

Obama must keep his eye on the Afghan exit

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By Ahmed Rashid

Another fraudulent election; a banking crisis that involves the president's family; unstoppable corruption; a war still in big trouble; and disarray in the west's continued commitment to that war - all but the blind can see that Afghanistan is not going well for the US and Nato.

The Nato summit in November and the Obama administration's policy review in December must tackle these facts in a realistic manner rather than covering them with an "all is well" message. We now know, thanks to Bob Woodward's new book *Obama's Wars*, that the US president had no instinct for a surge in US troops when he made his last policy review in December. Barack Obama wanted to get out of Afghanistan as fast as he could, but the US military outmanoeuvred him on his own turf in the White House.

That may happen again as US generals are already setting down markers two months before the next policy review, demanding an extension of the surge for another 12-18 months. That may be too much to bear for the US Congress and many of the 47 countries with troops in Afghanistan. In the past year, violent incidents have risen by 50 per cent, the Taliban have spread to the north and west of the country and the battle for control of the Taliban-dominated Pashtun south and east gets bloodier by the day. The Nato offensive in Kandahar province, ongoing since March, still has to show positive results.

The formula for General David Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy is "clear, hold, build and transfer". The last part is the most important because it presumes that US forces will hand over territory and towns, responsibility and governance, piece by piece to the Afghans. But will that transfer ever be possible in the critical Pashtun belt where 80 per cent of the Taliban come from?

The real long-term crisis for the west is the Afghan army's lack of readiness to take charge come next year when western troops start withdrawing. No doubt the numbers will be there - the Nato-trained Afghan army has reached its goal of 134,000 - although we know by now how illiterate, hashish-smoking and prone to desertions many soldiers are. Nato will expand Afghan numbers even further. By the end of this year, there will be 150,000 troops and 100,000 police - and they will be better trained.

Although 80 per cent of Afghan army units are now partnered with Nato units, nobody claims that any single Afghan unit is ready to take responsibility on its own. Afghan forces are in command in Kabul but that is partly because there is a sizeable western presence there. Moreover, when there is so little Afghan governance and administrative presence in outlying districts, what can Afghan forces actually achieve? The training of an Afghan civil service is even more behind, and corruption is endemic at every level.

The major disability of the Afghan army is its lack of a traditional, hardcore Pashtun officer corps and Pashtun soldiers recruited from the southern provinces. History is important here. I was a witness in the 1980s when the 100,000-strong Afghan army broke up twice and was rebuilt three times.

The first collapse came after the Soviet invasion in 1979-80 when soldiers deserted or joined the Mujahideen. The second break-down occurred in 1992 when the Afghan communist regime fell apart and the army disintegrated.

The conscription-based Afghan army was rebuilt three times, first by the Soviets in 1981-82 with massive outlays of money, equipment and training, then partially again in 1987-89 when the army had suffered heavy casualties and demoralisation due to Mujahideen successes. The third time was President Mohammed Najibullah's masterful restructuring after the Soviets left in 1989, when he enlisted tribal militias and warlords into the army and, as a result, hung on to power for another three years.

At each rebuilding there was always a core group of Pashtun officers from the Ghilzai Pashtun tribes of eastern Afghanistan, in particular from the three provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika that make up the region called Greater Paktia.

These were often Soviet-trained and educated, but they were dedicated, diehard Afghan and Pashtun nationalists, who had served the kings of Afghanistan since the 19th-century. They saved Afghanistan's fragile communist regime numerous times by inspiring troops to fight what they termed a "foreign-backed invasion" by the Mujahideen based in Pakistan.

Today, there is no such Pashtun officer class in the army and the preponderance of senior officers are non-Pashtuns who fought the Taliban in the 1990s. Sending army units with Hazara and Tajik officers to the Pashtun areas to fight alongside Americans makes for a double "occupation" for many Pashtuns - first by the foreigners and then by their ethnic rivals.

Greater Paktia is today dominated by Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Taliban and al-Qaeda ally whose network terrorises the Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan. As long as Mr Haqqani thrives, no Greater Paktia officer corps can be created. (That is one reason why the Pakistani military have given Mr Haqqani sanctuary - there will never be a strong Afghan army without a strong Pashtun Greater Paktia officer corps.)

Simultaneously, the US and Nato have dismally failed to recruit soldiers from the Durrani Pashtun tribes that dominate the Taliban south in the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul. That is not surprising when, from 2001-2005, the US ignored southern Afghanistan and allowed the Taliban to retake charge.

Today, Nato is careful to try to strike an ethnic and geographical balance in the Afghan army's recruitment patterns. Pashtuns are being recruited, but these are Pashtuns from marginal provinces - from the wrong tribes and from the wrong places.

These are compelling reasons why the west - unless it is prepared to countenance another five to 10 years in Afghanistan - needs to start negotiations with the Taliban. The first thing Mr Obama needs to do when he starts his policy review is to push aside the military pundits and base his decisions on realities on the ground rather than hyped-up hopes and targets.

The writer's latest book is *Descent into Chaos*. A revised, 10th anniversary edition of his best seller, *Taliban*, has just been published

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