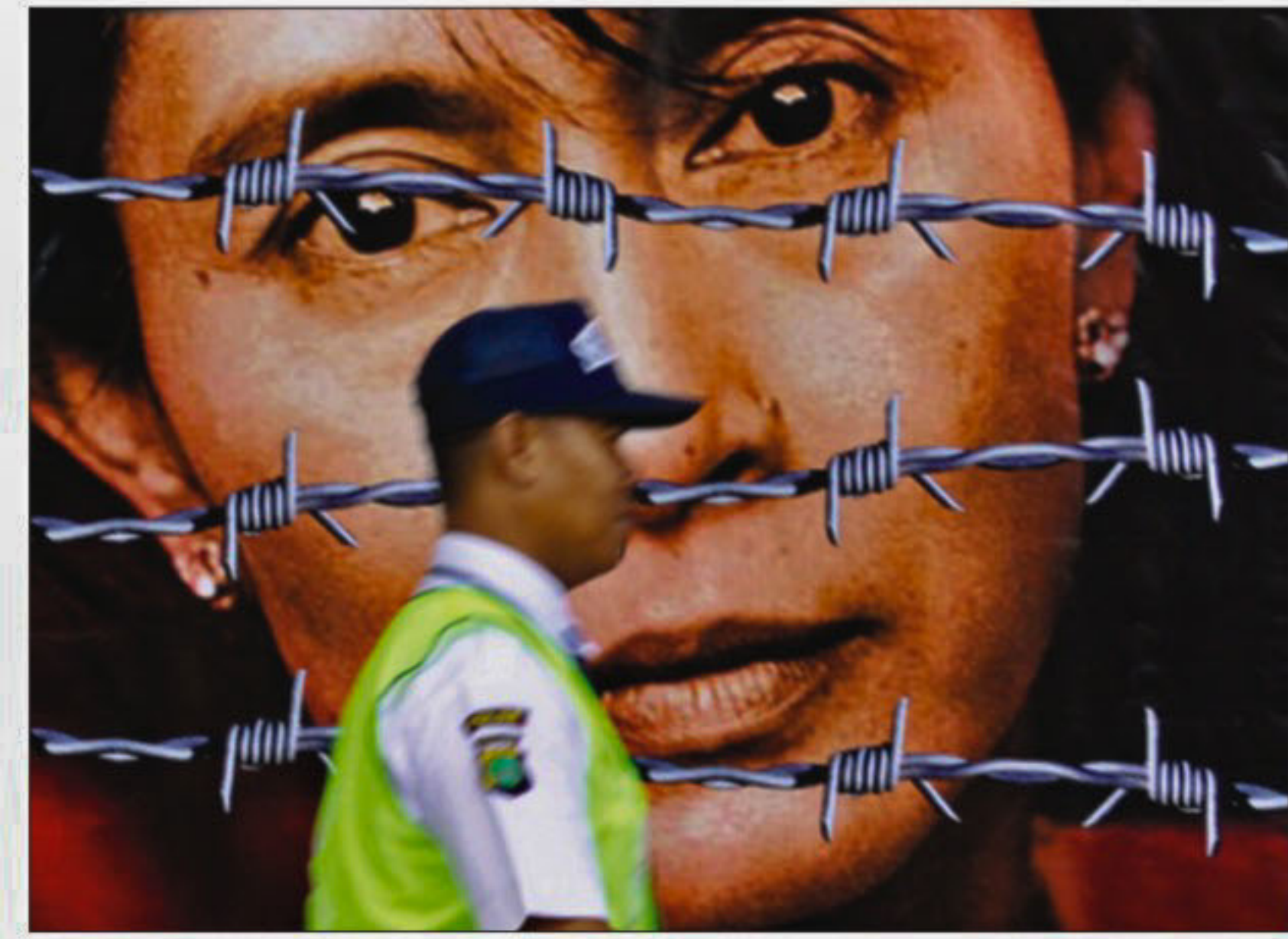


# Myanmar - shifting to military democracy?



M. SERAJUL ISLAM

THE military leaders of Myanmar through a brief radio broadcast have announced elections to the parliament on November 7th. Political parties have been given time till the end of the month to submit their list of candidates. Earlier, the military regime had tactfully ensured that Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was kept out of the contest by extending her house arrest till November 2010. To the regime's satisfaction, the

extension led Aung's National Democratic League (NLD) to decide against registering for the elections that resulted in the party being banned. The NLD opted against registering to give the international community the clear message that the next elections would be anything but a new strategy to entrench the power of the military.

