

China inherits Obama's nightmare

De Zeit Security Times, published at the Munich summit of world leaders, February 6, 2015.

By Ahmed Rashid

As NATO withdraws from Afghanistan, the continuing terrorism emanating from there and Pakistan has become a security threat to China

By Ahmed Rashid.

Two weeks before Barack Obama took his first oath of office as president of the United States in January 2009, he said that the country giving him the most sleepless nights was Pakistan. Although nobody has asked Obama recently - and in between lie the collapse of Syria and Iraq, the rise of the Islamic State, Ebola, tensions with Russia, Boko Haram and terrorism in Europe, - he would probably still say that Pakistan continues to give him sleepless nights.

The multiple crises in Pakistan today - terrorism, the ineffective government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a belligerent but ineffective opposition, a dire economy, chronic shortages of gas and electricity, capital flight, mass migration and the military takeover of the effective reigns of foreign policy and some civilian institutions - all point to the continuing breakdown of the Pakistani state. Next door in neighboring Afghanistan where Pakistan's military has been deeply involved in backing the Taliban for the past 30 years, the situation is equally dire.

There is a huge question mark over whether newly elected President Ashraf Ghani can pull his country out of the quagmire that the Americans and NATO have left behind after they withdrew the bulk of their troops last year. The Taliban is on the offensive and the barely trained Afghan army is only just holding its ground. There is no productive, revenue-yielding economic activity; there is capital flight, no jobs and a huge increase in opium production.

However as the Munich summit convenes there could be the beginnings of a slight thaw in the long winter of insurgency, terrorism and state failure that has gripped Afghanistan and Pakistan since the early 1990s. In Pakistan the army has taken charge although it has, for the moment, not overthrown the government. The no-nonsense, anti-intellectual, soldier's soldier army chief General Raheel Sharif (no relation to the prime minister) has gone on the offensive against the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. He has promised to clean up all terrorist groups, regain lost territory and put an end to the good Taliban, bad Taliban syndrome that was the hallmark of the military's favoritism policy for years. (The good Taliban were those who killed US and Afghan troops rather than Pakistani soldiers.)

After the devastating attack on an army school in Peshawar in December that left nearly 150 children and teachers dead, the army demanded that the Nawaz Sharif who only a few months ago was advocating dialogue with the Taliban, clamp down hard. The death penalty has been reinstated and over 500 convicted terrorists could be hanged in the months ahead. On Jan. 7 after much cajoling and pressure from the military, parliament passed two bills amending the Constitution and the Army Act to try civilian terrorist suspects in military courts.

Past martial law regimes have used military courts to punish and intimidate politicians, which is why many members of parliament were extremely reluctant to obey the army's marching orders. For starters military courts will try some 3,400 suspected terrorists. The criminal justice system had broken down years earlier and there was no attempt by the judiciary to reform the ancient and next to useless state prosecution service or modernize the police investigation process. The judges were easily intimidated by the terrorists.

As a result the army has, according to Dawn newspaper, been secretly holding some 6,000 alleged terrorists in prison camps in the mountains, fearful that if they were presented to the courts the judges would let them off due to a lack of evidence. Moreover the government has been more concerned about the threat it faces from the non-cooperation campaign by opposition leader Imran Khan than the threat from terrorism or judicial failure.

The army has also taken over foreign policy, in particular dealings with the US, Afghanistan and India. Tensions with India are high, but the army appears to distrust any civilian leader to make peace with New Delhi. On Afghanistan the army is finally becoming more positive, demanding that once Ghani gets his house in order, the army will offer the possibility of direct talks between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban leaders who are all residing in Pakistan. What is abundantly clear is that the army is very much here to stay. The hard won battle for a semblance of democracy that has seen for the first time one elected government succeed another could be in jeopardy. Yet the army faces trouble ahead. Even though it is operating just under the radar, we can expect that civil-military relations will worsen, the Islamic parties will not play ball on any major counter terrorism policy, tensions will persist on control of foreign policy and the army itself could become part of the problem. The answer is for the civilians to deliver on state building, but that is unlikely given the lack of leadership amongst them.

