

A Path Paved With Pitfalls

The United States is building up a formidable coalition to take on Saudi terrorist leader Osama bin Laden and his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan, but behind the sabre-rattling and heavily charged statements, the problems Washington faces are only just beginning

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

Most defence experts believe the ruling Taliban is likely to be swept out of power quickly. But Washington's military strategy, complicated by Afghanistan's rugged terrain and the probable guerrilla tactics of the Taliban's forces, must be matched with an intensive political strategy to build a coalition of anti-Taliban Afghan groups and to establish a new government in Afghanistan, even as the war goes on.

Try as it might, Washington continues to face a difficult time convincing Muslims that its war against terrorism is not aimed at Islam in general. In this regard, two key obstacles to an assault on Afghanistan all but melted away when the United Arab Emirates on September 22 and Saudi Arabia on September 25 withdrew diplomatic recognition of the Taliban, leaving Pakistan as the only country maintaining ties with the radical Islamic regime. How that may affect Islamic radicals' professed hatred and suspicion of the U.S. remains to be seen.

But in any case, credibility will be a major problem for new rulers. For the moment, the U.S. appears to be hedging its bets, working with military opponents of the Taliban and talking to the exiled former king, Zahir Shah.

Only a new government accepted by the international community and regional states-in an area fraught with rivalries between major powers will be able to ensure that terrorist groups from more than a dozen countries, stretching from the Middle East through China to Southeast Asia, do not continue hiding out in Afghanistan. That new government must also deal with the humanitarian crisis now unfolding in the country and help to restore regional stability.

The news about the UAE and Saudi Arabia came as Washington was getting regional nations and rivals firmly on side, military forces were building up around the Indian Ocean, Central Asian airbases were being prepared for use by the Americans and contact was being established with the Afghan opposition inside and outside the country.

President George W. Bush, in a landmark address to Congress on September 20, had warned that the Taliban would also be targeted if they refused to hand over bin Laden and his followers, whom the U.S. leader accused of being behind the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States that left thousands dead. They've chosen to ignore him.

U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice went further three days later. Describing the Taliban as "a repressive and terrible regime," she said "the Afghan people would be better off without it-we will see what means are at our disposal to do that."

U.S. intelligence officials are using the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan to coordinate intelligence gathering and offer support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, also known as the United Front-military arm of the exiled Afghan government recognized by the United Nations-which on September 20 began a major offensive in three provinces of northern Afghanistan.

The United Front is attempting to capture the north's largest city, Mazar-e-Sharif, whose airport could offer U.S. forces a bridgehead inside the country. Turkey, Iran and Russia have announced that they are stepping up military aid to the United Front. Turkey backs the Uzbek component of the alliance led by Gen. Rashid Dostum, who told Turkey's Sabah newspaper on September 22: "We are ready to give the U.S. help in the region." Meanwhile the government-in-exile's Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah has offered 15,000 of his largely Tajik troops to the U.S. coalition.

The normally fractious front's four main factions are coordinating closely despite the recent assassination of charismatic military commander Ahmad Shah Masud, apparently by bin Laden agents posing as journalists. Masud's successor, Gen. Muhammed Fahim, controls some 20,000 largely Tajik troops in the northeast of Afghanistan and in a small pocket north of Kabul. In the north, Dostum has an estimated 3,000-5,000 troops, while Shia Muslim Hazaras in central Afghanistan are trying to retake Bamiyan, and in the west a small force under legendary anti-Soviet commander Ismail Khan is trying to capture Herat.

The anti-Taliban military alliance could provide invaluable assistance in northern, central and western Afghanistan to the U.S.-led forces, who will be loath to deploy a large ground force in Afghanistan for fear of stirring up a groundswell of anti-American feeling. But the front would likely not be so successful in the Taliban heartland in the south, and might not be acceptable politically as the core of a new government.

The United Front largely gathers fighters from ethnic groups on the fringes of Afghanistan, such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, but has little influence among the dominant Pashtun ethnic group in the south and east.

Afghanistan's rulers, including the Taliban and the last ruling royal family, have traditionally come from the Sunni Muslim Pashtun, who would be more acceptable to Taliban moderates and Pakistan, which vehemently opposes the front.

