

## The true benchmark for maturity and stability

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By Ahmed Rashid

### Afghanistan will need constant pressure, advice and incentives from the Americans to keep Karzai on track

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the communist President Najibullah ordered his 100,000 strong army and a similar number of militia to adopt a 'Fortress Kabul' strategy. This meant giving up large parts of the countryside to the Mujahedin, but holding on to all the major towns and cities and keeping some key roads open. Contrary to CIA assessments that he would last a few weeks, Najibullah lasted three years and would have continued longer if the Soviet Union had not itself collapsed and his sources of money and arms dried up.

The present Afghan army is likely to adapt the same Fortress Kabul strategy after US and NATO forces withdraw in 2014 - despite the \$10 billion plus a year for the past four years that the US has spent on building up a 200,000 strong Afghan army and 150,000 man police force. Even though NATO will leave behind a small military force after 2014 and pay for the entire Afghan defense budget for the next five years at a cost of \$4.1 billion year - few Afghans accept that the Afghan army will stand up for long against the Taliban. With a 90 percent illiteracy rate and a 30 percent desertion rate the army also lacks the critical ideological motivation; who are they defending?

Last year alone, more than 60 US and NATO troops were killed in insider attacks by fellow Afghan soldiers or policemen, which means NATO forces cannot trust the very Afghans they have spent so many years training. The Taliban will quickly take the Pashtun belt in the south and east. (The majority of Taliban belong to the Pashtun tribes that straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.) Already the geographically daunting provinces of Kunar and Nuristan on the border with Pakistan have been abandoned by the Afghan army to the Taliban and al Qaeda. Other provinces whose capital cities are too difficult to defend will follow.

Meanwhile apart from the army, much of the \$90 billion spent in reconstruction and development in the past twelve years has been wasted in corruption and poorly implemented projects, leaving state institutions barely stronger than they were in 2001. Military failure could be coupled by a political breakdown between Kabul and the Northern warlords belonging to the non-Pashtun ethnic groups. The most likely cause would be if the government and President Hamid Karzai once again decided to rig the presidential elections set for April 2014, as they did in 2009.

Karzai cannot be a candidate in 2014 but he will want to ensure that a Pashtun loyal to him wins the presidency so his family is protected for the future. Such a move could lead to a multidimensional civil war. So stark is the reality of such a breakdown that John Kerry, who patched up the near failure of the 2009 Afghan presidential vote, warned in his Jan. 24 senate confirmation hearings for the post of US secretary of state, of the risks attached to the next election: "If it doesn't have legitimacy, if we don't succeed in that effort, its going to be very, very difficult to convince the American people, and to convince the allies ....to stay engaged in this effort."

Such an internal meltdown will persuade neighboring states to once again arm and fund their various Afghan proxies as they did in the 1990s, thereby fuelling a civil war. There will be a mass exodus of refugees, especially of the best-educated and -qualified, while there is already a massive capital flight. The West, hammered by economic recession is

rushing for the exits and will not turn back to try and put the Afghan pieces back together again. Last year, more active duty US soldiers committed suicide (349) than died in combat (295) - a clear indicator of the stress of war on Western armies.

The above scenario is the gloomiest on the horizon and probably the most commonly predicted off the record by US and NATO officers, as well as by most people in the region. But the truth is that none of the major players wants to live with such a scenario or see a continuation of the civil war in Afghanistan. Everyone wants peace and that includes the Taliban, the northern warlords and the neighboring states.

So the real question is, can the US and its allies expend sufficient diplomatic energy, and bring to bear enough high-powered intervention and inventiveness to help generate a ceasefire in the present war followed by a political deal between Kabul, the Taliban and their protectors in Pakistan? Can the allies also convince the wider region which includes Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, India, China and Russia that no single state will have an undue advantage in Afghanistan and no state will interfere in Afghanistan's future?

For months now there has been excessive Western media focus on the timetable for a NATO forces withdrawal and the question of how many troops will be left behind after 2014. The Pentagon favors a long drawn out time table, with the maximum number of soldiers being left behind, while the White House favors a speedier withdrawal and fewer forces left behind in Afghanistan.

However the debate in Washington about troop numbers is misplaced. The real issue, which should top the agenda for the US and its allies now, is a transition to a ceasefire and a peace plan rather than an exit strategy. Any such plan will have to simultaneously tackle three intensely complicated moving parts. The first and most important issue is the urgent need for talks for a negotiated cease fire between the Taliban, the US and the Afghan government so that NATO troops can exit with dignity and the horrendous levels of violence be reduced.

