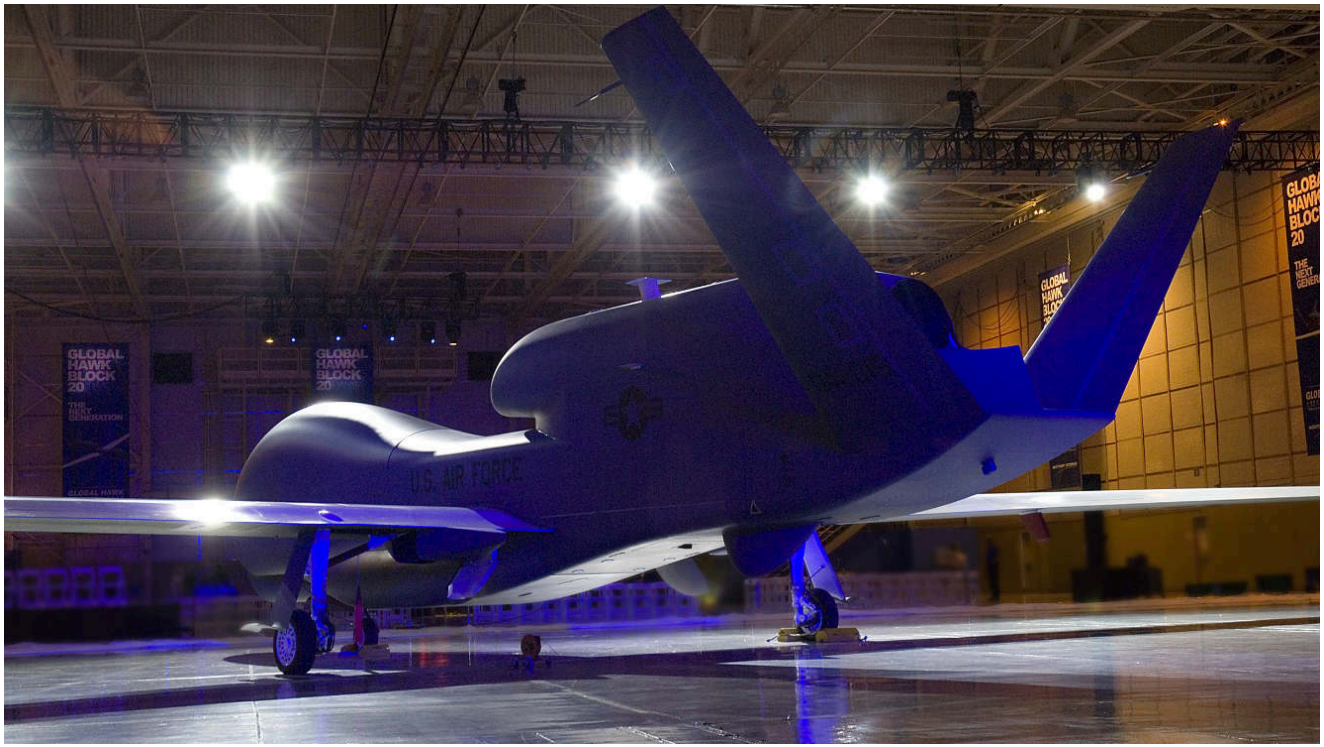
COMMENTARY



Killing the Emir: What We Know About the Strike that Killed Mansour and What It Says About Pakistan and the Taliban

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Last Friday, following another uninspiring meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, Pakistan issued a statement that more needed to be done militarily to deny Taliban military gains and bring the group back to the negotiating table. The next day, the United States announced that it had conducted a drone strike against Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, and President Obama later confirmed his death. A number of analysts and former U.S. government officials noted that the first drone strike ever in Pakistan's Balochistan province had crossed a key threshold both in terms of location as well as the target

Soon after the strike, former U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad raised two important questions: Will Pakistan start to cooperate with the United States on Afghanistan? Will this strike fragment and degrade the Taliban?

