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US Officials Protect Pak Military on Aid to Taliban

By Gareth Porter

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Despite evidence implicating the current Pakistani army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, in a major military assistance program for the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan over the past few years, senior officials of the Barack Obama administration persuaded Congress to extend military assistance to Pakistan for five years without any assurance that the Pakistani assistance to the Taliban had ended.

Those officials, led by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen, have been arguing that Kayani is committed to ending support the Taliban and other radical Islamic movements receive from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, but that he is not yet able to control ISI operatives.

Late last year, U.S. officials were reportedly pressing Kayani for far-reaching changes in the ISI that would end its role in support of insurgents in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) demanded that the ISI be put under civilian control and threatened to introduce legislation making military assistance to Pakistan conditional on evidence that the Pakistani military had ended such support to the Taliban.

But Kerry dropped his proposal for conditioning U.S. military assistance to Pakistan on ending the ISI-Taliban program. In February Kerry said conversations with Mullen and "other players" had persuaded him that Kayani and his choice for new ISI chief, Ahmad Shuja Pasha, had "a willingness to engage in transformation" of the ISI.

The Kerry-Lugar legislation passed by the Senate in June provides \$2 billion in military aid as well as \$4 billion in economic assistance to Pakistan over five years and makes no mention

of evidence of military aid to the Taliban. It merely requires the secretary of state to certify that the "security forces of Pakistan" are making concerted efforts to prevent the Taliban and associated militant groups from using the territory of Pakistan as a sanctuary from which to launch attacks within Afghanistan."

Obama's national security team established a critical basis for its argument to Congress by leaking a story to the *New York Times* asserting that Kayani would not be able to control the activities of ISI in the short run.

The story, published March 26, acknowledged "direct support from operatives" of the ISI for the Afghan Taliban insurgency, but it quoted anonymous U.S. officials saying it is "unlikely that top officials in Islamabad are directly coordinating the clandestine efforts" – a carefully chosen formula that does not deny that they are presiding over a policy of aiding the Taliban.

The story said unnamed U.S. officials "have also said that mid-level ISI operatives occasionally cultivate relationships that are not approved by their bosses." That statement diverted attention away from whether the Pakistani military leadership has approved military assistance to the Taliban.

Mullen has been suggesting that Kayani has demonstrated good faith by purging the ISI. He told Trudy Rubin of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in early April that the new head was "handpicked" to change the ISI.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee May 21, Mullen emphasized that Gen. Kayani had changed "almost the entire leadership of ISI" over the previous six months.

After a conversation with Mullen, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius quoted him in a June 29 article as saying that Kayani and his choice for ISI chief "have committed very specifically to change the culture of ISI," but that "that's not going to happen overnight."

Mullen has carefully avoided saying that Kayani has given assurances he intends to halt the military assistance to the Taliban, however.

The historical evidence on Kayani's past relationship to the issue suggests that he has no intention of changing Pakistani policy toward the Taliban.

Kayani himself served as head of ISI from late 2004 to late 2007 and presided over the development of a major logistical and training program for the Taliban forces operating out of Pakistan's Baluchistan province.

The ISI military assistance program was first revealed in a NATO report of a two-week battle by NATO forces against a determined Taliban offensive in Kandahar province in September 2006.

During the battle, NATO forces captured a number of Pakistani fighters who detailed the ISI role in supporting the Taliban offensive. The NATO account, reported in the *Telegraph* by Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid on Oct. 6, 2006, described two ISI training camps for the Taliban near Quetta in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. It also documented the provision by the ISI of 2,000 rocket-propelled grenades and 400,000 rounds of ammunition – just for that one Taliban campaign.

The size and scope of the program of support described in the report were hardly consistent with the idea that assistance to the Taliban is a rogue operation by ISI operatives.

Mullen and Defense Secretary Robert Gates presumably know about Kayani's past support for the Taliban assistance program. Evidence of continuing ISI assistance to, and safe have for, Taliban forces after Kayani replaced Musharraf as the top Army general was compiled in an intelligence assessment circulated to the top national security officials of the George W. Bush administration in mid-2008, according by David Sanger's book [*The Inheritance*](#).

Kayani was also overheard in a conversation intercepted by U.S. intelligence referring to a high-ranking Taliban leader, Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani, as a "strategic asset," according to Sanger's account. Haqqani was a Taliban minister during that organization's brief period in power during the late 1990s, and his network has been a key target for the U.S. campaign of drone strikes in Pakistan during 2008 and 2009.

Kayani is not the first Pakistani military leader to assure the U.S. that he is purging the ISI of pro-Taliban elements. President Pervez Musharraf did the same thing to ease pressure from Washington to toe the line on Afghanistan in early October 2001.

Musharraf claimed he had made far-reaching changes in the ISI by removing its director, Mahmood Ahmad – who he said had been affiliated with Islamic extremists. But Musharraf never changed his pro-Taliban policy; despite his pledge to do so immediately after the 9/11 terror attacks.

The March 26 *Times* story reported Pakistani officials as portraying their Taliban policy as "part of a strategy to maintain influence in Afghanistan for the day when American forces would withdraw" leaving "a power vacuum to be filled by India."

After the *Times* story, Gates began arguing that the U.S. must convince Pakistani leaders that it will not abandon the war in Afghanistan.

In a March 29 interview with Fox News, Gates said the Pakistanis had ties with the Taliban "partly as a hedge against what might happen in Afghanistan if we were to walk away or whatever." The U.S. has to convince the Pakistanis that "they can count on us and that they don't need that hedge," Gates said.

Mullen and other U.S. military leaders have an interest other than Afghanistan – which appears to driving their willingness to overlook Kayani's past and present support for the Taliban. They once had close ties with the Pakistani military, which they touted for decades as a basis for U.S. influence in the country, despite persistent and sharp divergences in U.S. and Pakistani strategic interests.

Those ties were cut off in the 1990s because of legislation requiring an end to military cooperation over Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Mullen and other military leaders now argue that close relations must be a top U.S. priority.

As Mullen told the *Inquirer's* Rubin, "One of my strategic objectives is to close this gap in the relationship with the Pakistani military."