

Once again US Afghan policy is hobbled by divisions

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Much has rightly been made of the audacious attack on Kabul last week by a group of heavily armed Taliban insurgents, which was clearly aimed at sabotaging peace talks between the Taliban, the Americans and the Afghan government. Rather less attention however has been given to the other pressing issues threatening the talks - the deep divisions within President Barack Obama's administration over their future, and his apparent failure to exercise control over his officials.

Last week's 20-hour siege followed August's attack on the British Council in Kabul, and showed once again that the Taliban can now penetrate Kabul's "green zone" with ease. In retaliation US Special Forces now mount up to a dozen raids every night, killing and capturing Taliban and civilians in what are often hit-or-miss operations, fuelling Afghan public anger at the Americans.

In these circumstances European governments and the majority of Americans want a speedy troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. But it is not only hardline American generals like David Petraeus, the former commander in Afghanistan, who now heads the CIA, who are dragging their feet. Senior US diplomats are doing so as well. "The Taliban needs to feel more pain before you get to a real readiness to reconcile them," said Ryan Crocker, the prestigious new US ambassador to Kabul who arrived in June.

In a blistering interview with the Wall Street Journal he also said the conflict should continue until more of the Taliban are killed. With such statements he riles Nato and US officials by openly undermining the drive to hold talks.

Gen Petraeus was well known for wanting to continue to fight the Taliban until well into next year, even as Nato troops are being pulled out. Whether his views will carry weight in the more sceptical CIA still has to be seen. However European officials - and some US ones - describe Mr Crocker as the spokesman for a new cabal in the US administration who want to delay talks with the Taliban for the time being and reduce the insurgency first, by killing as many as possible.

"What Crocker is saying is totally destructive to what we have agreed upon," says one senior European official. "His language humiliates the Taliban which is not the way to bring them to the table," says another. European officials are deeply concerned that the attempted dialogue will stall in the wake of such comments.

The ambassador's statements are reducing the chances that the Taliban will go ahead with their plan to open an office in Qatar, as was expected to happen as the next step towards an agreement. Moreover his fiery statements are exactly what the Taliban irreconcilables want to hear, because they sabotage negotiations that representatives of the mainstream Taliban faction may be having with Kabul and Washington.

"Crocker's hardline comments play into the hands of the hardline Taliban who want the talks sabotaged anyway," says the first European official. What is clearly missing is leadership. The State Department team, led by Marc Grossman, has been engaged for some months in talking to the Taliban, but senior officials including even Mr Obama and secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, appear to be doing nothing to discipline their officials. Mr Obama rarely talks about Afghanistan and he barely mentioned it at the tenth anniversary commemorations of the 9/11 attacks in New York last week.

Yet both Mr Obama and Ms Clinton have publicly and vociferously supported the need for talks with the Taliban. Reconciliation is the official name of the new US strategy. Beset as he is by domestic difficulties, in particular on the economy, Mr Obama needs to become more proactive on Afghanistan and seek to drive forward the talks rather than merely to be a “back stop” for them.

Ironically the “hardliners” in Washington have no support from traditional Republicans who want the US troops to come home. There is no presidential candidate among the Republicans who wants to prolong the war. In Europe every government wants a quick exit for its troops. European officials meanwhile fulminate at what they see as chaos in Washington where foreign policy appears to be set by an ambassador - while a president cannot decide which side to back.

The writer is author of Descent into Chaos and The Taliban