

Afghanistan - Include Afghans In Fight Against Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

The total war being planned in the White House against Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan's Taliban will dramatically reshape the political contours of Central and South Asia. Instead of merely dealing with the threat of terrorism, the magnitude of the U.S. response to the attacks in New York and Washington could destabilize the region and create even more serious problems. The risks are huge, but so are the potential benefits. The outcome will depend more on Washington's political strategy than on its fire power.

For Pakistan, the potential rewards are great. Its military could de-link itself from Islamic fundamentalists and the growing culture of jihad, or holy war. It could rebuild its ties with the West, improve relations with India and ask that a major portion of its \$38 billion international debt be written off. But if the U.S. military offensive is drawn out and Washington lacks an overarching strategic vision for the region, Pakistan could unravel. Islamic militants would take to the streets, the already wobbly economy could fall and the army splinter into rival factions. The risk-reward equation is no less dramatic for Central Asian republics. A U.S. military success would rid these countries of the militant Islamic opposition movements that are based in Afghanistan. They could then concentrate on improving their economies and instituting democratic reforms. Or they could dissolve into even more authoritarian and repressive states if the U.S. fails.

As for Afghanistan, a U.S.-led alliance could help construct a new government that would bring peace after more than 20 years of war. Or it could re-create the warlordism that dominated the country in the 1990s and cleared the way for Taliban rule, setting in motion a new flood of Afghan refugees that would offer terrorists fresh recruits for their operations.

The key to success will be Washington's commitment to remain engaged in the region, in general, and in Afghanistan, in particular, once the shooting is over. As the threat of a U.S. attack mounts, Bin Laden and Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, along with the Arab and Afghan hard-liners around them, will be increasingly isolated. The Taliban, which is dominated by the Pushtun ethnic group from southern and eastern Afghanistan, are deeply factionalized. Its moderate leaders have already sent their families to Pakistan for safety reasons. They are also making contacts with anti-Taliban forces. Many of these leaders will desert if they see a credible anti-Taliban Pushtun alternative backed by U.S. forces.

The strongest opposition group on the ground at present is the United Front. But it is largely composed of Afghanistan's minority ethnic groups--Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens and Hazaras--and its base of support is in northern Afghanistan, not the critical south. It is therefore critical that the U.S.-led alliance back a Pushtun uprising against the Taliban.

Commanders and supporters of Mohammed Zahir Shah, who was deposed as king in 1973 and now lives in Rome in exile, want to do just that by creating a national resistance composed of the United Front, other Afghan factions and representatives of Afghan civil society. Since November 1999, Shah has been calling for a loya jirga , or grand tribal council, to be held in Afghanistan. Such a council is the only legitimate authority that can form a new government and attract broad support. Many Taliban have privately supported the formation of a loya jirga , but they have been unwilling to confront their hard-line colleagues. But with U.S. military action imminent and the collapse of the Taliban regime near, these Taliban dissidents are now directly approaching potential members of such a council.

These Afghan forces must be given a role in U.S. military strategy. Afghanistan's mountains and deserts will prove difficult terrain for U.S. soldiers, especially since the Taliban-Arab forces are likely to break up into small, highly mobile guerrilla groups. There are few obvious targets in the country, and the continued presence of U.S. forces could spark a backlash by the fiercely nationalistic Afghans. Accordingly, Washington would be wise not to use ground troops to invade or occupy even a small part of Afghan territory. U.S. special forces could operate out of an airbase inside Afghanistan for a limited time, but airstrikes against cities, or occupying them, would be hazardous and useless.

Enter the anti-Taliban forces under U.S. air cover. The Taliban need to know that there are Afghan forces on the ground to whom they can defect, not the Americans. And as the anti-Taliban forces take territory and cities, U.S. forces will need to provide humanitarian aid and air protection to the liberated populations.

By supporting the loya jirga peace process and encouraging all anti-Taliban Afghan factions to join it, the United States could help establish a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan that would enjoy the support of all the country's ethnic groups. But for that to happen, the U.S. would have to stay committed in the region and enter into dialogue with Afghanistan's neighbors, including Iran, with which the U.S. has no diplomatic relations. It should also pledge at least \$1 billion toward a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan. Managed by designated international agencies, money from this reconstruction fund would be disbursed when all the anti-Taliban factions agreed to form a national unity government and comply with U.N. resolutions calling for the surrender of all terrorists in Afghanistan.

In short, the United States has to construct a global alliance not just to make war against terrorists, but also to make peace after the terrorist networks are destroyed. Washington cannot do this alone, of course. It needs the support of the United Nations and, in particular, its special representative to Afghanistan. Previous U.N. efforts have been stymied by the obduracy of Afghani factions and by Afghanistan's neighbors, particularly Pakistan. But a major cause of failure has been the lack of support from the international community, particularly the U.S.

Americans, angry at the mounting casualties caused by the attacks on New York and Washington, want instant and overwhelming retaliation against the terrorists. They may also be angry at the enormous wave of anti-Americanism now sweeping through the Muslim world. That can only change if the American people insist that their government remain engaged in the region to build a real peace in Afghanistan, which would put the United States on the side of the people who now protest its very existence.