

A Desire To Be Left Alone

Afghanistan's power-hungry neighbours threaten to revive the ruinous civil war of the early 1990s that gave rise to the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid/Kabul

Russia is arming one warlord, Iran another. Wealthy Saudis have resumed funding Islamic extremists and some Central Asian Republics are backing their ethnic allies. India and Pakistan are playing out an intense rivalry as they secretly back opposing forces. The playing field is Afghanistan, and the interference threatens to revive a multifaceted power struggle that in the early 1990s eventually gave way to a near-ruinous rule by the Taliban.

The danger is widely recognized. On December 22, under the watchful eye of Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, the foreign ministers or ambassadors of Afghanistan's closest neighbours-China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan-signed the Kabul Declaration in which they pledged to never again interfere in the affairs of the war-ravaged country. Officials from other interested countries like Russia, India and Saudi Arabia looked on.

But the pledges of support for Karzai and the principle of non-interference, along with promises of aid for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, hid a starker reality. The very fact that such a declaration was needed, despite the all-powerful presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, demonstrated the apprehensions of Afghan leaders and the world.

"We are not going to be a political football for neighbours in the region as we were in the 1990s," says Karzai in an interview at the presidential palace prior to the signing of the declaration. "The soil of Afghanistan cannot be used by any country against a third country."

IN DANGER OF SPLINTERING AFGHANISTAN

Karzai's determination to keep his country free of outside disruption won't be easy to realize because many of the same neighbours who sponsored Afghan warlords in the early 1990s, prolonging the country's turmoil and eventually helping to bring the Taliban to power, are keen to resurrect their influence. According to western diplomats, many of the neighbours believe that the U.S. forces will wind down their operations in Afghanistan once a war in Iraq begins. They feel that Karzai's government is weak and Afghanistan will split along ethnic lines if the U.S. leaves.

Karzai and the U.S. strongly refute such conjecture, but many neighbours don't seem convinced. Russia backed the former Northern Alliance during the 1990s and is continuing to support the army of Gen. Mohammed Fahim, once a powerful Northern Alliance leader and now Karzai's defence minister. Last September Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov declared in Kabul that Russia would provide \$100 million worth of military equipment to the Afghan army.

It seems clear at this point that the aid will flow to Fahim's army. That force is separate from the one now being trained by the U.S. and France to be the official Afghan National Army (ANA)-a projected body of 70,000 men of which only 3,000 have been trained so far.

Quietly U.S. officials have asked Moscow to stop the flow of arms, but to no avail. Zamir Kabulov, director for Asia at Russia's foreign ministry, says the aid to Fahim's force is permissible according to old treaty obligations between Russia and Afghanistan. Washington is unwilling to push harder for the moment because it needs Moscow's support for its potential invasion of Iraq. "We have made it clear to all of Afghanistan's neighbours that the country should be allowed to develop without interference," says Robert Finn, the U.S. ambassador to Kabul.

Western intelligence believes some Russian spare parts and even tanks are arriving in the northern city of Kunduz from Tajikistan and being transported down to the Panjshir Valley where Fahim has a large stockpile of weapons. Fahim denies the charge. "The Russians have made no promises and so far we have received no items from Russia," he says.

Afghan ministers also say Russia has run off with the country's only geological survey of oil and gas resources, which was made in the 1970s. "We have asked Russia to return these documents," says Juma Mohammed Mohammadi, the minister of mines. Russian oil companies are reportedly negotiating with Gen. Rashid Dostum, a warlord in northern Afghanistan, to resume supplies of Afghan gas to Central Asia. The U.S. has said it will carry out a new geological survey.

Even if Karzai can straighten out these issues, his problems have only begun. Afghan officials say Iranian Revolutionary Guards are continuing to provide cash and military support to Ismail Khan, a warlord in Herat in the west. And wealthy Saudis have apparently resumed sending money to remnants of the Taliban based in Pakistan. Not to be outdone, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan has provided his own bodyguards to guard the Afghan Uzbek warlord Dostum, an opponent of Fahim.

Meanwhile India and Pakistan are using Afghanistan as a proxy battleground for their ongoing conflict. New Delhi has promised to deliver military vehicles and train Afghan officers. By providing civilian airplanes, buses and hospital equipment, India has quickly developed a huge presence in the country.

India is helping develop a new export route for landlocked Afghanistan through Iran—thereby avoiding Pakistan. It has opened consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west, and Kandahar and Jalalabad close to the Pakistan border. "India sees Afghanistan as a means to undermine Pakistan's western border, and Pakistan is retaliating," says a European ambassador in Kabul.

"I have assurances from India that these consulates will only be for trade and consular activities," says Karzai. "We will not allow either India or Pakistan to use Afghanistan to work against each other."

Nevertheless, India's moves have irked Pakistan tremendously. An infuriated Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf reportedly made testy phone calls complaining to Karzai after he heard about the new Indian consulates.

Publicly, Pakistan supports Karzai and continues to hand over Al Qaeda operatives to the U.S. But according to western diplomats and Afghan leaders, Pakistan's Inter-service Intelligence is also giving sanctuary to top Taliban leaders, some of whom are living openly in Pakistan, and allows them to cross into Afghanistan to orchestrate rocket attacks against U.S. bases.

Moderate Pashtun leaders in Peshawar say the Inter-service Intelligence is fuelling Pashtun radicalism, which is the ideology that led to the creation of the Taliban in the first place. Pakistan wants to retain some influence in southern Afghanistan among ethnic Pashtuns as well as to counter the influence of India in Kabul.

Retired Pakistani military officers say the army is playing two sides of the Afghanistan conflict in border cities like Peshawar and Quetta. According to these sources, one senior Inter-services Intelligence officer and his staff work with the U.S. in Pakistan to catch Al Qaeda elements, while another senior officer works separately to help protect the Taliban.

U.S. generals in Afghanistan say 90% of attacks they face are coming from groups based in Pakistan. "I think the security situation in eastern Afghanistan is going to be a problem for some time to come," said General Richard Myers, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff at Bagram in an address to troops on December 21. Myers wants Pakistan to put more troops on the border to stop the infiltrations.

A stronger Afghanistan central authority may be coming in the spring. That's when large-scale international funding is scheduled to arrive and flow to building up the Afghan army and major infrastructure construction projects such as roads and power development. Stepped up economic development would undermine the warlords and their foreign backers and strengthen Karzai.