

It's time for Plan B in Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Next week Gen David Petraeus, the US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, is expected to begin a public relations blitz to sell and explain the Afghan war.

He has said very little since he took charge in July but over the coming weeks he will talk about the mission to a global audience in a series of interviews with journalists in America and Europe.

It will not be easy to defend such a complex conflict, with its many facets, particularly since opinion polls across the western world are showing unprecedented public demand for their troops to be withdrawn.

But it is critically important that the West does not just walk away from Afghanistan now. To do so would ensure an expansion of the Taliban and al Qa'eda, plunging the country and the region into chaos and extremism. The insurgency has spread throughout Afghanistan and neighbouring states fear that similar neo-Taliban violence will engulf Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics.

This week the United Nations released a report which said civilians casualties were rising in Afghanistan and blamed the Taliban and their allies for a 31 per cent increase in violence in the first half of this year compared with the same period in 2009. The Taliban, said the UN, were responsible for 76 per cent of the 1,271 deaths.

Although Nato has reduced the number of Afghans being killed by imposing new restrictions on air strikes, Gen Petraeus will be under pressure to cut the numbers still further or risk losing support for his strategy.

The signs are not good.

On July 27, 114 members of the US Congress voted against a bill to provide an additional US\$39 billion (Dh143bn) to finance operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Last year, only 32 Democrats opposed a similar mid-term bill, but this time 102 Democrats were joined by a dozen Republicans - the strongest indication yet of how the mood against the Afghan war has changed. Just a few months before November's critical mid-term elections, the chances of Barack Obama retaining control of Congress look bleaker than ever.

In several European parliaments the mood is much the same. Opposition parties, parliaments and the media in Britain, Germany, Spain and Scandinavia have virtually written off the war in Afghanistan as a lost cause.

It is not too late to turn the tide but to do so America and Nato must revise their thinking.

Reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban should be the first priority - and the Americans need to talk directly to the Taliban as well. Until now, a US-led military policy has prevailed over political demands in Afghanistan, but what is needed immediately is a political plan to which the military becomes subservient.

Gen Petraeus still supports the previous strategy of first smashing the Taliban before reconciliation talks can start. But this will not work even if he is given another year. No matter what advances Nato forces make in the Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the next six months, any successes are not even remotely sustainable for a longer period considering that the Afghan army, police and administration have still to show up and take charge. These institutions are simply not ready to do so.

Throughout June and July, record numbers of western troops were killed and no democratic government can sustain such losses for long. Some senior American military officers now understand that the war cannot be won on the battlefield. Mr Obama's December policy review should be brought forward to begin as soon as possible.

The US military should secure Kandahar but abandon the upcoming offensive in the city's surrounding areas and stop targeting the Taliban leaders once peace talks begin. They should not allow any further expansion of the Taliban presence in Kandahar province but at the same time should try not to occupy any more Taliban positions. Essentially this means keeping the status quo as peace talks get under way.

The Taliban leaders based in Pakistan have let it be known that they want to talk face to face with the Americans. Ordinary Afghans want Washington's direct participation in any peace talks so that the US acts as a kind of guarantor to ensure that Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, does not make too many concessions and also to prevent neighbours such as Pakistan and Iran imposing their own conditions at the expense of Afghanistan. Once talks start they will have a hugely positive impact in the region.

There is a new US dynamic with Pakistan as for the first time Washington has earmarked \$1.5 billion in economic aid for civil society, in addition to \$2 billion in military aid. The US has initiated a long-awaited strategic dialogue with Pakistan which covers both security and development. Some \$55 million in US aid has now been earmarked for Pakistan's flood victims.

American pressure and military aid has resulted in Pakistan's army seriously going after the Pakistani Taliban for the first time since their eruption six years ago. That campaign is only 15 months old and the army has taken more than 1,000 casualties. It still refuses to go after the Afghan Taliban leaders living on its soil and it seems unlikely it will do so; the Pakistan army has used the Afghan Taliban as a strategic asset for regaining influence in Afghanistan.

However, after years of mutual distrust, Mr Karzai and Pakistani leaders, including Gen Ahmad Shuja Pasha, the Inter-Services Intelligence chief, have been talking and trying to forge a common strategy.

In the past, Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, has been a major destabilising influence in Afghanistan, for which army chief Gen Ashfaq Kiyani, who served as ISI chief from 2004 to 2007 and has just received an extension as army chief for the next three years, must bear some of the responsibility.

It is still too soon to say if the situation has changed. With Pakistan facing multiple crises, Gen Kiyani may now want Mr Karzai and the Americans to talk to the Taliban and end the war in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Instead of going for the hardest killing fields first - Kandahar and Helmand - US military forces should focus their attention on more achievable objectives, providing security to a majority of Afghans, strengthening governance and encouraging economic development.

The first obvious need is to clear and secure the ring road that links all of Afghanistan's major cities and those cities to its frontiers. Rebuilt at considerable cost by the international community after 2001, hundreds of miles of the road are today controlled by the Taliban. Even the critical Kabul-Kandahar leg is littered with checkpoints run by corrupt police, criminal gangs, warlords and Taliban groups.

Clearing the ring road will open up safe travel and trade to the millions of people who live beside it, providing an economic boost to the country and reducing the massive corruption that permeates the delivery of supplies to Nato bases around the country.

Next, the provinces around Kabul should be cleared of Taliban so that aid agencies can once again operate in the vicinity of the capital and major US resources committed to economic and agricultural development can actually be spent. For the past 18 months aid agencies have not allowed their expatriate staff to stray outside the capital.

The Taliban are not numerous in these provinces but still they terrorise a population that is largely pro-government. The weak Afghan army and police could be better used to secure and hold these areas because many of their recruits come from these same provinces.

The northern and eastern provinces would need to be cleared of Taliban next. This region is more pro-government than the south, where the Taliban have reigned supreme and untouched since 2002. In the south, US forces should conduct a holding operation preventing Taliban expansion and blocking supply routes from Pakistan. At the same time US Special Forces should stop targeting Taliban commanders so they become more

amenable for talks.

Blame for present failures should be apportioned correctly. For eight years, the administration of George W Bush ignored Mr Karzai's weaknesses, disregarded Pakistan's support to the Taliban, allowed Afghan-Pakistani tensions to escalate and, critically, never provided enough US troops or money to get the job done when the Taliban insurgency was a mere trickle.

By contrast, in the past 18 months the Obama administration has seriously tried to turn around the region. In Afghanistan the US is reducing and correcting the corrupt contracting systems, providing more oversight over aid money and allowing 50 per cent of it to go through the Afghan government. A new US military policy to reintegrate Taliban fighters and conduct a better counter-insurgency with fewer civilian casualties is in place.

But there is no reliable partner on the ground. Mr Karzai's erratic and self-serving style of ruling, especially since the rigged presidential election fiasco last year, coupled with corruption, poor governance and lack of progress in development, has only increased public anger at his government.

The entire region and European allies are now waiting for Mr Obama to make a critical decision - a game-changer - and that is to open talks with the Taliban.

A military strategy that is rooted in political dialogue and takes on easier goals first is more likely to gain support from the Afghans, regional countries and the international public and allow western troops to stay longer if necessary. The old strategy can work no longer and, if it is pursued indefinitely, there will be an ever deepening and widening chaos across the region.

Ahmed Rashid's most recent book is *Descent Into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. His best-selling *Taliban* has just been updated and reissued on the 10th anniversary of its publication.