

Pak - Afghan war of words

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON 14th June, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai threatened to send Afghan troops across the border to fight militants in Pakistan, a forceful warning to insurgents and the Pakistani government that his country was fed up with cross-border attacks.

Karzai's threat

Karzai reportedly said that because militants cross over from Pakistan "to come and kill Afghan and kill coalition troops, it exactly gives us the right to do the same. Therefore, Baitullah Mehsud should know that we will go after him now and hit him in his house", referring to the top Taliban leader in Pakistan, suspected in the assassination last year of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Some say President Karzai has his eye more on Afghan domestic politics. He knows that many Afghans see the Taliban as the cat's paw of Pakistan -- specifically of Pakistani intelligence. So it's popular for Karzai to threaten retaliation for the cross-border raids by the Taliban.

There have been rallies in support of Karzai in the southeastern provinces of Paktia and Paktika as well as the western province of Herat. In the southern insurgency-plagued province of Helmand and the northern province of Baghlan similar gatherings have expressed support for the President.

Karzai has long pleaded for Pakistan and international forces to confront militants in Pakistan but has never before said he would send Afghan troops across the border.

US officials have increased their warnings in recent weeks that the Afghan conflict will drag on for years unless militants are defeated.

Informed sources believe such threat from the President of Afghanistan was very unusual unless the President had the support of the Bush administration.

Analysts agree that without U.S. military support, Afghan forces would have little chance of success in a battle within Pakistan's tribal agencies. But it's unclear if Washington is willing to provide that support.

On 16th June, President Bush urged Pakistan to work more closely with Afghan and U.S. forces in the fight against terrorism.

The President reportedly said, "Our strategy is to deny safe haven to extremists, who would do harm to innocent people, and that's the strategy of Afghanistan. And it needs to be the strategy of Pakistan. It's in all of our interests to prevent those who murder innocent people to achieve politi-



cal objectives to gain safe haven."

Bush's comments come as relations between U.S. and Pakistani security forces appear to be at a new low. Last week, a U.S. air strike killed 11 Pakistani soldiers within Pakistani territory. The Pentagon says it targeted a group who had attacked U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and then fled back to Pakistan. A joint inquiry is being held on this incident.

Washington's growing distrust was highlighted last week by the release of a Pentagon-funded study by RAND Corporation. That study concludes that individuals in Pakistan's Frontier Corps and intelligence services support the Taliban by providing them with intelligence about the movements of coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and prominent author who is critical of the international approach in Afghanistan, says that Washington has become frustrated with Pakistan's military.

"There is a very massive breakdown between the U.S. and the Pakistani military. I think talks between these two have failed," Rashid says. "Whatever the details are of this clash [and air strike], we really don't know what happened. There are many versions. But I think the real issue was that the Americans are clearly sending

a very tough message to Pakistan."

Pakistan's reaction

The threat naturally angered Pakistan's new Gilani government, which summoned the Afghan Ambassador, to issue a formal complaint.

A Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mohammad Sadiq, commented on 15th June on Karzai's warning: "We think that he did not use his best judgment by making this statement."

It is reported that Siddiqui Farooq, a spokesman for the second largest party in Pakistan's coalition government, condemned Karzai's comments. He said that no one would be allowed to violate the international border.

Pakistan's Prime Minister is quoted to have said that the threat "will not be taken well."

Meanwhile former Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, the largest partner in the coalition government, said that President Musharraf made Pakistan so weak that the US killed Pakistani soldiers in its soil and that Afghanistan threatened Pakistan.

There is another dimension to the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations that cannot be ignored. Pakistan wants Afghanistan to be within its sphere of influence and during the Taliban period Afghanistan was in fact within Pakistan's

domination. That ended when Karzai took over in 2001. It is believed that India's influence has grown in Afghanistan considerably and Pakistan is not comfortable with that.

Furthermore, it is noted that in the past, Afghanistan had claimed border areas as their part of territory known as "Pakhtunistan" and in 1947 it was only Afghanistan which objected to the admission of Pakistan to the UN in the General Assembly.

Against this background, the war of words is nothing new between them, except that this time, Afghanistan is emboldened by the likely support of the Bush administration.

What is at stake?

Tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan would provide an opportunity for the militants to grow in strength. Most of cross-border militants are Pakhtuns, and when they cross the border no one knows whether that individual is a Pakistani or an Afghan because they speak the same language and look alike.

