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It is time to rethink the west's Afghan strategy

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By Ahmed Rashid

The departure of General Stanley McChrystal as commander of the US and Nato mission in Afghanistan must usher in a review of what is a failing military strategy. At the same time, President Barack Obama's officials must demonstrate greater unity in dealing with America's allies and developing its approach. The appointment of General David Petraeus comes at a critical moment – when the crisis in Afghanistan is affecting the west's ability to project a comprehensive united foreign policy stance.

Much has been made of President Hamid Karzai's erratic and self-serving style of ruling, especially given last year's rigged presidential election and the corruption and poor governance of which he is often accused.

What is less well known is the dysfunctional nature of Mr Obama's team. Since they were appointed, the senior officials who decide US policy in the region have been at loggerheads. The White House has failed to consult Richard Holbrooke, the state department's special representative to the region. In Kabul, Gen McChrystal and retired General Karl Eikenberry, the US ambassador, have at times barely been on speaking terms. In turn, Gen Eikenberry and Ann Patterson, the US ambassador to Pakistan, have had sharp differences with Mr Holbrooke.

In the Pentagon, there have been acute differences between the generals on policy and policy towards Afghanistan's and Pakistan's civilian leaders. The burning issue below the surface has been the generals' reluctance to accept Mr Obama's time-line – the start of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011. As one US military officer told me: "You don't fight an insurgency by the clock."

The underlying differences are well-known to Afghan and Pakistani leaders, who have tried to exploit them. They are equally familiar to Nato officials, who wonder why Mr Obama has not resolved them earlier. The need to put a lid on this simmering cauldron saw Mr Obama frame Wednesday's sacking as a test case for civilian leadership over the military. He delivered tough messages emphasising to the military the need for it to come fully under civilian authority and to his diplomats and officials that they needed to end the disarray in their ranks.

Some of these disagreements go back to the 2008 US election rivalry between Mr Obama's aides and those of his rival for the Democratic nomination, Hillary Clinton, now secretary of state. The apparent lack of control has demoralised America's allies, who are having a hard enough time keeping their publics on side.

The real crisis, however, is that the US-Nato strategy in southern Afghanistan has barely made a dent in the Taliban's resistance, which is spreading across the country. Nato's offensive in Marjah, in Helmand, is five months old and still has not secured the area. The anticipated surge to secure Kandahar province has been postponed due to the Taliban's penetration of the region. Seventy-nine Nato soldiers have been killed in June so far – the highest monthly figure since the war began.

Mr Karzai wants to talk to the Taliban not fight them. The Europeans have also been urging the Americans to start negotiations, so a political solution can be found before the start of the drawdown. But Mr Obama's aides insist the Taliban must first be dealt a military blow.

That may not be possible, so a political strategy must now be paramount. The Taliban leadership has let it be known it wants to talk to the Americans. Many Afghans also want Washington's participation in the talks, so the US can be a fire-break, ensuring Mr Karzai does not make too many concessions, and preventing neighbours such as Pakistan from imposing conditions upon Kabul.

The military strategy must be subservient to this new political process. Instead of going for the hardest killing fields first – Kandahar and Helmand – US and Nato forces should focus on more achievable objectives, such as

governance and economic development.

The first priority should be securing the roads linking major cities, and linking cities to the frontiers. Even the critical Kabul-Kandahar highway is littered with checkpoints run by corrupt police, criminal gangs, warlords and Taliban groups, making it unsafe for travel by Afghans. Clearing key roads will bring security to trade, providing an economic boost and reducing corruption.

Next, the provinces around Kabul should be cleared of the Taliban, so aid agencies can operate. US resources to expand economic and agricultural development could then be spent.

The Taliban are not numerous in these provinces but they terrorise a population that is largely pro-government. Moreover, the still weak Afghan army and police could be better used to secure these areas, because many of their recruits come from these same provinces. The same process can then be repeated in the eastern provinces, and in the north. These areas are more pro-government than the south, where the Taliban has reigned untouched since 2002.

In the south, Nato forces should conduct a holding operation preventing Taliban expansion, eliminating its leadership, blocking supply routes from Pakistan and trying to alienate it from locals.

Gen McChrystal's counter-insurgency strategy no doubt reaped dividends such as reducing casualties and winning hearts and minds. But a military strategy rooted in political dialogue, and which takes on easier goals first, is more likely to gain support from the Afghans and regional countries, and enable western troops to stay longer if necessary. The alternative is a deeper chaos.

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