Then there is the question of whether the army will go after not just the Pakistani Taliban in the northwest but the tens of thousands of militants in Punjab and Karachi that the army itself had trained and armed to fight India in Kashmir. Will the army help regulate some 8,000 madrassas or religious schools in the country, many of which recruit for terrorist groups? Will the awful curriculum of state schools and even the army's own training programs that teach hatred against non-Muslims also be changed? Essentially, General Sharif's message is: all in good time.

But he needs to move fast on several sensitive fronts. Just take a look at foreign policy. Pakistan is involved in shooting wars with three of its neighbors at present - India, Iran and Afghanistan - and it is hugely mistrusted by all regional countries for its past use of jihadists to pursue foreign policy aims, while giving shelter to jihadists from neighboring countries like the Afghan Taliban, the Iranian Jundullah group and Indian Kashmiris. Pakistan is also enormously mistrusted by the West, especially the US. The West remains deeply concerned about the long-term safety of Pakistan's over one hundred nuclear weapons and whether the extremism that has penetrated the military will be dealt with ruthlessly enough. Significantly most of those dozen or so terrorists who have already been hanged

were ex-armed forces personnel found guilty of taking part in terrorist attacks. It is too early to say whether General Sharif can take on what amounts to a total restructuring of the state, but at least he has had the courage to talk about extremism and the need to end it.

Equally dangerous for the entire region is the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which recently led to President Ghani suggesting that US forces stay on beyond 2016 when all US troops are scheduled to leave. He was met with a flat 'no' from the White House. The US declared formal combat to be over on Dec. 31, 2014. However according to US officials the country will remain an area of active hostilities for the time being as 10,600 US troops aided by another 2,000 Nato troops and some 45,000 contractors will continue training the Afghan army, launch special forces operations against terrorists and use drones to fire missiles at targets in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most Afghans do not believe US promises that it will continue funding and support for Afghanistan's economy and army.

The West has pledged \$4 billion a year for budget support and salaries and another \$4 billion a year for the Afghan military until 2017. There are serious doubts if the money will be delivered given the renewed recession in Europe and the new military commitments in the Middle East to deal with the Islamic State. Pakistani and Afghan officials are convinced that the US is quickly walking away from the region despite US statements to the contrary.

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are increasingly looking at China to come to the rescue. Ambassador Sun Yuxi, China's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan told me in November that, "we are ready to do more; we want to play a bigger role (in Afghanistan)." He went on: "We would welcome the Taliban in any neutral venue such as in China. We will make negotiations happen but the process must be Afghan owned and Afghan led." In December a Taliban delegation visited China for talks with Beijing at the same time as President Ghani was there.

The West hopes that China could broker a peaceful end to the civil war not least because it can put real pressure on its close ally Pakistan. China's interests in the region are multiple - the desire to tap into the mineral resources of Afghanistan, to help Pakistan build an economic corridor from the Gulf port of Gwadar to the Chinese border but above all to deal with terrorism. For years small numbers of Chinese Muslims or Uighurs from Xinjiang have studied and trained at madrassas in Pakistan and then honed battle skills fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now they are returning home either as members of the banned East Turkestan Islamic Movement or as militants linked to al-Qaeda.

The continuing terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan has become a national security threat to China so there is much more at stake now for China to help a peace process. Ultimately foreign powers can do little to stabilize volatile domestic crises which both Pakistan and Afghanistan are presently going through. The idea that nations have to be built from the bottom up, one step at a time and with honest and purposeful leaders has yet to penetrate the region. No amount of foreign pressure or money can save a nation from internal collapse if it is not willing to save itself. Q

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the bestselling book "Taliban" and a foreign policy expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Pakistani activists participate in a rally for the victims of the Peshawar school massacre, in southwest Pakistan's Quetta on Dec. 21, 2014. At least 141 people, mostly children, were killed by Taliban terrorists who attacked the army-run school in Pakistan's northwestern provincial capital of Peshawar on Dec. 16.

