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HIGH TENSION BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

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Elections in sight in Kabul, political crisis in Islamabad

Tensions have risen between Kabul and Islamabad since Afghan President Hamid Karzai threatened to attack the Taliban bases in Pakistan on the grounds of "legitimate defence". For the first time, the Afghan president threatened to send soldiers over the border to attack the insurgents. Karzai's main targets are two emerging Pakistani Taliban leaders: Maulana Fazlullah and Baitullah Mehsud. "The fact that they (the Taliban) cross the border", Karzai declared, "in order to kill Afghan targets and coalition soldiers gives us the right to go there and do the same."

"Baitullah Mehsud should know that we will go after him and attack him on his own ground," Karzai said. "Along with Fazlullah he will understand that we will defeat them and we will avenge all that they have done in Afghanistan in these past years."

It remains to be seen if Karzai's threat, which is reminiscent of the Turkish incursions against the militant PKK Kurds in the North of Iraq, will be carried out. Humayun Hamidzada, Karzai's spokesman, underlined that the president is also contesting the Pakistani government's plan to begin peace negotiations with the Taliban in the tribal areas just over the Afghan border. Karzai's words caused an immediate reaction in Islamabad where the Foreign Minister summoned the Afghan ambassador to issue a formal objection to Karzai's speech. Premier Yousuf Raza Gilani stressed that he will not allow foreign troops to follow the militia onto Pakistani territory.

Tensions with Washington have also been rising ever since the Americans carried out an air attack in Northwestern Pakistan which killed 11 Pakistani soldiers. A unit of American troops, part of the ISAF mission, was attacked on 10 June in the province of Khyber on the Pakistan border. The attackers used light arms and RPG missiles from Afghanistan, just two hundred metres from the Pakistan border. The unit called for air support and a coalition bomber dropped four bombs which hit the hostile forces that had fled into Pakistan. The victims were eleven Pakistani paramilitaries from the border corps whose task it is to keep peace on the fragile border.

In reality, the border corps is made up of members of the local Pashtun tribes who often cannot be distinguished, even in their dress, from the Taliban. The border guards, in any case, are said to have helped the Taliban to infiltrate into Afghanistan. This accusation is contained in secret American documents which reveals that a large number of Afghans have infiltrated into the Pakistani border corps. The Pakistani paramilitaries are even accused of having taken part in the Taliban attacks against the coalition forces, according to several reports written after the border clashes.

The 10 June incident took place 35 kilometres Northwest of Ghalanai, in Eastern Afghanistan, close to the Mohmand district in the Pakistani tribal zone. The Americans released a film on internet of the clash and the air attack which was taken by a pilotless plane. (http://www.dvidshub.net/media/video/0806/DOD_100020431.wmv). This document shows clearly that what took place was, as the US troops had already claimed, a "legitimate" bombing. In addition no border corps post was hit.

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Despite this evidence, Islamabad condemned this action as an “unacceptable” and “vile” attack which was a “gross violation of the Pakistan-Afghan border”. According to the foreign minister it was a “clear denial of the big sacrifices that Pakistan made in order to combat terrorism”.

The Mohmand tribal elders issued a statement condemning the America attack and they threatened to summon a “laskhar”, that is, a tribal army to fight against the Americans “for our country, as we already did in 1948 in Kashmir”.

The Pashtun from the tribal zones sent volunteers to fight in the first India-Pakistan conflict which led to the division of Kashmir.

Things worsened on 22 June when NATO soldiers were attacked by mortars launched from inside Afghanistan and responded with an artillery attack. The three artillery attacks were launched for “self-defence” in the border area of Paktika. The number of incidents in Eastern Afghanistan has increased by 40% since the start of the year, with a jump of 53% in April.

There was no shortage of even more hostile motives between Kabul and Islamabad. Sayed Ansari, spokesman for NDS, the Afghan intelligence agency, accused Pakistan of ordering the 27 April bomb attack against Karzai. The head of State barely avoided a well-planned kamikaze attack carried out during a military parade. According to various documents, confessions, and the terrorists’ mobile telephone logs, ISI, the powerful Pakistan military secret service, was behind the attack. The Pakistani defence minister dismissed these accusations as lies but the revelations were embarrassing.

