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ASIA UPDATE - AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

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Afghan-Pakistan relations remain tense, with both countries facing serious security problems, especially along their long and rugged border. Each side has blamed the other for Taliban resurgence and for Al Qaeda cross-border operations in Afghanistan. The Hamid Karzai government and many of its international backers, most importantly the US and Britain, have criticised the regime of Pervez Musharraf for not doing enough to deprive the Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies of sanctuaries and logistic support from Pakistan. In turn, Islamabad has lambasted the Karzai government and its NATO backers for failing to improve the conditions in Afghanistan in ways that would undercut the position of the Taliban and their supporters. While engaged in stabilising Afghanistan and at the same time maintaining a close alliance with Pakistan as a partner in the 'war on terror', Washington has recently pressed both sides to join forces in fighting a common enemy: terrorism. In early August 2007, this led to Afghanistan and Pakistan's convening in Kabul a Joint 'Peace Jirga' (assembly). The objective was to bring together tribal and religious leaders from both sides of the border to agree to common anti-Taliban and anti-Al Qaeda goals. Both Presidents Karzai and Musharraf attended the Jirga, but several major tribal leaders from Pakistan's North and South Waziristan border area, where the Taliban and Al Qaeda are believed to have their main sanctuaries and bases of support, boycotted the assembly.

The Jirga agreed on the need for the two countries to strengthen their 'brotherly' relations and to campaign jointly against terrorism as part of their national policies.

However, the path to achieving this goal remained as problematic as before.

Neither the Afghan leader nor his Pakistani counterpart is in a position to deliver on their pledges to address the problem of terrorism effectively. They both face mounting domestic political and security problems and foreign policy complications, constraining them from doing anything that would have more than marginal impact.

President Karzai remains a weakly positioned leader. After nearly six years in power, he has not been able to create a clean, efficient and effective system of governance or to generate the necessary conditions whereby a majority of the Afghan people could actively support and trust his government. He presides over a more or less dysfunctional administration, too heavily infested with highly corrupt, incompetent officials and dangerous ethnic entrepreneurs. Family, ethnic, tribal and factional connections rather than merit and national needs have continued to form a basis for senior appointments. The relations between the presidential palace and various ministries as well as with and within the Parliament remain extremely tenuous. For example, Karzai himself, of late, has hardly been on talking terms with one of his Vice Presidents, Ahmad Zia Massoud, or with the speaker of the parliament, Yunous Qanooni. Massoud has been making policy recommendations, especially on how to deal with the problem of poppy growing (which has turned Afghanistan into a major source of narcotics in the world) which are contrary to Karzai's policy thinking. Qanooni has increasingly become critical of Karzai for not dismissing his foreign minister as demanded by the parliament. Even Karzai's presidential palace, cabinet and security forces are widely infiltrated by various opposition groups, most importantly the Taliban and their Hezbi Islami (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar group) allies, as well as hostile foreign intelligence networks, most notably Pakistan's military intelligence, ISI. There are few details of cabinet and National Security Council discussions and decisions that cannot be leaked to opposition forces within hours.

President Karzai is personally clean and forward looking and acceptable to Washington, but he has not proved to be enough of a visionary or sufficiently decisive to enable him to create an administration that could serve the cause of national unity and rapid processes of security building and economic reconstruction. He has had plenty of opportunity to do so, given the degree of support that he has had from the international community and the public mandate that he received from the Afghan population in the presidential election of 2004. However, he seems to have missed such opportunities with a remarkable display of political short-sightedness. His government is entirely dependent on the support and protection of the US and its NATO allies. Without such support, it lacks the necessary capacity to endure for more than a very short time.

The Taliban, with growing network of supporters inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been able to regroup and make a comeback, especially since early 2006. They have been able to intensify and expand their military activities not only in the provinces along the border with Pakistan, but also in other parts of the country, including Kabul. An increase in fighting has meant not only more casualties for the Taliban and the US-NATO and Afghan forces, but also heavy losses for Afghan civilians, with many of them being killed as a result of misguided American and NATO bombardments. This has only added to the Afghan disenchantment with both the Karzai government and the foreign forces, and helped the Taliban to mount a successful war of propaganda. Beyond this, the Taliban have also been able to make many diplomatic gains by directly dealing or negotiating with foreign governments and agencies, as in the case of their recent negotiation with South Korea over the Christian Korean group that they had taken hostage.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's economic reconstruction has faltered, and that the country remains awash with guns, poppy growing and drug trafficking. Today Afghan economy is made up of 40 percent from opium, 50 percent from foreign aid and 10 percent from internal sources. Many of its citizens have turned against the Karzai government and the foreign forces. Afghanistan is indeed placed on a knife-edge. As long as this remains the case, there is a huge political and security vacuum for the Taliban and their supporters to exploit to keep the Karzai writ very limited and the resources of his government and international backers tied down by a relatively low grade but costly insurgency.

