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Militants in no mood to talk

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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ISLAMABAD - Pakistan stands at a crossroad in its battle against militancy.

On the one hand, its Washington ally wants to turn their strategic partnership into a closer military alliance in which the United States would help the Pakistani military significantly ramp up the war against militancy - meaning opening a new battlefield, as the Americans did in Laos during the Vietnam war.

Alternatively, Pakistan is tempted to set aside American interests and apply its own mechanism to defeat militancy - which means striking deals with the "good" Taliban and defeating the "bad" Taliban without care for the consequences on the war in Afghanistan or the future of al-Qaeda and its allied Punjabi groups operating in the Pakistani tribal areas.

Pakistan took a step towards the second option at the weekend when it air-dropped leaflets in the North Waziristan tribal area warning pro-Taliban tribes "to back out of their support of the militants [al-Qaeda and its associate Punjabi militants] or face the consequences, like the people of Swat and Bajaur -tribal agencies] faced and lost their properties and assets".

For hawkish decision-makers in Washington and "bad" militants in North Waziristan, there is another option: remove Pakistani links in the war and deal directly with one another on Pakistani soil.

Last week, the Barack Obama administration authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to step up drone attacks on militants in the tribal areas to include missile strikes against unknown targets. Previously, a suspect had to be identified. The CIA wasted no time. In a series of attacks over the weekend, at least 10 militants were reported killed in North Waziristan.

The hardcore militants also flexed their muscles by blocking efforts led by the Afghan Taliban, who are not hostile towards Pakistan, for a truce and for the release of a former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) hostage.

Colonel Ameer Sultan Tarrar, nicknamed "Colonel Imam" by the mujahideen as he was instrumental in helping to raise the Taliban militia, was abducted by a Punjabi group, the Asian Tigers, on March 25, along with journalist Asad Qureshi. The bullet-riddled body of Khalid Khawaja, another former ISI official who was abducted at the same time, was recently found in North Waziristan.

The Tigers ignored instructions from Taliban leader Mullah Omar that the men should be freed, instead issuing a list of high-profile men in Pakistani jails to be released in 15 days. Otherwise, they said, Tarrar would meet the same fate as Khawaja. For the release of Qureshi, there is a separate demand of US\$10 million in ransom.

The New York Times reported on Friday that evidence of ties between the man accused of trying to car bomb Times Square in New York - Faisal Shahzad - and Pakistani militants had intensified debate inside the Barack Obama administration about expanding America's military presence in Pakistan. Some officials are said to want to increase the number of special operations forces working with Pakistani troops in the western mountains.

In a dispatch from Washington, the newspaper said the American military presence in Pakistan had already grown substantially over the past year, and now totaled more than 200 troops, part of a largely secret program to share intelligence with the Pakistani army and paramilitary troops and train them to battle militant groups.

This would play into the hands of the militants, who aim to lure the Americans into what they see as a trap in the rugged mountainous terrain on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.

Militants make demands

Among the 150 prisoners the militants want released are those involved in an attack on military headquarters in Rawalpindi, the killing of a retired general, abductions for ransom, and those allegedly connected to the attack on Mumbai in India in November 2008. Interior Minister Rahman Malik, who is traveling in Britain, was unable to respond to questions from Asia Times Online.

The militants had initially said they would release both captives.

A militant spokesman, Usman Punjabi, told ATol on April 29 on the telephone that Khawaja would be executed (which happened the next day) but that Colonel Imam would be released as he was not a part of Khawaja's plan to negotiate peace between the militants and the military,

Other sources told ATol that Colonel Imam was to be released because of pressure from the Afghan Taliban and that he would be handed into the custody of Afghan Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani's group led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur, the chief of the Taliban in North Waziristan. This was also widely reported in the Pakistani media.

However, everything changed with the arrest of Faisal Shahzad in New York and the ramping up of the drone program. Al-Qaeda forcibly put its foot down and managed to undermine the authority of Mullah Omar.

"It was completely wrong news that we agree to the release of Colonel Imam and Asad Qureshi," Usman Punjabi told ATol on the telephone on Sunday. "We did not receive any direct instruction from Mullah Omar. We did not see any direct emissary of Mullah Omar's. What we heard regarding the instructions [from Mullah Omar] was just talk by some ISI-backed Taliban groups in North Waziristan that they had been asked by Mullah Omar to release Colonel Imam.

"So we have asked them to provide evidence - any audio or video recording of Mullah Omar in which he ordered the release of Colonel Imam. We cannot believe the words of just any person in that regard," said Usman Punjabi.

"For us Colonel Imam was not a mujahid. If he was assumed in the past as the father of the Taliban, he did that as a government employee - being an army officer. He still receives a pension from the Pakistan army. To us he is their man," said Usman Punjabi. This is in direct contradiction to what he earlier told ATol, that Colonel Imam would be released.

It is becoming apparent that al-Qaeda is calling the shots in North Waziristan and creating a situation under which the good and bad Taliban will not have any choice but to operate under al-Qaeda's flagship while trying to entice the US into a fight.