

India Risks Destablising Afghanistan

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With foreign combat troops preparing to leave Afghanistan, India has agreed to supply the country with military equipment. Guest columnist AHMED RASHID says the move risks raising tensions.

India's decision last week to pay for arms and equipment from Russia to boost the strength of the Afghan National Army (ANA) could be a dramatic game-changer in the region - as well as a step fraught with escalation in regional rivalries.

Pakistan is almost certain to look critically at the deal and accuse India, its rival, of trying to outflank it. For the last few years India has tactfully declined to say yes to Afghan President Hamid Karzai's repeated pleas for the Indian supply of heavy weapons for the ANA, such as long range artillery, tanks and aircraft.

Spending billions of dollars in the past decade, the United States has rebuilt the ANA, but it has made sure that it remains a lightly armed force with defensive rather than offensive weapons.

Both the US and India seemed to have been careful in not upsetting Pakistan, which has been critical of the size of the ANA and will most certainly react if the ANA receives offensive weapons.

Until recently there have been high tensions between the Pakistan military and the ANA along their disputed, porous and unmarked border, with the Afghans repeatedly accusing Pakistan of wilfully allowing the Taliban to cross from their havens in Pakistan to fight the Americans and the ANA.

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan have no control over large parts of their common border.

India's refusal to accept Mr Karzai's requests has gone down well in Islamabad, and both India and Pakistan have been on their best gentlemanly behaviour when it comes to not making provocative or rash statements about their well-known mutual rivalry in Afghanistan.

This relationship only improved after the Afghan Taliban's Haqqani network launched attacks several years ago on the Indian embassy and its personnel in Kabul.

India and the US have repeatedly put the blame on Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has worked closely with the Haqqani network since the 1970s.

Since those attacks ceased, both countries have kept the rhetoric down, despite constant needling by Mr Karzai, Afghan army generals, Russia and Iran, which have all argued that India needs to do more to support the ANA. India has declined, saying it does not want to get involved in the civil war in Afghanistan even though it has supported the government strongly.

Now that the Americans are leaving by the end of this year, India seems to have changed its tune.

So far the agreement with Russia implies that India will pay for Russian arms such as light artillery and mortars to be delivered to Afghanistan. However both countries say it could involve the delivery of heavy weapons in the future. According to Reuters, India is expected to help Afghanistan restart an old armaments factory near Kabul, refit old Soviet-era weapons, and step up training of Afghan officers and special forces - something it has already been doing in small numbers.

Afghans have long fought with Russian or, previously, Soviet weapons and much prefer those to Western arms. Under US supervision and payment, the Russians recently supplied the tiny Afghan air force with Russian-made M-17 helicopters, which the forces of the Northern Alliance used for many years in the war against the Taliban. All this is likely to deeply annoy Pakistan, and escalate tensions with India and rivalry over their influence in Afghanistan.

The Pakistan army has a low opinion of the ANA and does not trust it receiving offensive weapons which could be used on their common border.

Now - just as Pakistan is giving the Afghan Taliban and its leader Mullah Mohammed Omar sanctuary on its soil - Afghanistan is allowing the Pakistani Taliban and its leader Mullah Fazlullah to shelter in Afghanistan. Both sides have denied providing official sanctuary to the Taliban.

This tit-for-tat escalation has already led to fire-fights, exchanges of artillery fire and casualties between the two armies on the border. Islamabad also has suspicions that Indian trainers or advisers on the border could theoretically now replace US and Nato trainers.

Moreover, the arms deal could lead to a replay of the bloody civil war in the 1990s, when Pakistan backed the Taliban, and India, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian republics backed the then Northern Alliance. Balancing act?

However, one country could play a stabilising or balancing role and that is China. President Karzai has also asked China for military help but Beijing has been extremely reluctant to get involved on the ground in Afghanistan - just as China refuses to get involved in other conflict zones such as North Korea. Pakistan could now ask its closest ally, China, to get more involved in bolstering the ANA. That could balance Indian and Russian influence.

One critical unanswered question remains: who is going to pay the \$4bn a year that the ANA needs to continue functioning and paying salaries?

The US and Nato have said they are willing to foot part of the bill but not for very long. There is no hint that India, Russia or China have offered money up front to support the ANA.

Most experts conclude that the ANA will have to drastically reduce its size anyway by next year, because nobody will be willing to support more than 320,000 soldiers and policemen who constitute the present Afghan security forces. If outside countries pour in heavy weapons without the money to pay for sustaining the army, the danger of those weapons ending up with the Taliban becomes even greater.

That is exactly what happened with the last lot of Soviet heavy weapons left behind in 1989 when Soviet forces left Afghanistan. The weapons were soon in the hands of warlords and the Taliban and the civil war started. Pakistan fears that any heavy weapons arriving in Afghanistan could end up in the hands of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.

Afghanistan needs peace before it needs more weapons, and it needs bigger doses of diplomacy and political dialogue to get the Taliban to stop fighting.

If that could happen, rather than flooding it with weapons once again, Afghanistan would be a happier place.