The Way Out of Afghanistan

The New York Review of Books. 12/16/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

For the 100,000 American forces, 40,000 NATO troops, and their commander, General David Petraeus, it's Year One of the Surge in Afghanistan. For many Afghans it's Year Nine of the US Occupation—or, to be kind, Year Nine of the US-led war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

US officers say that the war is finally on the right footing, with enough men and equipment to hammer the Taliban in their bases in the south. For US and European diplomats there are larger imponderables. The strategic policy review released by President Obama on December 16 is extremely cautious, noting that recent gains in the south remain "reversible." The report says the strategy "is setting the conditions" to withdraw a small number of US troops in July 2011, but it does not specify how many of the 100,000 American forces might leave. A Western ambassador posed the problem to me clearly: "Are we creating a sustainable government, are we getting the politics right, will there be an Afghan army and civil service to take over when we leave?"

In Kabul the foreigners breathe a little easier after several months with no suicide attacks. Kabulis say that the protective blast walls and concrete barriers that line the streets are now twenty feet high, suffocating them and eating up their road and living space.

War is always a mixture of different, conflicting stories, depending on whether you are crouching in a ditch or sipping tea at the presidential palace. To have dinner with Petraeus and tea with President Hamid Karzai is a central part of the story, as is journeying to the edge of the city to tiny, unlit, unheated flats to talk to former senior Taliban officials who want to explain to you how the Americans and the Taliban can make peace. Everyone tells you the endgame has started in Afghanistan but nobody can tell you how it will end.

The world is obsessed with the big picture of the Afghan war, not the domestic details that make it so difficult to end. The NATO summit in Lisbon on November 19–20 was a clear example. It tried to clarify the vision of a Western withdrawal but also created confusion. The NATO leaders—speaking for the organization, not the US—said that they planned for a phased transfer of responsibility for security to Afghan forces and the end of NATO's combat role by 2014. They were committed to stay after that in a supporting role, while the US warned that its forces would continue fighting beyond that date if the security situation deteriorated. Clearly, the US and NATO are on two different timetables.

To confuse Afghans even further, President Barack Obama also added that some US troops would start withdrawing from Afghanistan next July. That date, announced in January 2010 as the US surge began, has proved deeply embarrassing to the White House. It has been challenged by the Republicans, dismayed the Afghans, and created enormous uncertainty among regional countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

Obama's final words in Lisbon were extraordinarily vague. Apparently speaking about the NATO decision to withdraw in 2014, he said, "It is a goal to make sure that we are not still engaged in combat operations of the sort that we're involved with now," but "it's hard to anticipate exactly what is going to be necessary." He added, "We are much more unified and clear about how we're going to achieve our ultimate end state in Afghanistan."

What Is the End State and How Do You Get to It?

None of the attempts at rebuilding the Afghan state over the past nine years have really worked. What assurance is there that they will work by 2014? The dates and debates in the White House tell only half the story. Afghanistan is going through a series of domestic crises, which will determine whether there will be a functioning state by 2014 or not.

The most immediate issue has been the parliamentary elections, which were held on September 18, but whose final results were delayed until the end of November. After the rigged presidential elections in 2009, which Karzai won after immense controversy and international embarrassment, the United Nations and NATO were reluctant to hold parliamentary elections so soon. However, Karzai insisted—hoping that his preferred candidates would win a majority in the 249-seat lower house of parliament, which would prepare the way for it to endorse Karzai's peace talks with the Taliban.

Again rigging took place on a huge scale—except this time it was done by individual candidates, not by the government. Karzai's handpicked Independent Election Commission (IEC), which oversaw the poll, stunned everyone by acting remarkably independently. It invalidated 1.33 million votes for fraud, or nearly a quarter of the 5.74 million cast, and in mid-November disqualified twenty-four candidates who had been declared unofficial winners, including a cousin of the President. The IEC asserted itself but left behind an intractable problem.

