

Bomb blast in Kabul points to rising Indian-Pakistani tensions

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The bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul on Monday has again highlighted the profoundly destabilising impact of the US invasion of Afghanistan on the broader region. The ongoing war between US-led forces and anti-occupation insurgents is spilling into Pakistan and further fuelling tensions between longstanding regional rivals—India and Pakistan.

A suicide bomber drove a car packed with explosives into the embassy, killing 41 people and injuring at least 140. Among the dead were Defence Attaché Brigadier R.D. Mehta, senior diplomat V. Venkateswara Rao and two Indian security officials. Most of the casualties were Afghans who were at the embassy for various reasons, including seeking visas.

In all but name, the Afghan government has accused Pakistan's military intelligence agency—the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—of masterminding the attack. Presidential spokesman Humayun Hamidzada claimed on Tuesday: “The sophistication of this attack, and the kind of material that was used in it and the specific targeting; everything has the hallmark of a particular intelligence agency that has conducted similar terrorist acts inside Afghanistan in the past.”

Hamidzada added: “The project was designed outside Afghanistan. It was exported to Afghanistan.” Asked to name the agency, he said the answer was “pretty obvious”. Kabul has repeatedly accused the ISI of harbouring and supporting the Taliban in its attacks inside Afghanistan. Last month, Afghan President Hamid Karzai threatened to send military forces into Pakistani territory to root out insurgents.

Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousef Raza Gilani immediately denied any involvement in the embassy attack. Speaking in Malaysia, he said: “We want stability in the region... We ourselves are a victim of terrorism and extremism.” On Sunday, a suicide bomber killed 13 Pakistani policemen near a rally in Islamabad to mark the first anniversary of the storming of the Red Mosque to end its occupation by Islamist militants. More than 100 people were killed by the Pakistani military in last year's operation.

Kabul has offered no concrete evidence to link the ISI to Monday's embassy bombing. Unsubstantiated claims of ISI involvement are now becoming a matter of routine for Afghan authorities as part of an increasingly belligerent anti-Pakistani campaign. Such propaganda does demonstrate the Afghan government's close alignment with India—where the ISI is regularly blamed for every terrorist incident.

Last month, Afghan officials accused the ISI of conspiring in the attempt on President Karzai's life in April. Despite tight security, gunmen were able to sneak automatic rifles and mortars within range of the annual military parade where Karzai and other high dignitaries were presiding. However, an article in the *Chicago Tribune* on June 30 pointed out at least six of the suspects were Afghan officials,

including an army general, Talib Shah, who allegedly provided arms to the militants.

India has been quick to interpret the embassy bombing as aimed at driving it out of Afghanistan. Retired Indian diplomat Lalit Mansingh, who served in Kabul in the 1970s, told the *New York Times*: “It is a notice saying you quit or we are going to hit you.” Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared India had no intention of leaving Afghanistan and that Indian involvement would “continue with renewed commitment”.

Some sections of the Indian media have even called on the government to flex its military muscle in Afghanistan. An editorial in the *Indian Express* declared: “As India mourns the murder of its two diplomats in Kabul, it must brace itself up to a new burden that comes with increasing global weight... New Delhi cannot continue to expand its economic and diplomatic activity in Afghanistan while avoiding a commensurate increase in its military presence there.”

The *Hindustan Times* took an even more provocative stance: “The message of the attack is stark: Kabul is part of the outer perimeter of India's own security. And New Delhi needs to take a more active role in shoring up this defence... Building hospitals and roads is all very well. But ultimately such projects will be useless if the battle being fought with bullets and blood is lost. The strategy of an NGO cannot be the basis of defending Indian interests in the subcontinent.”

The bombing is part of a raging civil war inside Afghanistan. The “Taliban” or anti-occupation insurgents, based among the majority Pashtun tribes in the south and east, are pitted against US and NATO forces as well as the Afghan security forces, which are drawn mainly from the Northern Alliance's militia based among the country's Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara minorities. Although he is an ethnic Pashtun, Karzai is widely reviled as a puppet not only of the US, but also of the Northern Alliance, which was backed by India in its battles against the Taliban government in the late 1990s.

The international media, following the US military, generically brand all anti-occupation insurgents as “Taliban” or “Al Qaeda”. But the armed resistance to the US is far from united: there are distinct “Taliban” factions with connections to Pashtun tribes and Islamist groups over the border inside Pakistan, and various local Pashtun warlords and tribal leaders in Afghanistan are also active.

Asked about a formal Taliban denial of responsibility for the embassy bombing, Paul Burton from the London-based Senlis Council, told *Newsweek*: “Some groups are keen to claim bombings, some aren't. And if the generic ‘Taliban’ denied it, what does that mean? The people issuing denials could well be spokesmen for the Mullah Omar group [which dominated the Taliban in the 1990s]. It's such an amorphous group, who knows? It's fragmenting on a daily

basis.”

