

Islamabad's Lingering Support For Islamic Extremists Threatens Pakistan-Afghanistan Ties

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Kabul

Pakistan reopened its embassy in Afghanistan on July 21 after closing it for nearly two weeks, but tensions between the two countries remains high. Before the reopening, American officials called a hasty diplomatic meeting to stop skirmishes between Afghan and Pakistani troops.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai says he supports the full restoration of bilateral relations. For that to happen, however, the Pakistani government must convince Afghan leaders that Islamabad is neither sheltering nor supporting the Taliban, a radical Islamic movement that ruled Afghanistan until forced from power by the US-led anti-terrorism offensive in 2001.

"I want to establish parameters of the relationship between the two countries. One, we want friendship. Two, we want trade and business. Three I want a civilized relationship with Pakistan which avoids acts of aggression against Afghanistan and support for extremism," said Karzai in an interview.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf renounced support for the Taliban in September 2001, weeks before the start of the anti-terrorism offensive. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. But today, many Afghan, foreign and United Nations experts - including some who had previously been friendly to Pakistan- suspect the Pakistani leadership has resumed providing covert support to the radical Islamic movement. Some diplomats contend that Musharraf, his army, and the powerful security agency known as the Inter-Services Intelligence are directly supporting the Taliban as a matter of state policy. [For background, see the Eurasia Insight archives. < <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav042103.shtml>>]

Musharraf's personal denials of such claims now carry little weight with Kabul's diplomatic corps. Even a boost from United States President George W. Bush, whom Musharraf met with in June, has been unable to dispel diplomats' skepticism.

American officials are among those calling on Musharraf to step up anti-terrorism efforts. "Every effort has to be made by Pakistan not to allow its territory to be used by Taliban elements," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the American Special Envoy to Afghanistan, at a press conference on July 15.

"We need 100 percent assurances on this from Pakistan, not 50 percent assurances." Khalilzad added: "We know the Taliban are planning in Quetta."

Karzai considers himself a friend of Pakistan, given his fluency in the Urdu language and the fact that he lived there for many years. Over the past 18 months, at no small expense to his own political popularity in Afghanistan's factionalized political environment, Karzai has advocated the need to maintain strong relations with Pakistan.

The Afghan president stressed that his country could not last long if it becomes Pakistan's enemy. "We are like conjoined twins, and like such twins sometimes we cannot stop kicking each other," Karzai said.

At the same time, Karzai said he felt the "brotherly feeling" between himself and Musharraf was evaporating. [For background, see the Eurasia Insight archives. < <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav070803.shtml>>]

"We have one page where there is a tremendous desire for friendship and the need for each other," Karzai said. "But there is the other page of the consequences if intervention continues.... Afghans will have no choice but to stand up and stop it."

The tension between Karzai and Musharraf is to a certain extent a reflection of other regional issues, including Pakistan's antagonistic relationship with India, and Karzai's less-than-firm authority over Afghan provinces. The Afghan president reportedly became enraged by reports that Musharraf had said Karzai's legitimacy stopped at the edge of Kabul. In addition, Islamabad has aired grievances over Karzai acceptance of Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar, two cities that border Pakistan.

"If Pakistan is worried about the role of India, let me assure you I have been very specific in telling the Indians that they cannot use Afghan soil for acts of aggression against another country," Karzai said. "The Indians are only building roads and hospitals and schools, what do you want me to do - to tell them to stop doing that?"

Both Pakistan and India pledged \$100 million in aid to Afghanistan at a January 2002 donors' conference; so far, Pakistan's support for reconstruction efforts have notably lagged behind India's. Karzai feels this lack of support from Pakistan sharply, since much of Afghanistan's future depends on trade with its neighbor. "When I finally leave office, I want to be a citizen of this region. I want Afghans to go to Islamabad for their vacation and Pakistanis come here to Kabul for their weekends like they used to do before all the troubles," said Karzai.

"There are already 6,000 Pakistani skilled and semi-skilled labor working in Kandahar on reconstruction projects and other Pakistanis are working in Kunar [province]," Karzai continued. "Let's expand on this."

Many regional political analysts believe that Islamabad's current geopolitical position is unsustainable. They reason that Pakistan cannot afford to have confrontation with India along its eastern border while having a tense relationship with Afghanistan. Karzai has urged Musharraf's government to abandon its policy of "strategic depth" towards Afghanistan -- a policy that pushes Islamabad to seek a controlling influence over Kabul.

"I would like to see Pakistan stop living for the dream of attaining strategic depth," Karzai said. "Let us all be friends and attain strategic depth that way."

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and the author of two books. A separate piece based on his interview with Hamid Karzai ran in the Daily Telegraph