Turnout among the Pashtuns of southern and eastern Afghanistan, who make up some 40 percent of the population, was very low. The Taliban, who are largely Pashtuns, had threatened the Pashtun voters, telling them to boycott the polls. As a result the Pashtuns lost between 10 and 20 percent of their seats to ethnic minorities, especially the Tajiks and Hazaras. In the last parliament Pashtuns held 129 seats and now they are down to around ninety. All eleven seats in the important province of Ghazni, which has a mixed Pashtun-Hazara population, were won by Hazaras, a result that infuriated both the Pashtuns and Karzai. Ghazni's results were announced after much delay and the eleven Hazaras were declared winners. Earlier the results were challenged by the attorney general, who ordered the arrest of several IEC officials, and there were demonstrations in Kabul for the failure to announce the results.

The election drama will continue. The non-Pashtuns are broadly against any peace deal with the Taliban, resent Pashtun dominance, and want to amend the constitution to introduce a parliamentary system in place of the current presidential system, which gives Karzai enormous powers. Karzai is trapped. If he accepts the election results, as he eventually must, he faces a parliament dominated by non-Pashtuns and his political opponents, which could scuttle his talks with the Taliban. Yet if he declares the elections null and void on account of the rigging and orders them redone, he could face open defiance from the ethnic minorities.

These election results have brought the unresolved ethnic problems to the forefront. Nine years after 2001, the divisions between the Pashtuns and the non-Pashtun nationalities that make up the complex weave of the Afghan national carpet are worse than ever. The notorious corruption and incompetence of the Karzai administration are still seen to have benefited the Pashtuns. The American development efforts have focused heavily on wooing the Pashtun south and east where the Taliban insurgency is based, to the neglect of the minorities in the north and west. Non-Pashtuns are furious that an estimated 70 percent of all development funds are being spent in just two provinces in the south to woo the Pashtuns away from the Taliban.

The non-Pashtuns mistrust Karzai's talks with the Taliban. Despite several attempts by Karzai to arrange a national consensus, the non-Pashtuns are deeply suspicious that any Karzai–Taliban deal will only strengthen Pashtun hegemony in the country and further reduce minority rights. As a result non-Pashtun leaders from all the ethnic groups have launched political and grassroots movements to oppose talks with the Taliban.

Meanwhile the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Turcomen minorities have achieved advantages that cause immense resentment among the Pashtuns. For the first time the Tajiks and Hazaras dominate the upper officer class in the army and police even though US training and recruitment includes a strict parity between all ethnic groups.

Traditionally the Afghan officer class has been Pashtun. Pashtun representation in the army is lower than its proportion of the population, and only 3 percent of recruits are from the volatile south.

The minorities who dominate the north and west have opened up roads and trade networks, imported electricity and gas supplies, and created other profitable links with their neighbors—Iran and the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Afghanistan's drug trade—30 per- cent of which travels into Iran and Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan—has also enriched local elites. All this has improved lives for ordinary people, provided independent sources of wealth for local warlords and elites that are not dependent on Kabul, and given them political power. Meanwhile the Pashtuns in the south are stuck with the power of their neighbor Pakistan, which supports the Taliban and has done little toward improving their lives.

Tajik and Uzbek warlords have become so rich and powerful in the north that they now barely listen to Karzai. Governors of northern provinces have created their own fiefdoms that are left alone by NATO forces based there, because removing them would create further instability. You may not know it from press reports, but the most powerful man in the country after Karzai is probably Atta Muhammad Noor, a Tajik general who once fought the Taliban and is now the governor of Balkh province bordering Uzbekistan. He and his fellow northern warlords are rearming their militias in preparation for what they fear will be a long war with the Taliban.

The fear is justified because the Taliban have already arrived in the north, setting up bases, appealing to local populations, attacking NATO and Afghan forces, and infiltrating militants into Central Asia. For the first time, say US officials, there is evidence of the Taliban winning support from not just northern Pashtuns but even Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Making the Transition

Amid these worsening political problems there is the complex question of transition. After years of neglect, the US and NATO are at last trying to invest more in the numbers, equipment, training, and mentoring of the Afghan army. This year the US alone will spend $11 billion on the Afghan security forces—the largest single item in the US defense budget. The Afghan army has reached its first target of 134,000 men and will expand further, according to US officers involved in the training program. The police now number 109,100.

