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Reuters

India, Pakistan and the Afghan army

By Sanjeev Miglani

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai is in Pakistan on Thursday, and one of the issues on the table is a rather audacious Pakistani offer to train the Afghan National Army.

The Pakistani and Afghan security establishments have had a rather uneasy relationship, stemming from Pakistan's long-running ties to the Taliban.

For the Pakistani army to be now offering to train the Tajik-dominated ANA – which is fighting the Pashtun Taliban – is quite a shift in its approach to the neighbour.

Or is this the latest battleground for the tussle for influence between India and Pakistan?

India has for years been running courses at its defence institutions which small groups of Afghan officers have attended. In recent years, several security experts have urged New Delhi to get more directly involved in training the new Afghan army, triggering concern in Islamabad.

Pakistani army chief Ashfaq Kayani, who announced the surprise offer to help train Afghan national forces last month, said better security ties with Kabul were in Pakistan's interest.

“Strategically, we cannot have an Afghan army on my western border which has an Indian mindset. If we have an army trained by Pakistan, there will be better interactions on the western border,” he is quoted as having said.

On Thursday he repeated the offer to Karzai during a meeting in Islamabad. And Karzai said he didn't want his country to be turned into a proxy battlefield , either between India and Pakistan on the one hand, and between Iran and the United States on the other.

The Afghan chessboard is changing fast and regional players are positioning themselves for the time when the U.S.-led forces will retreat, leaving the ANA as the principle instrument of the state to keep the peace.

Kayani said as much: "Our objective is that at the end of all this (Afghanistan), we should not be standing in the wrong corner of the room and should remain relevant in the region. This is our greatest challenge."

Changing course overnight and switching support to the Afghan security forces will also not be easy, warned Zafar Hilaly, a former Pakistani ambassador in an article in The News. While it made sense for Pakistan to try and prevent India from deepening its ties to the Afghan army, it wasn't going to be easy for Islamabad to become the ANA's instructor.

"Training a hitherto unfriendly, Pakistan-averse Tajik-dominated force to fight a Taliban/Pakhtun opponent that is traditionally well disposed to Pakistan would require a level of dexterity that only erstwhile Byzantine courtiers possessed. It simply won't wash."

The Indians might just be better placed to train the Afghan army, argues foreign policy expert Sumit Ganguly. Given its extensive experience fighting insurgencies including ironically a Pakistani-backed revolt in Kashmir, an infrastructure that includes a crack counter-insurgency school as well as a high altitude warfare institution, and above all old cultural bonds, the Indian army would be a natural choice, he says.