

US/NATO crisis in Afghanistan generates greater pressure on Pakistan

By James Cogan
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NATO forces and the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai were compelled to launch a major operation last week to dislodge hundreds of anti-occupation fighters who had seized control of villages in the Arghandab valley, just 16 kilometres to the northwest of Kandahar city. Some of the 1,000-plus prisoners who were freed during the assault on the Sarposa prison in Kandahar on June 13 may have been involved. They reportedly linked up with insurgents who had recently crossed into Afghanistan from safe-havens inside Pakistan.

A 700-strong battalion of the Afghan Army was rushed to Arghandab from Kabul to reinforce local units and spearhead the offensive to retake as many as 10 villages. NATO aircraft dropped leaflets advising the population to remain in their homes. However, after years of US air strikes and artillery barrages inflicting civilian deaths and injuries, thousands of people elected to flee. A police officer manning a checkpoint on the occupation-held eastern side of the Arghandab River told Reuters that as many as 4,000 villagers left the area for Kandahar.

Afghan government forces crossed the river and pushed into the valley last Wednesday, backed by Canadian and US troops, warplanes, unmanned Predator drones and helicopter gunships.

There are conflicting reports regarding casualties. Kandahar governor Asadullah Khalid took journalists to one village, Manara, where the mangled bodies of as many as 19 men lay around a crater caused by a 225-kilogram bomb dropped by a US warplane. Khalid claimed that at least 105 guerillas had been killed during the operation.

American and Canadian officers did not endorse Khalid's claim, stating that the insurgents had not attempted to directly engage the more numerous and better-armed occupation forces, and had fled the area. Two Afghan soldiers were killed in the first hours of the operation, but no other occupation casualties were reported.

By the weekend, NATO officers claimed that the Arghandab valley was securely in their control. Nevertheless, the ability of insurgents to brazenly storm a major prison and follow it up by seizing a rural area so close to one of Afghanistan's largest cities underscores the fragility of the US-led occupation.

US general Dan McNeill, the outgoing commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), told journalists in early June that at least 400,000 troops would be needed to control a country as large and populous as Afghanistan.

The ISAF, however, consists of just 53,000 troops, of whom about 20,000 are deployed in the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces where the vast bulk of insurgent activity is taking place. An American force of some 14,000 operates independently of the ISAF in the eastern

provinces, ostensibly in search of Osama bin Laden and surviving Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan. The foreign troops are supported by the Afghan Army, but it consists of just 70,000 men of varying training and reliability.

Outside the major cities, insurgents are able to move with relative impunity. Adding to the military challenges facing the occupation forces are the tribal ties between Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Pashtun fighters move freely between the two countries, using the autonomous tribal provinces in Pakistan to rest, re-supply, train and recruit. Under pressure from Washington, the Pakistani government has deployed tens of thousands of troops into the frontier provinces since 2002. After years of clashes with Pashtun tribesmen, however, Pakistani forces have proven unable—or, in many cases, no longer willing—to prevent cross-border movements.

US Major General Jeffrey Schloesser, the commander of the American force in eastern Afghanistan, told journalists on Tuesday that attacks on his troops had increased by 40 percent this year. He stated that 12 percent of all insurgent attacks took place along the Pakistani border. "The enemy is taking refuge and operating with some freedom of movement in the border region," he said.

Schloesser also described the growing tactical sophistication of the Afghan guerillas in using roadside bombs. Over recent months, the general reported, insurgents have begun allowing convoys to pass one bomb, then hit it with a second further up the road. Following the bombing, machine gun and small arms fire is poured in from both sides of the road. Quick reaction units coming to assist the ambushed convoy are then hit by the first bomb. The size of the explosives has also increased as insurgents seek to destroy the more heavily armoured vehicles used by the US military.

Vehicle and body armour are the main factors keeping deaths and injuries among occupation troops in Afghanistan relatively low. Casualties have spiked this month, however. At least 35 US and NATO troops have been killed in June thus far, compared with 23 in May, 14 in April and 19 in March.

In the most recent incidents, guerillas on motorcycles attacked a convoy of trucks on Tuesday carrying food and other supplies for NATO troops in Kabul as it approached the town of Saydabad, some 60 kilometres to the south of the capital. The insurgents killed one person in the convoy and set as many as 40 trucks ablaze. In Helmand province, a British soldier was shot dead the same day during a firefight in the Sangin Valley, while an American soldier was killed and three others wounded when their patrol struck a mine in the eastern province of Nangahar.

The day before, a US air strike allegedly killed a young man and a child in Nangahar, provoking demonstrations and vows of vengeance

among local tribesmen. Clashes also took place from Friday to Sunday in the eastern province of Paktika, between US troops and a large contingent of insurgents who had crossed over from Pakistan. American military sources claimed that 55 militants had been killed, mainly by air strikes.