In the meantime, the US and its NATO allies have not been able to come up with a viable strategy to accelerate the processes of Afghanistan's reconstruction and security building to make a difference in the life of a majority of Afghans, who still live in abject poverty. Nor have they been able to secure the 2,200 km long and treacherous Afghan-Pakistan border to stop the Taliban's cross-border operations into Afghanistan. This is partly because the US and its NATO allies do not have sufficient forces in the country and are unable to deploy enough resources to monitor the border effectively. It is partly because there are still elements within the Pakistani military and ISI who wish Pakistan to have some leverage in Afghan politics in order to protect what they see as Pakistan's regional interests. They have worked on the assumption that the foreign forces sooner or

later will leave Afghanistan, as has increasingly become evident in German, Italian, Spanish, Canadian and Japanese attitudes, and thus Afghanistan will once again become a problem for Pakistan to manage. So, they have remained committed to providing sanctuaries and support for the Taliban in one way or another. President Musharraf has already acknowledged this to be the case, but he is not in a position to do much about it.

The fact is that President Musharraf is under siege, facing a severe crisis of political legitimacy and national security. His grip on power has been rapidly weakened by opposition from a cross-section of the Pakistani polity, ranging from his political and judicial critics to radical Islamist and provincial nationalist opponents. He is now governing largely on the basis of support from the military and the ISI, and the Bush Administration. Even in relation to these forces, he cannot be sure of unqualified support from either the lower echelons of the military and security forces, where sympathy for the opposition is reportedly running quite strong, or from Washington, whose backing of Musharraf has become a public liability for him.

Musharraf has certainly pledged to suppress Muslim extremism, but he knows he has little capacity to do so. His government has very limited control over the tribal areas of Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan, which have become highly Talibanised and where the Taliban and their Al Qaeda supporters have their main sanctuaries and popular support. He also cannot confidently rely on the military to achieve his objective. The Pakistani Supreme Court's reinstatement of the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Ahmed Chowdhary, whom Musharraf had dismissed early this year, and its latest ruling to enable former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whom Musharraf deposed nearly eight years ago, to return from exile have caused much humiliation for the Pakistani leader. Like his Afghan counterpart, Musharraf has now little or no capacity to engage in anything more than a politics of leadership preservation.

Under pressure from Washington, in 2006 Musharraf deployed 80,000 troops with a great deal of fanfare in the border areas with Afghanistan, especially Waziristan, with a publicly stated aim of combating terrorism, extremism and cross-border Taliban infiltrations into Afghanistan. However, after his troops sustained heavy casualties, he pulled them out within a short space of time on the basis of a face-saving September 2006 agreement with the region's tribal leaders that they would no longer support Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This soon proved to be illusory, providing an opportunity for the Taliban

and their supporters to become more active than ever before. While facing mounting domestic difficulties and while most of Pakistan military forces are still deployed on the border with India, Musharraf is in no position to deliver on any of his major foreign policy promises, especially in relation to Afghanistan.

To ask Karzai and Musharraf in their present conditions to act decisively and credibly against the Taliban, drug traffickers and smugglers, is as unrealistic as to expect the US and its NATO allies to deploy more resources to establish control over the long and rugged Afghan-Pakistan border. With many US military resources tied down by the Iraq fiasco and with many of America's European NATO allies reluctant to augment their troop deployment in Afghanistan, especially in the fighting zones along the border with Pakistan, it is hard to see how Karzai and Musharraf can fulfil their anti-terrorism commitments.

The approach that could possibly work is for the US and its allies to maintain their present level of troop deployment in Afghanistan, but to invest more in helping the Afghans build a credible government and the Pakistanis move down the path of genuine democratisation. With regard to Afghanistan, they would need to maintain their military deployment and reconstruction investment for at least another 15-20 years. In the case of Pakistan, Washington will be required to prompt Musharraf to step down in favour of a civil-military allied government for not more than three years, followed by a multi-party general elections and the retreat of the military to the barracks. In the meantime, a new constitution would need to be adopted to bar the military from renewing its political ambitions, to confine its role to supporting the democratic processes, and to go through the necessary institutional reformation to enable it to serve under the control of elected governments. Beyond this, the ISI needs to be restructured to serve as no more than an intelligence agency within all the necessary democratic constraints.

If urgent, serious steps are not taken in this direction, both Afghanistan and Pakistan face a much longer period of instability and volatility than can be anticipated at this stage. Both countries are now at critical crossroads, in desperate need of a clear future. They are already seriously disrupted states. There is a strong chance that they may become failed states. Given Pakistan's status as a nuclear-armed state, this may entail debilitating consequences for US interests in the region and for that matter world politics.