China inherits Obama's nightmare

As NATO withdraws from Afghanistan, the continuing terrorism emanating from there and Pakistan has become a security threat to China | By Ahmed Rashid

Two weeks before Barack Obama took his first oath of office as president of the United States in January 2009, he said that the country giving him the most sleepless nights was Pakistan. Although nobody has asked Obama recently – and in between lie the collapse of Syria and Iraq, the rise of the Islamic State, Ebola, tensions with Russia, Boko Haram and terrorism in Europe, – he would probably still say that Pakistan continues to give him sleepless nights.

The multiple crises in Pakistan today – terrorism, the ineffective government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a belligerent but ineffective opposition, a dire economy, chronic shortages of gas and electricity, capital flight, mass migration and the military take over of the effective reigns of foreign policy and some civilian institutions – all point to the continuing breakdown of the Pakistani state.

Next door in neighboring Afghanistan where Pakistan's military has been deeply involved in backing the Taliban for the past 30 years, the situation is equally dire. There is a huge question mark over whether newly elected President Ashraf Ghani can pull his country out of the quagmire that the Americans and NATO have left behind after they withdrew the bulk of their troops last year. The Taliban is on the offensive and the barely trained Afghan army is only just holding its ground. There is no productive, revenue-yielding economic activity, there is capital flight, no jobs and a huge increase in opium production.

However as the Munich summit convenes there could be the beginnings of a slight thaw in the long winter of insurgency, terrorism and state failure that has gripped Afghanistan and Pakistan since the early 1990s.

In Pakistan the army has taken charge although it has, for the moment, not overthrown the government. The no-nonsense,

anti-intellectual, soldier's soldier army chief General Raheel Sharif (no relation to the prime minister) has gone on the offensive against the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

He has promised to clean up all terrorist groups, regain lost territory and put an end to the good Taliban, bad Taliban syndrome that was the hallmark of the military's favoritism policy for years. (The good Taliban were those who killed US and Afghan troops rather than Pakistani soldiers.) After the devastating attack on an army school in Peshawar in December that left nearly 150 children and teachers dead, the army demanded that the Nawaz Sharif who only a few months ago was advocating dialogue with the Taliban, clamp down hard. The death penalty has been reinstated and over 500 convicted terrorists could be hanged in the months ahead.

On Jan. 7 after much cajoling and pressure from the military, parliament passed two bills amending the Constitution and the Army Act to try civilian terrorist suspects in military courts. Past martial law regimes have used military courts to punish and intimidate politicians, which is why many members of parliament were extremely reluctant to obey the army's marching orders. For starters military courts will try some 3,400 suspected terrorists. The criminal justice system had broken down years earlier and there was no attempt by the judiciary to reform the ancient and next to useless state prosecution service or modernize the police investigation process. The judges were easily intimidated by the terrorists.

As a result the army has, according to *Dawn* newspaper, been secretly holding some 6,000 alleged terrorists in prison

camp in the mountains, fearful that if they were presented to the courts the judges would let them off due to a lack of evidence. Moreover the government has been more concerned about the threat it faces from the non-cooperation campaign by opposition leader Imran Khan

“The Taliban is on the offensive and the barely trained Afghan army is only just holding its ground.”

than the threat from terrorism or judicial failure.

The army has also taken over foreign policy, in particular dealings with the US, Afghanistan and India. Tensions with India are high, but the army appears to distrust any civilian leader to make peace with New Delhi. On Afghanistan the army is finally becoming more positive, demanding that once Ghani gets his house in order, the army will offer the possibility of direct talks between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban leaders who are all residing in Pakistan.

