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The Washington Post

Chinese court Afghanistan's Karzai

By Jeff Stein

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According to the usually reliable Paris-based Intelligence Online newsletter, a top Chinese general recently made an offer to Afghan President Hamid to train his army and security services “after NATO’s withdrawal.”

General Ma Xiaotian, deputy head of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army, “recently met Karzai to convince him that China would help him to form his new army and security services after NATO’s withdrawal,” the newsletter’s current edition says.

Asked about the origin of the unsourced item, an IO newsletter editor would say only, “Asian intelligence sources.”

India and China (as well as Pakistan and Iran, of course) have long jockeyed for supremacy in Afghanistan, each loath for the other to gain advantage on their borders.

None of the half dozen China and Afghan experts I consulted had heard of such a meeting between the Chinese general and Karzai. While a couple dismissed the report out of hand, others said it made a certain sense.

China has been quietly training Afghan police and road-mine removers since 2009, one expert noted.

"If this report about Gen. Ma is true, offering to fill the vacuum of a retreating NATO, that would be consistent with longstanding Chinese objectives of gaining far greater sway in Afghanistan," Richard D. Fisher, author of "China's Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach," said by e-mail.

But Chinese commanders may have a more immediate goal in cozying up to Karzai: opening a door for their lieutenants and sergeants to get hot-fire training in counterinsurgency -- quite a turnaround for an army born as revolutionary guerrillas.

John Lee, author of Will China Fail?, told me he's spoken to senior officers of the People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police about the effort.

"Behind closed doors, both the PLA and PAP are worried about what they perceive to be their lack of 'field experience' in combating serious, coordinated insurgencies -- they feel that their procedures, operational effectiveness, logistical capacity, etc., are 'untested'," said Lee, foreign-policy fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney.

Lee continued:

"So while Gen. Ma would have promoted the PLA and PAP's competence to Karzai on this issue, it is highly likely that the PAP and PLA would do more than 'train' the Afghan security forces, by taking a front-line role. Of course, the possible future active involvement by PLA and PAP troops could also decisively shift Kabul's allegiances toward Beijing."

"Ordinarily," added Paul Pillar, CIA National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, "we would be uncomfortable about China moving in someplace where NATO is moving out."

But Pillar added:

"Maybe in this instance we should be pleased that China is willing to contribute more on the security side, and is providing a reason that NATO can withdraw without feeling that the Afghan government is being cut adrift."

Intelligence Online also reported that Chinese intelligence was also reaching out to Gulbuddin Hekmatayar, the powerful Afghan warlord who heads Hezb-e-Islami, the fundamentalist organization with close links to al-Qaeda.

"China's military intelligence service, Qingbaobu and its civil intelligence service, Guoanbu, are supporting a possible rapprochement" between Karzai and Hekmatayar, it said.

That made sense, Fisher said.

"I would not expect the Chinese to take sides and actually offer troops to defend Karzai; they have already proven they are just as comfortable hooking up with the Taliban."

“Actually,” he added, “the best Afghan scenario for China is one in which they become the main support for the 'Karzai' part of the country while helping arrange a modus vivendi with a stronger Taliban. That would relieve pressure on Chinese ally Pakistan’s military while giving China broad economic access and power in all of Afghanistan, while dealing a body blow to Indian influence, thus strengthening China’s 'encirclement' of India.”

Pillar noted the irony of the Chinese cleaning up, so to speak, from American sacrifice in Afghanistan.

If the report of the Karzai-General Ma meeting is true, he said, “it speaks indirectly (and ironically) to a critical observation that some have made about the war in Afghanistan: that the United States and its allies are expending their blood and treasure to stabilize the place, but that China will be the main beneficiary, at least economically, from any resulting stability.”