

Afghan-Pakistani doubts over Obama plan

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By Ahmed Rashid.

US President Barack Obama declared a clear-cut strategy with a three-pronged focus when he outlined his plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, he has given his generals only 18 months to implement the plan before US troops start pulling out of Afghanistan, and an improvement in such a short space of time will be difficult to achieve, writes guest columnist Ahmed Rashid in Lahore.

"There are three core elements of our strategy - a military effort to create the conditions for a transition, a civilian surge that reinforces positive action, and an effective partnership with Pakistan," Mr Obama said.

The 30,000 US troops, enhanced by another 5,000 to 10,000 Nato troops, will arrive early next year in Afghanistan and stay until July 2011, when some US forces will start withdrawing after handing over to the Afghan security forces

Mr Obama has given Gen Stanley McCrystal, the US and Nato commander in Kabul, more or less the numbers he wanted to beat back the Taliban from major population centres.

However, Mr Obama has given the general only 18 months to do the job - a Herculean if not impossible task when one considers the gains the Taliban have made in the past few years, and the feeble state of the Afghan government and army.

"Many Afghans and Pakistanis will doubt Mr Obama's promise of a long-term commitment to Pakistan and Afghanistan post-2011"

What Mr Obama could have said - instead of offering a date certain for withdrawal - was that in parallel with an improvement on the battlefield, a better performance by the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and greater co-operation from Pakistan, US forces could start withdrawing from 2011.

Instead, the US president has presumed that the situation will manifestly improve in the next 18 months - something that few in the region believe can happen.

Illiterate ANA

America's hopes rest on the Afghan National Army (ANA), which today numbers some 90,000 soldiers, taking charge.

However, after eight years not a single brigade is self-sufficient or combat-ready. The only charge the ANA has is of Kabul city, where thousands of Western troops are available for back-up.

Some 70% of current ANA recruits are illiterate and cannot read the simplest orders or be tasked with anything remotely sophisticated. The 93,000 police recruits are in even worse shape.

The US civilian surge will depend on how effective President Hamid Karzai's government will be in partnering international development aid.

After a fraudulent election, the dismal performance of the previous Karzai-led government and the short timeframe now available, it may be difficult to make Mr Karzai into an effective partner in the next 18 months.

Moreover, the Taliban may well be thinking that Mr Obama has given them just one more full fighting season -

the spring and summer of 2010 - before the Americans start withdrawing. They may calculate to sit it out, keep their powder dry and try to capture power once the Americans start to leave.

Unfortunately, many Afghans and Pakistanis will doubt Mr Obama's promise of a long-term commitment to Pakistan and Afghanistan post-2011.

After all, the Americans have made similar commitments several times to both countries before - and instead people will only read the cut-out date.

Mr Obama's speech was short on detail.

There was no mention of what strategy the new US troops would implement - and no mention of the regional strategy, much promoted in Mr Obama's March speech, which would bring together Afghanistan's neighbours into a compact to help stabilise Afghanistan.

There was little on to what degree the US would help in development and rebuilding, while there was a marked silence on any mention of nation-building.

And even though British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has loudly proclaimed a list of benchmarks that the West would set for the Afghan government to fulfil, there was no mention of it by Mr Obama.

Pakistani headache

Mr Obama clearly spelt out to the Pakistanis that "a safe haven for those high-level terrorists, whose location is known, and whose intentions are clear, cannot be tolerated".

This is a tough statement that will be echoed in European capitals in coming days, and Pakistan's attempts to fudge this issue are clearly no longer acceptable or believable.

One key factor in prolonging the Taliban insurgency has been the attitude of the Pakistan military, which is accused of allowing the Taliban sanctuary in the border regions of Pakistan-Afghanistan since 2002.

Does it suit the interests of some in Pakistan to abandon the Afghan Taliban now, when the worst-case scenario for Islamabad could be a future civil war in Afghanistan and massive border unrest for Pakistan?

The answer is presently unclear, even to the Americans.

Mr Obama is trying to change the strategic calculations for the Pakistan military by promising a package of desperately needed aid and development for Islamabad and a long-term commitment for Pakistan's security.

On the other hand, there is also a package of unstated threats.

The key to changing the Pakistan military's attitude is if the US is willing to bring pressure to bear on India to restart the stalled dialogue with Pakistan and ease tensions between the two arch-enemies.

When Mr Obama took office less than a year ago, there were only 32,000 US troops in Afghanistan. By next spring there will be 100,000.

Those troops will have to eliminate al-Qaeda, degrade the Taliban, stand up the ANA and police, provide the space and security for development and delivery of services to the Afghan people - and then get out.

It's a tall order and it may not all be achievable within the given time frame.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the best-selling book Taliban and, most recently, of Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.