Analysts believe this war of words, this rhetorical contest between two governments, between two partners in this region must end. Pointing fingers leads nowhere, when what Afghanistan needs most is constructive engagement with Pakistan and joint action to tackle a very serious security challenge.

The truth is that these networks are operating in both Afghanistan and Pakistan that the leaders spend time in both countries and military action is required wherever they are located.

It is noted that of the 142 Taliban leaders mentioned in Security Council Resolution 1267 of 1999, which slapped sanctions on Taliban and Al-Qaida operatives and associates, only a handful have been captured, reconciled with the Karzai government or their whereabouts otherwise established, due to a lack of international cooperation.

It is reported that Pakistan had taken steps against some people on the list, arresting some, but most experts would agree that others were believed to be hiding in Pakistan. Pakistan has given on many occasions the assurance that if these leaders are found in Pakistan action will be taken. Experts say there is more work to be done in and around Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan.

For peace and stability in the region, it is high time that both countries should work together to meet the common threat of militants.

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Impact of Israel and Hamas ceasefire

BILLY I AHMED

ON 19 June, Israel, and Hamas that controls the Gaza Strip, agreed to a ceasefire through an indirect negotiation by Egyptian mediators. It took three months for the Egyptian mediators to organize this truce between the two sides. However, it is uncertain how long this recently agreed truce will last.

Both sides agreed to start off with three days of calm. If that holds well, the economic blockade imposed a year ago by Israel will begin to ease.

The blockade was imposed when Hamas took the control of the strip from its secular political rival Fatah.

The next phase will be to renew talks on an exchange of Palestinian prisoners (perhaps some 1,400) for an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit.

Both sides could benefit from a break. Gaza's militants have rained a stream of rockets at Israelis nearby. Most are inaccurate and homemade but they have lately included more lethal, longer-range versions smuggled in from Egypt. They have killed a dozen Israelis in eight years.

Israel's attacks on Gaza have been more targeted but far bloodier: they have killed some 370 Gazans this year alone, not all of them gunslingers and at least seventy of them children.

Israel has piled on economic pressure, too. The 15 months of sanctions it imposed on the Palestinian Authority following Hamas's victory in a general election in 2006 had already weakened the economy; the blockade on Gaza, during which Israel let in only minimal levels of humanitarian goods and fuel, has ruined it.

Most Gazans still blame Israel. Hamas's popularity seems to rise when Gaza is under attack. But the combined military and economic pressure no doubt played a part in Hamas's decision to call a truce.

In any event, the ceasefire is fragile, not least because both Hamas and the Israelis have doubts about its benefits. The big push came from Egypt, which took on the mediator's role after some fierce fighting earlier this year.

Since Hamas blew down Gaza's southern wall in January, letting Palestinians flood into Egypt for a few days, the government in Cairo was worried that increasing Israeli pressure could again dump Gaza's problems on Egypt's lap.

So various things could end the ceasefire. Though other militant groups in Gaza hint that they would respect it, some may try to spoil it.

Among them are members of Fatah, Hamas's secular rival, which is still smarting at Hamas's takeover a year ago.

Since Israel and Hamas refuse direct contact, the channel for resolving disagreements or dampening sudden flare-ups is Egypt. Egypt will be slow at best.

Besides, keeping up the ceasefire will need progress that both sides are uneasy about. Hamas wants Israel to lift its economic siege and eventually extend the ceasefire to the West Bank.

But Israel's eventual goal is still to weaken

Hamas in favour of Fatah. It is holding talks with Fatah's leader, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, who runs the West Bank; anything that gives Hamas respite may undermine these talks.

Fatah itself has been making noises about reconciliation with Hamas in the past few days, but for that reason it would rather see the Islamists weakened so it gets the best terms for a rapprochement.

Israel, for its part, wants Hamas to reduce smuggling weapons through tunnels under Gaza's border with Egypt.

But Hamas considers the arms essential to beefing itself up against a possible Israeli military incursion, and Egypt has been unable to stem the traffic itself.

In short, the ceasefire is likely to last only as long as neither side feels it is helping the other side too much.

And if the ceasefire collapses? Israeli leaders were sounding ever more aggressive before the ceasefire; a massive incursion to strike a mortal blow at Hamas was a matter of time.

A security official says the differences of opinion in the defense establishment on such an operation are now merely "tactical". Yet there is an element of bragging in all this, no doubt fuelled by Israeli politicians who are scenting early elections in the wake of the latest corruption scandal to engulf Ehud Olmert, the prime minister.