The answer to the first question of future Pakistani behavior rests in part on another that some have raised: What role — if any — did Pakistan play in the latest strike? Recent accounts remain ambiguous. If Washington managed to elicit some cooperation from Islamabad to pressure the Taliban, it could reveal some potential overlap of U.S. and Pakistani interests. If the attack was conducted without Pakistani involvement, then it suggests that despite a reduced footprint, the United States still possesses capabilities to independently disrupt organizations, coerce adversaries, and deny objectives of actors in the region. Either way, the strike against Mansour suggests a tactical achievement for the United States in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, Khalilzad's second question may be more fundamental as it grapples with longer-term strategic consequences of the strike against Mansour. Tactical advances may not necessarily translate into medium- to long-term gains because they will have uncertain effects on the impending leadership transitions of most parties to the Afghan conflict, the cohesion of a future reconciliation process, as well as on Taliban organization, combat power, and level of violence. While tactical advancements are encouraging, the strategic consequences could be negligible.

If Pakistan cooperated…

Pakistan's potential future cooperation in Afghanistan — though invariably selective and self-interested —may hinge upon whether it cooperated in this instance or not. On the surface, Islamabad's formal condemnation of the strike and expression of concern regarding the U.S. violation of their sovereignty suggests not, but there are some reasons to think they might have covertly cooperated with the operation.

First, the fact that this strike was conducted by U.S. military rather than the CIA has led some to infer it was cleared by Pakistan in order to de-conflict airspace and ensure help with recovery in case of an incident. Second, though accounts differ on the exact location of the airstrike in Balochistan (with *The New York Times* initially reporting both Ahmed Wal and Dalbandin), it would have been at least 23 miles inside of Pakistan's territory where armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) loitering in Pakistani airspace would be vulnerable to even the most basic air defenses. Pakistan had also upgraded and reconfigured its air defenses on the western border between 2010 and 2011 after some vulnerabilities were revealed during the Osama Bin Laden raid and the Salala incident. Thus, one might surmise a UAV could easily operate in Pakistan airspace only with Pakistani complicity or sheer incompetence. Finally, reports have surfaced that there was tacit cooperation within Pakistan's intelligence establishment, perhaps due to prior commitments to apply pressure if the Taliban remained intransigent.

Furthermore, there were plausible motives for Pakistani cooperation. First, some have suggested this is a *quid pro quo* to appease the United States and gain support for the discounted sale of F-16s. This seems unlikely however given that in 15 years, Pakistan has refused sell out its regional interests for a few hundred million dollars in inducements.

Another explanation is that Pakistan wanted to punish an unruly Taliban and compel it back to the negotiating table after Mansour had embarrassed Pakistan by refusing reconciliation talks. Pakistan — fearing its power over the movement was eroding — may have wanted to generally assert more control since Mansour was reportedly diversifying Taliban support and cultivating independent sources from Iran or Russia. That this aligned with U.S. goals was an added bonus.

Third, some have suggested Pakistan may have supported the strike as a "high risk gamble" to clear the way for recently promoted Taliban deputy commander, Sirajuddin Haqqani, to assume control of the movement and advance Pakistani interests (This gamble apparently did not pay off as the Taliban just appointed Mansour's other deputy, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, to be their new leader). After his father died, Haqqani assumed control of the network that the U.S. State Department officially lists as a terrorist organization. Most U.S. analysts and officials believe the Haqqani network enjoys a closer relationship with and more direct support from Pakistan than the main Kandahari/Quetta Shura branch of the Afghan Taliban. A pessimists' take is that installing Haqqani at the helm would bolster Pakistan's hegemonic designs on Afghanistan and relieve U.S. pressure on Pakistan by pitting American demands — to support reconciliation and to target the Haqqani network — against each other. An optimists' take is that this could potentially enable a durable reconciliation process because only a leader of the most lethal wing of the anti-Kabul insurgency with hardliner credentials could credibly commit to a deal (assuming he was inclined to it in the first place) and prevent outbidding or spoilers. At the same time, others contend the Taliban movement, which originates in Southern Afghanistan, would never select a leader from the country's east like Haqqani. Thus, some sources predicted Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqob, would emerge as the movement's new leader.

The point is that there were plenty of reasons for Pakistan to have partnered on this strike. Most (though not all) of these possible motives seem to point to a modest congruence of interests between the United States and Pakistan on Afghanistan's future — at least tactically — and pathways for future cooperation between Washington and Islamabad.

Why deny if you supply?

