

Afghan president threatens Pakistan: Warnings of a wider war

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President Hamid Karzai Sunday threatened to send Afghan troops across the border into Pakistan, claiming that it would be an act of “self defence.” The Western-backed regime in Kabul together with the US-led NATO forces occupying the country have blamed elements of the Taliban acting from safe havens inside Pakistani tribal areas for stepped-up attacks on their forces.

Tensions have been building between the two countries for some time, but this is the first time Kabul has issued such a blunt threat to Islamabad since US-led forces invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime in 2001. At the time, Washington enlisted the backing of then-Pakistani military dictator Pervez Musharraf for the invasion and the subsequent installation of Karzai’s puppet regime.

Speaking at a press conference, Karzai claimed that “[W]hen they (Taliban forces) cross the territory from Pakistan to come and kill Afghans and to kill coalition troops it gives us the right to go back and do the same.” He warned Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud that his forces would “go after him now and hit him in his house”. He likewise threatened Taliban leader Mullah Omar, declaring that “Afghanistan has the right of self-defence”.

Karzai’s desperate threat came in the wake of the loss of 15 troops from Afghan and NATO forces in several incidents, and an attack on a prison in southern city of Kandahar in which the Taliban released over 1,000 prisoners, including many of its own members. In the prison attack, about 30 security forces were killed. Adding to this humiliation, another attack saw the governor of Helmand injured and his police chief killed.

Karzai is facing growing popular hostility. He is presiding over an utterly corrupt and repressive regime with the backing of US forces.

The Afghan president’s threat drew an immediate rebuke from Pakistan, adding to tensions. Yusuf Raza Gillani, prime minister of the Pakistan People’s Party

(PPP)-led government, declared: “Neither do we interfere in anyone else’s matters, nor will we allow anyone to interfere in our territorial limits and our affairs”. He added: “We want a stable Afghanistan. It is in our interest. How can we go to destabilise our brotherly country?”

Pakistan’s foreign ministry summoned the Afghan ambassador to Islamabad, Anwar Anwarzai, and “lodged the strongest protests.” Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi stated that Islamabad “shall defend its territorial sovereignty,” but he insisted that, as both “countries were faced with a common enemy, it was all the more necessary that Afghanistan refrained from making irresponsible threatening statements.”

“Pakistan as a sovereign state will not permit any Karzai to violate the international border,” said a spokesman for the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN).

In issuing his blunt threat to Pakistan, Karzai is no doubt echoing sentiments within the Bush administration. Washington is making the same charge that Islamabad is allowing Taliban forces to establish “sanctuaries” in the tribal areas on the Pakistani border with Afghanistan, from which they attack Afghan and NATO forces.

Only last Tuesday, US warplanes bombed tribal areas in Mohmand in this border area, resulting in the killing of 11 members of the Pakistani Frontier Corps and injuring scores more. Washington maintains that this attack was justified because Afghan and NATO forces were under attack from Taliban groups.

In a counter claim, the Pakistani military denounced the attack as a “deliberate act of aggression.” It accused the Afghan forces of entering the area for the purpose of establishing a military post, but said they were persuaded by the Pakistani Frontier Corps to return to Afghanistan. Then, according to the Pakistani account, the US Air Force bombed the area, killing Pakistani soldiers.

The border between the two countries is porous, with a majority of Pashtun tribal people on both sides. Historically, the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan has not been well defined. The masses of people in the region live in dire poverty and backwardness. They are facing increasing repression as a result of the US invasion of Afghanistan, and the insurgency has therefore grown against the occupation forces.

Under the pressure from the Bush administration, the Pakistani president and former military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, mobilised a massive contingent of military forces to crush the tribal insurgency and increasingly coordinated operations with NATO forces. Islamabad claims it still has about 90,000 troops along the border.

This repression only deepened the insurgency in the border areas, however, and spurred the growth of pro-Taliban groups. Intensified popular opposition to US imperialism and Musharraf's rule in Pakistan was demonstrated in the national election last February, resulting in the defeat of the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (PMLQ).

The Bush administration and Karzai in Kabul are angered by the newly installed government's attempt to reach agreements with tribal and Taliban groups to salvage Islamabad's grip over the area. Washington and its puppet Karzai want Pakistan to stop these negotiations and instead use its full military forces to crush the opposition in the tribal area, in support of the attack on the insurgency within Afghanistan itself.

As for last Tuesday's killing of the Pakistani troops, the Bush administration's position is that although it regrets the deaths, the attack was legitimate. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi in Paris Friday, expressing US regrets. Echoing her message, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher told the press: "We need to find out how and why it happened...how to make sure we avoid this in the future."

Washington's position was more clearly explained by the outgoing US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Dan K. McNeil, at a Pentagon press conference on Friday. While admitting that opposition to US occupation forces is on the rise, he declared: "[A]lthough record levels of foreign and Afghan troops have constrained repeated Taliban offensives, stabilizing Afghanistan will be impossible without a more robust military campaign against insurgent havens in Pakistan."

Casting doubt on the role of the Pakistan Frontier Corps,

General McNeil noted: "My understanding of what the Frontier Corps is, is they are pretty much tribal themselves." He cited the "assassination" of a US officer by members of the Frontier Corps and made clear that he felt the force was completely unreliable.

Expressing his view that the Pakistani military should act as a loyal US client, the general said that it did not respond to his calls to for meetings to coordinate operations properly: "The last one (meeting) should have occurred the last two weeks I was there. And I spoke with (Pakistan Army chief) General Kayani on the phone, and he found it too difficult. I think because of a very difficult political situation in his country he was finding it difficult."

The difficult "political situation" referred to by the American general was Islamabad's attempt to arrange a ceasefire agreement with the tribal groups while deflecting the popular hostility to the US and the Pakistani government's collaboration with Washington.

Speaking at a London press conference Monday, Bush claimed that he did not endorse Karzai's threats and declared that his administration can "calm down" the strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the insurgent attacks.

But in the same breath, he said that the US "goal is to deny a safe haven to violent extremists. That's the strategy of Afghanistan. It needs to be the strategy of Pakistan." Bush's statement is yet another warning that Pakistan should crush tribal insurgency, and an encouragement to Karzai.

The reality is that Washington's role is not to "calm down" the mounting tensions on the Afghan-Pakistani border, but rather to pave the way for a far wider war in the region.



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