

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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Subject: Fw: Drone Attacks Split U.S. Officials (Wall Street Journal)

As predicted.

We should think through broader frame

Cdm

From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: Drone Attacks Split U.S. Officials (Wall Street Journal)

WASHINGTON (WSJ)—Fissures have opened within the Obama administration over the drone program targeting militants in Pakistan, with the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan and some top military leaders pushing to rein in the Central Intelligence Agency's aggressive pace of strikes.

Such a move would roll back, at least temporarily, a program that President Barack Obama dramatically expanded soon after taking office, making it one of the U.S.'s main weapons against the Pakistan-based militants fighting coalition troops in Afghanistan.

The program has angered Pakistan, a key ally in the fight against Islamist militants. The debate over drones comes as the two sides try to repair relations badly frayed by the shooting deaths of two Pakistanis by CIA contractor Raymond Davis in January, a wave of particularly lethal drone strikes following Mr. Davis's release from Pakistani custody in March, and the clandestine U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden on May 2.

The White House National Security Council debated a slowdown in drone strikes in a meeting on Thursday, a U.S. official said. At the meeting, CIA Director Leon Panetta made the case for maintaining the current program, the official said, arguing that it remains the U.S.'s best weapon against al Qaeda and its allies.

The result of the meeting—the first high-level debate within the Obama administration over how aggressively to pursue the CIA's targeted-killing program—was a decision to continue the program as is for now, the U.S. official said.

Another official, who supports a slowdown, said the discussions about revamping the program would continue, alongside talks with Pakistan, which is lobbying to rein in the drone strikes.

Most U.S. officials, including those urging a slowdown, agree the CIA strikes using the pilotless aircraft have been one of Washington's most effective tools in the fight against militants hiding out in Pakistan. The weapons have killed some top al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and left militants off balance in a swath of mountainous territory along the Afghan border with Pakistan where they once operated with near impunity. No one in the administration is advocating an outright halt to the program.

Yet an increasingly prominent group of State Department and military officials now argue behind closed doors that the intense pace of the strikes aggravates an already troubled alliance with Pakistan and, ultimately, risks destabilizing the nuclear-armed country, said current and former officials familiar with the discussions.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter, backed by top military officers and other State Department officials, wants the strikes to be more judicious, and argues that Pakistan's views need to be given greater weight if the fight against militancy is to succeed, said current and former U.S. officials.

Defenders of the current drone program take umbrage at the suggestion that the program isn't judicious. "In this context, the phrase 'more judicious' is really code for 'let's appease Pakistani sensitivities,'" said a U.S. official. The CIA has already given Pakistani concerns greater weight in targeting decisions in recent months, the official added. Advocates of sustained strikes also argue that the current rift with the Pakistanis isn't going to be fixed by scaling back the program.

The debate has largely been muted until now, in part because the details of the program are classified and because drone strikes against militants have generally been popular with the White House and most Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

Pakistani officials have always publicly condemned the drone program; only in private have they consented to the campaign and acknowledged to having helped the CIA pinpoint targets.

Now Islamabad is lobbying Washington in public and private to curtail the strikes because of Pakistani complaints that they take a high civilian death toll.

Lt. Gen. Asif Yasin Malik, who commands Pakistani forces fighting militants in the country's northwest, said in an interview that drone strikes are making it harder to win allies among tribal leaders.

"It's a negative thing in my area of responsibility. It causes instability and impinges on my relationship with the local people," Gen. Malik said.

Advocates for reining in the program argue that the pace and scope of strikes have become politically unsustainable because of their unpopularity in Pakistan.

In a series of recent closed-door meetings, according to current and former U.S. officials, Ambassador Munter and some senior military officials argued that more selective targeting will maintain the strikes' effectiveness while easing the political blowback in Pakistan, making it easier for officials there to work with Washington.

"You can't take your foot off the gas completely—the drones have a suppressing effect on them," a U.S. official said of militant groups in the border areas. "On the other hand, the Pakistanis need some breathing space."

Pakistan has given some indications it would ramp up efforts to root out militants, following a renewed U.S. request to do so by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen during a visit to Pakistan last week.

National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor declined to discuss the covert program or any internal debate over its future.

"The president has issued a clear directive to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda, and the United States government is completely united behind that goal. I think the results speak for themselves," Mr. Vietor said.

The CIA's targeted killing program, ramped up by President George W. Bush in July 2008, was initially

designed to target high-level al Qaeda leaders. Strikes averaged roughly one a week in the last half of 2008.

Mr. Obama has overseen a dramatic expansion of the program. The drones were originally used against specifically selected "high-value" targets, a list drawn up with Pakistani help.

But in the past year, the CIA has been targeting lower-level fighters after tracking their activities and movements.

The CIA last year conducted more than 100 strikes. The pace has slowed to roughly 30 in the first five months of 2011, partly over concerns about Pakistani reaction, a U.S. official said.

The latest drone strike came Friday, hitting three compounds in Pakistan's South Waziristan region and killing at least four people, according to an official familiar with the matter.

There is disagreement over how many civilian bystanders the strikes have killed. The Pakistanis say hundreds of civilians have died in the strikes, which is part of the reason they want them scaled back. The U.S. says 30 civilians have been slain. Both sides agree hundreds of militants have been killed.

The pushback by some U.S. officials against the drone program comes as U.S. diplomats and officials serving in Pakistan express dissatisfaction with what they see as the generally hostile tenor of the U.S.'s policy toward Pakistan.

These diplomats and officials say the deep vein of anti-Americanism that runs through Pakistani society forces its elected and military leaders, including army chief Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, to distance themselves from Washington to avoid a popular backlash.

"What's worrying a lot of us is whether we're turning people who should be our natural allies into our adversaries," said a U.S. diplomat in Pakistan.

A senior U.S. official said the key is figuring out what level of drone strikes can satisfy U.S. security needs and at the same be tolerated by the Pakistanis. "I think we underestimate the importance of public opinion in Pakistan to our detriment," the official said. The Pakistanis have "a legitimate concern."

Islamabad has proposed narrowing the scope of the CIA program to target militants that have been agreed to by both sides, a Pakistani official said.

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