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Tensions and Operational Challenges in Pakistan

By Scott Stewart

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On June 4, four U.S. diplomats assigned to the Consulate General of the United States in Peshawar, Pakistan, were stopped at a military checkpoint and temporarily detained after refusing to allow their two vehicles to be searched. The diplomats -- including a vice consul -- were traveling in a two-vehicle motorcade and were accompanied by three Pakistani Foreign Service National (FSN) security officers.

According to media reports, the Pakistani military has charged that the diplomats had traveled to Malakand without first obtaining permission from the Pakistani government. Malakand is a city located about 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Peshawar in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province. Because of the problems Pakistan has had with foreign jihadists in its border badlands, all foreigners are required to obtain something called a No Objection Certificate from Pakistan's Interior Ministry before visiting areas in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the adjacent Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Furthermore, the Pakistani press noted that the Pakistani military also objected to the Americans and their Pakistani FSNs' being armed and operating vehicles with fake license plates to disguise the diplomatic vehicles.

At its core, though, this incident is not about these small infractions. Indeed, Peshawar is the capital of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and diplomats stationed there already have received host country permission to be in the province. Additionally, U.S. diplomats assigned to Peshawar rarely venture outside of their secure compounds without a protective detail because of the extreme security threat in the city. Rather, this incident is a product of the strain in U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Motorcade Operations

The threat against U.S. diplomats in Peshawar is quite acute. In August 2008, American Consul General in Peshawar Lynne Tracy survived a small-arms attack against her motorcade. In November 2008, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Peshawar, Stephen Vance, was assassinated in an attack on his vehicle. In June 2009, Peshawar's Pearl Continental Hotel, which housed many foreign diplomats and U.N. personnel, was attacked with a massive vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), and in April 2010 the American Consulate building was the target of an elaborate VBIED plot. In May 2011, a U.S. diplomatic motorcade was attacked in Peshawar using a remotely detonated VBIED that was activated as the motorcade drove past. Jihadists also have attacked numerous Pakistani targets inside the city, including military, police and other government officials.

Given the threat in Peshawar, it makes sense that the vice consul would travel in an armed motorcade to attend a meeting -- especially in Malakand, which is even more remote than Peshawar and even more dangerous for a U.S. government employee. The use of fake vehicle tags is also logical. There are places where it is beneficial to announce one's diplomatic status, but in Peshawar, diplomatic vehicles and premises are targeted specifically for attacks. It is also an environment in which the militants possess the weaponry to engage a fully armored vehicle, so it is much better to attempt to be low key than to maintain a high-profile protective detail. American and other diplomats frequently do this in Pakistan, so it was somewhat disingenuous of the Pakistani military to raise it as a point of contention in this case.

From the configuration of the motorcade as shown on Pakistani television, it appears that it was intended to safeguard the vice consul, who was presumably riding in the rear seat of the first vehicle with a U.S. driver and the agent in charge of his protective detail riding in the vehicle's front passenger seat. The security follow-car appears to have been staffed by a U.S. shift leader riding in the front passenger seat and a Pakistani FSN driver and two FSN security officers in the rear of the vehicle.

It is not clear if the three U.S. security officers are full-time government employees or contractors. They reportedly were carrying U.S. diplomatic passports at the time of the incident, but not everyone who holds a diplomatic passport is afforded full diplomatic immunity. Still, it is likely they were at the very least members of the administrative and technical staff and that they would be afforded functional diplomatic immunity for activities related to their official duties.

This case is quite unlike the January 2011 Raymond Davis case, in which a contract security officer assigned to the U.S. Consulate General in Lahore shot and killed two men who he claims attempted to rob him. In the June 4 incident, the security officers were with the diplomat they were protecting and clearly were performing their assigned duties. This means they would be immune from prosecution for any violations the Pakistanis can cite in this incident. However, the FSN security officers could find themselves in a much worse position if the Pakistani government decides to pursue charges against them.

U.S.-Pakistani Tensions

While the June 4 incident is unlike the Davis case, it certainly is related to the growing tension between the United States and Pakistan exacerbated by the Davis shootings. The countries' relationship deteriorated further after the U.S. raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan. Relations between the two countries reached an all-time low in November 2011 after U.S. airstrikes against a Pakistani military post along the country's northwestern border with Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of 24 Pakistani soldiers. In response, the Pakistani government shut down NATO's supply route into Afghanistan, asked U.S. forces to vacate an air base used to fly unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and suspended military and intelligence cooperation.

After the November 2011 airstrike, the United States noticeably scaled back its UAV strikes in Pakistan. From Jan. 1 to May 21, the United States conducted just 13 UAV strikes while it sought to persuade the Pakistanis to reopen the NATO supply lines. However, since the conclusion of the NATO summit May 21, there have been eight U.S. airstrikes, including three strikes on June 2, 3 and 4. The June 4 strike reportedly resulted in the death of al Qaeda leader Abu Yahya al-Libi.

Considering this dynamic, it was no coincidence that the U.S. diplomatic motorcade was stopped the evening of June 4. The incident was meant to send a message to the Americans -- and perhaps even more important, a message to the Pakistani public, which has been full of anti-American sentiment since well before the Davis case. In fact, the Pakistani government has used anti-American sentiment as a tool for many years now, spanning several military administrations and now a civilian administration. The presence of a television crew at the scene also raises the possibility that the Pakistani military staged the entire incident.

The video shot by the television crew revealed another interesting point aside from the continuing tensions between the Americans and Pakistanis. Based on the footage, it is apparent that even though it has been two-and-a-half years since the suicide bombing against the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, and a year and a half since the Davis case, Washington continues to send Caucasian-looking men to work in this very hostile region rather than recruiting officers who could blend in on the street. The presence of Caucasians in a city like Malakand would draw even more attention than diplomatic vehicle plates.

Following 9/11, there was a rapid increase in the number of case officers assigned to collect information pertaining to al Qaeda and bin Laden, and the CIA was assigned to be the lead agency in the hunt. According to government sources, one big problem with this was that most of the case officers hired were young, inexperienced and ill suited to the mission. The CIA was simply unable to recruit case officers who understood the region's culture, issues and actors and who could move imperceptibly within the local milieu. Instead, the case officers are obviously foreigners. Along with the threat level in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan, this ensures that these officers, like other U.S. government employees in the region, receive protection when they leave secure compounds.

Not only does the United States lack officers who can blend in within the region, but also the Americans' operational security is typically worse than al Qaeda's. The areas where the remaining al Qaeda leadership is hiding are remote and insular. Visitors to the area are quickly recognized and identified -- especially if they happen to be Caucasian. Local residents who

spend too much time talking to such outsiders often are labeled as spies and killed. These conditions have helped the jihadists maintain a superior human intelligence (and counterintelligence) network in the area.

The June 4 incident highlights the persistence of these organizational problems as they continue hampering U.S. efforts to collect intelligence in Pakistan.