Some analysts have expressed doubts about collaboration given Pakistan's public condemnation of the drone strike and the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. While denial would muddle Pakistan's signals towards the Taliban and the broader U.S. audience, the "relatively muted reaction" — with no statements from Pakistan military officials or its Inter Services Public Relations arm (until four days later) — allows them to signal different reactions to different audiences: cooperation to the United States and anger to the Taliban. Moreover, we've seen this private complicity and public denial on drone strikes for over a decade now, ever since Pakistan agreed to "flight boxes" for U.S. targeting of Pakistan-based militants. The reasons articulated for secrecy are usually either a) concern for a broadly anti-American domestic constituency that bristles at collaboration with the United States, or b) a fear that public collaboration could trigger a snowball effect and mobilize all Taliban and other militant groups to unify against the state.

If a unilateral strike…

Despite the previous arguments, a unilateral U.S. drone strike without Pakistani permission or cooperation, while difficult, is conceivable, and it would also serve as a different sort of a tactical success. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which U.S. drones could have beaten Pakistani radars and air defenses.

For example, U.S. forces could have employed RQ-170 Sentinels and flown them between the seams of Pakistan's radar systems to track Mansour's vehicle from Iran. Then they could have passed coordinates off to armed Reaper drones flown in from Afghanistan (as one recent account suggests), possibly Kandahar Airfield, to a point along the Taftan-Quetta highway close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, perhaps where the United States suspected air defenses were sparsest. Ahmad Wal might have served as a convenient point close to the border. If the drones began tracking Mansour's car at the Taftan border crossing, they would have had to operate in Pakistani air space over Balochistan for at least five or six hours (based on Google maps estimates) to track it for the 472 kilometers to Ahmad Wal plus any additional loiter time before his car was hit by Hellfire missiles.

Armed drones, which are being employed more frequently in Afghanistan, may not have triggered warnings in Pakistan until it was too late. Alternatively, air defense suppression tactics, such as jammers, could have been employed to clear a path for the Reapers. Finally, it is also possible that Pakistan detected intrusions in its air space, recognized these to be U.S. assets, and chose not to attack fearing the consequences. Any of these scenarios would reveal some vulnerability in Pakistan's air defenses or its deterrent.

If the United States killed Mansour without Pakistani cooperation or assent, it would send a powerful message that Washington possesses military reach, intelligence capabilities, and willingness to threaten the Taliban outside Afghanistan in areas where they were once "protected" and "immune". The message could also pressure Pakistan and reassure the Afghan government of U.S. resolve to stay engaged rather than rush to the exits.

While drone surveillance and phone intercepts may have been employed to triangulate Mansour's position, the operation most likely relied on some human intelligence to pick up Mansour's trail. First, this would demonstrate the United States has cultivated valuable intelligence sources — either within Afghanistan or Pakistan — to hold Taliban leaders and Pakistani assets at risk in a part of Pakistan where they have traditionally been secure. It has always been plausible that Pakistan's massive military and intelligence apparatus contained some dissent, leaks, and moles. This is even more likely for a 40,000 to 60,000 strong Taliban movement riven by factions and rivalries. Second, it could invalidate critiques that intelligence collection depended on larger force presence and bolster the credibility of a light footprint counterterrorism mission pressuring the Taliban and other actors even in perceived "safe havens."

Third, demonstrating a willingness to employ a unilateral strike capability without tripping air defenses or triggering escalation affords renewed leverage over Pakistan. The United States is far less exposed to retaliation in the region than when it had over 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. The Mansour strike proves that at a low premium, the United States can now threaten to not only disrupt Pakistan's control of its proxy, but potentially stoke instability on the border with unmanageable externalities for Pakistan. This leverage is sharpened by the fact that, due to declining internal violence and rising foreign investment prospects, Pakistan currently has much more to lose.

There are also reasons to count on U.S. capacity to conduct more of these strikes in the future. First, fissures create openings for exploitation. While Mullah Omar was the undisputed leader of the Taliban movement, Mansour faced a number of disgruntled rivals. The next Taliban leader will likely face even more internecine fighting, which can be exploited for targeting intelligence. Second, to win over disgruntled factions and consolidate authority, the next Taliban emir might feel compelled to visit different theaters to confer with commanders and placate rivals rather than hunker down far from the front. As has been demonstrated with other high value targets, more movement creates more exposure and vulnerability to tracking and drone targeting.

It appears that the fear of drone targeting is already having a deterrent effect as reports surfaced that some Taliban commanders, citing safety concerns, hesitated to attend the Quetta Shura meeting on leadership succession.

