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One big problem

The worsening wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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FOR America, Pakistan and Afghanistan can no longer be treated as separate foreign-policy issues. Quick to realise this, President Barack Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke, a senior diplomat, as his envoy to both countries—“AfPak”, as they are becoming known. And on Wednesday May 6th he held a summit in Washington, DC, with their two presidents, Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Asif Zardari of Pakistan.

His two guests do indeed face two similar and linked problems. One is to fight a worsening Taliban insurgency. Afghanistan’s is fuelled by militants fleeing to safe havens across the border in Pakistan’s semi-autonomous tribal areas. From there, the “Pakistani Taliban” are also extending their influence into Pakistan proper.

second problem is America. Both Mr Karzai and Mr Zardari have been staunch American allies. And both pay a price for it in their standing at home. Mr Karzai was in Washington as news emerged of what may have been the most serious unintended slaughter yet of Afghan civilians by American forces, after air strikes in Farah province on Monday. Hundreds of protesters, chanting “Death to America!”, were reported to have taken to the streets there on Thursday.

Mr Zardari has courted similar unpopularity by tolerating (despite his government’s public protests) American unmanned air strikes on targets in Pakistan. And many in Pakistan will see this week’s offensive against the Taliban in the Swat valley in North-West Frontier Province as an American-ordained onslaught on fellow Pakistani Muslims.

The government signed a peace deal with the Taliban in Swat in February, and even seemed ready to countenance the Taliban’s expansion last month into the neighbouring districts of Buner and Lower Dir. Only when American officials complained in loud, alarmist tones about this

“abdication” to the Taliban, even voicing fears about the security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, did the offensive begin.

If it intensifies, as Pakistan's prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, threatened on Thursday, and, as expected, tens of thousands more civilians are forced to flee their homes, Mr Zardari is likely to face even more popular anger. If, on the other hand, as has happened in the past, the offensive proves short-lived and the Pakistani government swiftly reverts to patching up peace deals with local militants, American exasperation will mount.

In fact, neither president has America’s full confidence. George Bush saw Mr Karzai as a friend. The new administration regards him as a disappointing leader who has done far too little to rid his government of corruption, and to distance himself from thuggish local strongmen.

This week Mr Karzai registered himself as a candidate for re-election as president in August, and dismayed his foreign allies by naming a civil-war era warlord, Mohammad Fahim, as one of his running-mates. But, with the opposition melting away, Mr Karzai shows every sign of defying the apparent unpopularity of his government, and winning re-election.

The Obama administration, which at one time seemed to harbour hopes of seeing a less tainted replacement, will have to live with him. The same goes for Mr Zardari, whose reputation is even worse, and whose grip on his own country appears tenuous.

After their meeting, Mr Obama understandably refrained from lavishing praise on his guests, confining his expressions of support to the democratic process that has produced them as leaders. He called the talks “extraordinarily productive”.

But America’s dialogue with Pakistan seems to have changed little since the former military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, reluctantly signed up to George Bush’s “war on terror” in 2001. America demands a greater effort against the militants and pours in aid to encourage it. Pakistan responds that its past sacrifices are under-appreciated and future efforts will be redoubled; and takes the money.

Similarly, the dialogue with Afghanistan remains stuck in the old tramlines. America urges Mr Karzai to clean up his government’s act, to help earn popular support for the war with the Taliban. The Afghan government retorts that the war will never be popular as long as foreign forces keep killing civilians.

At least, however, the third side of this triangle, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, seems on a better footing. Mr Karzai seems able to talk to Mr Zardari. Being in the same room as Mr Musharraf was a trial.