“The terrorists used code-names in phone calls to Pakistan and they received text messages from abroad about the attack”, according to an Afghan spokesman. The key player in this was an Afghan known only as Hodayoun. The head of a cell that already tried to assassinate Karzai, he was killed during an attack on the terrorists’ hideout in Kabul. The numbers contained in his phone provide evidence of the involvement of several persons linked to ISI, such as Jalaluddin Haqqani, a noted Mujaheddin commander, now allied with the talebans and Al Qaida, and one who has always, since the holy war against the Red Army, kept close ties with ISI.

The porous nature of the border with Pakistan is one of the main elements of destabilization in Afghanistan just as it was at the time of the Soviet invasion when the Mujaheddin used the tribal border zones as safe havens. The Pakistani prime minister Yousaf Razi Gilani renewed his offer to build a barrier along the border to stop militia crossing over. The building of a “wall” was already begun by the previous pro-Musharraf government but was subsequently judged useless and construction was abandoned. The border is 2,400 kilometres long and initial work was only on a 35-kilometers section. The land is so dangerous and so difficult to keep under surveillance that the Talebans would have no trouble, in any case, in finding ways across into Afghanistan.

Pakistan has also installed a satellite surveillance system for the porous border, especially for those areas that have never been precisely defined on maps. This was announced by Rehman Malik, the Pakistan Internal minister. He explained that the system will not only keep an eye on illegal movements towards the border but will also monitor the movements of the NATO forces. This is a sign that we are only at the beginning of the Afghan-Pakistan border crisis.

Afghanistan: elections on the way

The Afghan presidential elections, due to be held in 2009, still seem a long way off, but the political manoeuvring has already begun. The terrorists already tried to upset things in their

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assassination attempt against President Karzai during a military parade in Kabul. What is at stake is not only the future of the head of State but also the gradual shifting of power to the dominant ethnic group, the Pashtun, which has markedly conservative and Jihadist tendencies. Parliamentary elections will be held in 2010 if the UN fails to convince the riotous Afghan politicians to hold the two elections jointly in order to save money and guarantee better safety.

Karzai was the first to announce that he will be running and, at the moment, he remains the favourite to succeed himself even if he is accused of not having kept promises made with regard to security, jobs, and the battle against corruption.

On 12 April, speaking at a conferring ceremony at the University of Kabul, Karzai announced that he would run and that “professor Rabani had telephoned to ask me to do so”. Burhanudin Rabani is one of the old guard of Mujaheddin leaders who fought against the Soviet invaders. He has been a supporter of Karzai, on and off, for many years so there was nothing casual in Karzai’s choosing to mention him because other leaders of the past, such as the ultra-conservative Abdul-ul-Rab Rasoul Sayaf and Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, are both anxious to get into the fray.

If Karzai decides on an alliance with the conservatives he will probably be forced to give two vice-presidential positions to the two former Mujaheddin. Karzai seems determined to seek support from the extremists and has not ruled out involving some Taleban fringes with whom he has been negotiating secretly.

Several other minor figures have announced that they will run for president including Ramazan Bashardost, a Hazara parliamentarian and supporter of the war against corruption, and the Tajik Massouda Jalal, the only woman candidate, who already ran in 2004.

The big players who will challenge Karzai are waiting none-too-quietly in the wings to forge alliances for both the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Zalmay Khalilzad’s decision to enter the field has created quite a stir. It seems he is preparing to resign as American representative to the United Nations. Of Afghan origin, he was the first US ambassador to Kabul after the fall of the Talebans. He later served as ambassador in Baghdad and is one of Karzai’s mentors. Asked about his future, he did not rule out the possibility of running: “I am not a candidate for any position in Afghanistan but I am at the service of the Afghan people”. Sources close to him, say that the former Columbia University professor is seriously considering either running for President or lending his support to his old friend Karzai. The real challengers will be the former interior minister, Ali Ahmad Jalali, and Hedayat Amin Arsala, one of the most prominent members of Karzai’s cabinet. Jalali is also an Afghan-American and former professor at the national Defence University in Washington. He served as interior minister from 2003-2005 in Kabul. A genuine Pashtun, he worked with the Voice of America for twenty years and, as minister, immediately clashed with the Tajik officials in the ministry. In the end, he was forced to resign but he has continued to build a network in the light of a possible run in the elections.

