This Pakistan-US blow-up simply assists the Taliban

By Ahmed Rashid

The last thing Pakistan needed right now was a blow up with the US and Nato. But that is exactly what has happened, even though the country is beset with momentous floods, a political crisis, Taliban terrorism and an economic collapse - dealing with all of which heavily depends on financial support from the US and Europe.

Last week four Nato helicopter gunship incursions into Pakistani territory left three Pakistani soldiers dead and several wounded in the tribal areas on the border. Nato said it was in hot pursuit of Taliban gunmen.

After pressure from the army, politicians and the media, the Pakistan government retaliated by closing down the northern border crossing for Nato goods convoys entering Afghanistan. More than 80 per cent of Nato's non-lethal supplies travel through Pakistan.

Then the Pakistani Taliban, allied to the Afghan Taliban, started to pound the Nato convoys that were still travelling north from the port city of Karachi. Four attacks have taken place - the latest yesterday, when a dozen oil tankers were torched just a few miles from Islamabad.

Eight armed assailants attacked the trucks and killed three drivers. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility. Significantly, not a single convoy attacked was escorted by the Pakistani police or army - clearly an open invitation to the Taliban and a further snub to Nato.

The US and Nato are increasingly frustrated by the continuing sanctuary that the Afghan Taliban have in Pakistan. Meanwhile Pakistani generals have said they will carry out no military operations their side of the border because the army is involved in flood relief.

This blow-up is also partly a result of General David Petraeus, the US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, trying to notch up some battlefield successes before President Obama undertakes his policy review on Afghanistan in December and a Nato summit in November.

US drones carried out 22 missile attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas in September, killing 100-plus militants - the highest number of drone attacks ever, although these incursions are cleared by the Pakistani army.

To make things worse, Osama bin Laden has issued two radio broadcasts in the space of three days urging Pakistanis to revolt against their government, while Europe is said to be facing a potential terrorist threat from German and British militants who are training with the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas. The US, Britain and Japan have issued travel alerts for their citizens travelling in Europe. Pakistan denies that it has any intelligence about such an attack and has hinted strongly that the West is making this up just to pressure Islamabad.

Pakistan is likely to open the border for Nato traffic soon because it cannot afford a prolonged conflict with the US, from which the army receives $2billion a year. However, there is little Washington can do to force Pakistan's army to end its go-slow against the Taliban on Pakistani soil.

But if there is a successful terrorist attack in Europe that is seen to originate from Pakistan's tribal areas, then all bets are off. In such a scenario, the US has made it clear that it would automatically expand its drone attacks and possibly even bomb terrorist camps and sanctuaries in other parts of Pakistan. There is still a real danger that the US and Pakistan tensions could soon get worse, not better.

Source: http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23884790-this-pakistan-us-blow-up-simply-assists-the-taliban.do