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## Great Game or Endgame?

By Ahmed Rashid

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After the failure of talks between India and Pakistan over their long running disputes, both countries are now locked in an escalating proxy war in Afghanistan.

If no solution is found to reconcile Pakistani and Indian interests in Afghanistan, the coming months might see stepped up terrorist attacks against Indians in Kabul and the return of militants infiltrating Indian Kashmir from Pakistan. The fact that in recent weeks a large number of Taleban operatives have been captured in Pakistan signals an intensified struggle over the fate of Afghanistan rather than a winding down of the conflict. With Afghan President Hamid Karzai seeking negotiations with the Taleban, some of whom Pakistan distrusts, along with India increasingly concerned about the Pakistan-backed Taleban coming to power in Kabul, the conflict is reaching a new stage of intensity. Even as an intensive US and NATO military offensive against the Taleban is underway in southern Afghanistan, neighboring states are already considering the Americans as good as gone and preparing for an end game scenario with old rivalries renewed.

While Pakistan charges India with undermining Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, India fears Pakistan is preparing the ground for pro-Pakistan Taleban elements to negotiate with Kabul, in an attempt to force India out of Afghanistan after US forces start leaving in July 2011.

Meanwhile, a year after Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) carried out Mumbai attacks they are yet to be brought to justice. Against this backdrop, Indian and Pakistani Foreign

Secretaries met in New Delhi last month but failed to make any progress. Just a day later a suicide squad in Kabul hit two hotels, killing 16 people including 7 Indian civilians and two Indian army majors. Three days later the Afghan government accused LeT of being responsible for the Kabul attack.

In a series of briefings to the Pakistani and foreign media, Pakistani generals have portrayed India as seriously threatening Pakistan, using its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan to harbour, train and fund Baloch separatists, trying to undermine Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and even for backing elements of the Pakistani Taleban. Tensions heightened after four Pakistani workers were gunned down in Kandahar in early March by unknown assailants. The Pakistani media has accused the Indian consulate in Kandahar of organising the attack.

Pro-military commentators have risen to the occasion demanding that as Pakistan now faces a two front situation, India should be pushed out of Afghanistan, if and when peace talks between the Taleban and the Kabul government are held.

India was seriously rattled when the US and NATO agreed at the recent London conference on Afghanistan to begin "re-integrating" Taleban fighters and field commanders and lavishly funding a peace package for them. Karzai went much further by demanding 'reconciliation' with the mainstream Taleban led by Mullah Omar. India was aghast at the unanimity of the international community which is tiring of the war in Afghanistan, as India has vociferously opposed any dialogue with the Taleban.

India sees the Afghan and Pakistani Taleban and Al Qaeda working closely with groups such as LeT who have begun to re-infiltrate into Indian Kashmir to restart the guerrilla war. Although Karzai has declared that "Afghanistan does not want proxy war between India and Pakistan," India's real concern is that Pakistan appears determined to position itself centre-stage in Kabul. Top Afghan Taleban leaders, who have been engaged in talks with representatives of the Karzai administration, were captured in Pakistan by CIA.

Senior US officials in Washington say the initial arrest of the powerful second in command Taleban leader, Mullah Baradar in Karachi in early February was accidental – after the CIA discovered the location of a meeting of Taleban commanders where Baradar was found. However, despite his significant sanctuary in Pakistan, Baradar was at odds with the ISI talking independently to Karzai's representatives and instead enlisting the help of Saudi Arabia. Over the past 12 months Saudi Arabia has been intermittently involved in helping the two sides hold informal talks that so far have not led to real negotiations, although they have the potential to do so.

The Obama administration is still far from accepting the idea of negotiating with the Taleban leadership and US officials were annoyed with Karzai after the London conference for raising the issue, but the ISI and the military are now forcing the pace to have a three way dialogue between Kabul, Islamabad and the Taleban, while also pushing the US administration to accept such a dialogue and agree to a major role for the ISI.

India has now embarked on a diplomatic offensive to counter Pakistan's growing role, sending National Security Adviser Shivsankar Menon to Kabul in early March and Foreign Minister SM Krishna to Iran in coming weeks. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's trip to Afghanistan this week underlined Tehran's keen interest in Afghanistan endgame. India has asked Karzai about his secret negotiations with the Taleban and how India can play a role. At the same time India appears to be wanting to rebuild the alliance with Iran, Russia and the Central Asian Republics that opposed the Taleban in the 1990s and supported the Northern Alliance.

Missing as yet from this complicated manoeuvring is the US administration which will have to decide soon on supporting Taleban talks, if it is not to see its military and economic development offensives in Afghanistan be undermined by regional rivalries. Also missing from the equation is Pakistan's civilian government which has been bypassed in the foreign policy decision making by the military and the ISI. It is well known that President Asif Zardari would like to improve relations with India and Afghanistan and encourage trade and investment, rather than foment a new set of regional tensions.

However, a too overt Pakistani role is likely to be rejected by Karzai, by Afghanistan's non-Pashtuns and civil society and even by many Taleban who are tired of fighting and would like to end their dependence on Pakistan.

Any sign of excessive Pakistani influence would immediately prompt a reaction from India, Iran and others, which could include backing anti-Pakistan proxies in Afghanistan making it even more difficult for Afghanistan to achieve peace and stability.