If Pakistan was surprised by the strike, some have argued Islamabad may react with resentment, fear, and anger at U.S. military penetration and the liquidation of what some accounts regarded as a Pakistani asset and long-term investment to ensure their future stake in Afghanistan. This could motivate Pakistan to resist U.S. efforts at every turn, or Pakistan could conclude that its maximalist objectives will not be met and could start to use coercive levers to more aggressively shape a satisfactory reconciliation process that it can live with. After all, even though Pakistan appears out of all Afghanistan's neighbors to have the greatest interest and capabilities, parties like the United States can hamper or raise the costs of Pakistan's objectives with relative ease.

Strategic consequences?

While the United States might expect some near-term tactical gains and leverage from the recent strike, the strategic consequences of Mansour's death in terms of organizational decay and violence in Afghanistan, Taliban willingness to bargain, and an uncertain geopolitical environment remain in question.

There is an ongoing debate on whether leadership decapitation is an effective method to defeat militant groups. Much of the answer depends on whether you're measuring effects on organizational survival, martyrdom effects, overall time horizons, combat power, counterinsurgency success, or levels or types of violence.

Even if the evidence of those who favor leadership targeting is compelling, there are reasons to think organizational fragmentation and degradation can be a lengthy, contentious, and violent process, especially in the case of Afghanistan where civil war has historically been driven as much by intra-group competition as inter-group battles. This is due to intensified militant competition, out-bidding, and spoilers. In the three months following the revelation of Mullah Omar's death (August through October), the number of daily violent incidents jumped higher than the number in the spring and summer periods for the first time in three years. Some also predict Taliban fragmentation will create a void filled by the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al Qaeda. Continued, or even escalated, violence can overwhelm already vulnerable Afghan security forces . It can also dissuade international actors from remaining involved or committing new funds to prop up the Afghan government, in the fear that they would be throwing good money after bad (hundreds of billions of it).

Second, though it is undoubtedly the U.S. goal to push the Taliban to the bargaining table, it is unclear if this strike improves those prospects. Mansour was rumored to be "less that of a preacher than a cartel boss" and therefore more of a pragmatist than an ideologue. Thus if Mansour was unwilling or unable to come to the bargaining table, it is hard to imagine his successor, whether Haqqani, whose organization was thrived on violence the past decade, or another figure with the requisite ideological credentials, would be more disposed to reconciliation.

For that matter, there is even more uncertainty about what can be delivered at the negotiating table. Even if the United States was willing to "take the gloves off" against the Taliban and increased coercive pressure proved effective in bringing them back into the reconciliation process, it is unclear if the Afghan government is cohesive, strong, and/or willing enough to find some bargaining space with the Taliban. High levels of infighting, fractious elites, competing modes of governance, and substantial opposition to reconciliation all divide Kabul. As one analyst pointed out at a recent conference, of all of the parties to the Afghan conflict and reconciliation process, the only committed actor is the United States.

Third, even if the next Taliban leader is amenable to bargaining, he will likely move slowly. He will need roughly six months to consolidate power, and he will face continued uncertainty about the extent of his power. In this, the Taliban's recent bumpy leadership transition is instructive. Eight months after death of Mullah Omar was revealed and Mansour was formally appointed as the head of the Afghan Taliban, he was still consolidating control over the organization. This was in line with predictions by some

seasoned analysts, despite the fact that he had effectively been running the organization for two years. If this timeline is repeated, when the next Taliban leader has consolidated power, there will be a new U.S. president elect, a new Pakistan army chief, and an Afghan National Unity Government with questionable legitimacy. These conditions will make for a highly tenuous environment for the reconciliation process.

So what now?

The recent strike of the Afghan Taliban leader appears to be a tactical success and a positive development for the United States in the near-term. It either reflects some amount of cooperation with Pakistan or the prospect of significant intelligence and military reach despite a smaller footprint, either of which can serve the United States well in the near-term. However, in the long-term there is abounding uncertainty over the consequences for the Taliban as an organization, the timeline for new leadership consolidation, and the willingness of the new Taliban leadership and Kabul government to seriously engage in a reconciliation process. Since the Obama administration has openly pursued a negotiated settlement rather than outright military victory as the more realistic outcome, tactical means of leverage will only translate into strategic gains if it advances that endgame.

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