Yet these figures are seriously deceptive. The attrition rate from the Afghan army is still a staggering 24 percent per year. Some 86 percent of soldiers are illiterate and drug use is still an endemic problem. The Afghan police are even worse. (As a recent report on 60 Minutes showed, they are plagued by elementary incompetence, illiteracy, and corruption that make the creation of an adequate police force one of the country's most intransigent problems.) Although 80 percent of army units are working with NATO units, no single Afghan unit is ready to take responsibility on its own in the field. Afghan forces are only in command in Kabul, but this is largely because there is a sizable NATO presence there.

Moreover, when there is so little Afghan administrative presence in the provinces, Afghan forces, even if they are well-trained, can achieve very little. There is now a civil service academy turning out bureaucrats, but it will be years before they make a difference.

Equally grave is the failure to establish an indigenous Afghan economy that is not permanently dependent on aid handouts. For the first few years after September 11 President Bush refused to rebuild Afghan infrastructure, including adequate roads and electrical supplies, and this stymied economic growth. Kabul got full-time electricity only this year. Industry failed to develop because of the lack of infrastructure and because neighbors such as China and Iran were dumping cheap goods in the Afghan market and undermining local productivity.

Obama has initiated a program to help the local civilian economy take off, but it needs time. The US Army still buys no local produce, but the Afghan army, at least, is being equipped with locally manufactured boots and uniforms. Another acute problem is that the huge profits of the drug trade are recycled into property speculation rather than economic production.

Thus the key question for General Petraeus is not how many Taliban he kills, but whether the bare bones of an Afghan state—army, police, bureaucracy—which have been neglected so badly in the past nine years, can be

set up by 2014. Moreover, can Afghan leaders, including the President, win the trust of a people who have put up with insecurity, gross corruption, and poor governance for many years?

If there is to be progress toward self-government in Afghanistan, a clear-headed Afghan president is badly needed. Yet Karzai is wrapped in contradictions and enigmas. During a two-hour animated conversation I had with him in the presidential palace, he seemed to be straining to not break ties with the US and NATO, while at the same time wanting to throw off their yoke because it makes him appear as a Western puppet.

Karzai's on-again, off-again fights with Petraeus about the tactics of the US military surge are essentially about his own role, his own sovereignty, his own image in Afghanistan—in all respects he feels he is losing power. He wants the war to somehow go away. Petraeus wants to conclude it, which means more violence in the months ahead.

Karzai's view of the world has undergone a dramatic change and he is bitterly critical of the West and everything it has failed to do in the past nine years. He no longer supports the "war on terror" as defined by Washington, and he sees Petraeus's surge as unhelpful because it relies too much on body counts of dead Taliban, often killed by US drones with civilian casualties that are resented deeply, and on nighttime raids by US special forces. The alternative, says Karzai, is to seek help from nearby countries like Pakistan and Iran, which he thinks could help him talk to the Taliban and end the war.

The Neighbors

Many Afghans would disagree with Karzai. Neighboring states like Pakistan and Iran have a long and bloody record of monumental interference in Afghanistan, propping up proxy Afghan warlords and fighting over the spoils. Afghanistan will not become peaceful unless the neighbors are brought into an agreement not to interfere there that could be monitored by the international community. Obama made a promise to do just that when he was inaugurated but little has been accomplished.

The major problem is Pakistan. All three major Taliban factions have been based in Pakistan for nine years, receiving official and unofficial support, sanctuary, funding, and recruits; yet three successive US administrations have been unable to stop the Pakistan military from continuing that support. The December 16 strategy review avoids direct criticism of Pakistan for failing to crack down on Taliban and al-Qaeda bases. However, two classified intelligence reports given to the President in late November cited Pakistan's hosting of sanctuaries as a serious obstacle to US objectives.

President Bush never tried very hard, but Obama has offered much larger incentives and a tougher stick to Pakistan. Petraeus has been aggressive and made it clear to Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Kiyani that its support for the Taliban must end. But the US has no comprehensive strategy that either offers the Pakistani military some of what it wants or changes its assumptions that it must dominate Afghanistan. The army fears growing Indian influence in Afghanistan—an issue that nobody has addressed. It wants to use talks with the Taliban as a card in the endgame, so that maximum concessions can be extracted from the US, India, and Afghanistan in exchange for Pakistan obtaining concessions from the Taliban.

