIRAM SHAH. DOES THAT REMOVE DRONE STRIKE JUSTIFICATION?

Aside from a May 14 drone strike described as being on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, there have been no documented US drone strikes in Pakistan since December 26 of last year. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism links this break in drone strikes to the peace talks that Pakistan has been engaged in with the Taliban. On the surface, then, one might expect this week's offensive carried out by Pakistani troops in the North Waziristan stronghold of the terrorists targeted by the US to signal both the end of the peace talks and the opportunity for the CIA to re-start its drone campaign. As the New York Times reports, the peace process does appear to be dead:

Analysts cautioned that the surge in fighting did not appear to be the start of a much-anticipated military offensive across North Waziristan – a longstanding demand of American officials. But it did appear to spell an effective end to faltering peace talks between the government and the Pakistani Taliban.

“The talks will fizzle out if this campaign continues,” said Talat Masood, a retired general and political analyst. “The military leadership feels the militants aren’t serious about talking – and I think the civilian leadership is starting to see that too.”

But note that even though this isn't seen as the beginning of a major offensive, Pakistani troops are now in control of Miram Shah:

Pakistani soldiers seized control of a neighborhood dominated by foreign Islamist militants in the North Waziristan tribal district on Thursday as part of the most concerted military operation in the area in several years, a senior security official said.

Over 1,000 troops, backed by tanks and helicopter gunships, moved after dawn into a neighborhood on the edge of the district's main town, Miram Shah, that had become a sanctuary for Uzbek and Chinese fighters, said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

If Miram Shah and its surrounds are now under the control of the Pakistani military, then one of the Obama administration's criteria for use of drones could well no longer apply to the area. See this post by bmaz on the issue of "Kill or Capture". While the central issue in that analysis is the decision to kill US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, we see that one of the justifications trotted out by the Obama administration was that al-Awlaki could not be captured to be brought to trial. The claim could well have been bogus, as bmaz states:

Who says there was no way between the combined capabilities of the US and Yemen Awlaki could not at least be attempted to be captured?

But with the Pakistani military now controlling Miram Shah, shouldn't they be in a position to capture terrorists that the US wants to be taken out of action? That is, if they haven't already been killed by the offensive:

"Troops used explosives to blow up more than a hundred houses belonging to militants in Machis Camp," an intelligence official in Miramshah said. He added that artillery and helicopter gunships were targeting militant

hideouts while troops on the ground had begun a door to door search operation for militants.

The military also targeted suspected militant hideouts in the nearby town of Mirali. "The troops have destroyed about 300 shops in the main Mir Ali bazaar," a local official told AFP.

A spokesman for Inter Services Public Relations insisted the security forces were carrying out a 'sanitisation' operation in response to heavy shelling from militants on security installations in Miramshah following Wednesday's air strikes in North Waziristan.

Today's figures put the death toll in this week's operation at more than 80.

It remains to be seen whether the CIA will re-start drone strikes around Miram Shah. While the peace talk process appears to be dead, if the military continues to hold some of the prime territory where US targets have resided, carrying strikes on those sites may be subject to a different prohibition.