

## Viewpoint; The US Must Choose To Talk Or Fight The Taliban.

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If the US is to see a clear way out it must reach a deal with the Taliban, military leaders say.

As the question of a promised pull-out of US troops from Afghanistan brews like a storm on the horizon, the US needs to decide if it is to talk to the Taliban or fight them, says guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

Despite mounting criticism from Republicans, Congress and some world leaders, President Barack Obama is holding firm to his deadline of July 2011 as the start date for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

With the battle against the Taliban becoming bloodier by the day and the prospects for victory uncertain, many are confounded by US plans - including Afghan President Hamid Karzai, most Afghans, Afghanistan's six neighbours and other powers in the region.

With growing anti-war feeling in countries like the US and Britain, many Afghans fear that an over-hasty withdrawal by Western forces could lead to the collapse of the Kabul government, prompting renewed inter-ethnic conflict in Afghanistan - and even civil war.

For some time now, Mr Karzai's mantra has been to talk to the Taliban.

Only a negotiated settlement and power-sharing, he argues, can end the war, allow Western forces to leave in good order and bring peace to the region.

The problem is that the Taliban, who have held indirect negotiations with Mr Karzai for more than a year, want to talk directly to the Americans.

So far the US has refused to budge.

### 'Reintegration'

Nato, which has more than 40,000 non-US troops in Afghanistan alongside 100,000 Americans, is also desperately keen for negotiations but is waiting for Washington.

The US supports and helps fund "reintegration", or the bringing in of low-level Taliban commanders and fighters, and their resettlement.

However, it still does not fully support "reconciliation" - talking to the Taliban leaders, who are mostly believed to be living in Pakistan.

Moreover, the US says it wants to demolish the power of the Taliban first through its offensives in the Taliban heartland of Helmand and Kandahar provinces before any talks with the insurgent leaders.

General Sir David Richards, the head of the British Army, reflected the views of many in Nato when he told me that Nato and UK troops could not be in Afghanistan indefinitely, and it was logical to talk to the Taliban.

"It is possible to fight and talk at the same time and negotiations should start soon," he said.

Significantly, in recent weeks Washington has changed its mantra from "no talks with the Taliban" leaders to "support for Karzai's efforts to negotiate with the Taliban".

That is a major step forward, but unless the US gets involved itself, the Taliban will not take its talks with

Kabul seriously. The risks of a renewed civil war in Afghanistan may increase.

## **Family Enterprise**

Here is why.

Nato generals in Kabul speak of several levels of engagement and negotiation that an Afghan settlement will need, and Mr Karzai is not in a position to carry out even half of them.

Firstly, Mr Karzai has made talking to the Taliban a family enterprise - using his brothers and cousins, rather than putting together a multi-ethnic team of Afghans to do the talking.

To many Afghans, it looks like the Karzai family is trying to strike a personal deal rather than a national deal with the Taliban.

Thus, many Pashtuns - the major ethnic group which includes both Mr Karzai and the Taliban - are opposed to talks because it excludes their tribes, and Mr Karzai has done little to woo them.

## **Confidence**

The minority Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras are vehemently against any deal with the Taliban.

The death toll is placing pressure on the politicians

The divide inside the country has widened among the Pashtuns and also between the non-Pashtun north and the Pashtun south.

For Afghans, only the involvement of the US and Nato in talking to the Taliban would give some confidence that everyone's interests would be taken care of.

Even more complex are the demands of Afghanistan's neighbours who all want to make sure that their proxies dominate the next government in Kabul.

Afghans consider the most danger as emanating from Pakistan, which is accused of housing the Taliban leadership since 2001.

The Pakistan army wants to see a settlement that brings the Taliban back to Kabul in a power-sharing deal, reduces the influence of its enemy India and gives Pakistan a friendly Afghan government.

After Pakistan's army chief Gen Ashfaq Kiyani laid out Pakistan's terms to Karzai in March, Mr Karzai has tilted heavily towards Pakistan but gained little in return.

Mr Karzai has carried out secret negotiations with the army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which first wants him to reconcile with the neo-Taliban groups led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani - the very groups the US wants kept out.

Mr Karzai sacked his own intelligence chief, Amrullah Saleh, who was opposed to concessions to the ISI.

## **'Game'**

However, Mr Karzai has got nothing in return.

Now he is deeply frustrated with the ISI's refusal to extradite to Kabul senior Taliban leaders it is holding.

Then there are the other regional players such as Iran, Russia, the Central Asian republics, Saudi Arabia and India who in varying degrees would generally prefer not to see the Taliban back in power.

So far only China is supporting the Pakistani position.

US Vice-President Joe Biden on a recent visit to Iraq urged Afghan leaders to "get in the game", step up to take responsibility and accept that the US would be eventually leaving Afghanistan.

"We're not here forever," he said.

However, before that happens Afghans want to know that America is going to help them negotiate a fair and respectable deal with the Taliban.

***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.***