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Afghanistan Conference 'Doomed to Failure'

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Following deadly NATO attacks on Pakistani border posts, the country has refused to attend the upcoming international conference on the situation in Afghanistan. But as the most influential nation in helping stabilize their war-torn neighbor, Pakistan's presence is crucial, German commentators say on Wednesday.

The timing couldn't be worse. Just ahead of the international conference in Bonn to address the situation in Afghanistan, officials from the country's most important neighbor, Pakistan, have decided to boycott the event. Outraged over a cross-border NATO raid that left 24 Pakistani troops dead over the weekend, Islamabad has accused the military alliance of deliberate aggression. The dispute now threatens to torpedo delicate efforts to stabilize the region.

Pakistani officials allege that NATO forces continued firing on two northwestern posts even after being informed that they belonged to the Pakistani military. "Detailed information of the posts was already with ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), including map references, and it was impossible that they did not know these to be our posts," Major General Ishfaq Nadeem said at an army briefing on Tuesday, according to Pakistan daily *The News*.

NATO has apologized for the incident, promising an investigation. But anger over the incident continues to swell in [Pakistan](#), sparking protests and fiery editorials, and has strained already shaky ties between Pakistan and the United States.

The decision by Islamabad to boycott the Bonn conference is "regrettable," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters on Wednesday in South Korea. "Nothing will be gained by turning our backs on mutually beneficial cooperation," she said.

Stability Tops Priorities

The deadly attacks have also damaged relations between Islamabad and Kabul. On Wednesday Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani rejected a telephone request by Afghan President Hamid Karzai to reconsider the decision to boycott the conference. Because NATO launched their airstrikes from [Afghanistan](#), their southern neighbor would not attend in protest, Gilani said.

Meanwhile, the Rhineland city of Bonn continues preparing to welcome 100 delegations to talks that begin on Dec. 5, the main focus of which will be stabilizing the region before NATO troops complete their withdrawal at the end of 2014.

"Afghanistan needs a credible commitment from the international community not to abandon them after withdrawal," Germany's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Michael Steiner, told news agency DAPD.

But on Wednesday German commentators questioned whether it would be possible to achieve the conference's aims without Pakistan's participation.

Conservative daily **Die Welt** writes:

"More than 100 delegates have been invited by the Afghan and German governments to meet two goals. First, to promise the Afghans that the troop withdrawal won't mean a complete end to the engagement there. ... And second, that the political process of reconciliation between the Afghan government and the insurgent Taliban will finally move forward. This is unthinkable without the involvement of neighboring countries, the most important of which is Pakistan. Leading insurgent cells ... have their operational bases there."

"Should Pakistan stick to its conference boycott, the political process will remain what it is: a diplomatic wish. For the German government and particularly for Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who has made the success of reconciliation a personal mission, this is a serious setback. Westerwelle must know that Germany's possibilities for influence are confined to playing the supporting role of a well-meaning intermediary. The leading roles are played by Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States. And the latest NATO strike on the Pakistani border post isn't the only reason that the relationship between the latter two is suffering dearly."

"Before the Bonn conference even begins comes the bitter insight that only the decision to withdraw troops is certain. Only hope remains for what comes next."

The left-leaning daily **Die Tageszeitung** writes:

"Pakistan's government and military are just as dependent on US assistance as US-led NATO troops in Afghanistan are on Pakistani cooperation. There are justifiable doubts about the latter, however. Pakistan's unwillingness to be dominated and pushed around by the US is understandable. But American mistrust is warranted. And it doesn't help when Pakistan declines to participate in international attempts to solve the Afghanistan problem, such as the planned conference in Bonn. That only confirms that Islamabad isn't a reliable partner. Just as the US military should not automatically be trusted, Pakistan's secret service has often enough played a dirty double game."

"Pakistan's decision not to participate in the Bonn conference has likely doomed it to failure. Indeed, with the Taliban and Iran also not in attendance, several central players will be missing. It has also become clear that, 10 years after the start of the intervention in Afghanistan, there is still no concept for how to deal with the country's important neighbors. The West isn't just in danger of failing in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan as well."

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"Among the lessons from Afghanistan is the realization that Germany is too big to hide on the issue, but also too small to have any pivotal influence on a conflict so far from Europe. As the provider of the third-largest number of troops, German forces amount to just one-twentieth of US troop presence there. Washington will set the tempo for troop withdrawal. It's apparent that not even the outcome of the Bonn conference is in German hands. Coaxing by Westerwelle couldn't prevent Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar from boycotting the conference in protest of the deadly NATO attack on a Pakistani border post. With Pakistan's boycott, every proposal painstakingly prepared for the conference in recent months will collapse. The promise of help from the West after 2014 shouldn't be the only thing that happens there. The countries in the region, above all Pakistan, should show some respect for Afghanistan. It's sobering to realize that nothing will come of this."

The left-leaning **Berliner Zeitung** reports:

"For years politicians, diplomats and military officials in Berlin and Washington have repeated that Pakistan is Afghanistan's most important neighbor. ... And they say that the conflict can only be solved in the region. That is all correct, but it's mainly a cheap assertion that inadequately hides the helplessness of the international community when it comes to Afghanistan."

"To be sure, a big conference is not the appropriate instrument for influencing developments in Afghanistan. The Bonn jamboree will be a spectacle that has a greater effect in the participating

countries than on changing the situation in Afghanistan. The Germans, the British, the Americans and every other country providing troops will vaunt their plan to end the military mission there by the end of 2014. Finally, the mission so unpopular with the people back home will be over."

"Nothing concrete will happen. ... The Bonn conference will be just another big event in a sequence that has brought little benefit to the Afghans. And participation by Pakistan wouldn't make any difference."