In fact, international opinion has concurred with Aung who had led the NLD to a decisive victory in Myanmar's last polls held 20 years ago only to be denied power

and kept under house arrest for 14 years since that victory. There are also many other visible signs to suggest that the ruling military is ready for nothing short of continuing with their stranglehold on power, albeit under a civilian facade. First, 166 of the 498 seats would be reserved for the military. Second, ahead of the elections by a well laid out policy a substantial number, including the Premier, resigned from the military to contest the elections. Third, the military has already left no one in doubt that its civilian extension in the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) whose members are all beneficiaries of the military junta and obliged to allow military dominance for their own sake. Thein Sein now leads the USDP to make the linkage more than obvious.

At least 40 political parties have registered to contest the elections of which a breakaway faction of the NLD naming itself the National Democratic Force is one. Most of these parties are small and have regional or limited agenda. The western nations, led by the United States have expressed deep reservations about the polls. As part of President Obama's policy of engagement with regimes such as the one in Myanmar, US Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell visited Myanmar twice in six months, the last one in May this year, the first such senior official to visit Myanmar in 14 years. Then he met Premier Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. He returned deeply disappointed with the country's preparations for the elections. The United Nations has also expressed similar concerns. UN Secretary General

Baan Kin Moon has called on the Myanmar military junta to keep its commitments to hold a credible and transparent election for transition from military rule to democracy.

There have also been news, unconfirmed as yet, that the top military leaders of Myanmar General Than Shwe with the next two Generals, Maung Aye and Thura Shwe Mann of the 12 member State Peace and Development Council have resigned from the military. The resignations that are now inevitable are in anticipation that the next parliament would elect General Than Shwe as the President and the other two Generals as the Vice-President and Premier. If the resignations are true and the three generals hold those anticipated posts, then the military would have a full proof mechanism in place for any civilian government to even dare to challenge the military's dominance. Meanwhile, there has been the biggest reshuffle in the military since General Shwe became the top General more than two decades ago and has held the country by the scruff of the neck ever since. More than 70 senior army officers have been involved in this reshuffle that has been strategically made by General Shwe to assure the military's loyalty once he leaves the military to become the country's President.

Those who are interested in looking for a silver lining in the cloud argue that it would not be correct to dismiss the forthcoming elections straightaway. They further argue that the elections would bring into politics, leaders from the new generation who would be able to motivate the aging mili-

tary leaders about the need to move gradually towards genuine democracy. They also feel that within the military as new generation of leaders take charge; there would be able to influence the military's mindset in line with changes and realities of the contemporary world. Finally, they also feel that this is the most sincere and realistic offer by the Generals to cede absolute power.

The results of the elections are hardly anyone's concern. The military backed USDP will win the elections convincingly and form the Government. This is why there is seemingly no obstacle being created by the military in the way of freedom of the candidates to move freely in the country, something not usual in Myanmar. The main concern is how those who would be leaving the military's top positions to become the country's top political leaders and parliamentarians share power with the new leadership in the military. General Shwe has just not ruled Myanmar with an iron fist; he also had to tackle conflicts within the army as well. In 2004, he had to sack the Premier. He rose from an ordinary postman to become the most powerful man in his country. He has also reportedly acquired significant wealth together with earning wrath of the silent opposition as well as Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups that his regime has subordinated ruthlessly to have an enormous personal stake in the way Myanmar transforms politically. The aging strong man who is 77 and his close colleagues who are not young either, under considerable world pressure for demo-

cratic change, thought time to be opportune to share power with civilian groups who have grown rich under their sponsorship and ready to accept the dominance of the military even under future civilian rule. The military is also wary that without some concessions, Myanmar's economy and condition of the people that are in dire straits could lead to new spate of mass uprisings. Despite all the full proof measures to assure continued military dominance, General Shwe and his Generals who are known to be "notoriously superstitious" chose the date of the election by invoking astrology so as to leave nothing to chance!

