

The Taliban - First, The War

A new Bush policy aims at the Taliban, though the final target is still

Osama bin Laden

Far Eastern Economic Review- 26/07/2001

By Ahmed Rashid/Washington

Since last year the United States government has been building an international alliance to strangle the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan, eliminate the threat of resident terrorist Osama bin Laden and put pressure on Pakistan to halt support for the Taliban. It is an alliance that, according to an official of the U.S. National Security Council, "starts from Afghanistan's neighbours and extends to the Group of Eight, Nato, the European Union, East Asia and the Middle East."

To followers of affairs in the region, this may sound like more hot air from Washington. But as the administration of President George W. Bush concludes a much-anticipated review of policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, the contours of a significantly different Afghan policy appear to be taking shape. Contrary to the former Clinton administration, which made catching bin Laden and crippling his organization the centrepiece of its Afghan policy, the Bush administration is targeting the Taliban and the small extremist clique that surrounds leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. Senior U.S. officials now view the Taliban's removal from power as a pre-requisite to catching bin Laden and to ending the civil war in Afghanistan.

Some U.S. officials complain that Clinton, by publicizing the campaign against bin Laden, made him even stronger, an international hero fighting a heroic battle against America.

This is not to say that the U.S. has surrendered in its fight against the Saudi terrorist. On July 19, Washington issued its third warning in three months that terrorist groups sponsored by bin Laden may attack American targets in the Persian Gulf. On the same day, foreign ministers at the G-8 meeting in Genoa urged the Taliban to close down terrorist-training camps and, in a clear message to Pakistani leaders in Islamabad, urged those countries "having influence on the Taliban to act responsibly." Moreover, by disabling the Taliban, the U.S. would get at bin Laden directly: Afghan tribal leaders are convinced that bin Laden plays a key role in shaping Taliban foreign policy. Some U.S. officials agree.

"Non-Afghans including Arab and Pakistani Islamicists are now part of the Taliban's decision-making process," says a U.S. counter-terrorism official. "We cannot accept that."

undermining the taliban The contours of the new U.S. policy are likely to include restoring the military balance in Afghanistan by encouraging Russia, Iran and India to step up military supplies to Ahmad Shah Masud's anti-Taliban alliance (though Washington is unlikely to get involved in arms supplies itself); supporting anti-Taliban elements among the Pashtuns, the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan; and encouraging greater cooperation between Masud and former Afghan King Zahir Shah, who heads a peace process from exile in Rome, while galvanizing Zahir Shah's so-far-dormant efforts. The U.S., already the largest donor of humanitarian aid, will step up support to address the desperate refugee crisis in the country.

The Taliban, who presently control some 80% of the country, are mainly Pashtuns. Several Pashtun commanders from the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union in the 1980s are now actively trying to promote a Pashtun revolt against the Taliban. Prominent amongst them is Abdul Haq. He has recently met with U.S. officials and congressmen, Masud, Zahir Shah and others. Although Haq is supported by private U.S. citizens, covert support from Washington is unlikely until he can show his support amongst Pashtun tribal chiefs and former commanders.

However, Pakistan's continuing support of the Taliban remains the most sensitive and critical issue for the international community. In a new report on arms supplies to all the Afghan factions, Human Rights Watch concluded that Pakistan was continuing to provide arms and ammunition to the Taliban despite UN Security Council sanctions. Pakistan denies the charges. "We are fully complying with UN sanctions," says Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar.

U.S. officials told Sattar during his visit to Washington in late June that there is "a growing body of evidence that Pakistan is breaking the sanctions." But, said a U.S. official, "we don't want to confront Pakistan but we can't improve relations with it until it changes its Afghan policy." In calling for a comprehensive embargo on arms and other military assistance to all warring factions in Afghanistan, the Human Rights Watch report also criticized support by Russia, Iran and other countries for Masud's anti-Taliban coalition.