

How the US can talk turkey with the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

The New York public relations companies that the US and Nato hired in Afghanistan to carry out psychological warfare against the enemy have finally delivered. Last month, a well-managed series of leaks and press statements seemed at last to signal a breakthrough in talks between the Taliban and the government of President Hamid Karzai.

Representatives from the two sides met in Kabul for the first time after Nato facilitated the arrival of Taliban representatives from the south. The publicity has sowed confusion in the Taliban rank-and-file, surprised Pakistan and Iran, and even recast the king of military surges, US commander General David Petraeus, as a potential peacemonger.

This could be a turning point. While the western media have been focusing on the revelation that Mr Karzai has received bags of cash from Iran - an admission that has further undermined his reputation in the US and Europe - the Kabul meeting has signalled a critical new reality: that the west can fight and talk at the same time.

We should remember such secret Karzai-Taliban "talks about talks" have been ongoing for over two years with little success. But until now, Mr Karzai's efforts to talk to the Taliban have been shunned by US commanders. The signal to the Afghan leader now is that the US military will give him the space to continue negotiating.

So how should this be developed? The provision of safe passage is a confidence-building measure between the Taliban and Kabul that should be rapidly expanded. Other such measures could include a safe haven inside or outside Afghanistan where talks can continue, ceasefires in selected districts to guarantee aid deliveries, or an agreement with the Taliban to stop targeting aid workers and Afghan officials in exchange for an end to attacks by US special forces on their leaders.

Western officials have to understand - as many now do - that peace will have to be built layer upon layer, district by district, group by group. The Taliban do not have a political agenda in the western sense that can be discussed and whittled down. Broking peace will not come in a grand conference in some European palace but through talks between multiple mediators and the various Taliban factions.

This will, of course, be a drawn-out and dangerous process, constantly threatened by spoilers. But more successful confidence-building measures between the Taliban and Mr Karzai could persuade President Barack Obama to accept the need for direct talks. That is what the Taliban want and such a move would be fully supported by Washington's European allies and many Americans.

A straw in the wind was Iran's attendance at a meeting last month in Rome where 40 countries discussed Afghanistan. The US and Nato have long signalled they are willing to put aside larger differences with Iran in pursuit of an Afghan peace. The unpredictable Iranian regime may finally be responding.

Now more pressure needs to be applied to Pakistan whose prime minister, Yusuf Raza Gilani, publicly said he was piqued that his government was not involved in setting up the Kabul meeting. Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) have given sanctuary to the Taliban since 2001. The ISI expects countries that want to talk to the Taliban to come via Islamabad. In the past Taliban leaders who tried to talk secretly to Mr Karzai without ISI clearance have been detained.

Somehow the ISI has to be persuaded to make a paradigm shift and start trying to facilitate a settlement rather than monopolising the terms for one. That would be in Pakistan's favour, as it would help overcome the massive distrust it faces internationally.

It will not, of course, be easy to persuade Pakistan to overturn its previous strategy and offer ideas on how to build a regional agreement to support the talks. Nor will it be easy to persuade it and its bitter rival India to separate their Afghan differences from their larger disputes. But Mr Obama will have to push for this on his visit to India this week as he builds on the policy shift over talking to the enemy, for real progress will come when the US commits to negotiate directly with its opponents. War is too complicated a business to be left to the generals - even Gen Petraeus.

*The writer's latest book is **Descent into Chaos**. A revised edition of his **Taliban** was published this summer.*