In effect what would be taking place in Myanmar through the 7th November elections is a transition of the top military leaders to top civilian posts; from pure military dictatorship to military led democracy. In fact, as a civilian President, General Than Shwe has no reason to apprehend in the short run any challenge to his authority from the elected Government. His main and perhaps only apprehension would be how those he would be putting in charge of the military would treat him when he says goodbye to his military uniform for civilian outfit. The history of such transformation has not been good for military dictators who have eventually democracy has won. That gives hope that history could repeat itself in Myanmar.

The writer is a former Ambassador to Japan and a Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.

# War clouds over Iran

MAHAN ABEDIN

WHILST war is not likely in the foreseeable future, the likelihood of its occurrence further down the line has increased in the light of Admiral Mullen's statement.

The candid remarks in early August by Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and America's highest ranking military officer, that the United States has drawn up plans to attack Iran has touched off a flurry of reporting and analysis on the likelihood of a military strike on Iran in the near future.

Although Mullen was careful enough to add that he thought military action was a bad idea inasmuch as its regional consequences were unpredictable, nonetheless he has raised the stakes considerably by formally disclosing what many knew already existed. The Pentagon has contingency military plans in place for many parts of the world but it rarely discusses these in public.

But there has been speculation of a growing threat of war independent of Admiral Mullen's carefully-crafted statement. Three articles in particular stand out. The first is pro-Israeli journalist Jeffrey Goldberg's "The Point of No Return" published in the September edition of the Atlantic, in which Goldberg argues that if President Obama does not take decisive action to halt Iran's nuclear programme within one year then Israel will send up to one hundred warplanes to take out the visible dimension of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. In this lengthy piece, which carries the input of forty current and past Israeli decision makers, Goldberg allows his interviewees to dominate the narrative, without taking them to task for some of their core assumptions, in particular their belief that Iran poses an 'existential' threat to Israel. In his critique of Goldberg's article, the Israeli strategic affairs analyst Yossi Alpher cites the overriding Israeli imperative to influence the Iran debate in Washington, and claims that Israeli policy makers view Goldberg as a useful tool to achieve that objective. In other words, the Israeli threats conveyed in Goldberg's article are more

akin to psychological warfare than concrete plans.

By contrast, Iran expert Ray Takeyh and former national security council staffer Steven Simon's op-ed in the Washington Post entitled "If Iran came close to getting a nuclear weapon, would Obama use force" (August 1) is a more nuanced piece. However, the authors' dovish reputation accentuates the gravity of their worrying conclusion; that yes in the event of exhausting all political, diplomatic and economic tools (embodied by the complex sanctions regime imposed on Iran), President Obama would be left with little choice but to order strikes on Iran's

interests in the Middle East.

What all these articles fail to discuss adequately is the nature and intensity of the Iranian response to an American attack on the country's nuclear infrastructure. Takeyh and Simon for instance whilst paying lip service to the possibility of a robust Iranian retaliation appear to be advising the White House that the cautious and rational leadership in Tehran would limit its reaction to "large demonstrations" and eschew a military response due to its recognition of the logic of power.

Takeyh and Simon's analysis likely has some resonance inside the Pentagon and the wider American

are normally confined to the very margins, they are likely to be thrust centre stage in the event of US military aggression. The statements by the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Iran's parallel ideological army) in response to Admiral Mullen's remarks should be a wake up call for American defence and strategic policy makers.

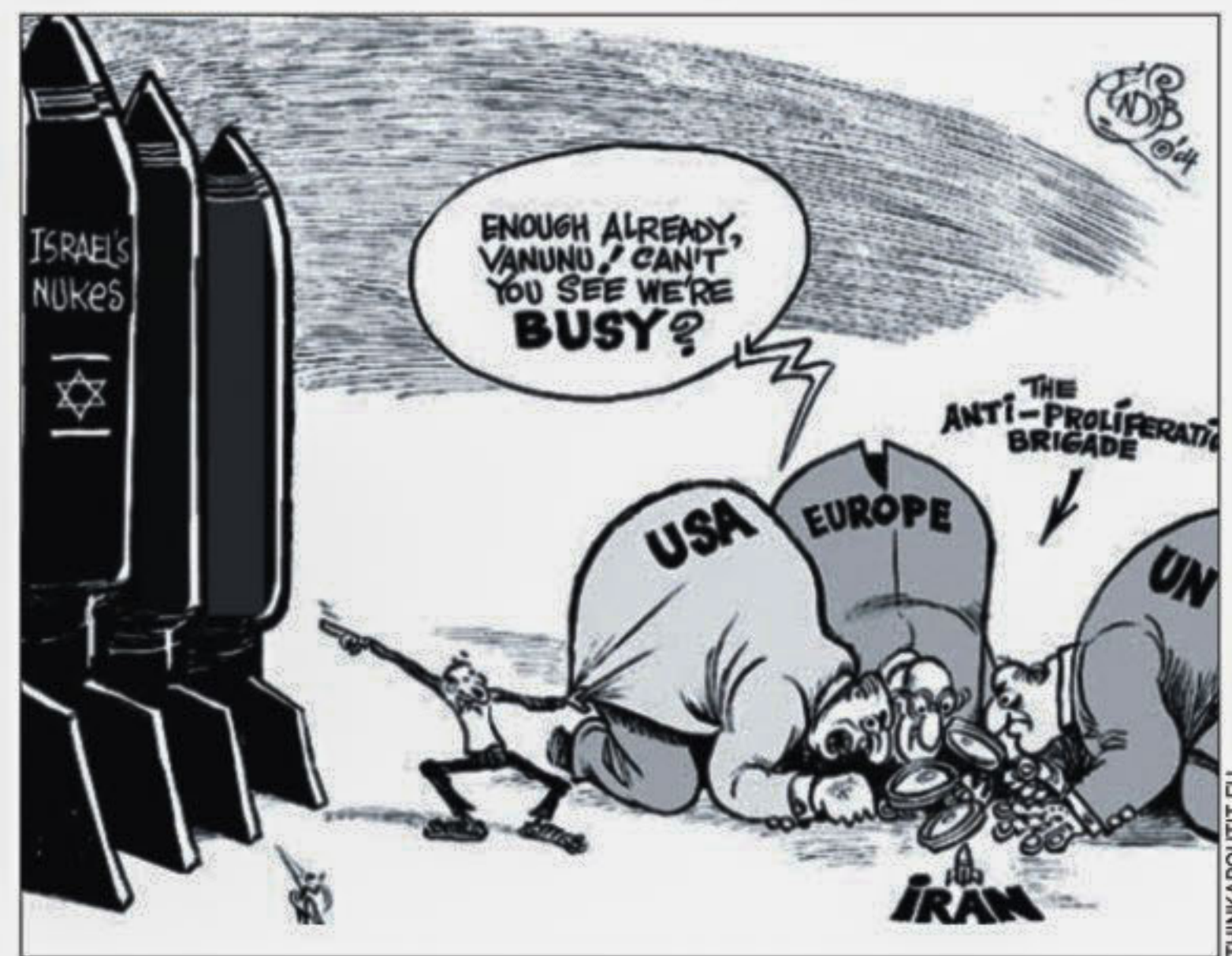
Even before Mullen's statement, these commanders, alongside the Guard's political and ideological officers, had warned of the dire consequences of military confrontation, promising to combine conventional and asymmetric forms of warfare to deliver a robust response. At the very least the IRGC is expected to try to close the Strait of Hormuz through which nearly forty per cent of world crude oil supplies pass.

On the question of Israel, the Jewish state is highly unlikely to attack Iran, for many reasons, but most importantly because the U.S. will in the end decisively veto this dangerous option. As for the United States, the Americans will have to balance a dizzying array of interests, factors and scenarios as they contemplate military action in the months and years ahead. Even if the worst-case scenarios are correct and Iran is indeed bent on producing nuclear weapons or at least the ability to assemble one within a short time frame the U.S. still has a range of options to contain the Islamic Republic, none of which is as dangerous and unpredictable as a military strike.

In the meantime the Iranians are likely to repeatedly highlight the spectre of an asymmetric response, as this confuses and confuses American planning, thus constituting the most effective deterrent. But whether all this sabre rattling by both sides produces a desirable outcome for instance, in the form of direct American-Iranian talks and thus dramatically reduces the likelihood of conflict is not clear.

In the final analysis, whilst war is not likely in the foreseeable future, the likelihood of its occurrence further down the line has increased in the light of Admiral Mullen's statement.

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nuclear infrastructure.

Meanwhile, an article by prominent Iranian-American Trita Parsi in Salon (August 13) argues that Goldberg's piece should be viewed as the opening salvo of an attempt to weaken Obama by portraying him as weak on national security issues, with a view to facilitating his downfall in the November 2012 Presidential Elections. An expert on Iran-Israeli relations, Parsi does not rule out the long-term risks of war, undertaken most likely by a Republican Administration with a more militant commitment to Israel's security and

defence establishment. In this respect the American defence establishment clearly doesn't believe the propaganda of U.S. administrations in the past three decades, namely that Iran's leadership is irrational and messianic. After all, only an unfailingly rational and meticulously risk-averse political system would forego the option of retaliation in the face of gross and intolerable military provocation.

But Takeyh and Simon are wrong in their appraisal of the Islamic Republic. The Iranian system is not without irrational actors, and whilst these elements



# Afghanistan's ire

HUMA YUSUF

PAKISTAN 'irritates' Afghan President Hamid Karzai, says an official of his government quoted in The Washington Post. Fair enough.

In the midst of a decade-old war with no favourable outcome and mounting civilian casualties, an incorrigible neighbour with 'safe havens' for militants is bound to feel like a major irritant. But that does not justify Kabul's call for sanctions against Pakistan.

Indeed, there is something desperate about Afghan national security adviser Rangan Spanta's recommendation that the US impose economic sanctions and deny Pakistani generals visas. Spanta's call says more about the contradictions rife in the Afghan capital than the Pakistani state's alleged policy to sponsor militancy. It also underlines recent overtures towards regional cooperation.

No doubt, the Afghans have the right to highlight Pakistan's role in their country's ongoing insurgency. Given the persistence of terrorist attacks within Pakistan it is clear that a double game is no longer tenable, and that Islamabad must crack down on militant safe havens within Pakistan's borders.

Pakistan's policy for a post-2011 Afghanistan -- shaping Afghan politics, engaging with the Taliban and keeping Indian investment at bay, all in the name of strategic depth -- no longer fits with reality. The fact is, Kabul is now empowered enough to determine its own agenda. And for a country that keeps on about the integrity of its national sovereignty, Pakistan has done a shoddy job of respecting that of its neighbours.

But sanctions will not eliminate sanctuaries or force Pakistan to stop meddling in Kabul's affairs. Dismantling training camps and militant hideouts along the Durand Line will require close Af-Pak cooperation, joint security action, intelligence-sharing, and perhaps new agreements regarding transit, trade and cartography along the porous border. To rid the war of 'international jihadis' who enjoy the support of some sections and sanctuary in Pakistan, Kabul will have to work with Islamabad, not against it.

Knowing this, why did Spanta call for sanctions? Obviously, this was a clumsy attempt to deflect attention from the towering corruption charges that have compromised Kabul's credibility, and blame Afghanistan's ills on Pakistan. Mention of sanctions follows a trip by US Senator John Kerry to Kabul, where he warned Karzai that US taxpayers were weary of funding a corrupt government. It also follows reports in the international press that corrupt governance threatens to destabilise Afghanistan more than the Taliban.

Spanta's flare-up comes on the heels of a corruption investigation into the activities of Mohammed Zia Salehi, a senior national security adviser. Salehi was arrested in July for taking a bribe to impede a US-backed, anti-corruption initiative. He was released seven hours later when Karzai intervened on his behalf. It was revealed recently that Salehi has been on the CIA's payroll for several years.

Rather than distract from allegations of corruption, though, Spanta's anti-Pakistan jibe focuses attention on the mēlée that is politics in Kabul. The extent of confusion in the Afghan capital was highlighted by a revelation in The Washington Post on Friday that the CIA makes secret payments to multiple members of the Karzai administration. Defending this practice, a former agency official explained that the payments yielded a steady flow of information, which was necessary because Karzai was not fully aware of all the goings-on in his own government.

Even without the CIA revelation, Kabul's erratic relationship with Islamabad indicates just how deeply entrenched palace intrigue is in the Afghan capital. Though flawed, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan has been consistent. The same cannot be said about Afghanistan's dealings with Pakistan -- competing actors with competing agendas in Kabul have led to on-again, off-again diplomatic ties with Islamabad.

Days before Spanta lashed out against Pakistan, Karzai was hobnobbing with President Asif Zardari in Russia, brainstorming ways in which to boost regional economic cooperation. Earlier this year too, in June, Pakistan was led to believe that Afghanistan was committed to working together against terrorism when Karzai accepted the resignations of his interior minister Hanif Atmar and intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh. The latter had openly critiqued Pakistan's ISI for facilitating Taliban attacks within Afghanistan, and was thus seen as an impediment to good relations between the neighbours. His dismissal suggested that all was well in Af-Pak-land.

Notably, this summer of cooperation followed a spring of discontent. At the start of this year, Afghanistan decided to blow Pakistan out of initial peace talks with the Taliban. The New York Times confirmed that the arrest in February of second-ranking Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as well as 22 other Taliban leaders was an attempt by Pakistan's security forces to stall direct negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban. By taking militants into custody, Pakistan was trying to force its way to a negotiating table that Kabul made clear it was not welcoming at.

Rather than expose the Pakistani government's machinations, however, Karzai appeared in Islamabad in March to announce that Pakistan would handle future negotiations with the Taliban. He added, "Pakistan is a twin brother of Afghanistan. We are more than twins -- we are conjoined twins."

That description seems apt in hindsight, since Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to act like squabbling siblings. Given how much is at stake in terms of regional security and development, capricious relations between Islamabad and Kabul must be stabilised. For the moment, it is up to Karzai to get his house in order and devise a clear policy regarding Pakistan. After that, the onus will be on Pakistan to respect Afghanistan's parameters for engagement.

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# US slaps new sanctions on North Korea



WASHINGTON: The US government slapped sanctions on four people and eight organizations accused of aiding North Korea's government through illicit trade, the Treasury Department said.

President Barack Obama issued an order freezing assets and imposing travel bans, as Washington stepped up pressure after the sinking of a South Korean navy ship in March which was blamed on Pyongyang.

Obama also expanded the scope of US sanctions to cover those

involved in the trade in drugs and luxury goods to and from the impoverished nation.

Among those targeted was a secretive branch of the Korean Workers' Party, known as Office 39, which is suspected of selling methamphetamine in China and South Korea and acquiring luxury items for North Korea's leaders.

The group is thought to be involved in a failed attempt to buy two Italian-made luxury yachts worth more than 15 million dollars for North Korea's reclusive leader,

Kim Jong-Il. "North Korea's government helps maintain its authority by placating privileged elites with money and perks such as luxury goods like jewelry, luxury cars and yachts," said the Treasury Department's sanctions tsar Stuart Levey.

Among those also targeted were the head of North Korea's intelligence agency Kim Yong-Chol, who has been linked to the March torpedo attack that killed 46 people on the South Korean ship. Pyongyang denies any role in the attacks.

Green Pine Associated Corporation, a group said to be controlled by Kim Yong-Chol's intelligence agency, was also sanctioned.

The organization was accused of "exporting arms or related materiel from North Korea," and is said to specialize in the production of maritime military craft and armaments.

"(Green Pine) has exported torpedoes and technical assistance to Iranian defense firms" the Treasury department said.

Other individuals, including two members of the North Korea's General Bureau of Atomic Energy were also sanctioned.

Others targeted included the head

of North Korea's atomic energy bureau Ri Je-son and Ri Hong-Sop, who according to the United Nations, once ran the controversial Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center.

The center is suspected of producing fissile materiel used in nuclear weapons testing.

Talks to ease the nuclear standoff with North Korea have spluttered, but during a visit to China, North Korea's ailing leader Kim Jong-Il reportedly backed the resumption of talks Monday.

Chinese television quoted Kim as saying that North Korea's stance on ridding the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons was unchanged and the country "is not willing to see tensions on the peninsula".

Kim pledged to remain in close consultation with China and hoped for the "early resumption" of six-party nuclear disarmament talks that also include South Korea, the United States, Japan and Russia, it said.

China hosts the six-party talks which began in 2003. The North walked out in April 2009 and staged its second atomic weapons test a month later.

Source: www.defencetalk.com