What is abundantly clear is that the army is very much here to stay. The hard won battle for a semblance of democracy that has seen for the first time one elected government succeed another could be in jeopardy. Yet the army faces trouble ahead. Even though it is operating just under the radar, we can expect that civil-military relations will worsen, the Islamic parties will not play ball on any major counter terrorism policy, tensions will persist on control of foreign policy and the army itself could become part of the problem. The answer is for the civilians to deliver on state building, but

that is unlikely given the lack of leadership amongst them.

Then there is the question of whether the army will go after not just the Pakistani Taliban in the northwest but the tens of thousands of militants in Punjab and Karachi that the army itself had trained and armed to fight

India in Kashmir. Will the army help regulate some 8,000 madrassas or religious schools in the country, many of which recruit for terrorist groups? Will the awful curriculum of state schools and even the army's own training programs that teach hatred

against non-Muslims also be changed?

Essentially, General Sharif's message is: all in good time. But he needs to move fast on several sensitive fronts. Just take a look at foreign policy. Pakistan is involved in shooting wars with three of its neighbors at present – India, Iran and Afghanistan – and it is hugely mistrusted by all regional countries for its past use of jihadists to pursue foreign policy aims, while giving shelter to jihadists from neighboring countries like the Afghan Taliban, the Iranian Jundullah group and Indian Kashmiris.

Pakistan is also enormously mistrusted by the West, especially the US. The West remains deeply concerned about the long-term safety of Pakistan's over one hundred nuclear weapons and whether the extremism that has penetrated the military will be dealt with ruthlessly enough. Significantly most of those dozen or so terrorists who have already been hanged were ex-armed forces personnel found guilty of taking part in terrorist attacks. It is too early to

say whether General Sharif can take on what amounts to a total restructuring of the state, but at least he has had the courage to talk about extremism and the need to end it.

Equally dangerous for the entire region is the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which recently led to President Ghani suggesting that US forces stay on beyond 2016 when all US troops are scheduled to leave. He was met with a flat 'no' from the White House. The US declared formal combat to be over on Dec. 31, 2014.

However according to US officials the country will remain an area of active hostilities for the time being as 10,600 US troops aided by another 2,000 Nato troops and some 45,000 contractors will continue training the Afghan army, launch special forces operations against terrorists and use drones to fire missiles at targets in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Most Afghans do not believe US promises that it will continue funding and support for Afghanistan's economy and army. The West has pledged \$4 billion a year for budget support and salaries

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are increasingly looking at China to come to the rescue. Ambassador Sun Yuxi, China's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan told me in November that, "we are ready to do more, we want to play a bigger role (in Afghanistan)." He went on: "We would welcome the Taliban in any neutral venue such as in China. We will make negotiations happen but the process must be Afghan owned and Afghan led." In December a Taliban delegation visited China for talks with Beijing at the same time as President Ghani was there.

The West hopes that China could broker a peaceful end to the civil war not least because it can put real pressure on its close ally Pakistan. China's interests in the region are multiple – the desire to tap into the mineral resources of Afghanistan, to help Pakistan build an economic corridor from the Gulf port of Gwadar to the Chinese border but above all to deal with terrorism.

For years small numbers of Chinese Muslims or Uighurs from Xinjiang have studied and trained at madrassas in Pakistan and then honed battle skills fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now they are returning home either as members of the banned East Turkestan Islamic Movement or as militants linked to al-Qaeda. The continuing terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan has become a national security threat to China so there is much more at stake now for China to help a peace process.

Ultimately foreign powers can do little to stabilize volatile domestic crises which both Pakistan and Afghanistan are presently going through. The idea that nations have to be built from the bottom up, one step at a time and with honest and purposeful leaders has yet to penetrate the region. No amount of foreign pressure or money can save a nation from internal collapse if it is not willing to save itself. ■

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the bestselling book "Taliban" and a foreign policy expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

PRIVATE

