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## The foreplay of an Afghan settlement

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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When "well-placed Pakistani and Arab sources" sing like magpie robins, you never get tired of hearing them. There is a lot of variety to their songs. The magpie robin gives voice to a range of motifs: loud songs to establish territory and pair formation; soft, aggressive songs to defend territory; or, haunting resting melodies.

Remember how such well-placed sources sang without a break from the mid-1980s in the run-up to the Geneva talks all the way to February 15, 1989, when the last Soviet [soldiers](#), led by General Boris Gromov finally managed after 10 years to leave Afghanistan on foot over the Hairatonbridge across the Amy Darya River? Well, they are singing again.

But they are very combative - less bird-like and more like kung fu masters ready to do battle. Are they establishing territory or merely defending it? Most certainly, these are not haunting resting songs.

Highly tendentious themes have appeared in rapid succession over the past week: Afghan President Hamid Karzai is in talks with the Taliban's Quetta *shura* (council) about a "comprehensive" Afghan settlement, with the latter participating in government; Karzai is also talking with the Haqqani network thanks to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). This follows the ISI setting up a meeting "on the Afghan-Pakistan border in the spring" between Karzai and Sirajuddin Haqqani, and the ISI escorting Sirajuddin's brother and uncle to Kabul. The Haqqanis realize that the time has come to "make the transition from the IRA to Sinn Fein" and that "This is the end of the road for al-Qaeda in

Waziristan", as diplomatic sources have been reported as saying. A calibrated media offensive has appeared, the principal objective of which is to underscore that the Taliban are gaining the upper hand politically. The intention seems to be threefold. First, to scare the daylight out of the non-Pashtun groups which believed from day one that the idea of accommodating the Taliban in the Afghan power structure would be extremely dangerous.

If the non-Pashtun groups could be sufficiently incited to agitate, they would exert big pressure on Karzai regarding the "sell-out" to the Taliban. The discord would tear apart the tenuous coalition that Karzai heads, and a sure casualty could be the High Council that the Afghan president is erecting as his bridge leading toward the Pashtun camp in Pakistan bypassing the Punjabi-led establishment.

Second, the media offensive projects the [veteran](#) mujahid Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son, Sirajuddin, onto the center stage. A "senior Pakistani official" even claimed that talks are going on between Haqqani, Karzai and the [US government](#) - "The ice has broken".

An impression is being created that while the Quetta *shura* may remain important, its stature as the principal interlocutor in the insurgency has eroded while the Haqqanis surged as the main military threat to the US forces on the battlefield. That is to say, there can be no enduring peace unless the Haqqanis are engaged in talks by the Americans as their key interlocutor.

Third, this sort of media expose creates confusion regarding the nascent reconciliation process. It puts Karzai on the defensive vis-a-vis his non-Pashtun allies, embarrasses moderate elements within the Taliban leadership and forces them to resort to grandstanding and intransigence that ultimately could derail the reconciliation process.

In short, this entire media blitzkrieg aims at aborting the sort of "Afghan-led" reconciliation process that Karzai is conceiving.

The reconciliation process is at an extremely vulnerable "embryonic" stage, to use the words of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) representative in Afghanistan, Mark Sedwill. Last week, while talking to reporters in Washington, Sedwill said, "There are significant [Taliban] leaders who seem to be weary of the fight and seem to be willing to contemplate a future within the mainstream." But, "Essentially, we're at the embryonic stage. The channels of communication are open. I wouldn't, at this stage, say that we've reached the point of real negotiation."

The context becomes very important from yet another angle. A new level of equilibrium or maturity has lately appeared in Washington's equations with Karzai. Washington has manifestly edged closed toward Karzai in recent days, putting behind the period of alienation and drift. The controversy over the issue of "corruption" has tapered off. Again, Washington accepts the conduct of the Afghan parliamentary [elections](#) and is preparing to deal with the emergent power alignment involving the new parliament and Karzai.

The Barack Obama administration seems to have decided to work with Karzai when the search for a political settlement is shifting gear.

