

Rival Aims Hinder War On Terror.

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

A complex three way game between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan is undermining the war on terror and hindering nation and democracy building, writes journalist Ahmed Rashid in his latest guest column for the BBC News website.

The shooting down by the Taleban of a Chinook transport helicopter packed with US Special Forces close to the border with Pakistan has once again raised the spectre of increased three way tensions between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States. At least 16 Americans were killed in what was the largest loss of American lives in Afghanistan since the defeat of the Taleban in 2001.

Many Afghan and some senior American officials insist that the resurgent Taleban are finding sanctuary and support from elements in Pakistan. The diplomatic tensions are not surprising. It's been the bloodiest summer in Afghanistan for four years.

And other pressures have been piling up on Islamabad after comments by US Vice President Dick Cheney and CIA Chief Porter Goss that they know where Osama Bin Laden is and that he is not in Afghanistan.

Both seem to be saying that Bin Laden is in Pakistan. While Afghan leaders feel vindicated by such comments and have stepped up their criticism of Islamabad, Pakistan has taken acute umbrage.

On 21 June President George W Bush telephoned President Pervez Musharraf and urged him to talk to President Karzai to stave off a worsening diplomatic crisis between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The bout of telephone diplomacy temporarily cooled down the war of words but tensions have continued to simmer.

The reality is that a complex three way game between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan has gone on since 11 September. It has been dominated by their ruling elites' self-interest veiled as national interest, rather than any alliance against terrorism.

The tug of war between their conflicting interests continues to hamper joint efforts to combat terrorism and provide a serious commitment to furthering nation and democracy building.

For President Bush the priority has been capturing Bin Laden and other senior al- Qaeda leaders, overriding concerns about nation building in Afghanistan or carrying out a strategic plan to prevent a Taleban resurgence.

For the first two years after the defeat of the Taleban the US committed hopelessly meagre resources to rebuilding Afghanistan and had few intentions to re-establish state institutions such as the army and police, preferring to rely on warlords to keep the peace.

Even the US priority of capturing Bin Laden became secondary as military manpower and surveillance facilities were shifted from Afghanistan to the war in Iraq.

Although US priorities have now changed for the better in Afghanistan, the legacy of its past policy failures are visible in rampant drugs production, a strengthened Taleban and growing anti-Americanism amongst ordinary Afghans due to the lack of benefits provided to them.

Mr Karzai has resented past US strategy as he has viewed the major threats to Afghanistan and his own political survival as emanating from a resurgent Taleban backed by Pakistan and Afghanistan's warlords.

For him the actual threat posed by al-Qaeda was minimal. Mr Karzai also considered the war in Iraq as extremely dangerous for Afghanistan's future because it provided a major and unnecessary diversion of the West's resources and commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan.

For Mr Karzai the real war on Islamic militancy is still based on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, not in Iraq as President Bush believes. However due to his indecisiveness Mr Karzai never pushed the envelope with the Americans to see the realities on the ground. Moreover his overweening dependence on the Americans has angered conservatives at home and his neighbours.

Rather than use US clout to build a regional alliance with his neighbours and persuade them to stop interfering in Afghanistan, he signed a strategic partnership pact with Bush in May just as tens of thousands of Afghans were demonstrating against the US for its treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo.

The timing was awful and the pact could have waited until the US role in Guantanamo, Iraq and even Afghanistan was less controversial. American frustration with Mr Karzai rests on his failure to build an organized political base for himself, despite the success of last year's presidential elections.

Now he goes into the parliamentary elections in September without a political party, a national platform or a clear ideology. By blaming Pakistan for his problems he takes the heat off his own political shortcomings. Pakistan's military regime has certainly - despite diplomatic denials - provided sanctuary and support to the Taliban since they retreated into Pakistan after their defeat in 2001.

Gen Musharraf has played a determined double game with the Americans convinced that this is in the army's interest. Islamabad knows its alliance with the US is short term, predicated on the war on terror - as long as it lasts. Washington's real interest is in building up rival India as a bulwark in the region - something the Pakistani military is desperate to delay if not scuttle.

Thus the military feels it has every reason to keep the Americans bogged down in Afghanistan by sustaining the Taliban, while keeping Washington on side by helping hunt down al-Qaeda.

Pakistan has only moved against al-Qaeda after enormous American pressure has been applied. Although the military has lost over 500 troops in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) hunting down the Arab and Central Asian components of al-Qaeda, it has not moved at all in Balochistan province where the Taliban have re-established themselves.

Nor has the military suppressed those Pakistani extremist groups fighting for the Taliban or in Kashmir. It is also in the military's self-interest to keep Bin Laden alive and on the run, even if it does not do so deliberately.

The army's political alliance at home is with the Islamic parties who rule the NWFP and Balochistan and have been avid supporters of the Taliban since the 1990s. By interfering as little as possible with their support to the Taliban, Musharraf ensures his own political survival and he assuages Islamist officers in the army that he is no stooge to the Americans.

This political game has gone on for far too long and had led to Islamic militancy thriving in the region. In order to defeat militancy all three players have to create better mechanisms of levelling with each other - discussing their priorities, their concerns and perceived national interest. As long as the players pull in different directions - the Taliban and al-Qaeda will thrive.