The governor of the province of Nangarhar, Gul Agha Shirzai and Ehsanullah Bayat, director general of one of the biggest Afghan companies, are two of his most prominent supporters. The former is attempting to speed up the reconstruction process while the latter is loved by the people for his initiatives in favour of the poorer sections of the community.

Another formidable opponent is Arsala, the most moderate member of Karzai’s cabinet. He is a Pashtun from the Jabar Kehl tribe which is linked to former Afghan king, Zahir Shah. He holds

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a doctorate from the George Washington University and worked at the World Bank before returning to Afghanistan to join the anti-Soviet resistance movement. Mustafa Zaher, the king's grandson, may also decide to run after joining Rabani's National Front. The unknown quantity will be Yunes Qanooni, the last surviving heir to the Tajik commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed in an Al Qaida attack two days before 11 September. President of the lower house of Parliament, he is the real *eminence grise* of the Panjsher group, so called after the valley where Massoud held out against ten fierce Soviet offensives. He ran against Karzai in 2004 and came second.

Redistribution of the Italian troops and the Farah offensive.

In August, the Italians will cede the command of the ISAF Mission in Kabul to their French allies. Thus the partial "repositioning" of our troops in Afghanistan, as announced by Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa, will begin. In the short-term, that is, in August, the number of troops will be reduced from the current 2,600 to 2,000-2,100. In the same time troops will be moved to the Western region under Italian command. At the end there will be some 2,400 Italian troops in Afghanistan. A reduced number will remain in Kabul, while the bulk of the troops will be concentrated in the Western sector, where there will be 500 more troops than there are today.

Italy will also send out about forty *carabinieri* who will be involved in the training of the local police. Minister La Russa has not ruled out sending four Tornado strike fighters to take part in air cover missions. The newly flexible approach to the caveats – the so-called national limits to how each contingent is employed – is already in place. The period of 72 hours initially required for an intervention outside a contingent's zone has been reduced to just 6. American Defense secretary Robert Gates has applauded this decision but the Italians will also have to do more in the Western sector. The ISAF command plans require reinforcements for an offensive in the Farah province, the "hottest" one under Italian control.

Musharraf risks impeachment

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf risks impeachment. These accusations could not come from the parliament but from the four provincial assemblies. Musharraf's opponents (the PPP or Popular party, and the PML-N, the Muslim League) have the two-thirds majority necessary in these assemblies to call for his impeachment. The leaders of the two parties, which are struggling to govern the country, are said to have already discussed taking this course. But they are hoping that Musharraf will resign without things having to come to this pass.

Political tension over the destiny of the head of state is mounting. Former premier, Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Muslim League, has gone so far as to demand that Musharraf be tried for treason, a crime which is punishable by hanging. "We asked you to leave with honour", Sharif told a public meeting in Islamabad, "now the people have issued a new verdict, they want you to be tried". At that point 20,000 protestors shouted "Hang Musharraf". "Is hanging only for politicians?" asked Sharif, referring to former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, father of Benazir Bhutto, hanged by a military dictator in 1979.

Asif Ali Zardari, widower of Benazir Bhutto, is hoping for a softer, less traumatic solution for the country and the armed forces. He too, however, has declared that "the day is not far off when we will call on an exponent of the Popular Party to assume the role of president".

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Following a flurry of unconfirmed rumors which suggested that the head of State was preparing for exile in Turkey or in Great Britain, Musharraf himself had to issue a denial. He does not want to leave Pakistan, but it is likely that he will have to leave office in order to obtain immunity if his rivals decide to proceed with his impeachment.

