

# ISI Boxes CIA into a Corner

*[Christine Fair](#) April 15, 2011*

With America looking for an endgame in Afghanistan, Washington has been ratcheting up the U.S. presence—both military and civilian—in Pakistan over the last year, a means of increasing efforts in order to withdraw. But most troubling for Pakistan’s intelligence services were all those new CIA boots on the ground. With Pakistani allegiances split between America and its enemies, a reckoning was inevitable.



The Raymond [Davis affair](#) was a game changer. It was not a coincidental encounter in a dodgy part of Lahore between two Pakistani ruffians and an American—who just happened to be a well-trained former special operator. Far from it. Mr. Davis was protecting a CIA cell that was trying to [collect information](#) on the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the ISI’s chief assets in its proxy war with India. Sources in Pakistan suggest that the ISI was unaware of this cell’s activities and when it learned of them, was nonplussed.

Likely, the ISI was unwilling to tolerate the CIA’s expanding —and increasingly unchecked—activities and wanted to stage an event that created enough fallout for them to reset the relationship with Washington on terms more palatable to the ISI. The Raymond Davis affair was that well-calibrated event. The two men that Davis killed are alleged by Pakistani sources to have been [tied to the ISI](#), likely as contractors. It is important to note that the two Pakistanis did not target the case officers that Davis was protecting. That would have been far too risky. The two Pakistanis were expendable and Davis was a pawn that would wrench concessions from Washington but not bring the wrath of the United States upon Pakistan.

Once Davis was taken into custody Pakistan’s rival political parties—the PPP, currently in power, and the PML-N, which dominates the Punjab—began to manipulate the situation for their own ends. No doubt at that point the ISI was anxious to invoke a quick end to the affair; no desire to have its agenda hijacked by Pakistan’s noisy political elites. Ultimately, Davis was

released after “blood money” was paid and in the wake of weeks of [political brinkmanship](#), amidst well-orchestrated Pakistani public outrage.

Pakistani interlocutors explain that the ISI likely put pressure on the families to accept this *dayat* as a means of ending the judicial process that was going nowhere. (In Pakistan, families who are aggrieved even by such high crimes as homicide can drop the case if they are paid for their losses.) American officials deny paying this *dayat* and many suspect (and claim) the [ISI may have forked over the cash](#)—money being fungible, it hardly makes a difference.

The incident succeeded in creating the strategic space that the ISI needed to reset relations and gain control over US operations in Pakistan. This week, Pakistan cashed in on the Davis affair. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, director general of the ISI, came to the United States and [delivered several stark demands](#) that included scaling back the successful [drone program](#) and withdrawing some three hundred thirty-five American personnel, including CIA officers, contractors and special operations forces, from Pakistan. While irksome to US officials, to me, the ISI’s straightforward declaration that US activities in Pakistan are unacceptable is also oddly refreshing.

Typically, both Washington and Langley, on the one hand, and Islamabad and Rawalpindi, on the other, avoid straightforward talk in public. Both sides make various disingenuous proclamations while reviling each other in private. Both sides have long concluded that the other is attempting to undermine them. Both are right.

Pasha’s bold move is an important departure from the routinized method of circumlocuting the simple fact that the United States and Pakistan have strategic interests that are increasingly on a collision course. The increasing autonomy enjoyed by America’s intelligence presence would have vexed any sovereign country—Pakistan or otherwise.

The ball is now in Washington’s court. The ISI has concluded that the United States needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs the United States and thus is loath to cut off security or economic assistance. Pakistan’s security elites no doubt were also emboldened by their position because Pakistan remains the single most important supply route for the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan. Until the United States downsizes, the northern distribution line will never be adequate. Pakistan is the only game in town to get the job done. It is no coincidence that just as the Raymond Davis affair was winding down—and as the ISI’s demands were becoming ever more clear—reporting about Pakistan’s burgeoning nuclear-weapons program reached a frenzied crescendo. Pakistan knows that the United States more than anything else wants to retain an ability to peer into Islamabad’s nuclear box howsoever limited those glimpses may be.

The ISI surely calculated that the CIA would begrudgingly accept these limitations while continuing to seek work-arounds. But in the end, Pakistan's spooks may well be right. In this game of chicken, the Americans are likely to swerve.