

Afghanistan: Peace signals from the Taliban.

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The Taliban have been sending signals that they are ready to sit down with the US. But it seems as if the US is unwilling to act, particularly as the presidential election nears. Writer Ahmed Rashid considers what this means for Afghanistan's future.

In the past three months, there have been numerous public signals by the Taliban that they are willing to resume talks with the Americans. But there has been no such response from Washington as the US elections draw near.

Meanwhile, the Taliban have stepped up attacks on US and Afghan forces, and there has been no respite in the fighting despite the advent of Ramadan.

At the end of June, at an academic conference in Kyoto, Japan, an active member of the Taliban shura (council) held substantial talks with Masoom Stanakzai, a leading member of the Afghan High Peace Council and adviser to President Hamid Karzai.

That was despite Taliban insistence that they would not meet any representative from Mr Karzai. At the same time, at a conference in Paris, former Taliban officials discussed sensitive issues with other Afghans, such as power-sharing and changing the constitution so the Taliban could be accommodated.

Later interviews with former or active Taliban by prominent academic and ex-UN official Michael Semple, and more interviews by a group from the War Studies department of London University, all pointed to a keen desire by the Taliban to get talks restarted with the US and a surprisingly conciliatory attitude on many issues.

No word

But there has not been a whisper from any member of the Obama administration, either welcoming these positive Taliban statements or even a mention of whether the US is committed to the talks.

The reason, of course, is the US elections on 2 November. Neither President Obama nor Mitt Romney want to say anything conciliatory towards the Taliban that may make them look weak in the eyes of their opposite number.

Although there have been some attempts by the State Department to get talks restarted, they are floundering on the back of the elections and the lack of unity within the Obama administration on the very issue of talking to the Taliban. As a result, it seems that talks could get delayed until after November.

The US and Taliban representatives had met at least seven times in secret talks in Germany and Qatar before talks were stalled in January 2012.

Although the Taliban called them off, the culprit seemed to have been the Americans, who went back on an apparent commitment to free five Taliban leaders from Guantanamo in exchange for a US soldier.

Meanwhile, Taliban attacks against US and Afghan forces over April, May and June - the beginning of the traditional fighting season - have increased by 11% compared with the same period last year.

Taliban revival

Most dangerous is the Taliban revival and re-emergence in Helmand and Kandahar, southern provinces that were supposed to have been swept clean by a massive US Marine offensive over the past two years.

Moreover, there has been no respite in fighting for the traditional month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. We have seen even more suicide attacks this year instead.

With US relations with Pakistan having also been in free-fall, and with the US continuing to accuse Pakistan of harbouring Taliban leaders and fighters, there was a hardening of the American position in the military, the US Congress and the media.

There is now every chance that rather than pressure for re-opening talks with the Taliban, there will be congressional pressure on President Obama to declare the Jalaluddin Haqqani network a terrorist organisation.

That would have enormously negative consequences in the region. It could implicate Pakistan as a state supporter of terrorism, which could lead to US sanctions, more cross-border raids by US forces into Pakistan and greater anti-Americanism.

It would make it virtually impossible for Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to restart talks with the US, as long as one of his colleagues was declared outside the pale by Washington. And it would likely lead to more suicide bombers against US forces.

Lives in danger

The Haqqanis also hold numerous Western, Pakistani and Afghan hostages and kidnap-for-ransom victims, including the US army sergeant, Bowe Bergdahl, 25, who has been held prisoner now for over three years. Their lives could be in danger with a terrorist label stamped on the Haqqanis.

The Taliban have no wish for the Americans to leave Afghanistan in 2014 in a continued or even worse state of civil war.

Mr Karzai is anxious for talks with the Taliban, and so is neighbouring Pakistan, although Islamabad has done little to help facilitate negotiations between the Taliban and the Americans or Mr Karzai.

Pakistan could have been much more helpful by putting greater pressure on Mullah Omar and the Haqqanis to reduce their fighting and hold talks.

The Pakistan military, which runs the country's Afghan policy, seems to be paralysed as a result of the continuing domestic crisis and the year-long war of words with the US.

Consequently, the military does not seem to have a coherent policy towards Afghanistan at present, which should involve a turnaround on some of its past practices, such as giving sanctuary to the Taliban.

Meanwhile, as US forces focus on the transition to Afghan forces which we are repeatedly told is going extremely well, Taliban attacks have increased.

Regional countries have also become more hostile to a planned long-term US military presence in Afghanistan of some 20,000 troops after 2014. There are growing fears about a downward plunge for the Afghan economy.

Afghan presidential elections and the uncertainty they carry loom in 2014, and ethnic divisions in the country are widening over the issue of peace talks with the Taliban.

The US and Nato have so far failed to put greater emphasis on these other political challenges, which will affect Afghanistan's future in the months ahead, almost as much as a successful transition to Afghan security forces will do.

The US needs to quickly reopen talks with the Taliban and start helping the Afghan government deal with this extraordinary set of problems.

Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Pakistan on the Brink: The future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West.