

BULLETIN

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Implications of Osama bin Laden's Death for the Conflict in Afghanistan

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The death of Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, could influence the political dynamics of the South Asia and serve as a watershed in the US-Pakistani relations. Despite recent tension, however, these will not come close to a breaking point as these two nations are interlinked in their desire to find a workable solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. If the prevailing status quo in the US-Pakistani relations was to be positively altered then opportunities for untested remedies should arise.

The fact that Al Qaeda's leader was tracked down in Pakistan reenergized the debate about the perceived duplicity of Pakistan's counterterrorist and foreign policies as its military now stands accused either of gross incompetence or of harboring the world's most wanted man. It theoretically gives the US a strong leverage over Pakistan to demand improved cooperation in the process of hunting down the Pakistan based militants and might constitute a turning point in the war in Afghanistan. Making the most of bin Laden's killing, however, is conditioned by the future conduct of the involved parties. Four scenarios now seem the most plausible in the region.

The Military Scenario. The US will use this opportunity to put pressure on Pakistan to deal a final blow to the insurgents operating along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The three main groups attacking the Afghan and international forces (Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb i Islami) rely on their sanctuaries in Pakistan for supplies, arms, money and recruits. Recent Pakistani military campaigns against the militants on the Afghan-Pakistani border focused more on the so-called Pakistani Taliban – extremists in conflict with the Pakistani state – than the aforementioned groups which are militarily active in Afghanistan. Since 2009 the Pakistani army has successfully resisted the American pressure to enter North Waziristan agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) – reportedly a safe haven of the Haqqani Network.

If the Pakistani army now musters enough forces for such an assault, it will most probably succeed in military terms. However, this victory might prove shallow as the militants will either avoid confronting the Pakistani military outright or after brief clashes escape into Afghanistan. As a result of this, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) could find itself under increased pressure in the South and especially in the East of Afghanistan as hundreds Afghan and Pakistani militants would simply move Westwards. This is bound to seriously increase the intensity of the combat operations in Afghanistan this year and could strain the Polish contingent based in the Ghazni province which might find itself under increased military pressure. Under these circumstances, the Polish contingent in Afghanistan should not be reduced and should continue with the stabilization mandate of its mission.

Such a turn of events could strain the ISAF troops in Afghanistan in the short term but could also improve the coalition's position in the longer term, provided that it emerges victorious out of this year's fighting. Pakistan's actions in North Waziristan definitely would please the US which could regard it as a sign of the Pakistani goodwill in the aftermath of the bin Laden's killing. In such conditions, the US would continue its huge civilian and military aid to Pakistan (20 bln USD since 2001) and gradually reduce the number of unilateral drone attacks in the FATA region. Consequently, the Afghan government could be empowered to commence a meaningful peace process from the position of strength in the aftermath of this year's fighting. All of these issues will be discussed

during the imminent visit of Hilary Clinton, US Secretary of State, to Pakistan which could serve to resume the US-Pakistan strategic dialogue.

The Political Scenario. Moreover, the killing of Osama bin Laden might create a window of opportunity for a political solution to the conflict. Pakistan will likely resist the American pressure to cut its links with the Afghan militants but instead push them into meaningful peace negotiations with the government of Hamid Karzai. Given bin Laden's removal, the commencement of the peace process could prove more acceptable for all of the interested parties.

The Afghan government, which constituted High Peace Council in September 2010 to pursue a reintegration and reconciliation process, may eventually find a willing partner in the insurgents. The Taliban, unable to rely on al-Qaeda assistance, might denounce ties with the jihadists, fulfilling one of the reconciliation preconditions, as agreed by the London conference in January 2010. With the war fatigue on the rise in the US and the date of the partial withdrawal of American troops approaching (July 2011), the Obama administration might use this occasion to opt for a negotiated solution. The success of this approach, however, very much depends on Pakistan and the extent of its true influence over all of the Afghan Taliban factions, and its resolve to implement this scenario against the backdrop of a spate of recent attacks by the Pakistani Taliban in FATA and Karachi.

The Non-conciliatory Scenario. During its special session on 13 May 2011, the Pakistani Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the US unilateral raid in Abbottabad, called for the end of drone attacks and warned that ISAF convoys passing through Pakistan could be halted. This suggests the potential for the hardening of the Pakistani position and puts at risk the future of its relations with the US.

The government might opt for a confrontation with the US which should prove popular with the anti-American Pakistani public. Rupture in Pakistani-US relations would spell trouble for the ISAF troops in Afghanistan as the Pakistan might indefinitely halt counterterrorism cooperation and block ISAF supply routes. Moreover Afghanistan and India could attempt to intensify their bilateral partnership, as was illustrated by the visit of the Indian prime minister to Kabul on 12-13 May, leaving Pakistan isolated in the region.

Such policies would lead to a dramatic worsening of the Afghan-Pakistani relations and could strengthen the American proponents of the unilateral counter-terrorist strategy in South Asia which envisages a seriously reduced international footprint in the region. The US would also attempt to cut aid to Pakistan and publicly co-ordinate more with India on all South Asian matters.

The Status Quo Scenario. The surprise of the Abbotabad raid could soon abate and one could potentially expect the situation to return to the pre-2 May status quo. Pakistan might prolong its co-operation with the FATA based militants and its involvement in Afghanistan but simultaneously could continue to tolerate unilateral US drone strikes on its soil, and aid the US in hunting down Al Qaeda elements on the Afghan-Pakistani border. In reward for this counter terrorist co-operation, Pakistan would continue to receive generous US aid. This would complicate Pakistan and US' relations with India and Afghanistan which see no reason to reward the country, in their view, complicit in sheltering terrorists. Therefore the Indian-Pakistani peace process might be put on hold and the Afghan government could intensify its efforts to engage with the Taliban without Pakistan's involvement. Simultaneously, the ISAF would continue its anti-Taliban counterinsurgency campaign and prepare the Afghan security forces for the coalition's withdrawal in 2014.

Conclusions. The killing of Osama bin Laden does not end the US led global war on terrorism but could provide a rare window of opportunity for the international effort to successfully end the conflict in Afghanistan. It should not serve as an excuse for an accelerated withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan as the war may now be entering its decisive phase. The US possesses an unprecedented possibility to pressurize Pakistan into alteration of its policy towards militants and extremist organizations in accordance with the outlined military scenarios. However, as the two sides seem to harden their respective positions and given the significance of Pakistan for the ISAF presence in Afghanistan, this scenario is bound to face important hurdles. Pakistan will most likely opt for the political scenario which could encounter initial US resistance as the Americans currently wish not to reward Islamabad with a Pakistani influenced peace process in Afghanistan. Consequently, the situation could still reverse to the pre-Abbottabad status quo.