As the insurgency grows, NATO countries are continuing to balk at US, Canadian and British appeals for them to send more troops to Afghanistan. Germany announced this week it would deploy an additional 1,000 personnel, but not until after October and only for service in the relatively calm northern sector of the country.

The crisis within NATO over how it will furnish the additional combat troops that military commanders say are needed is also leading to ever greater demands on the new Pakistani government to do more to stop insurgents using its territory as a safe-haven. A volatile situation is developing in Pakistan as a result.

The Afghan insurgents are almost universally labelled “Taliban”—or loyalists of the Islamic fundamentalist regime that was overthrown in 2001. Such a label only obscures the extent of the political and military opposition arrayed against the US-led invasion.

The insurgency against the US occupation has a number of driving forces, with anti-colonial sentiment playing a major role. For more than a century, the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border have waged protracted guerilla wars against every attempt to subjugate their territory. The resistance to US and NATO forces and the Pakistani government troops who have been deployed into the tribal regions is simply the latest chapter in a long struggle to maintain their independence.

The Karzai regime in Kabul is not only hated because it is an American puppet. Ethnic, tribal and religious factors are also in play. Though Karzai is a Pashtun, large sections of the Pashtun tribal hierarchy see his government as a stooge for the Tajik and Uzbek warlords whom they fought in the 1990s.

The Taliban emerged as a Pakistani-backed Pashtun movement to end the highly unstable warlord regime that followed the collapse of the Soviet puppet government in 1992. Sunni Islamic extremism and Pashtun nationalism were exploited to recruit youth from the squalid Afghan refugee camps inside Pakistan, as well as Pakistani tribesmen, for a military force. The Taliban were financed and equipped by the Pakistani military, particularly the intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). As the Taliban marched into southern Afghanistan in 1994, many of the Pashtun tribes allied themselves with it. By 1996 it had taken Kabul.

The current insurgency has clear parallels with the 1994-1996 civil war. The warlords defeated by the Taliban reconstituted themselves as the Northern Alliance. In 2001, the Bush administration returned them power. Now the Taliban and allied militias are fighting to restore Pashtun hegemony.

Pakistan’s backing for the Taliban in the 1990s was not motivated by religious, tribal or ethnic considerations, but by the geo-political interests of the Pakistani ruling elite. Their main concern was that the Tajik and Uzbek warlords were coming under the sway of India, their main regional rival, along with Iran and Russia.

Despite overwhelming popular opposition to US militarism inside Pakistan, the dictatorship of Pervez Musharraf acquiesced in the destruction of its Taliban client-state in order to preserve its alliance with Washington. It also bowed to US demands to crush Taliban activity inside Pakistan, by sending more than 90,000 troops into the autonomous tribal provinces.

Nearly seven years on, however, the possibility is emerging of a

rupture between the US and Pakistan over the renewed influence of India in Afghanistan and the incessant US demands for tougher military measures in Pakistan’s border areas.

Seth Jones, an analyst for the US Rand Corporation, noted to Voice of America on June 13: “What you have now is a government based in Kabul that is strongly allied with India, not with Pakistan. And so I think that is of major concern. You have a number of Indian development projects based in Afghanistan. You have road construction. You have a lot of Indian money that’s poured in. I think that has been felt with deep concern among senior elements of the Pakistan government, and certainly at lower levels of key government agencies.”

Jones claimed that Afghan insurgents were receiving backing from within Pakistan. “There is clear information that’s been collected by NATO, by a range of other organisations, including the United Nations, which indicates that there is more than just passive support and unwillingness to act on Pakistani soil, but that there is at least non-lethal assistance, training, logistical support, the provision of intelligence, by elements of the Pakistan government, in particular the Inter Services Intelligence directorate and the Frontier Corps.”

There is a groundswell of US accusations against the Pakistani military. The British *Observer* reported on Sunday that the American military had “box-loads” of evidence that members of Pakistan’s Frontier Corps—the paramilitary force responsible for security in the tribal regions—were taking part in cross-border attacks.

An unnamed source told the *Observer*: “The reality is that there are units so opposed to what the coalition is doing and so friendly to the other side that when the opportunity comes up they will fire on Afghan and coalition troops. And this is not random. It can be exceptionally well co-ordinated.”

On June 11, US air strikes were unleashed against positions of the Frontier Corps in Pakistan’s Mohmand tribal region, killing 11 soldiers. The American military continues to insist that it bombed Taliban insurgents who had attacked Afghan troops and then retreated over the border.

The *New York Times* published claims on June 24 that the Pakistani military was “brokering cease-fires and prisoner exchanges” with the Taliban and “allowing the militants to consolidate their sanctuaries while spreading their tentacles all along the border area”.

On June 15, Afghan president Hamid Karzai declared his military forces had the right to cross the border in pursuit of Taliban insurgents. The accusations of direct Pakistani complicity in the Afghan insurgency will only heighten tensions. Ultimately, it could trigger an Afghanistan-Pakistan border war that draws other powers into open conflict with Pakistan, including the US and India.

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