

Time for Pakistan to push Afghan talks with the Taliban

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President Hamid Karzai's expected cabinet reshuffle signals a growing confrontation with Pakistan after the appointment of a hardline confidante as head of Afghan intelligence. Through a variety of Taliban proxies, Pakistan and [Afghanistan](#) have been involved in intense skirmishing on their common border, even as the insurgents are getting routed in some provinces through local peoples' uprisings.

Earlier this month the Kabul parliament demanded that [Mr Karzai sack the ministers of defence and the interior](#) for not standing up to intrusions and shelling along the eastern border by Pakistani forces and Islamabad-backed Afghan Taliban. Mr Karzai has used the opportunity to do some house cleaning, mindful of the decision he has to take soon in choosing a successor to stand for presidential elections in 2014 when his term ends. The ministers' names were declared to the media by presidential aides but a formal announcement is due on Saturday.

The startling change in the expected reshuffle is the appointment of Asadullah Khalid as head of the powerful intelligence organisation, the National Directorate of Security, which is funded and partly managed by the US Central Intelligence Agency. [As a fiercely anti-Taliban former governor of Kandahar](#), Mr Khalid faced several assassination attempts from the radical Islamist movement. He always blamed the attempts on Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence agency. Mr Khalid and the ISI hate each other with a vengeance.

Previous fire-breathing Afghan intelligence chiefs have been Tajik, whom Pakistan found easy to condemn by describing them as pro-Indian. But Mr Khalid is a Ghilzai Pashtun from eastern Afghanistan - the very ethnic group which the ISI seeks to foster and considers loyal to Pakistan. Moreover he is a long-time confidante of Mr Karzai and has worked closely with the Americans in the past. Both facets will allow him to pursue an aggressive line towards Pakistan.

As a former minister of tribes and border affairs, Mr Khalid has recently taken credit for village uprisings in five provinces where local people have driven out the Taliban, but are also refusing to co-operate with the government. This new advent of people power across southern and eastern Afghanistan (in the provinces of Ghazni, Laghman, Nangahar, Kandahar and Baghdis) could be a positive game-changer for the US military as its troops are withdrawn by 2014.

Both Kabul and Washington are pleased with this new anti-Taliban mood, but also fearful of losing political control in [key provinces bordering Pakistan](#) to a new kind of people power that refuses to accept a government mandate. Under Mr Khalid the NDS will surely be entrusted with making sure that these movements are turned around to kick out the Taliban but embrace the government.

The ISI also loathes Mr Khalid for his role as tribal affairs minister in giving sanctuary in Kunar province to a Pakistani Taliban group that Islamabad has been trying to wipe out for several years. This group has launched a series of vicious [attacks on Pakistani army outposts](#) on the border, killing dozens of soldiers before retreating back to Afghanistan.

Afghans see this as payback for the decade-long safe havens that Islamabad has provided to the Afghan Taliban, who use Pakistan's tribal belt to organise attacks against US and Kabul's forces. The Americans are particularly obsessed with the Jalaluddin Haqqani network that has carried out the largest suicide attacks and is based in Pakistan's tribal belt. Last week it received a major blow when Badruddin Haqqani, the third son of the founder, was killed by a US drone-fired missile in Waziristan.

Mr Khalid's appointment also comes at a time when public and political anger against Pakistan is on the rise in

Kabul. Mr Karzai has called off all talks with Pakistan, as officials in Afghanistan blame the Pakistani military for frustrating political reconciliation with the Taliban and the promises made by Islamabad to allow Afghan leaders to talk to the Taliban based in Pakistan. Islamabad allowed one such meeting but there was no follow-up. Pakistan itself - government or military - has no coherent Afghan policy apart from knowing what it dislikes.

There is now an ever greater risk of a border skirmish between Afghan and Pakistani forces. This could lead to either side carrying out “hot pursuit” in the other’s territory. It could also leave the Americans having to broker a peace between two neighbours whom they expected to co-operate as Washington tries to withdraw its forces out of the Afghan quagmire. Ironically, however, the Afghan and Pakistani fears about the other may be the only equation that can bring both sides to the peace table. The international pressure for Pakistan to come up with a more rational policy facilitating reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban is building fast.

The writer is best-selling author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.