

Madam secretary, only 'talk' can save Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

A string of recent international conferences on Afghanistan and the region have failed to make any headway. With [Pakistan's decision to boycott the Bonn conference](#) this week, building an international consensus has become even more difficult - and this at a time when there is a risk of an unstoppable meltdown of order in Afghanistan and the region.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton recently defined US policy as "talk, fight, build". But that is already redundant. To get anywhere in this highly dangerous environment the strategy should be "talk, talk and more talk".

Unfortunately, there are clear and ever-widening differences between the state department, which wants to negotiate with the Taliban, and the Pentagon and CIA, which want to fight them until the last US soldier leaves Afghanistan - a policy that is silently rejected by most Nato states and regional countries and has plunged Afghan policy into much greater uncertainty. (Blaming the Taliban for not conceding more at the table is unfair when US policy is so unclear as to the future.)

At the heart of the crisis is the Taliban demand that US Special Forces stop the [night raids that have deeply antagonised Afghans](#), even as Pakistan demands an end to the CIA's secretive drone campaign in its border regions. Both the Taliban campaign of assassinations of key Afghan government figures and Pakistan's support for the Taliban are retaliation for these US policies. A US night raid near Pakistan's border [killed 24 Pakistani soldiers](#) and led to the present crisis between Islamabad and Washington.

The anti-American uproar in Pakistan, which follows a year of incidents undermining trust between the two countries, partly reflects genuine anger. But it has also been stoked by the all-powerful military. They want a role in talks with the Taliban, which the Americans are unwilling to concede.

To be clear, the US and Nato have been poorly prepared for the Afghan endgame, which now involves a complex battle for influence between the Taliban, the government and ethnic warlords, and an equally intense clandestine battle for influence by Afghanistan's six neighbours, especially Pakistan.

So, a decade after its predecessor, which set up the interim Afghan government, the Bonn conference has to address a host of problems. In particular, President Hamid Karzai is at odds with the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and their leaders over a range of issues, in particular their opposition to talks with the Taliban. Inter-ethnic rivalries are at their worst since 2001.

Mr Karzai has also antagonised the Afghan parliament and the wider political opposition, which includes the majority Pashtuns. They boycotted a recent loya jirga, or tribal council, he called and will boycott Bonn.

Equally pressing is the economic crisis. The recession in the west fuels doubt that money will be forthcoming in the future. The US has spent an inordinate amount of money on building up the Afghan forces, but nothing like the same funds on the civil service, the judiciary or on health and education. And it is still unknown whether the Afghan army can operate without US backing.

Then there is the problem of the constitution. Mr Karzai's term in office ends in 2014 and already there are demands from all ethnic groups to reopen the constitution, to change it from a presidential to a parliamentary

form of government and devolve power to the provinces.

If, and this is a big if, talks with the Taliban do succeed and there is agreement on power sharing, it is likely that the Taliban too will demand constitutional changes. These demands come from important segments of all ethnic groups and need to be addressed by the government and the foreign powers before they leave. Failure to do so could lead to civil war.

As for the secret talks between the Taliban and the Americans, they have continued even after the [assassination of a key Afghan interlocutor, Burhanuddin Rabbani](#), in September. But neither Mr Karzai, nor the Taliban nor Pakistan know how serious the Americans are about talks. Meanwhile, the Americans have big doubts about how serious the Taliban are about a negotiated settlement. As an added complication, against the backdrop of the latest US-Pakistan fracas, the Pakistan military will for now hold back Taliban leaders from talking to the Americans. The failure to secure neighbours' co-operation is weighing heavily on Afghans.

In the midst of the economic crisis, Afghanistan's problems may appear minor. But history is clear that the world neglects the region at its peril - and that is what we are doing now.

The writer's latest book is ['Descent into Chaos'](#)