Iran too has learned to raise the stakes. Shia Iran has no love for the Sunni fundamentalists who make up the Taliban, but Tehran has stepped up its support and sanctuary for the Taliban groups operating in western Afghanistan. Like Pakistan, Iran sees them as a useful hedge for the endgame, when the US and NATO will have to bring it in to discuss noninterference in Afghanistan. Iran has joined with India and Russia to ensure that Pakistan is unsuccessful in dominating Afghanistan.

So the region is already sharply divided. On one side stands Pakistan, virtually alone with some support from China, but none from the Arab-Muslim world that used to support the Taliban. Opposing Pakistan are Iran, Russia, India, and the Central Asian states, which are extremely suspicious of Pakistan and the Taliban but lack a strategy to deal with them. They want the US to stay longer in Afghanistan, but are also suspicious of an indefinite US presence.

The Taliban Want to Talk

What of the Taliban?

In separate interviews four former Taliban officials, now living in Kabul, told me that the Taliban leaders want to open a political office in a third country that is not Afghanistan or Pakistan, so that they can start talks with the Kabul regime, the US, and NATO. All four occupied high office in the 1990s when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan and cannot be identified for security reasons.

Some were captured and held for several years by US forces before being freed, and they all now live quietly in Kabul under heavy government guard. Still, they are allowed to remain in touch with the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan and have facilitated Karzai's attempts to talk to Taliban leaders.

They all said that negotiations would be possible only when they were free to negotiate from a neutral place—preferably an Arabian Gulf state, Turkey, Germany, or Japan. With Afghanistan under US occupation and Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) trying to manipulate them, they needed space, freedom, and an address of their own.

The four former Taliban officials also called for a release of all Taliban prisoners held by the US in Guantánamo and Bagram, the main US base in Afghanistan, and the removal of the Taliban names from a list of terrorists that is maintained by the United Nations Security Council. Three of the four men I talked to said that Taliban–US talks were essential because the US is "the occupying power." Karzai also admits that in his previous contacts, the Taliban have demanded talks with the Americans and he has tried to persuade Washington to agree.

The NATO summit did not mention anything about talking to the Taliban but it was the elephant in the room. Karzai sees his political survival as being linked to ending the war through a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Petraeus is less keen, wanting to continue the surge next year, killing more Taliban commanders and weakening others before inviting them to any negotiating table.

Petraeus does not accept the argument that by killing more Taliban you radicalize the movement further, bringing in younger and more militant commanders who owe nothing to the older leadership and are easier for the ISI to manipulate. He believes that the Taliban leadership can be broken, fragmented, and split off one by one. As a result, while drones target Taliban leaders and frequently kill them and people near them, less than a handful of US officials in Petraeus's headquarters are addressing the issue of reconciliation with the Taliban.

The US administration is divided about the need for talks now or later. Skepticism is greater after the CIA and Britain's MI6 were duped by a fake Taliban negotiator who twice held talks with Karzai, but turned out to be a Pakistani shopkeeper who was paid $65,000 each time he came to Kabul. Western officials believe the ISI was behind the scam.

Moreover, at the moment neither Karzai nor the Taliban have a clear agenda for talks. They do not even have a clear notion of how to get to actual negotiations—but both sides realize that such a venture would have to include confidence-building measures to create trust on all sides.

The Taliban leaders said that their first political aim would not be to lay down terms for power-sharing with Karzai, but to reach an agreement on a definition of what the future Afghan state would look like—would it be a democratic state or a shariah state? The most sensible among the Taliban also realize that since they could not run the country in the 1990s they will not be able to do so in the future. Rather than trying to grab power and then face isolation by the international community and the denial of funds and aid, they see the logic of a power-sharing formula with Karzai that would retain Western aid and international legitimacy. Their main concern right now seems to be how to break free from Pakistan, something the US can help them do only when it is ready to support peace talks.