Detractors and debunkers of Obama's war see things differently. The former US Central Intelligence Agency operative-turned-critic, Michael Scheuer, says, "The game is over and we are looking for a way out. Obama won't be able to hold his base for 2012 if he is not out [of Afghanistan and Iraq]".

However, we cannot be so very prejudiced as to overlook that there is a consistent streak in Obama's political personality. Laurence Tribe, the renowned professor who became Obama's intellectual mentor at Harvard, once summed up nicely, "Overall, Obama has ... a problem-solving orientation. He seems not to be powerfully driven by an *a-priori* framework, so what emerges is quite pragmatic and even tentative. It's hard to describe what his presuppositions are ..."

All indications are that Obama is acutely aware that the war isn't going too well. If anything, author Bob Woodward further provoked Obama into a "problem-solving orientation" with revelations in his latest book *Obama's Wars* of rifts in the administration over Afghan war policy.

No doubt, Obama's video teleconference with Karzai on Monday had a "hands-on" purposive approach. He firmed up a most crucial leg of any Afghan settlement, namely, formalizing the US commitment of long-term support to the Kabul government embracing the post-settlement era.

Obama and Karzai agreed that a new US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Declaration would be ready by the time a NATO summit takes place in Lisbon in November.

They linked this to the other key topic at the NATO summit, namely, "transition to Afghan lead security responsibility by 2014", as the White House readout put it. The White House said on Wednesday that Obama supported Karzai's efforts at opening peace talks with Taliban leaders, but "this is about Afghanistan. It has to be done by the Afghans."

On the other hand, US-Pakistan ties, which have always been difficult, have come under new pressures. The US has sharply escalated drone attacks on Pakistan's tribal areas. Two "hot pursuit" incidents provoked Pakistani attacks on NATO convoys and the closure of the Torkham border post from Pakistan into Afghanistan, but no one is losing sleep in Washington or Brussels.

A Voice of America commentary rhetorically asked, "Have the [Pakistani] attacks brought supply shortages to NATO troops in Afghanistan?" It went on to answer with a derisive "No", quoting General Joseph Blotz who commands the International Security Assistance Force:

We do have plenty of supplies and stocks within Afghanistan. We do have access to transport and logistics through other border crossing points ... and, yes, we need to look for other options and the other options are, you know, getting in the necessary supplies and logistics through border crossing points with neighboring countries in the north... where we get in actually almost as much supplies as through the border crossing points with Pakistan, so there are alternatives.

In sum, the US message is getting to be somewhat blunt: the Pakistani military has little choice but to cooperate. Again, regional players may have differences with the US [strategy](#) in Afghanistan, but the Obama administration keeps the back-channel to Iran, is actively consulting Russia, and has restrained New Delhi from making precipitate moves. Equally, it is preposterous that Beijing would contemplate goading the reluctant Pakistani military into the high-risk enterprise of "strategic defiance" of the US in the Hindu Kush.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has so far ignored the Pakistani attempt to draw the US into the unrest in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. On Thursday, the Wall Street Journal flashed details of a White House report that is being forwarded by Obama to the US [Congress](#) which in unusually plain speaking says that the Pakistani military is playing a double game in the Afghan war.

"The Pakistan military continued to avoid [military](#) engagements that would put it in direct conflict with Afghan Taliban or al-Qaeda forces in North Waziristan [tribal area in Pakistan]. This is as much a political choice as it is a reflection of an under-resourced military prioritizing its targets."

We are witnessing the foreplay of an Afghan peace settlement. No doubt about it. As a perceptive Guardian commentator put it, the issue is no longer about peace talks but as to when the fighting will stop. And Pakistan is reiterating its claim to be the key arbiter of any peace talks and has asserted its seamless capacity to be a "spoiler" if it is spurned.

A charming thing about magpie robins is that they can incorporate fragments of other bird calls into their songs. Remember how their songs kept frustrating the Geneva talks and prolonged the Soviet agony in Afghanistan?