

THE RAYMOND DAVIS FIRE STORM: OUR OBSERVATIONS IN ISLAMABAD AND LAHORE

In late January, a Chinese citizen named Chen Yuan shot and killed in a Chicago street two young Americans motorcyclists he later claimed were trying to rob him. Chen drove away from the scene of the crime but was quickly apprehended by the police. They found in his possession a high-speed automatic pistol, a pocket telescope, and sophisticated radio equipment. A few days later, the media reported that after shooting the two motorcyclists through the window of his car, Chen stepped out and drilled them both in the back as they lay writhing on the ground.

The incident soon claimed two more victims. Racing to Chen's rescue, a vehicle belonging to the Chinese Consulate General's motor pool drove the wrong way down a one-way street, killing a bicyclist. The Chinese occupants of the vehicle then retreated to the Consulate General and soon afterwards slipped out of the country. The final victim, the wife of one of the two men Chen shot, committed suicide in grief over his death.

The deaths led to a firestorm in the already strained relations between the United States and the People's Republic. The Chinese insisted that as a diplomat Chen could not be tried in an American court. President Hu Jintao publicly demanded that he be allowed to return at once to China. A top Chinese Politburo member flew to Washington to try to persuade the U.S. side to accede to Chinese demands.

The crisis deepened when early reports that Chen was a recently hired security operative on contract to a Chinese intelligence agency were confirmed. Republican politicians, retired diplomats, and other commentators appeared on TV to castigate as specious the Obama administration's tentative acceptance of the Chinese claim that Chen enjoyed diplomatic immunity and demanded that he face justice....

A fantasy? Of course it is. We've concocted it because we believe that placing in an American setting the dual killings that Raymond Davis carried out in Lahore on January 27 will give readers a better sense of how Pakistanis reacted to them.

In a visit to Lahore and Islamabad late last month, we spoke with senior media representatives, retired generals, former diplomats, military analysts, business people, politicians, academics, students, and others. Not surprisingly, these Pakistanis were mesmerized by the Davis incident. Its impact on official U.S.-Pakistan relations and the way Pakistanis view the United States (though not necessarily individual Americans) has been toxic. The incident depressed even further America's dismally low standing among Pakistanis. One long-time American scholar of Pakistan now resident in Lahore told us that in his view relations had become more poisonous than at any time he could

remember. We share his concern that should Washington and Islamabad work out a deal for Davis's release there could be serious trouble in the streets. Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the front for the Islamic terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, has already placarded Lahore with such slogans as "blood for blood" and "American killer Davis should be publicly hanged."

People we spoke with were unanimous in criticizing both the Pakistani and the U.S. governments for their handling of the case. They argued, and we agree, that Islamabad had been timid, confused, and contradictory in its approach. The coalition government led by President Asif Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani has tried with increasing desperation to kick the can down the road and shift responsibility to others – the courts, the army, and the opposition-led Punjab provincial government headquartered in Lahore. Washington is apparently looking to the military and its intelligence arm, Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), to play a helpful role. This reflects its understanding of the power the Pakistani army exercises in security and foreign policy matters. It is also the latest manifestation of a longstanding U.S. tendency to turn to the military when it needs to get things done.

Criticism of how the United States dealt with the issue started with the confusion over Davis's status. Was he a diplomatic officer enjoying full immunity for his acts (as the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad said) or a consular official with more limited protection (according to the U.S. Consulate General in Lahore)? The subsequent revelation that he was a security contractor working for CIA intensified these questions. Neither government clearly explained the diplomatic immunity issue. Knowledgeable diplomats were openly skeptical of the U.S. claims.

Some of those we spoke to thought Washington had been wrong in speaking out so loudly and at so high a level (President Obama himself) about the incident. They were critical about its decision to suspend high-level U.S.-Pakistani diplomatic discussions on other matters until the Davis case was resolved to its satisfaction.

We found that just about everyone we talked to agreed that the Pakistan government was in a very weak position as it tried to deal with the insistent U.S. demand that Davis be released and returned to the United States. Its reputation, already dismal for its ineffective governance, mishandling of the economy, reluctance to make difficult decisions, and many other widely perceived failures, has been further damaged by its dealing with the incident. Many of its political opponents have obviously relished the issue as a useful addition to the long list of particulars they can use to denigrate Zardari and Gilani.

In mid-February, the government asked the courts for extra time to state its position on Davis's immunity. The courts gave it until March 14. The defection of the former foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, has further complicated this process. Qureshi had been dropped from the cabinet in a reorganization soon after the Davis incident, evidently because he would not sign on to the proposal that Davis enjoyed the diplomatic immunity that Washington claimed for him. He has since become an

outspoken opponent of the claim and a favorite of the many anti-government TV cable outlets that now play a major role in influencing Pakistani political opinion. His recent diplomatic position gives him strong standing to argue his position.

No one we spoke to thought that over time Davis's continued incarceration would gradually become less of a focus for Pakistani politics, thus making it easier for the government to release him quietly in some deal with the Americans. ("Blood money" compensation to the victims' families, a U.S. pledge to try Davis in an American court, a prisoner swap, and agreement on a sharp reduction of U.S. intelligence operations in Pakistan have been mentioned as possible ingredients in such an arrangement.) Continuing indecision would only make matters worse, they argued.

We found important differences of view about the lasting impact of the affair on U.S.-Pakistan relations. Some argued that the damage would be only temporary, and that bilateral ties would eventually recover lost ground – though still remain highly problematic. Others took a gloomier view.

But all agreed that much would depend not only on what happens to Davis but also, perhaps more importantly, on how Islamabad and Washington deal with the problems that the Lahore killings and their aftermath have highlighted. The most immediate of these are the issue of the size and purpose of U.S. covert activity and the closely related question of the shadowy relationship between the CIA and Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence Directorate, the ISI.

The Davis case has clearly sparked concern within the public, and evidently within the army as well, about what Davis was doing in Pakistan and why the government permitted him and other U.S. intelligence officials posing as diplomats to operate with apparent impunity. Not surprisingly in a country that specializes in conspiracy theory, there was even speculation that their sinister activities include a U.S. plot to disable Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

The United States and Pakistan have had three marriages and two divorces in their volatile relationship. The Davis case has exposed and widened fissures within Pakistan – between political parties, between moderate politicians and extremists, and between civilian and military leaders. These further threaten the country's fragile democratic institutions and could eventually set the stage for a military takeover. The case has also led to one of the worst crises in bilateral ties the two countries have ever faced. It has added a further, dangerous clash of objectives to the strains that have long sprung from the difference between the national goals Washington and Islamabad have pursued in Afghanistan and on other major issues. The government's fear of seeming subservient to the United States, its political weakness, and, one suspects, ISI's anger and frustration at intrusions by the CIA have created a situation that amplified the natural and spontaneous outrage over the deaths of four Pakistanis.

Those at the helm of Pakistan policy, including the military, do not now wish to push things to a breakup with the United States, the much predicted "third divorce." But

so far at least, there are few signs that those more sober forces are finding the tools to reverse the public and political fury. Washington is rightly working with the government and army toward a solution; it has fewer tools for dealing with the public firestorm. Even if this incident is resolved, it will leave another layer of scars on a critical relationship that has twice in the past collapsed in an atmosphere of angry mutual recriminations.

We will be following the Davis case and its fallout in future SOUTH ASIA HAND postings. As noted, the next important date on the timetable is March 14. By that time, the Pakistan government must submit to the Lahore High Court its position on the immunity issue.

Stay tuned!