

India-Afghan pact further poisons Afghan-Pakistan relations

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Tense relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan can only deteriorate further following Tuesday's signing of a strategic agreement by Afghan President Hamid Karzai with India, during his visit to New Delhi. India—Pakistan's main regional rival—pledged long-term military and financial assistance to the Karzai regime after the December 2014 withdrawal of most US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. For his part, Karzai offered Indian corporations incentives to exploit Afghan natural resources and economically integrate the country with India.

The agreement is a clear threat that India, in conjunction with the US and its allies, will continue to build its political and economic influence in Afghanistan at Pakistan's expense. It will also add to the pressure on the government in Islamabad to bow to increasingly strident US demands to take greater action against the Afghan insurgents who operate from Pakistan's tribal border regions.

Ten years since the invasion of Afghanistan to overthrow the Pakistani-backed Islamist Taliban, US-led occupation forces have failed to suppress resistance, in part because of the continued ability of the insurgency to utilise the border regions as safe havens and the broad sympathy for the resistance among sections of the Pakistani population. The Obama administration is demanding that the Pakistani government launch a new campaign of repression against Afghan insurgents and their supporters, or face US economic sanctions or even military intervention.

Last month, following the September 13 assault on the US embassy in Kabul, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen labelled the Afghan Haqqani network, which was blamed for the attack, as a "veritable arm" of the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI. Mullen threatened that the US military would

carry out unilateral incursions into Pakistan in blatant violation of the country's sovereignty, like the operation that resulted in the assassination of Osama bin Laden.

Mullen's statements, which were made to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, implied potential US attacks on Pakistani intelligence and military bases, prompting a frenzy of speculation in the Pakistani press of a war with the United States.

In recent weeks, Karzai has joined with US military commanders in alleging that the ISI is sponsoring the anti-occupation forces in order to keep Afghanistan in chaos and bring about a return to Taliban rule after 2014. Over the past several months, prominent members of Karzai's inner circle have been assassinated, including his half-brother, and high-profile attacks carried out against targets in Kabul. Most controversially, Karzai's government has accused Pakistani-based groups of organising the assassination of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Rabbani had been heading attempts to initiate a peace deal with the Taliban and other insurgent organisations, with the aim of bringing them into the Afghan government and ending the 10-year war on US terms. He was killed by a suicide bomber on September 20. The Afghan intelligence agency has alleged the bomber was a Pakistani citizen and that the plot to kill Rabbani was planned in the Pakistani city of Quetta. Karzai responded with an announcement that his regime was suspending overtures to the Taliban and would seek direct talks with the Pakistani government instead, insinuating that the insurgency was nothing more than a front for Islamabad.

In this context, Tuesday's pact between India and Afghanistan was openly directed against Pakistan. The strategic agreement is predicated on the assertion that

the two countries face a mutual threat from “terrorism” and “radicalism.” For decades, the Indian government has accused the ISI of sponsoring the Islamist and terrorist organisations that carry out attacks inside India.

Yesterday, the insinuations against Pakistan were stepped up. Six men were arrested in Kabul on charges of plotting to kill Karzai himself. Afghan intelligence immediately went public with claims that the assassination plot had been planned by the Haqqani network from the Pakistani tribal agency of North Waziristan—another implicit accusation against the ISI. North Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan and is largely outside the control of the Pakistani government, is the main stronghold of the Haqqani network.

The Haqqani family heads an ethnic Pashtun tribal militia that was initially armed and financed by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. They supported the Taliban government that came to power in 1996 and have resisted US forces since the 2001 invasion. They are believed by the US military to command 10,000 to 15,000 fighters and are supported by the Pakistani Pashtun tribes that grouped themselves under the banner of the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP.

Washington has repeatedly called for the Pakistani military to deploy into North Waziristan to destroy the Haqqani bases and the remaining TTP forces. Islamabad has resisted. Operations against the Pakistani Taliban in other tribal agencies along the Afghan border have been costly and provoked terrorist attacks throughout the country. An offensive into North Waziristan to battle tens of thousands of well-armed fighters would require the redeployment of many of the Pakistani troops stationed on the border with India and trigger even greater internal unrest.

To placate Washington, the Pakistani government has for years turned a blind eye to the US military using Predator drones to wage a campaign of terror against insurgents and the population in its tribal agencies. The Obama administration, frustrated by its inability to bring the war in Afghanistan to anything resembling a conclusion, is now sending a clear signal that the drone strikes are insufficient. North Waziristan must be occupied.

White House spokesman Jay Carney stated on September 23: “We know that the Haqqani network

was responsible for the attacks on our embassy in Kabul. We know that the Haqqani network operates from safe havens in Pakistan, and that the government of Pakistan has not taken action against those safe havens.” Carney declared that the Pakistani government had to “break any links they have and take strong and immediate action against this network.”

The Pakistani press subsequently reported that the heads of the Pakistani military had categorically ruled out operations in North Waziristan. Their spokesman, Major General Athar Abbas, warned in an interview with CNN that unilateral US action would have “grave consequences” and would “put the government and the military’s backs to the wall.”

The Pakistani government has sought to counter US pressure by threatening to pursue closer ties with China at the expense of its long-standing strategic and military relations with Washington. Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani pointedly told Chinese Vice Premier Meng Jianzhu during a meeting on September 27: “Your friends are our friends, your enemies are our enemies and your security is our security.”

The India-Afghan agreement further destabilises an already unstable situation. The decision of the Karzai regime, with Washington’s tacit support, to draw India into greater involvement in Afghanistan raises the geopolitical stakes and the dangers of great power conflict in Central and South Asia immeasurably.



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