

## British policy in Afghanistan is seriously damaging Western efforts against the Taliban, diplomats from allied countries have warned

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By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

Officials from the United States and European members of Nato have told The Daily Telegraph that Britain is increasingly at odds with its coalition partners over its policy of making arbitrary peace deals with the Taliban, while at the same time declining to put pressure on Pakistan to stop providing sanctuary to the Taliban leadership.

Diplomats in Kabul and Islamabad say Britain's "go it alone policies" are threatening military preparations for a major Taliban offensive expected next month.

Western officials have strongly criticised a peace deal in Musa Qala, Helmand, where thousands of British fought daily battles with a resurgent Taliban.

British commanders say the deal was struck with tribal elders, but it has been claimed that the agreement was actually made with the Taliban, who controlled the town. British officers deny the claim.

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The truce is now reported to be breaking down with large numbers of heavily-armed Taliban returning to Musa Qala.

Britain wants more such deals, but the US and some Nato allies have rejected the idea.

Lt Gen David Richards, the British commander of the 32,000-strong Nato force, will be replaced this year by Lt Gen Dan MacNeil, an American who is expected to cancel all such agreements, officials said.

"We're going to have to fight those people [Taliban]. I don't see any opportunity or need to negotiate," said Richard Boucher, the US assistant secretary of state, recently.

Europe's other contention is the relationship with Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president.

Nato is trying to forge a common front to put pressure on Mr Musharraf to end the sanctuary that elements within Pakistan's intelligence services provide to the Taliban.

The issue is of critical importance in the next few weeks as the Taliban are expected to recruit thousands of men and collect armaments and other supplies for their spring offensive.

But Britain has resisted such pressure. Tony Blair lavished praise on the president when he visited Islamabad in November.

The reason, say diplomats, is the co-operation between MI6 and Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) agency on Britain's domestic terrorist threat from British-born extremists of Pakistani origin.