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Taliban put their heads together

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - Accusations and counter-accusations between President Hamid Karzai and his opponents over the August 20 Afghan presidential elections could drag on for months, placing at risk a stable post-election phase that was to have seen the opening of dialogue with the Taliban.

At the same time, regional armed groups have buried their differences in an effort to develop a counter to Washington's AfPak strategy that has seen a surge in the number of troops - and deaths - in Afghanistan, while also striking some telling blows against militants in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, United States Predator drone missile attacks have caused havoc with the command structure of the Pakistani Taliban-al-Qaeda nexus. Key Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) leader Baitullah Mehsud was killed in August, while the low-profile Ilyas Kashmiri, a Kashmiri veteran [commander](#) who joined al-Qaeda and changed the dynamics of the regional war theater, was killed recently.

In addition, ongoing [military operations](#) in Pakistan's tribal areas [on the border](#) with Afghanistan have gone a long way to breaking the militant networks that had been built up since 2002 and which fed into the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Decision-makers in Washington and London have adopted a twofold approach under which they would on the one hand escalate military operations against the Taliban, while also offering political deals to those Taliban commanders they believed could be isolated from extremist elements.

In this way, a broad-based consensus government that included the [Taliban](#) would be set up in

Kabul, and Western forces would finally be able to exit the country they invaded in 2001 to topple the Taliban regime.

The contested Afghan election has derailed this idea. A second round of voting will take place if Karzai's share of the total vote - which currently stands at 54% - drops under 50%. With 10% of the ballots cast in the polls being rigorously investigated after complaints by the main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, this is possible, and it could take months.

While there is discord and disunity in [Afghanistan](#), in an unexpected development, four [strange bedfellows](#) from regional armed groups gathered in the Afghan province of Khost about 10 days ago for prolonged discussions on the course of the regional resistance against [the North Atlantic](#) Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Pakistani [security forces](#).

These [leaders](#) included Sirajuddin Haqqani, who commands the largest Taliban group; the newly appointed chief of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Hakimullah Mehsud; his rival Mullah Nazir, a Taliban commander from Pakistan's South Waziristan tribal area who commands the biggest Taliban fighting network in the neighboring Afghan province of Paktia; and Gul Bahadur, a Taliban commander in North Waziristan.

Sources familiar with the meeting told Asia Times Online that it had been convened at the personal initiative of Sirajuddin Haqqani, whose emphasis was on immediate reconciliation between all Taliban factions - the Taliban are divided in the Pakistani tribal areas along tribal lines.

Although they all pledge allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his resistance against foreign forces in Afghanistan, in their own constituencies they remain divided. For example, Mullah Nazir and Gul Bahadur are from the Wazir tribe and have always been at odds with Mehsud tribesmen. At times, they have supported the government's military operations against one another.

One of the main issues addressed at the meeting was the military operations in Pakistan as these have devastated the Taliban's supply lines into Afghanistan. In past years, the Taliban have launched thousands of men annually across the border; this number has now been severely reduced.

The leaders agreed that all Taliban groups, whether they were rivals or not, would maintain close coordination and also develop joint operations when required. Such coordination among assorted armed groups has worked in Afghanistan, but this is the first time it has happened at a regional level.

Cooperation between different anti-coalition groups, especially in north Afghanistan, has brought unexpected success. The attack on Italian paratroopers in a NATO convoy in Kabul on Thursday is a case in point.

The suicide attack, which claimed the lives of six soldiers and 10 civilians, according to

official reports, was the result of coordination between a number of anti-coalition groups, even including the local administration.

A senior commander who is not authorized by the Taliban to issue statements did, however, talk to Asia Times Online. He called himself a jihadi with the name of Abu Abdullah.

"The [Kabul] operation was planned by Sirajuddin Haqqani, and about two dozen people were sent from Khost to Kabul at different times. They stayed at different locations in the Taliban's safe houses. One person was then picked for the suicide mission. The others are waiting for further operations in coming days," Abu Abdullah said.

According to Abul Abdullah, the operation was coordinated with local pro-Taliban people in Kabul who have deep penetration in the local administration and who track the movements of NATO convoys. An observation post was set up with the help of local sympathizers in the administration who alerted the attacker to three vehicles approaching through a main artery. The bomber's car then rammed smack into one of the vehicles.

Abu Abdullah claimed that all three vehicles had been destroyed and that 25 NATO soldiers had been killed.

"This is one of several successful attacks on NATO troops which has been actively supported by the masses, like the masses supported the resistance against the Soviets [in the 1980s]. If God is willing, we will carry out similar actions in the future," Abu Abdullah said.

In addition to such attacks, the Taliban are expected to concentrate on disrupting NATO's supply lines through Pakistan as well as those from Central Asian countries going into northern Afghanistan. Further clashes with the Pakistani security forces are also inevitable.