

## Petraeus's Baby by Ahmed Rashid

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The surprising and speedy crash of General Stanley McChrystal has been seen in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the wider region as just one more sign of the mess that the US and its NATO allies face in what is looking increasingly like an unwinnable conflict.

The Afghan Taliban are describing the general's sacking as a military victory—coming as it does at the height of their summer offensive; the most hurtful rumor going around Kabul and Islamabad is that McChrystal wanted to be removed because he didn't want to have to take responsibility for a losing war. The Taliban claimed another victory when Britain announced a week later that its troops would withdraw from Sangin, a remote and ever more deadly region of Helmand province in southern Afghanistan—although they will be replaced by US marines. Out of a deployment of 9,000 troops, Britain has lost 312 soldiers in Helmand since 2005—of which some 100 have been killed in Sangin alone.

All of which has heightened anxieties that the US commitment to Afghanistan is rapidly flagging. In Kabul, there is a sense of growing panic about President Obama's looming deadline for the start of a US withdrawal—now less than a year away. Pakistan, meanwhile, is contending with the increasingly real possibility of a gradual meltdown of its own, with the army and the political elite unable to challenge the rising power of the Pakistani Taliban or protect the civilian population.

Over the past six weeks, 125 US and NATO soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan, a new record for the conflict. On July 11 alone, six US soldiers, 14 Afghan policemen, and 15 civilians were killed in separate incidents; the policemen were killed when their posts in northern Afghanistan—until now relatively peaceful—were overrun by Taliban, who have been emboldened to extend their attacks to Kunduz and Badakhshan provinces in the north and Herat in the west.

In Pakistan, during that same six-week span, a series of suicide bombings and killings in widely different parts of the country have left nearly 800 casualties and demoralized the public. On July 9, 103 people, among them many women and children, were killed and another 115 wounded in two suicide bombings in the tribal areas close to the Afghan border. This followed a devastating twin bombing a few days earlier in Lahore at the shrine of Data Ganj Baksh, the most famous Sufi saint in the region, that left 35 people dead and injured hundreds. That attack, in turn, came only a few weeks after another Lahore bombing of two mosques belonging to the Ahmadi sect, in which 95 people were massacred.

In these and other attacks, it has become clear that the Pakistani Taliban have turned their guns from killing soldiers and police to mowing down minority sects and moderate Muslims. They are making a desperate bid to spark multiple sectarian wars between Muslims and non-Muslims, Shias and Sunnis, and amongst the Sunni sects, with the aim of overthrowing the state and establishing an Islamic emirate. Inter-religious wars, as medieval Europe knew well, know no boundaries, limits, or humanity.

At the other end of Pakistan, meanwhile, in the sprawling port-city of Karachi, five to ten people are being gunned down every day in political, ethnic, sectarian, and mafia killings. Nobody, least of all the police, seems to understand what is driving this wave of violence—which seems to have a logic apart from the extremist attacks in the tribal areas and the northern cities of Islamabad and Lahore—but it is fueling ever deepening pessimism and anger among the city's residents.

This summer of violence comes at a time when the governments in both Kabul and Islamabad are looking particularly weak—besieged by their political enemies and rivals, beset by corruption scandals, helpless in the face of severe inflation and economic crises, and incapacitated by internal squabbles. President Asif Zardari is still hamstrung by his rival Nawaz Sharif, an obstreperous judiciary, and an army that runs his foreign policy without necessarily informing him. President Karzai's domestic reputation and failures are too well known to

bear another recounting.

Karzai now has to make friends with the new US commander General David Petraeus, no easy task amid the Taliban's summer offensive, when day-to-day fatalities, rather than strategic thinking, preoccupy minds. Petraeus will have to make a judgment call soon about whether the concentration of forces in the Taliban heartland in Kandahar and Helmand is actually working or whether a new strategy is needed. It looks more than likely that Obama will quietly initiate a policy review well before he is scheduled to do so in December.

Petraeus faces another potentially destabilizing crisis. In September, 2,500 men and women will contest parliamentary elections for seats in the 249-member lower house of parliament. The huge amount of fraud and violence during last year's presidential elections, which seriously undermined the credibility of Karzai, the US and the United Nations could very well be repeated as Karzai is determined to have a more pliant parliament.

If the international community once again fails to condemn any fraud that occurs, it will be seen by Afghans as another Western betrayal and by the Taliban as a victory. Democracy cannot be built on repeated fraudulent elections that are tacitly condoned by the US and NATO. Kandahar and Helmand will remain in the hands of the Taliban and those fence-sitting Afghan farmers will finally jump down into their arms.

Apart from the Afghan government's well known corruption, reports that over US \$4 billion have left the country via the airport in Kabul—much of it money siphoned off by US contractors, aid workers or drug lords—hardly creates hope that the US Congress or the European parliament will dish out more cash for an economy that is still unmade and fails to deliver goods or services to the people (recent Pentagon talk of some \$1 trillion of potential Afghan mineral wealth notwithstanding).

In Pakistan the military has failed to adequately confront the threat posed by the Pakistani Taliban, and instead makes excuses about why it cannot carry out operations in North Waziristan or Punjab. In fact the army and its Interservices Intelligence (ISI) is presently obsessed, not with domestic security, but with trying to outwit the Afghans, NATO and particularly the Americans in trying to broker a peace deal between Karzai and the Taliban.

For starters the ISI is trying to get Karzai to strike a deal with the worst of the neo-Taliban—the murderous groups run by Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, who have been strongly backed by the ISI since 2001 and are loathed by the Afghan population. At the same time the ISI is trying to mould the mainstream Afghan Taliban—through arrests, pressure, and blackmail—into a body that will be loyal to its interests in negotiations with Karzai, which means making sure that India's presence in Afghanistan is eliminated or at least drastically reduced.

The ISI knows it is holding more cards than any of the other regional powers—Russia, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and there is little they can do about its interference in Afghanistan for the moment. Still, most of these countries would not tolerate an ISI-Taliban dominated government in Kabul, and eventually they will gang up against Pakistan, creating still more turmoil in the region.

Moreover it is highly unlikely that the ISI will ever be able to control the Taliban. It failed to control the outcome of the fall of Kabul in 1992 or the rise of the Taliban in 1994, and it lost all control of the Taliban just before September 11. If the ISI were to only set its sights a little lower, moderate its views and ambitions and genuinely help Karzai—for example by letting the Afghans strike a deal that above all suits Afghanistan's interests rather than Pakistan's—then it would be doing Pakistan a much greater service.

The Obama administration, including the CIA and the Pentagon, appears to be at a loss for how to deal with these problems while fighting the Taliban, propping up Karzai, being nice to Pakistan's army and keeping its European allies and Congress on board. Afghanistan is now Petraeus's baby and whether he is able to deal with this spreading conflagration will largely determine the future of the region and the US role there.

***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.***

