

Afghanistan Poses The Real Threat

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Lahore By Ahmed Rashid

The last thing Tony Blair and President George W. Bush need, at a moment of multiple crises for both of them, is a revamped Taliban taking control of southern Afghanistan - but that is now not impossible to imagine.

Bush and Blair have only themselves to blame, as they fought an unnecessary war in Iraq and allowed the Taliban and al-Qa'eda to fester in Central Asia during the five years that followed 9/11.

Yesterday's widespread riots in Kabul are indicative of how disillusioned many Afghans feel about the failure of the West to help rebuild their country.

Nato is now stuck with the consequences. To enlist more troops from more countries and increase its forces from 9,000 to 18,000, Nato billed its replacement of American forces in southern Afghanistan as a major stabilisation and reconstruction effort. Instead, Nato forces, including 3,000 British troops deployed in Helmand province, will have to fight their way out of an unprecedented Taliban offensive that has claimed 400 lives since May 17.

Fighting a full-scale guerrilla war is not what countries such as Italy, Spain, Holland, Germany and others enlisted for. The mandate from their governments is reconstruction, not combat.

"Nato will not fail in Afghanistan ... the family of nations will expect nothing less than success," General James Jones, the head of US and Nato forces in Europe, told a recent seminar in Madrid.

Gen Jones is now desperately trying to persuade contributing countries to end the restrictions they impose on their troops, making it impossible for some of them to fight or commanders to run a proper military campaign.

"What is the point of deploying troops who don't fight," ask many Afghans. That is why Gen Jones calls these caveats - they now number a staggering 71 - "Nato's operational cancer".

Nato's weaknesses are what worry President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan government. The Taliban and al-Qa'eda know this and more. They have closely followed the testy debates in parliaments across Europe about deploying troops to Afghanistan. They count on inflicting a few bloody casualties, letting body bags arrive in European capitals, and then seeing the protests against deployment escalate.

The Taliban are also testing American resolve. Nato's deployment is part of Washington's agenda to reduce its forces in Afghanistan. It is pulling 3,000 troops out this summer and possibly more later.

The Karzai government is angry with Washington, because many Afghans see this as the start of a full American withdrawal.

The Afghans are also angry that neither the Americans nor Nato seem to be taking the extent to which the Taliban have found sanctuary in Pakistan seriously enough. Senior Nato officials admit that Pakistan's military regime is turning a blind eye to Taliban activities, but what can Nato do when the Americans could do nothing during the past five years?

Despite Bush and Blair claiming to be successfully micromanaging the war on terror, the war is expanding and the region faces increasing chaos.

Afghanistan has become the new battleground for the 59-year proxy war between India and Pakistan; Afghan anger at the Pakistanis is returned in kind, as Islamabad accuses Kabul of allowing Indian spies access to Pakistan's western border, while Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad are accused of funding an insurgency in Baluchistan province. In turning a blind eye to the Taliban, Pakistan is pressuring Karzai, America and Nato to accede to its demands.

Al-Qa'eda, now under the operational leadership of the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahri, has helped reorganise the Taliban, create unlimited sources of funding from the sale of Afghan-grown opium and forged a new alliance linking the Taliban with extremist groups in Pakistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Iraq. Al-Qa'eda has facilitated a major exchange of fighters and training between the Taliban and the extremist groups in Iraq.

Iran is spending large sums out of its windfall oil income in buying support among disaffected and disillusioned Afghan warlords. The day America or Israel attacks Iran to destroy its nuclear programme, these Afghans will be unleashed on American and Nato forces in Afghanistan, opening a new front quite separate from the Taliban insurgency.

In Central Asia, the Western alliance is floundering. America lost its major military base in Central Asia after Uzbekistan kicked American forces out last year. Emboldened, tiny Kyrgyzstan is now demanding that Washington pay it 100 times more for the base it provides for American forces. Russia and China are working on making sure that America and Nato surrender all their remaining toeholds in Central Asia.

All this is a result of America, Britain and others taking their eye off the ball and circumventing the indisputable truth of 9/11: that the centre of global jihadism and the threat it poses the world still lies in this region, not in Iraq.

Yet in the past five years there has been no Western military presence in three of the four provinces in southern Afghanistan that constituted the Taliban heartland and today are the battleground for its revival. The promises of Western funding and reconstruction were never fulfilled; Pashtuns have seen barely any change in their lives and have reverted to cultivating opium as a means to survive. The vacuum in the south has been steadily filled by the Taliban.

Warlords, nominated as governors and police chiefs in the south by Kabul, indulged in drugs trafficking and abuses of the worst kind and went unchallenged for too long by the international community and Kabul. Meanwhile, Karzai's sensible offer of an amnesty to the Taliban in 2003 was never backed coherently by Western funding and support.

The Western alliance can still win in Afghanistan and root out terrorism, but only by means of a serious, aggressive and sustained commitment by its member countries. So far at least, that commitment is still not apparent.