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India and Pakistan's proxy war puts Afghanistan exit at risk

By Simon Tisdall
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The machinations of two old foes grow in intensity as they seek to fill the power vacuum left by Nato's pullout

Intent on filling a power vacuum after the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are engaged in what analysts warn is a dangerously escalating "proxy war". That's bad news for Britain and its Nato partners – because, paradoxically, the two old foes' intensifying machinations could delay or fatally undermine the western pull-out on which all current calculations are based.

Barack Obama's announcement last autumn that the US would begin a military draw-down in Afghanistan in mid-2011 caused dismay in Delhi, not least because it was not consulted. It exacerbated existing worries that Obama, unlike his predecessor, is not interested in India or its concerns and does not afford it sufficient strategic importance.

MK Bhadrakumar, a former ambassador, summed up Indian thinking in Asia Times. He said policymakers were "deeply disturbed ... that the Obama administration is determined to end the fighting in Afghanistan and as a means of securing that objective, seeks the Taliban's reintegration and reconciliation. They want the fighting to go on and on until the Taliban are bled white and vanquished from the face of the earth".

India's objections to peace talks arise directly from its conviction that key Afghan Taliban

groups are the creatures of Pakistan's military, specifically the Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency. In its view, such connections mirror Pakistani security establishment links to the Punjab-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, blamed for the 2008 Mumbai atrocities and for a long history of attacks in Indian Kashmir.

Speaking after a Pakistani man was found guilty this week of waging war on India and multiple murder in the Mumbai attack, India's home minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, said he knew where ultimate responsibility lay. "The judgment itself is a message to Pakistan that they should not export terrorism to India," he said. India can also point to the weekend terrorist attempt in Times Square, New York – an operation claimed by the Pakistani Taliban – as further evidence of the common threat posed by Pakistan-based or nurtured militancy.

India is also pushing back against perceived Pakistani efforts to weaken Delhi's influence in Afghanistan, where it has invested \$1.3bn in humanitarian and infrastructure aid projects since 2001. Bomb attacks on its embassy and Kabul hotels housing Indian nationals are traced back to Pakistan. "India fears that Pakistan is preparing the ground for pro-Pakistan elements from the Taliban to negotiate with Kabul in an attempt to force India out of Afghanistan after American forces start withdrawal," said Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid on YaleGlobal Online.

Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, is due to hold peace talks – at a jirga, or tribal assembly – with Taliban elements later this month, and India is busy making its views known. In talks with prime minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi last week, Karzai reportedly gave assurances that the reintegration process would be tackled with "prudence and caution" and would be "inclusive and transparent". But Karzai, a cardsharp lacking aces, is playing many hands at once.

India's worries that Pakistan, by inserting itself in the centre of the peace process, will either fix it or wreck it, depending on its self-interest at the time, may be shared in Washington. But in a deliberate switch, the US is now determined to keep both Pakistan's military and Karzai sweet, after the furious ructions and recriminations of the last 12 months over battlefield setbacks.

With a possibly decisive offensive looming in Kandahar, the immediate US focus is on beating back the Taliban militarily in the south, keeping Pakistan's tribal belt under pressure, strengthening the Afghan government's future negotiating position, and ensuring that "Afghanisation" will work sufficiently well to allow the troops to leave.

No doubt the Indians will lobby Obama when he visits later this year. But right now, Delhi's insecurities and resentments are not a top priority. There is also some sympathy for Pakistan's long-standing complaints that by involving itself in Afghanistan, India is surreptitiously trying to encircle Pakistan and is training and funding Baluch separatists.

Amid rising region-wide tensions, in which China, Russia and Iran also hold cards, the risk is increasing that the jockeying for position over Afghanistan could fatally

complicate US and British hopes of finally extricating themselves from the quagmire into which they strayed in 2001. Yet the closer their withdrawal gets, the less leverage they can apply.

"Neighbouring states are already considering the Americans as good as gone and are preparing for an endgame scenario with old rivalries renewed," Rashid said. "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."

Rather than the end of the Afghan war, this sounds uncomfortably like the beginning, or resumption, of a regional one.