A full-scale incursion against Hamas's estimated force of 15,000-20,000 armed and well-trained men could cost several Israeli soldiers' lives, more than have ever been killed by the rockets. Similarly, hundreds of Palestinians would undoubtedly die bringing international condemnation on Israel and destroying the peace process with Mr Abbas.

It would be hard for Israelis to argue for a military onslaught without either an extreme provocation or a guaranteed result. So a ceasefire gives both Prime Minister Olmert and Ehud Barak, his defense minister and political rival, who last month issued an ultimatum to Mr Olmert to step down or face early elections, some welcome space.

Prime Minister Olmert will also benefit if reports come true of an imminent prisoner swap with Lebanon's Hizbullah, which captured two Israeli soldiers and sparked a five-week-long war with Israel two years ago.

But finally the biggest winner may be a rival to both of them: Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of the opposition Likud party, who currently leads in the polls. Incase, there is heavy fighting, voters may still return to the battle-tested Mr Barak, a former army chief. If the ceasefire holds, Mr Netanyahu could reap the rewards.

Israel agreed to an Egyptian-brokered truce with Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip. It is hoped the truce will stop Hamas and other groups from firing rockets at Israel and that Israel will no longer carry out raids on Gaza.

The Palestinians of Gaza also hope the blockade imposed by Israel will gradually, if at first partially, be lifted.

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What Obama should say on Iraq

FAREED ZAKARIA

BARACK Obama needs to give a speech about Iraq. Otherwise he will find himself in the unusual position of having being prescient about the war in 2002 and yet being overtaken by events in 2008. The most important reason to do this is not political. Iraq is fading in importance for the public and, to the extent that it matters as an electoral issue, most people agree with Obama's judgment that the war was not worth fighting.

The reason to lay out his approach to Iraq is that, were he elected, the war would be his biggest and most immediate problem. He will need to implement a serious policy on Iraq, one that is consistent with his long-held views but is also informed by the conditions on the ground today. This is what he should say:

"In six months, on January 20, 2009, we will have a new president. But it is not clear that we will chart a new course in the ongoing war in Iraq. Senator McCain has promised a continuation of the Bush strategy -- to stay in Iraq with no horizon in sight, with no benchmarks or metrics that would tell us when American troops can come home. In 2006, when levels of violence were horrifyingly high, President Bush and Senator McCain said that things were going so badly that if we left, the consequences would be tragic. Today they say that things are going so well that if we leave, the consequences would be tragic. Whatever the conditions, the answer is the same -- keep doing what we're doing. How does one say 'Catch-22' in Arabic?"

"I start from a different premise. I believe that the Iraq War was a major strategic blunder. It diverted us from the battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan -- the people who launched the attacks of 9/11 and who remain powerful and active today. We face threats in Iraq, but the two greatest ones, as General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have testified, are Al Qaeda (which is wounded but not dead) and

Iran. Both are a direct consequence of the invasion. There was no Al Qaeda in Iraq before 2003, and Iran's influence has expanded massively since then.

"And then there are the more tangible costs. The war has resulted in over 4,000 U.S. combat deaths, four times as many grievously wounded, and tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths. Over 2 million Iraqis have fled the country and 2 million more have been displaced within the country. The price tag in dollars has also been staggering. In the last five years, the United States has spent close to \$1 trillion on the invasion and occupation of Iraq. That is enough money to rebuild every school, bridge and road in America, create universal health care and fund several Manhattan Projects in alternative energy. Whatever benefits the invasion of Iraq might produce, it cannot justify these expenditures in lives and treasure.

"But these costs have already been paid. Nothing we can do today, in June 2008, can reduce those expenditures or bring back to life those brave people. We have to look at the situation we're in now and ask, what can we do to create the best possible outcome at an acceptable cost? Economists warn us not to dwell on 'sunk costs' and, while painful, we must move beyond the mistakes of the past and focus on the possibilities of the future.

"The surge has produced a considerable decline in violence in Iraq. General Petraeus has accomplished this by using more troops and fighting differently. Perhaps more crucially, he reached out and made a strategic accommodation with many Sunni groups that had once fought U.S. troops. To put it bluntly, he talked to our enemies. These reversals of strategy have had the effect of creating what General Petraeus calls 'breathing space' for political reconciliation. And he has always said that without political progress in Iraq, military efforts will not produce any lasting success.