An Approach to Peace

To answer these questions and not give away too much to the Taliban at the outset, Karzai, neighboring states, the US, and NATO need to work together on a common agenda that reduces regional tensions and builds trust between the Taliban and Kabul. Any new approach to peace must include reciprocal confidence-building measures by Pakistan, Iran, and India as well as by the Taliban and the West. Karzai has set up the High Peace Council, a sixty-eight-person multiethnic body to negotiate with the Taliban, but he needs to do much more to build a consensus across the country. The main question, of course, will be how soon the White House and the Pentagon decide that it is time to talk to the Taliban. Victory on the battlefield is not possible but peace cannot be achieved without US participation in negotiations.

Here is a possible step-by-step approach, involving all the players, that is intended to build trust and confidence in the region so that ultimately negotiations with the Taliban can take place.

1. NATO, the Afghan government, and Pakistan free most Afghan Taliban prisoners under their jurisdiction and seek to accommodate them safely in Afghanistan or allow them to seek refuge in third countries. NATO guarantees freedom of movement for Taliban mediators opening an office in a friendly third country.

2. Iran enters into negotiations with the United Nations and European countries to end its safe haven for Afghan Taliban and allow them to return home or seek refuge in third countries. None of these actions includes amnesty or safe passage for al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

3. The Taliban respond with confidence-building measures of their own such as publicly dissociating themselves from al-Qaeda, ordering an end to targeted killings of Afghan administrators and aid workers, and an end to suicide bombings and burning schools and government buildings.

4. The US, NATO, and the UN declare their willingness to negotiate directly with the Taliban when the Taliban publicly request it, although they insist that the dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban remain the main avenue for negotiating a peace deal.

5. A new UN Security Council resolution calls for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban to bring the war to an end. The UN resolution mandates its special representative in Kabul to help those negotiations and to start a dialogue between Afghanistan's neighboring states to reduce their mutual antagonisms and interference; the resolution also calls for Afghan Taliban leaders who do not have ties to al-Qaeda to be struck off the list of terrorism suspects.

6. India and Pakistan enter into secret talks between their intelligence agencies in order to make their presence in Afghanistan more transparent to the other and end their rivalries. Later the two governments come to agreements that would allow each one to tolerate the other's embassies, consulates, rebuilding activities, and trade interests in Afghanistan. Both pledge not to seek a military presence in Afghanistan or to use Afghan soil to undermine the other.

7. Central to any plan would be a deal with the separatist insurgents in the Pakistani province of Balochistan who make use of territory in Afghanistan to carry out their attacks on Pakistan. To address the problem, Pakistan issues a general amnesty for all insurgent Baloch separatist groups and dissidents and announces its intentions to discuss a new peace formula with all Baloch separatist groups to end the current insurgency. The army and ISI free all Baloch prisoners they are holding including the hundreds of "disappeared" prisoners.

8. The Afghan government makes a commitment to return all Baloch separatist leaders on its soil once agreement is reached on a political deal in Balochistan and safe passage for Baloch leaders to return home is guaranteed by the Pakistan army and an international agency such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

9. Pakistan issues a timetable and deadline of between six to twelve months for all Afghan Taliban leaders and their families who want to do so to leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan. Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the UN would jointly help those Taliban not wishing to return home and not on any terrorism list to seek political asylum in third countries. Simultaneously Pakistan would undertake military action in North Waziristan in an

effort to destroy remnants of al-Qaeda and Afghan and Pakistani Taliban who may remain and try to sabotage any peace process. Even if such action were not fully successful, the aim would be to limit their capacity to sponsor insurgency.

10. The Afghan government works to build a national consensus inside the country among all ethnic groups, civil society, and the tribes before entering into formal negotiations with the Taliban. Negotiations also start between the US and the Taliban. The US agrees to sharply restrict killing of Taliban leaders by drones and other means.

Many questions hover over such a plan. It is a tragic loss that Richard Holbrooke, who would have been a strong leader in advancing such steps, died before they could be pursued. The former Taliban officials I talked to seemed open to a sequence of this kind. Whether their comrades in Pakistan can be persuaded to make a series of compromises and to estrange themselves from al-Qaeda is far from clear. But if after ten years the war is to be ended and the "end state" is to be actually achieved, then some such series of steps will be needed.

Source: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/way-out-afghanistan/?pagination=false

Ahmed Rashid is the author of Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia and Taliban, an updated edition of which was published in April. He lives in Lahore. (January 2011)