

Divide Afghanistan at your peril

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By Ahmed Rashid

Over the past 32 years, Afghans have fought a series of wars to keep their country together. For all the machinations of great powers and neighbouring states, no Afghan warlord or leader has ever succumbed to outside pressure for partition.

The war in Afghanistan just got more complicated with the release of secret military files by the Wikileaks website - a big embarrassment to the US, Nato and Pakistan. Yet despite their damaging content, the leaks should not distract from some powerful positive elements that have helped Afghanistan to survive in the past.

Afghanistan has been a nation state since 1761 - a good deal longer than four of its immediate neighbours (Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). Even though Afghanistan has suffered severe internal wars and coups, falling victim to the entire gambit of 20th-century ideologies, the country and its people have shown remarkable resilience.

The latest attempt to suggest partition comes from an American, Robert Blackwill, a former official in the Bush administration and former US ambassador to India. Mr Blackwill wrote recently in the FT that as the US cannot win the current war in Afghanistan, it should consider a de facto partition of the country, handing over the Pashtun south to the Taliban and propping up the north and west where Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras live. Such a partition, he writes "is now the best that can realistically and responsibly be achieved".

Really?

Not a single Afghan will ever support such a demand. In 1988-89, as the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, the KGB tried hard to convince the Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum to create a buffer state to protect Soviet central Asia from the Mujaheddeen. Gen Dostum described to me how he gruffly refused.

In the 1980s, and again in the 1990s, Iran tried to persuade its Shia and Hazara protégées to create a Shia corridor linking western and central Afghanistan with Iran. Afghan leaders turned Iran down. In the mid-1990s some of Tajikistan's leaders tried, and failed, to persuade the Afghan Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Massoud to build a Greater Tajikistan.

In 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul but initially failed to take the north, Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) suggested that the Pashtun group create their own state in the south. The Taliban refused, despite their dependence on the ISI.

Twenty years ago, Gen Dostum told me that the first Afghan who suggests partition would have his throat slit. Before the attacks of September 11 2001, Taliban leaders told me the same thing. The same holds true today.

The first thing to note is that Afghanistan's ethnic mix is extremely complex, with millions of Pashtuns living in the north amidst the Uzbeks and Tajiks. Likewise, the south has its fair share of non-Pashtuns. Partition could lead to worse horrors than witnessed at India's division in 1947. Mr Blackwill blithely writes that "small islands of non-Pashtuns in the south and east would be an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence".

Moreover, abandoning the south would betray those Pashtuns who have resisted the Taliban. Partition would relegate the Pashtuns to pariah status, ignored and forgotten except when the US finds it necessary - as Mr Blackwill suggests it sometimes will - to send in the drones.

Such a policy would seriously undermine Afghanistan by fuelling inter-ethnic war. It would endanger Pakistan, encouraging some of the 40m Pashtuns in Pakistan to link up with their 15m Afghan Pashtun brothers and forge an extremist ethnic state that gives refuge to terrorists.

The tragedy of the Bush administration was that for too long after September 11 all Pashtuns were treated as the enemy, and the south and east of Afghanistan became a free-fire zone for US forces. Only recently, under President Barack Obama, has there been a decisive attempt by the US and Nato to woo the Pashtuns and also to strengthen those Pashtun tribes, peoples and women who have been resisting the Taliban all this time.

In Pakistan, several thousand moderate Pashtuns have been gunned down by the Pakistani Taliban. They too need to be bolstered and supported as the Pakistan army is now, finally, belatedly trying to do.

Afghans and Pakistanis have seen the bloody results of 20th-century partitions - not only in India but also Korea, Vietnam, Germany, Yugoslavia, even Pakistan, with the separation of East Pakistan in 1971. To play around now with the borders of a region beset with extremism, terrorism and ethnic conflict would be to throw a match on a ready-made bonfire.

Yes, the situation in Afghanistan is critical, the war against the Taliban is being lost and western forces want to pull out soon. However, the only solution is dialogue between the genuine Taliban leadership, Kabul and Washington for a power-sharing deal at both the centre and in the provinces.

Mr Obama needs to move quickly. The region cannot wait for his December policy review or General David Petraeus's attempts to inflict defeat on the Taliban before talking to them. The US and Nato must open talks with the Taliban now, forge a regional consensus among Afghanistan's neighbours for such talks, provide Afghanistan with a long-term nation-building commitment, and slowly transfer power to the Afghan army and police. Talk of partition should be relegated to the dustbin of history.

The writer's book, *Taliban*, has just been updated and reissued on the 10th anniversary of its publication