Concerned about deepening the political crisis in Pakistan, Washington has been cautious about publicly accusing the ISI of direct involvement in the Kabul bombing. The Bush administration’s insistence in 2001 that President Pervez Musharraf and the Pakistani military end its support for Taliban regime in Afghanistan has had a profoundly destabilising impact. In the 1990s, the ISI, with the tacit backing of the US, helped to train and arm the Taliban against feuding Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara warlords that nominally formed the Afghan government.

Ending that support played a major role in the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. In Pakistan, however, it triggered bitter opposition to the Musharraf dictatorship, which was branded as a stooge for Washington. Among Islamist groups and Pashtun tribes, that hostility has only escalated as the US pressed the Pakistan military to crack down on support for the Taliban in tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan and carried out its own air strikes, which have claimed a rising number of civilian casualties.

It is possible that elements of the ISI and the Pakistani military have been quietly providing assistance to various Taliban factions—both to destabilise the US puppet regime in Afghanistan and also for political advantage inside Pakistan. The fragile coalition government formed after Pakistani opposition parties soundly defeated Musharraf’s party in elections in February is already under fire from various military figures for not taking decisive action against Islamist militias. “I have a feeling that no one is in charge and that is why the militants are taking advantage,” former general Talat Masood told the *Australian* this week.

The Rand Corporation, which has close connections to the Pentagon, released a report last month alleging that some ISI operatives had been assisting the Taliban. The report’s author Seth Jones told the London-based *Times* this week: “Right now, the Taliban and other groups are getting help from individuals within Pakistan’s government, and until that ends, the region’s long-term security is in jeopardy.” He claimed that ISI instructors were training insurgents in camps at Quetta, Mansehra, Shamshattu, Parachinar and other centres.

These and other allegations by the US military have been backed by little in the way of concrete facts. Moreover, far from being a sign of a unified policy, any Pakistan involvement with the Afghan insurgency is evidence of the factional warfare inside the country’s military, state apparatus and political establishment unleashed by the US invasion of Afghanistan and closer US strategic ties with traditional rival India. It is undoubtedly the case that sections of the Pakistan security apparatus have been deeply concerned by India’s growing influence in Afghanistan since 2001.

New Delhi dresses up its involvement in Afghanistan as motivated by humanitarian concern for the plight of the people. Indian policy, however, is driven by its decades-long rivalry with Pakistan and its ambition to establish itself as the preeminent regional power in South Asia. India undoubtedly viewed the US invasion of Afghanistan as a golden opportunity to reverse decades of setbacks and end Pakistan’s influence in one blow.

As a Cold War ally of the Soviet Union, India backed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 and continued to support Soviet-aligned governments in Kabul even after Red Army was forced to withdraw by US-backed and funded Mujaheddin groups. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—and with it the Najibullah regime in Afghanistan—India along with Russia and Iran increasingly threw its support behind various militias that eventually formed the

Northern Alliance. By the late 1990s, however, the Pakistan-backed Taliban had not only seized Kabul but driven their rivals into small pockets of territory in the country’s north.

Since 2001, India, assisted by its closer ties with Washington, has been back in force in Afghanistan. Author and longtime commentator Ahmed Rashid told the BBC this week: “India’s reconstruction strategy was designed to win over every sector of Afghan society, give India a high profile with Afghans, gain the maximum political advantage and, of course, undercut Pakistani influence.”

India is now Afghanistan’s fifth largest bilateral aid donor after the US, Britain, Japan and Germany. It has pledged around \$US750 million in aid and is involved in an array of projects from providing food to children to large infrastructure projects, including the Afghan parliament building, a power transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and the rebuilding of the Salma Dam in the western province of Herat. An estimated 4,000 Indian citizens are involved in various projects in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Afghans have been given scholarships to study in India. Trade between the two countries has grown rapidly to \$225 million in 2006-07.

In 2003 New Delhi opened four consulates in major Afghan cities in addition to its embassy in Kabul, provoking opposition from Islamabad. Pakistani officials have accused India of using its consulates in the eastern cities of Jalalabad and Kandahar to provide assistance for Pashtun and Baluchi separatists operating just over the border inside Pakistan.

The most significant Indian project is a 218-kilometre, all-weather highway connecting the Iranian port of Chabahar to Afghanistan’s main highway system at an estimated cost of \$266 million. Among other purposes, including forging ties with Iran, the road is aimed at circumventing Pakistan, which has barred India from using its highway system for trade and supplying aid to Afghanistan. When the road is completed, Indian goods will be shipped to Chabahar then trucked into Afghanistan. The strategic significance of the road has already made it the target of repeated insurgent attacks, in which several Indians have been killed.

More than six years after the US invasion, the Bush administration has not only failed to stamp out armed resistance to its neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, but has set events in train that have the potential to trigger far broader conflicts. Any attempt by India to boost its military presence inside Afghanistan in the wake of the embassy bombing will only heighten tensions with Pakistan and intensify rivalry between the two nuclear-armed powers in a country that is of vital strategic importance for both.



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