Zahir Shah offers an alternative pillar of opposition and, ultimately, reconciliation. The former king has stepped up efforts from his exile home in Rome to summon a traditional loya jirga, or tribal council, of all Afghans in a bid to form a new government and rally support against the Taliban. Washington and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are expected to endorse the process at a meeting in Brussels in late September.

The last king can also count on the support of dozens of Pashtun former mujahideen guerrilla commanders such as Abdul Haq, who said in Rome on September 24 that he was heading to Pakistan to organize a coordinated assault on the Taliban with opposition groups. "Former mujahideen commanders are ready to go into Afghanistan and hundreds of Taliban are ready to defect the moment the king gives an order for a national uprising," says tribal leader Hamid Kirzai, who is involved in the loya jirga process.

Zahir Shah hinted as much in radio broadcasts to the Afghan people on September 19, saying that "effective and immediate measures . . . for the liberation of our homeland and people" were being prepared. On September 23, U.S., European Union and United Nations diplomats began hectic consultations with him in Rome.

The United Front has pledged loyalty to the loya jirga process, but closer unity is needed for it to move toward the appointment of a post-Taliban government. "The U.S. must work with two focal points of Afghan politics, the United Front and the loya jirga process," says Barnett Rubin, an Afghanistan expert at New York University.

The U.S.-led coalition will also need the help of the Afghan opposition to help it win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people by preventing a massive humanitarian crisis. UN aid workers say that after more than two decades of strife, Afghanistan was already facing a disaster. An attack will simply make it worse. "They have got to separate the Taliban from the Afghan people," says Pakistani defence analyst Ikram Seghal, adding: "It is the Afghan people who are going to give them succour."

Huge outflow

UN refugee officials expect an outflow of 1.5 million Afghans to Pakistan and Iran once the U.S. offensive begins. "We are facing a humanitarian catastrophe," says UN High Commissioner for Refugees official Yusuf Hassan in Islamabad. The UN's World Food Programme, which normally feeds some 3 million Afghans inside the country, says it has only 2-3 weeks of food stocks left and no hope of sending in more. "There are pre-famine conditions, people are eating grass and animal fodder," says WFP official Khaled Mansour.

To prevent a flood of refugees into neighbouring states, areas liberated by anti-Taliban forces could be turned into safe havens for the population, with the help of air cover and food supplies from U.S. forces. "The American forces cannot just come in, do their job and go," says Kirzai of the loya jirga process. "The international community has to help us build a new Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, preparations for an assault are well under way. The U.S. has deployed four aircraft-carrier battle groups, some 500 fighter aircraft and an unspecified number of troops, marines and special forces to the region.

B-52 and B-1 heavy bombers are being based on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, which will be the main logistics centre for U.S. military operations.

Britain has deployed 18 warships, 50 aircraft and 20,000 troops to the Gulf region, while unconfirmed media reports say German and French special forces are also involved. Pakistan has provided three small airfields close to the Afghan border, along with its ports and logistics facilities, for use by coalition forces.

Nato member Turkey has opened its bases for U.S. forces, while Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are providing airbases, with Russia's unprecedented blessing, for U.S. special forces and attack helicopters, though neither government has admitted to it for fear of retaliation from the pro-Taliban Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Russia has been nervous about allowing U.S. forces into its backyard, but it is also keen to eliminate the Taliban and the IMU. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are already part of Nato's Partnership for Peace programme, which provides for security cooperation between the Western military alliance and countries that once were under the Soviet orbit, and recently held exercises with U.S. special forces, who are also training their armies.

Washington is also launching a diplomatic offensive to win over Muslim nations in the region, including Iran. British Foreign Minister Jack Straw held talks with his Iranian counterpart Kamal Kharrazi in Teheran on September 25 to that end.

But Kharrazi, who had earlier said Iran would cooperate in the fight against terrorism as part of an international effort under UN auspices, warned against "rash, hasty action" that would lead to insoluble problems. Initial victory may come easily, but that could just be the start of a long series of escalating problems with mutually exclusive solutions.

David Lague in Islamabad contributed to this article