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Pakistan holds onto its Taliban

By Gareth Porter
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WASHINGTON - The refusal of Pakistani intelligence to turn over Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and as many as six other top Taliban figures to the United States or the Afghan government has dealt a serious blow to the Barack Obama administration's hopes for Pakistani cooperation in weakening the Taliban.

It has left little doubt in the minds of US officials that the Pakistani military intends to keep physical custody of the Taliban detainees in order to exert influence on both the pace of peace negotiations in Afghanistan and the ultimate terms of a settlement.

The Pakistani custody of Baradar and other Taliban leaders now appears to be more of a safe haven for the Afghan insurgents than a normal detention. At least some US officials already accept the likelihood that the Pakistanis will allow the Taliban leaders to continue to maintain contact with other Taliban officials while in custody.

The primary evidence of the Pakistani military leadership's intentions is the Pakistani refusal to allow the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to question Baradar in the days following his initial detention. The CIA was denied direct access to Baradar for "about two weeks", according to US media reports.

That Pakistani refusal of access frustrated the CIA, which was eager to interrogate Baradar about details of the Taliban's operations and finance. During those crucial two weeks, US intelligence officials got no information that would lead them to the rest of the Taliban leadership.

US intelligence officials doubt that they can get the truth from Baradar as long he is in Pakistani military custody, according to Miller's report.

During that two-week period, CIA director Leon Panetta and other US officials asked the Pakistani government and military leaders to transfer Baradar and other Taliban leaders to the US detention center at Bagram air base in Afghanistan to allow the US military to interrogate him, according to one report.

But Pakistani Interior Minister Rahman Malik flatly rejected that proposal on February 19. He announced that Baradar and two other high-ranking Taliban leaders arrested in February would not be handed over to the US, and that Pakistani questioning of Baradar would continue to determine whether he had violated Pakistani law.

Even if Baradar was found not to have broken the law, Malik said he would be returned to "the country of origin, not to the USA".

The Obama administration then tried to pressure Pakistan to extradite the Taliban leaders to Afghanistan. Federal Bureau of Investigation director Robert Mueller, accompanied by Afghan Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, met secretly with Interior Minister Malik last Wednesday and sought to get him to agree to extradition to Afghanistan, as Anand Gopal reported in the Christian Science Monitor.

Despite Afghan government statements that he had agreed to extradition to Afghanistan, Malik was non-committal about extradition on Thursday. He promised only that his government "will definitely look at" a formal request from the Afghan government.

Pakistan and Afghanistan were reported to be negotiating an agreement on the return of prisoners, with the "mechanisms" for such a return still to be worked out.

Then on Friday, a provincial high court in Pakistan's Punjab province delivered what appeared to be the final blow to the prospects for extradition of Baradar and four other Taliban leaders to Afghanistan. The court blocked any extradition by Pakistan of the Taliban leaders to any country until the court could hear the issue of the detainees' rights.

The Pakistani government could appeal the decision, but officials in Islamabad told CBS News there were no plans for such an appeal at present.

Even before the court intervened in the issue, any hopes the Obama administration and the US military might have had that Pakistan was prepared to sell out its former Taliban allies had already waned.

The newspaper report in the US on Wednesday quoted a "top American official" who had met with Pakistani army chief Ashfaq Pervez Kiani "recently" - presumably Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who had met with Kiani on January 21 - who did not seem confident about the prospects of getting control of the Taliban leaders. The official said, "We'll know soon whether this is cooperation, or a stonewall and kind of rope-a-dope."

The official was referring to a number of past episodes in which the Pakistani military was ostensibly supporting US policy in Afghanistan while it continued to support the Taliban.

The same story last Wednesday quoted a "top American military officer in Afghanistan" as speculating that the Pakistanis were intending to use Baradar and their other Taliban prisoners to accelerate the timetable for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. "I don't know if they're pushing anyone to the table," said the unnamed general, "but they are certainly preparing the meal."

By suggesting that the Pakistanis were preparing for a negotiating process involving Baradar, the "top military officer" was acknowledging that he and other US officials expect Pakistan to allow Baradar to negotiate with the Hamid Karzai government in Kabul while he is in custody.

That role would also require that Baradar be allowed to communicate with other members of the Taliban leadership - both those in custody and those still operating freely, including Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Multiple reports from US sources have indicated that the original arrest of Baradar was not the result of a raid specifically targeting the Taliban's second-ranking leader but an "accident". Baradar's identity was discovered only after the raid took place, the US officials said.

It now appears that Pakistan's military leadership quickly adopted a new strategy for stepping up the timetable for Afghan peace negotiations and ensuring that its interests were protected in those negotiations after it realized that it had Baradar in custody.

That decision would account for the rapid detention of as many as six other members of the Taliban leadership council that followed the apprehension of Baradar, as Gopal reported in the Christian Science Monitor on Wednesday.

The plan evidently assumes that the Taliban leaders will have to consult Pakistani intelligence officials while they negotiate with the Afghan government and the United States.

The Obama administration had been counting on Pakistan to end its policy of providing safe haven for Afghan Taliban leaders and fighters because, without such a decision, US officials admit there is little or no possibility of seriously weakening the Taliban.

That assumption impelled Obama to write a letter to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari last November, warning bluntly that Pakistan's support for the Taliban would no longer be tolerated, the Washington Post reported on February 19.

The Pakistani government adjusted to the latest US pressure on its Taliban policy by allowing the Central Intelligence Agency to expand its intelligence operations in Pakistan aimed at intercepting Taliban and al-Qaeda messages to Karachi. It also agreed to joint operations with the CIA to find high-level Taliban operatives.

But it is now clear that the increased intelligence cooperation with the CIA did not mean Pakistan had abandoned its broader strategy of relying on the Taliban as the best guarantee of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan.