

## Afghanistan Hopes For Neighborly Goodwill.

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

For the past 25 years, landlocked Afghanistan has suffered from constant interference from its neighbours—Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics—and from regional powers like Russia and India. The neighbours are still interfering, but there are signs that rather than undermining Afghanistan's stability, they may now actually be trying to strengthen it.

Speaking to the Review before the election, President Hamid Karzai said, "The elections should be reassurance to all our neighbours . . . that a stable Afghanistan, a peaceful Afghanistan, is good for all. Nobody should feel [like] a loser." All the regional countries have publicly backed the Karzai government and supported the electoral process, but serious undercurrents remain as they all have their favourite proxies in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has often been accused of harbouring Taliban extremists planning to disrupt elections. But at the highest level, the United States has avoided criticism of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf on the ground that he is helping to catch Al Qaeda elements inside Pakistan. That changed last month when President George W. Bush, Musharraf and Karzai met in New York on the sidelines of a United Nations General Assembly session.

Western and Afghan diplomats intimately involved with the meeting said Bush pushed Musharraf hard on reining in the Taliban so that elections could take place peacefully. Bush is reported to have asked a flustered Musharraf: "Where are Mullah Omar, Mullah Usmani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar?" All three are extremist Taliban members or key Taliban allies and known to be living in Pakistan. "It was the first time that Bush totally focused on the Taliban threat rather than Al Qaeda with the Pakistanis," says a Western ambassador. Karzai was clearly pleased. "President Musharraf promised to help us and cooperate with us on curbing terrorist activity by the Taliban," says Karzai.

The next day an angry Musharraf said that Pakistan would categorically not send Pakistani troops to Iraq, a clear snub aimed at the Americans. Until then he had said Pakistan's options were open. However, Pakistani officials insist that the decision was unconnected to the tripartite meeting.

U.S. and Nato military officers in Kabul say it is too early to say whether Bush's tough message succeeded in persuading Musharraf and the powerful Interservices Intelligence (ISI) to try to rein in the Taliban. However, there are signs of a crackdown on the Pakistan side. "Pakistan now has a large force deployed in the province of Baluchistan, which was not there before," says Lt.-Gen. David Barno. He says Taliban elements still cross the border, but "there is much better tactical cooperation between our forces."

Afghan officials welcomed the appointment on October 3 of Lt.-Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani as the new ISI chief. Kiyani is well known and liked in Kabul—for the past year he has led the Pakistani delegation in monthly meetings with the Afghan military on issues related to their common border.

Karzai also has to deal with the stepped-up rivalry between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. Islamabad accuses New Delhi of using two of its consulates in Afghanistan, Kandahar and Jalalabad, to train Baluchi insurgents who are active in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Pakistani officials claim there are 42 Indian intelligence agents based in Kandahar and another 12 in Jalalabad. "They have no business being there," says a Pakistani official. Both India and Afghanistan deny the claim. Amrullah Saleh, the head of Afghanistan's National Security Directorate, said "we will take it very seriously" if Pakistan can show evidence of its claims.

With the U.S. military now on two sides of Iran in Iraq and Afghanistan, moderates among Iran's leadership are keen to help stabilize Karzai so that the U.S. reduces its presence in Afghanistan. However, powerful hardliners in Teheran may be trying to undermine that strategy. Iranian officials played a major role in persuading failed presidential candidate Younus Qanooni to accept the results of the election.

However, Iran is deeply concerned about the U.S. occupation of Shindand, a massive Soviet-era air base just 30 kilometres from Iran's border. The enhanced American presence in western Afghanistan was only made possible after the ousting last month of Ismail Khan, the warlord and governor of Herat province. Khan was a close ally of Iranian hardliners, though Iranian officials say they didn't object to Khan's ousting because they want to strengthen Karzai's campaign against warlords.

At a time of heightened tensions between Teheran and Washington over Iran's nuclear-weapons programme and calls by neo-conservatives in Washington that a second Bush term should deal with Iran aggressively, the Iranians fear that Shindand could be used as a listening post, spying facility and even a launching pad for future U.S. action against Iran. Afghan officials say the Americans have moved more than 100 special-forces personnel and helicopters to Shindand. However, Barro insists that the U.S. presence poses no threat to Iran.

This places Karzai in a difficult and sensitive position because he has to maintain excellent relations with both Washington and Teheran. "Afghanistan has had the benefit of cooperation from both the U.S. and Iran," says Karzai. "So far, what they have done together has been good for us, and that's how we would like to keep it." Nobody can claim that elections have brought an end to the neighbours' interference in Afghanistan. But Karzai's electoral mandate now should make it more difficult for the neighbours to put pressure on him.