The governmental crisis, brought on by the resignations of the ministers from the Muslim League (9 of 24 ministers, including the Finance minister), reflects the indecision of the executive, and undermines the country's stability. Sharif has guaranteed external support but has not been able to come to a deal with Zardari over the fundamental cause of the crisis: the re-installment of the sixty judges sacked by Musharraf. It is not an insignificant question because if the magistrates, including the president of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, are re-installed, Musharraf's position could become even less secure.

The judges could contest crucial decisions, such as last year's declaration of a state of emergency, with the aim of bringing about Musharraf's impeachment. Zardari is afraid that a judicial revenge would cancel the amnesty which allowed him to return home and which cancelled various charges for which he would otherwise have had to answer, including corruption.

The PPP has presented a proposal for the revision of the constitution which would see the powers of the head of state being reduced. The proposal, which contains 62 constitutional emendments, cancels the President's right to remove the government from office. The power to nominate the head of the armed forces and of the provincial governments would pass to the prime minister. And not only: the president would only be allowed to stay in power for two mandates. Which Musharraf has already done.

Uncertain agreements with the Talebans and Washington's fears

Pakistan's defense minister, Chaudhry Ahmad Mukhtar, is convinced that dialogue with the Talebans is in his country's interests. "Meetings with the Taliban leaders were held before and are being held now", he was reported as saying, by the local Geo television. In May the Islamabad government ordered the "gradual" withdrawal of troops from the Swat valley in the northwestern Pakistani tribal zone. For months the Islamic militias fought in tough battles against the army. The leader of the armed fundamentalists is Mullah Fazlullah. A young people's leader, he has forged an alliance with Beitullah Mehsud, head of the Pakistani Talebans who fights further South in his stronghold in Southern Waziristan.

The truce in the Swat valley provides for the total application of the tough Koran Sharia law. In exchange for the gradual withdrawal of the army, the militias have agreed to stop their attacks, to allow young girls attend school, and to avoid public displays of weapons.

The Pakistani troops have partly withdrawn or, as they put it, have been repositioned, also in that slice of Waziristan devastated by the guerilla war and terrorism carried out by Mehsud's men. Mehsud is the most dangerous element in the tribal area and has been accused of having ordered the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto. Formally, this "changing of positions", was decided in order to allow 200,000 homeless from the area to return to their half-destroyed fields and the decimated livestock.

Mehsud has made it clear that while he accepts the truce with Islamabad he will not give up his war against the NATO troops who support the Kabul government. "Islam does not recognize the frontiers or borders", he declared, "the Jihad will continue in Afghanistan".

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In reality that truce and the negotiations are very fragile and reflect the internal weakness of the Islamabad executive. The best term to explain the current situation and the government's strategy for the area is "confusion". The most worrying aspect is that the Tehrik-e-Taleban, Meshud's new Taleban movement, is expanding beyond the remote tribal areas. Even Peshawar, the Northwestern Casablanca where spying, Al Qaida hunts, and fundamentalism meet, is under threat. In June the Pakistani launched an offensive with tanks, helicopters and fighter planes in order to break the "siege". The aim is to guarantee security for NATO's vital supply route in Afghanistan, which follows the Kyber pass.

The Afghani foreign minister, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, expressed his deep concern: "The meetings with extremist groups will not help the peace process in Pakistan or in Afghanistan" while John Negroponte, the US Assistant Secretary of State, told congress: "I hope that these negotiations proceed with caution, and that they don't conclude with a result which provides the extremist elements with the right or the capacity to have free run of the tribal areas, areas from which to launch attacks against Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United States or the rest of the world".

In addition to this, the body which controls American government spending (GAO), made a nasty discovery. Since 2001, Pakistan has received 5.5 billion dollars from the US for the war against terrorism. Some 2 billion dollars of this sum is now being investigated by the GAO. By way of example, at least 35 million dollars should have been used to build military roads and bunkers but no trace of these can be seen.

To underline its concern, the Pentagon suspended 81 million dollars worth of military supplies to Pakistan. A small portion of the total defense sum but still an important signal against the negotiations between Islamabad and the Talebans.