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Pakistan frees Taliban commander

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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Pakistan has freed the supreme commander of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, so that he can play a pivotal role in backchannel talks through the Pakistani army with Washington, Asia Times Online has learned.

The release of Baradar, who was arrested in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi in February, was confirmed by a senior Pakistani counter-terrorism official. He added that the United States was fully aware of the development although he gave no indication of the Americans' reaction.

A senior Taliban leader, speaking to Asia Times Online on Thursday from the southern AfPak region, also confirmed that Baradar "had reached the safety of his people". The implication is that he is back with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Baradar has represented Mullah Omar in previous peace talks with Washington, mediated by Saudi Arabia.

When news broke of Baradar's arrest in a raid by Pakistani and US intelligence officials, it was widely touted as a major victory in the war in Afghanistan, given his top position.

Talking to Asia Times Online at the time, a senior US official confided that Baradar had been picked up in a stroke of luck as intelligence operatives were not aware that he was in the vicinity when they went after other suspects. (See Pakistan, [US undeterred by Afghan setback](#) Asia Times Online, April 23, 2010.)

"The Pakistan army's mental block about the Afghan Taliban is still there. They still believe them as their connection in Afghanistan. Mullah Baradar's arrest was not deliberate, it was a mistake," the US official told Asia Times Online.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was aware of the presence of Baradar and other Taliban figures in Karachi but never intercepted them because they were not considered a threat to the internal security of the country. The military did not want to mess with them as it was convinced that once foreign forces finally withdrew from Afghanistan, these Taliban would in one way or another be a part of the political set-up.

"At the time of Baradar's arrest, all the [Pakistani] bosses [chief of army staff and director general of the ISI] were in Brussels. We got a hint that somebody very important was lurking in Karachi. We informed them [Pakistanis] and jointly we went there. At the time of the arrest, neither we nor the Pakistanis were aware that they had rounded up Baradar," the official told Asia Times Online after the arrest.

Following Baradar's seizure, the US tried its level-best to get its hands on him through the Afghan government, which pressed Pakistan to deport its citizen so that he could be tried in an Afghan court.

But squadron leader Khalid Khawaja, a former ISI official killed this year by militants in Pakistan, successfully petitioned for a stay in the Lahore High Court against Baradar's extradition. Baradar was confined in a very comfortable safe house in the capital, Islamabad.

Several days after his arrest, the Americans were given access to him, and according to a US official he shared some valuable information. However, because of the delay in access, the situation had already changed on the ground.

Baradar's release coincides with an announcement by the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, that Pakistan had promised to launch military operations in the North Waziristan tribal area to dislodge al-Qaeda and the powerful Haqqani network, which is active in Afghanistan. Pakistan has for months dragged its feet on going into this volatile area.

Mullen reiterated that war and reconciliation with the Taliban would continue side-by-side. Before this statement, Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani toured North Waziristan and met members of the military stationed there.

As a compromise, Pakistan might carry out limited surgical strikes in the town of Mir Ali and in the Datta Khel area, home to al-Qaeda, and spare the Miranshah and Dand-e-Darpa Khel areas that form the base of the Haqqani network and his ally, Hafiz Gul Bahadur.

Pakistan adopted this approach in South Waziristan when it spared Moulvi Nazeer, who

runs the biggest Taliban network in the Paktika region across the border. The military did target Makeen and Ladha, home to the Mehsud tribe that was hostile to Pakistan and which had little role in the Taliban's struggle in Afghanistan.

It appears, therefore, that a military operation is inevitable, even at this critical juncture of embryonic backchannel talks with the Taliban. These currently involve confidence-building measures on the part of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that are aimed at eventually bringing the Taliban and the US to the negotiating table.

Baradar's chance arrest, his comfortable confinement, the refusal to hand him over to Afghanistan, and now his secretive release once again show that the real cards are in the hands of the Pakistan military and that it has the ability to play an ace whenever it chooses.