"He is right. All today's gains could disappear when American

troops leave -- and they will have to leave one day. The disagreement I have with the Bush administration is that it seems to believe that time will magically make these gains endure. It won't. Without political progress, once the United States reduces its forces, the old mistrust and the old militias will rise up again. Only genuine political power-sharing will create a government and an army that are seen as national and not sectarian. And that, in turn, is the only path to make Iraq viable without a large American military presence.

"In recent months there has been some movement on the reconciliation long promised by the Bush administration. It remains piecemeal and limited -- nothing like the new national compact that the Maliki government promised two years ago -- but I welcome the gains. It is encouraging to see the Iraqi government act against Shiite militias in Basra and Sadr City, which sends a signal that they will be equal-opportunity enforcers of the law.

"More needs to happen. Militias remain powerful in many parts of Iraq. The Sunni tribes that have switched sides must have their members enrolled in the armed forces and police (a process that has moved very slowly so far). Constitutional discussions that have been postponed again and again need to take place soon.

"I have often said that we cannot give a blank check to the Iraq government. And I believe that congressional pressure -- the growing frustration of Democrats and Republicans -- was an important factor in getting the Iraqi leadership to start moving on outstanding political issues. I believe that we must continue to keep that pressure on the government in Baghdad. The best pressure remains the threat of troop withdrawals. But the obvious corollary is that were the Iraqi government to take decisive action, we should support it by altering the pace of our draw-down. I have set as a target the reduction of U.S. forces at one to

two brigades a month, starting in early 2009. Were the Iraqi government to make significant political progress and request a pause in this timetable, and were General Petraeus to support this request, I would give it serious consideration.

"My objective remains to end American combat involvement in Iraq and to do so expeditiously. At some point we are going to have to take off the training wheels in Iraq. I believe that we must have a serious plan that defines when that point is reached. If we define success as an Iraq that looks like France or Holland, we will have to stay indefinitely, continue spending \$10 billion a month and keep 140,000 troops in combat. And that is neither acceptable nor sustainable. We will have to accept as success a muddier middle ground -- an Iraq that is a functioning, federal democracy with a central government and an army able to tackle the bulk of challenges they face. General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have themselves said that no matter what success we achieve, there will remain some Al Qaeda presence in Iraq and some Iranian influence, since Iran is a neighbour.

"I have been a longstanding opponent of the Iraq War. But I am a passionate supporter of the Iraqi people. They deserve a decent future after decades of tyranny and five years of chaos. The United States must continue its assistance and engagement with Iraq on a whole range of issues -- economic, administrative and security-related. We owe the Iraqi people this, and we hope to maintain a friendship with them for decades. I have always said that I would not withdraw troops precipitously, nor do I insist that we will draw down to zero. If circumstances require, we will have a small presence in the country to fight Al Qaeda, train the Iraqi army, protect American interests and provide humanitarian assistance. But it will be small and it will be temporary -- which is also as the Iraqi people seem to wish.

"Another significant difference



between Senator McCain and me is that I would couple the reduction in our military forces in Iraq with a diplomatic surge, not just to push the Iraqis to make deals, but also to get its neighbours more productively involved in Iraq. It is a sign of our neglect of diplomacy that today, five years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, only two Arab governments have pledged to name an ambassador to Baghdad. Iraq is not an island. It is a founding member of the Arab League and a crucial country in the Persian Gulf. We need to engage with all Iraq's neighbours --

including Syria and Iran -- to create a lasting political stability that is supported in the region.

"But finally, I would return to my original concerns. General Petraeus has successfully executed the task he was given, to shore up a collapsing situation in Iraq. But his responsibility was Iraq. His new area of operation stretches from the Arab world into Pakistan and Afghanistan. There lie the most dangerous and immediate threats to American security. The Taliban is enjoying its greatest resurgence since 9/11. Former U.S. commander Gen. Dan

McNeill has said we need at least two more combat brigades to fight it. But there are literally no brigades to spare because of our massive commitment in Iraq.

"The president of the United States is responsible not just for Iraq, not just for the Middle East and West Asia, but for America's interests across the globe. We must make our commitment in Iraq one that is limited, temporary and thus sustainable. And we must also be aware that there is a much larger world out there, with the Taliban in Afghanistan, with Iran's growing ambitions, a

rising China, a resurgent Russia, an obstructionist Venezuela. All these require attention. The test of a commander in chief is not to focus obsessively on one battlefield but to keep all of them in view and to use resources and tactics in a way that creates an overall grand strategy, one that keeps the American people safe and the world at peace."

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