

BOUNTY ON PAKISTAN WILL NOT PAY OFF

For Islamabad, the location and timing of the reward confirms deeper US-India ties

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WASHINGTON'S decision last week to post a \$US10 million (\$9.7m) reward for Hafiz Mohamed Saeed, founder of the Lashkar-e-Toiba, a terrorist organisation accused of being behind the Mumbai attack in 2008 that killed 166 people, will not help put US-Pakistan relations back on track.

On the contrary, it will complicate matters further, both bilaterally and regionally.

This award is on par with the one offered for the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, who is said to be hiding in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan's province in western Pakistan.

The LET was banned in Pakistan in 2002, but it metamorphosed into a successor organisation, the Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a

highly popular charity organisation. A UN Security Council committee has placed Saeed and the JUD on a list of people with links to al-Qaida and the Taliban.

The Indians have demanded the arrest of Saeed for his alleged role in the Mumbai attacks. But the Pakistanis have stressed all along that there was not enough evidence to arrest him. Saeed has persistently denied any involvement in the Mumbai attacks.

It is unclear what prompted the US State Department to post this bounty on its website at this critical time when bilateral relations are in effect frozen since November last year, when 26 Pakistani soldiers were accidentally killed by NATO planes during an operation against Taliban fighters along the border.

Pakistan claims the killings were deliberate.

The Obama administration has been very keen to re-establish some sort of normalcy in its relationship with Pakistan, a critical player in the lead-up to the US's and other Western nations' departure from Afghanistan in 2014.

In retaliation for the deaths of the Pakistani soldiers, Islamabad stopped all convoys, which supply 30 per cent to 50 per cent of all the non-lethal material needs of the foreign troops in Afghanistan, from going through Pakistan. Washington has had to rely on a northern supply route instead, adding millions of dollars in cost.

Following the deaths of the Pakistani soldiers, the Pakistani government, supported by the military, decided to review, root and branch, the country's relationship with the US. The government requested a parliamentary committee to do the review and to come up with recommendations for "restarting" the relationship.

The Pakistani government is not about to hand over Saeed

However, one of the recommendations that is likely to be put forward is for the restoration of the supply lines to be explicitly tied to the cessation of unmanned US drone strikes against the Taliban and al-Qaida along the border with Afghanistan.

Washington will certainly not accept such conditions. Those drone attacks have been highly successful in killing high-valued targets, including Pakistani Taliban terrorists who have wreaked death and destruction throughout Pakistan for years.

But the drone attacks have also caused many civilian casualties and this alone has fed an already virulent and rampant anti-Americanism. And Saeed has exploited this at large rallies throughout the country.

Also at the forefront of protests against any resumption of the NATO supply lines, His popularity makes the pro-US government of President Asif Ali Zardari very uncomfortable and nervous.

According to the Pakistani interior minister, Pakistan had not been warned that Washington was going to post a reward for Saeed's arrest. To add insult to injury, this decision was announced by the US Under-Secretary of Political Affairs, Wendy Sherman, on her first visit to India.

This was music to Indian ears, it was poison for the Pakistanis.

The timing of the announcement was doubly poor because it came days before President Zardari went on a private trip to India to visit a famous Sufi shrine, the first trip to India by a Pakistani president since 2005.

Surprisingly, the visit still went ahead and appears to have gone smoothly. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh even accepted an invitation to visit Pakistan — where he was born pre-Partition — but only if something substan-

tial, including on the issue of Saeed, could be achieved. Notwithstanding these positive atmospheres, for the Pakistanis the location and timing of the US announcement simply confirms the deepening of US-Indian relations since the 2006 nuclear deal Washington made with New Delhi.

Needless to say, the Pakistani government is not about to hand over Saeed. He has too many important friends in government and in the military, and too many followers for that to happen. And the Americans would know this.

So why didn't Washington wait until after US-Pakistan bilateral relations had been restored to normal? The timing of this announcement simply makes life that much harder for the pro-US government in Islamabad to deliver what Washington needs.

All in all, the Obama administration will now be further away from achieving its goals in Pakistan, which include having it play a constructive role in the lead-up to the West's smooth exit from Afghanistan in 2014.

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