

Behind the rift between the Afghan and Pakistani presidents

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US President George Bush's highly publicised attempt on Wednesday to reconcile two American allies—Afghan and Pakistani presidents Hamid Karzai and General Pervez Musharraf—appears to have come to nought.

Before going into the White House to dine on sea bass and soup, the two leaders stood stiffly alongside Bush, refusing to even shake hands, as Bush spoke of the event as “a chance for us to strategise together”. But the dinner produced no joint communiqué or new strategy.

White House spokesman Tony Snow told the media the two leaders had agreed on greater cooperation in “intelligence sharing [and] coordinated action against terrorists”. However, his comments sparked new wrangling between Afghan and Pakistani officials over interpretation, echoing the very public brawling of the previous week.

The US and international media generally played down the affair, labelling it as “a spat” between two “bickering allies”. But the episode points, not only to the unfolding disaster in Afghanistan as the US and NATO troops come under increasing fire from anti-occupation forces, but also the deeply destabilising impact of the American-led invasion throughout the region.

Karzai triggered the row by declaring that Pakistan should shut down its “sources of hatred”—the country's Islamic schools or madrassas. He followed up by expressing scepticism about a truce signed earlier in the month between the Pakistani government and local tribal leaders in North Waziristan. Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani military had sent 70,000 troops into the previously autonomous Pashtun tribal areas near the Afghan border to suppress local sympathy and support for anti-occupation militia fighting in Afghanistan.

While Musharraf has presented the non-aggression pact as a triumph, it was a humiliating retreat after months of bloody fighting in which hundreds of Pakistani soldiers were killed. The army pulled its troops out of North

Waziristan and the government offered compensation, in return for a flimsy guarantee that tribal forces would prevent the cross-border movement of anti-US insurgents. The military presence only generated fierce resistance in the border areas, and provoked opposition in army ranks, which include significant numbers of Pashtuns.

Karzai's comments on the North Waziristan pact followed persistent criticisms from US generals, officials and diplomats blaming Pakistan for the escalating insurgency in Afghanistan and demanding that Musharraf take tougher action to prevent cross-border infiltration. There is a strong element of hypocrisy in these accusations. After all, in the 1980s, the CIA armed and trained the Islamist groups based in Pakistan that slipped across the notoriously porous border to fight the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

Anti-occupation guerrillas are undoubtedly using Pakistan as a sanctuary. However, the overriding reason for the upsurge of attacks against the US-led occupation is the widespread hostility among the Afghan population to repressive methods of the US military and the obvious failure of the Karzai government to address the country's appalling social and economic crisis. As a result, there is no shortage of Afghan recruits to the insurgency.

Musharraf hit back publicly at Karzai, declaring that Afghanistan was a failed state and rejecting claims that Al Qaeda and the Taliban were operating from Pakistan. “None of this is true and Karzai knows it,” he told CNN. “He knows that the drug trade is financing the Taliban. He knows that this is not a problem created by Pakistan. But he is turning a blind eye. He is like an ostrich with his head buried in the sand.” His open contempt for Karzai was an effort to distinguish himself from someone who is viewed throughout the region as a US puppet.

Musharraf's comments reflect the difficult political position in which the US invasion of Afghanistan has placed him. Broad layers of the population regard him as

an American stooge for backing of the “war on terror”. Despite his support in overthrowing the Taliban regime and rounding up militants, Musharraf faces unrelenting US pressure to do more. Yet, his regime relies on the support of an alliance of Islamist parties.

Significantly, Bush has publicly endorsed Musharraf’s deal in North Waziristan, despite obvious opposition in the Pentagon and among NATO allies. On Wednesday, the day of the White House dinner, a US military officer told the media there had been a trebling of attacks on US and allied troops in Afghanistan since the truce was signed. On Thursday, a report from Britain’s Defence Academy was leaked to the press alleging that Pakistan’s military intelligence—Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—was indirectly supporting the Taliban.

Nevertheless, Bush welcomed Musharraf to the White House as “a good friend” and attempted to patch up his relations with the Afghan president. The cautious approach reflects real concerns in Washington about the stability of the Pakistani regime and US fears about the growing influence of Islamist parties in Pakistan. US backing for Musharraf, however, is conditional on him continuing to do Washington’s bidding. This means undermining his own base of support—a situation, which, in the long term, is untenable.

The failure of the White House dinner to resolve the conflict between Karzai and Musharraf highlights the reckless character of the Bush administration’s military adventure in Afghanistan. The September 11 attack provided a convenient pretext for pursuing Washington’s ambitions to secure its economic and strategic domination in the Middle East and Central Asia. Afghanistan, located between the two resource-rich regions, was a convenient first step.

The strategy is in tatters. Bush administration confronts an expanding armed insurgency in Afghanistan. At the same time, the invasion has seriously weakened Musharraf, a key US ally, and threatens to undermine Washington’s efforts to stem longstanding rivalry between Pakistan and India. The conflict between the two South Asian rivals cuts across the Bush administration’s plans to forge closer economic ties with India and transform it into a potential ally against China.

Afghanistan has long been an arena of Indian-Pakistani competition. To counter the Pakistani-backed Taliban regime, India supported the warlords of the so-called Northern Alliance, which now forms part of the Karzai regime in Kabul. Not surprisingly, India has exploited the opportunity to strengthen its position in Afghanistan,

providing significant economic aid. In April, Karzai made his fourth trip to New Delhi with a 110-strong delegation of ministers, MPs and businessmen. The warmth of relations with India, which promised another \$US50 million in aid to bring the total to \$650 million, is in marked contrast to the accusations traded with Pakistan.

The Pakistani regime is acutely sensitive to India’s involvement with Afghanistan, which poses the potential threat of a close Indian ally on its western flank. Pakistan has refused to allow the transport of Indian goods across its roads to Afghanistan. Moreover, the ISI has accused India of being involved in fomenting armed separatist opposition in the unstable Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

The White House dinner could do nothing to resolve any of these issues. Undoubtedly significant pressure was brought to bear on Musharraf to accede to US demands to crack down on the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces operating in Pakistan. But his rather open criticisms this week not only of Karzai, but of the Bush administration, indicate that he has little room to manoeuvre domestically.

The next US step is unlikely to be another quiet chat in the White House. An article in *Time* magazine this week noted: “Key NATO countries whose troops are fighting a hot war with the Taliban in southern Afghanistan—Britain, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands—actually considered issuing an ultimatum to Musharraf to either close down the Taliban and arrest its leaders operating from Pakistan, or face the consequences.”

The “consequences” include NATO troops crossing into Pakistan to track down and kill alleged Taliban fighters. Bush has declared that if the US military identified Osama bin Laden’s location in Pakistan, he would expect US forces to cross the border and “get him”. Such a move would set the “allies” on a collision course. As Musharraf told CNN: “This is a sensitive area. We operate on our side of the border and the US and its allies operate on the other side. Let’s leave it at that. We don’t want our sovereignty violated.”



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