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Taliban deliver hammer blow to NATO

By Pepe Escobar

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Spin masters from Washington to Brussels to Kabul are bound for many a sleepless night. World public opinion has been relentlessly shocked and awed by the chimera that the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are "winning" the AfPak combo war. Now for the facts on the ground. Immediately after the US government decided to "suspend" US\$800 million in aid to the Pakistan army, Pakistan Defense Minister Ahmed Mukhtar told local Express TV channel, "If at all things become difficult, we will just get all our forces back" - hinting there would be no more troops from Islamabad fighting Pashtun-majority guerrillas in the tribal areas. Mukhtar couldn't have been more explicit; "If Americans refuse to give us money, then okay ... We cannot afford to keep the military out in the mountains for such a long period."

This graphically shows, once again, the Pakistani army is - reluctantly - playing Washington's counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency game in the tribal areas. As much as Islamabad may fear Pashtun nationalism, the army knows it must proceed with extreme caution, otherwise it will face a mass tribal Pashtun rebellion that would put on the table the supreme taboo; the consolidation of Pashtunistan, breaking up Pakistan as we know it.

Warlord down Then there was President Hamid Karzai, the puppet who barely controls his own throne in Kabul, according to local lore, talking in a joint news conference with the visiting liberator of Libya, neo-Napoleonic French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Karzai said, "Inside the houses of Afghan people, we have all suffered from the same kind of pain. And our hope is that, God willing, there will be an end to the pain and suffering of Afghan people, and peace and security will be implemented." Arguably not many Afghans will feel "the same kind of pain"

when confronted by the assassination of Ahmad Wali Karzai, the president's half-brother, a major drug dealer, an asset on the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) payroll and the top powerbroker in Kandahar as head of the Kandahar provincial council. Considering the Taliban may actually control as much as 70% of the country, the assassination is a sterling coup, with responsibility duly claimed by the Taliban via spokesman Usuf Ahmadi: "This is one of our biggest achievements since the spring operation began. We assigned Sardar Mohammad to kill him recently and Sardar Mohammad is also martyred." A counter-spin in Kandahar has Sardar Mohammad, a trusted Karzai commander issued from the same Popolzai tribe, killing Ahmed Wali with two shots on the head, "on drugs", and for personal reasons. The Taliban anyway are already winning the public relations war. Since the spring of 2010, the Taliban have managed to kill the provincial chief of police of Kandahar, the deputy governor, the district chief for Arghandab, and the deputy mayor of Kandahar City.

Now they got rid of the major pro-Washington actor not only in Kandahar but in the whole south of Afghanistan - where NATO has been involved en masse to crush the Taliban in their spiritual home and favored grounds. The assassination smashes to bits the hegemonic "NATO is winning" narrative. The King of Kandahar I spent a long afternoon with Ahmad Wali in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province in Pakistan, when the US was bombing the Taliban in the autumn of 2001 - weeks before he and his half-brother transitioned from "kebab sellers" (the word in the street) to political heavyweights. He was already a CIA asset - at the time the US was busy parachuting Hamid Karzai inside Afghanistan - and a major opium smuggler, not to mention tribal leader and a much more assertive personality than his half-brother.

During the 2000s, he kept all these roles, as well as owning hotels, real estate and even a Toyota dealership, but most of all struggling to "contain" Kandahar, always heavily Talibanized, as commander of the Kandahar Strike Force, a hardcore, private paramilitary group that helps US Special Forces and the CIA in targeted assassinations of top Taliban commanders. He was the de facto governor, popularly known as "The King of Kandahar" - much more powerful than the governor and the toothless provincial council.

The lesson Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and secular Pashtuns are learning from his assassination is that the Karzai government is a sham (well, most Afghans already knew it) - incapable of protecting even the most powerful of the Karzais. As for the fiction that NATO is in the process of conquering Afghans' hearts and minds and making them fall in love with the central government in Kabul - you can try to spin that to a rock face in the Hindu Kush. So much for NATO "winning" in Afghanistan. As for the US "winning" in the Pakistani tribal areas, one just has to turn to what powerful chief of army staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani - a Pentagon darling - and head of the Inter-Services Intelligence Lieutenant General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, are thinking. Via their minions, they are saying they can get by without the "suspended" \$800 million from Washington, or ask "all-weather friend" China for anything they need. According to Pentagon spokesman Colonel David Lapan, Islamabad can have the \$800 million if it issues a lot more visas for, essentially, US spies, and reinstates widespread training of Pakistanis in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. Islamabad - already dealing with a US drone war over the tribal areas - is not interested.

The "winner" in this case is really al-Qaeda, which has used the Pakistani Taliban in a confrontation against the Pakistani army in the tribal areas as a diversion tactic, while plotting to expand its caliphate-driven agenda towards Central Asia. But wait, wasn't the US "winning" against al-Qaeda? That's what General David Petraeus - now transitioning from top commander in Afghanistan to CIA chief - has been spinning; "There has been enormous damage done to al-Qaeda in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas ... and it does hold the prospect of really a strategic defeat" for al-Qaeda. Well, not really - unless you drone the tribal areas to death.