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## President Asif Ali Zardari's Row With David Cameron Meant to Shore Up Support With the Military and Provincial Governors

LSE Ideas

By Faheem Haider

By now, no doubt, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister David Cameron have hashed out their differences. And no doubt, both peace and justice now reign supreme in some Kingdom Far, Far Away. I live in a fantastical world, built from the ground up, molded and cast in my hopes and dreams. So, why not this?

A second has passed and I have come out of my reverie. And so I have to deal with the world that is given me. Why is President Zardari risking his standing with his public at this gravely difficult time to pick a fight that he won't win? I'll offer some tentative thoughts on that somewhat badly phrased question.

Prime Minister Cameron's comments in Bangalore that Pakistan had to shoot straight and at only one enemy came at the heels of the recent WikiLeaks document dump, and were surely meant to distance his government from Labour's perhaps overly credulous investment in time, money and lives in the region. In response, the Pakistani President sent off a volley of recrimination and hedging, though only while sitting comfortable in Paris, away from his secured fortress in Islamabad, away from the not-too opulent, very nearly uncomfortable conference chairs in 10 Downing Street.

His comments to Le Monde only telegraphed the deeply ambiguous views he holds on the ISAF intervention in the region. He declaimed that:

"The international community, to which Pakistan belongs, is losing the war against the Taliban"; that this is "because we have lost the battle to win hearts and minds"; that given the diplomatic and military moves made to try to secure the region "military reinforcements are only a small part of the response"; and that "to win the support of the Afghan people, we must bring them economic development, and prove that we can not only change their lives, but improve them."

Moreover, as if to tie up loose ends, he said that the Taliban "have no chance of regaining power, though their influence is growing," but also that, waiting on the wings of the U.S and U.K's commitment to the region "time is on [the Taliban's] side." Though cautionary, these are hardly words of friendship and comity. They stand as warnings of some unfortunate outcome, games striven and forfeited, players shirking their nearly artificial responsibilities. Indeed, Zardari's comments ring true as a promise that, were the ISAF coalition to back out of the region, the net result will be destabilization of the region, entire. And who knows maybe the Islamists who, so far, have the people's allegiance through fear and social goods could soon have the nuclear football under their white clad arms.

Zardari's comments come at the time when Pakistan is suffering through the worst monsoon rains and floods in a century. Already more than 1,500 people are dead; as many as 2 million people are homeless, while more than half the livestock owned by farmers in the region have perished. People are suffering, and those who have been able to get out on the roads to leave the blighted areas have challenged the government to intervene in a helpful and forceful way. So far, claim the affected citizens of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, the government has not done its part in a way that sensible people could support their best hopes for tomorrow.

Plainly President Zardari does not think he needs the support of the people affected by this on-going catastrophe. Plainly he does not think that the U.S. will intervene in Pakistan's bilateral relations with the U.K. Plainly he thinks talking tough against David Cameron's strong words has a positive pay-off. That is because his survival in office depends on the military's backing and the support of Pakistan's provincial governors. They are, as it were the electorate that counts; in Professor Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's terminology, they are his selectorate.

Hence, as if trying to patch together countrywide support for his ambivalent opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan and, the Tehrik-e-Taliban, in Pakistan, he claimed: "The war against terrorism must unite us and not oppose us." Finally, almost as if it

were a promise, made in this case to the military, President Zardari said that he “will explain face to face that it is my country that is paying the highest price in human life for this war.” He seems to be saying that he understand the military’s losses and the crosscutting deals in which the provincial governors are complicit. He will fight for their needs, he wants to say and will tell off the diplomats who would have Zardari do otherwise. His posturing is, simply, a shot across the bow.

Still there are other competing explanations for President Zardari’s remonstrations. It is possible that Zardari’s challenge to Cameron has been particularly harsh because the U.K does not help prop up the PPP government as the U.S. does. Indeed, in fact if not in tact, the British Prime Minister made the same demands on the Pakistani government as U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Though his comments seemed more forceful, unless rhetorical chicanery can carry the day over substance—which of course it can—Zardari is baldly taking his pot shots and declaring his stamina to stand up for the fight against the Taliban in both Afghanistan and in Pakistan, a fight paid for in part by U.S and U.K aid funding.

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