Afghanistan cannot be stabilized by fighting to the last day as some US generals and think tank pundits believe. Secret talks between US representatives and the Taliban began in Doha, Qatar in 2011. But they floundered in 2012 over the first confidence-building measure each side was supposed to take. Since then there have been meetings of the Taliban and members of the Afghan High Peace Council which is the body nominated by Karzai to talk to the Taliban in several Arab and European locations. However these have been talks about talks rather than negotiations.

Now that Presidents Obama and Karzai have agreed to allow the Taliban to open an office in Doha, there is renewed efforts to get the US-Taliban and the Taliban-Kabul talks going again, although now its Karzai who keeps throwing spanners into the ongoing efforts.

Simultaneously there are several levels of regional talks going on among Afghanistan's neighbors led by Turkey, Britain, France and others. The delay in all these efforts was due to the US elections which put everything on hold for months. Now all the players are hoping that John Kerry hits the ground running and quickly appoints a new Af-Pak negotiator and mediator.

Talks for a ceasefire need to be sequenced by further negotiations between the Taliban and Kabul over a political power sharing arrangement that will enlarge the space for the ceasefire, integrate the Taliban into state structures, allow them to take part in political processes and end in an ultimate political agreement between the two to end the conflict. Finally Karzai must urgently hold a relatively free and fair presidential election in April 2014 and starts preparing for that now bringing all political forces into the process - something he has yet to do. Every detail of the voting preparations being carried out by the Afghan Independent Election Commission is being contested by Karzai and their schedule is lagging behind dangerously.

Moreover the elections will take place in the midst of the NATO troop withdrawal, leaving the alliance with little leverage in Afghanistan. What needs to be done needs to be done now rather than later. This will be the true benchmark for Afghan maturity and stability and it will need constant pressure, advice and incentives from the

Americans to keep Karzai on track.

Finally there is the need to ensure that Pakistan, which gives sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, cooperates with rather than undermines any peace process and allows the Taliban to hold talks with Kabul on their own terms rather than terms Pakistan may impose. For the first time Pakistan's military and its all powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) - which has allowed the Taliban to mobilize resources for its war against the Americans from Pakistani soil for a decade - also appears to have changed its attitude. Army chief General Ashfaq Kayani now says that ending extremism in Pakistan is its main aim rather than opposing India or trying to exert influence in Afghanistan.

As such it supports all peace talks and initiatives taken by anyone with the Taliban. The ISI is in the process of freeing some one hundred Taliban whom it earlier jailed, either for maintaining secret contacts with Kabul, the United Nations or the Americans or those who did not dance to the ISI's tune. Most of such Taliban are so called moderates who support an end to the war. Now the same ISI is pushing these freed Taliban to renew their contacts and talk peace with their adversary.

For the first time in a decade, Kabul and Islamabad are cooperating rather than abusing each other. British Prime Minister David Cameron is overseeing an intense series of meetings between the presidents and the army chiefs of the two countries. US officials are still sceptical of the ISI's intentions so it becomes vital for Pakistan to play further positive cards that will persuade the Taliban to resume talks with the Americans and Kabul. As a consequence there is also a vastly improved US-Pakistan relationship, which broke down last year when a series of incidents including the US raid to kill Osama bin Laden snapped the relationship cold. (Pakistan still has to explain the presence of bin Laden on its soil.)

The US, Pakistan and Afghanistan have created 'a core group' which meets regularly to discuss all aspects of the peace process. The secret talks the US conducted with the Taliban in Doha in 2011 partly broke down because of the divisions within the Obama administration on offering concessions to the Taliban. Obama gave the go-ahead for the talks yet never asserted himself in those talks or made any effort to bridge the gap between the Pentagon and the State Department.

Now, according to US officials all the departments of the US government agree on the need for talks and both John Kerry and Chuck Hagel as the nominated secretaries of state and defense, know the region well and understand what is at stake. Kerry and Hagel have high standings in the region and are the best possible figures to break the logjam, but they must be fully and openly supported by the president.

In 2011 the Kabul government was also divided on talking to the Taliban and several cabinet members tried to sabotage talks by offering negative advice to Karzai. True to form, Karzai was both adamant and ambivalent about the need for talks and he still needs to be pushed to the table by the Americans and the Afghans. The stability of Afghanistan will depend on a peace plan being implemented.

The key to that is whether the second Obama administration will muster the diplomatic resources, energy and political will that is needed to forge one. Or will other pressing crises such as Iran, Syria and Mali consume the limited diplomatic and foreign policy space that Obama is willing to spare in his second term? Afghanistan needs a massive amount of international attention, both before and after NATO forces withdraw. If that is not there, expect the Taliban to return to Afghanistan in force and in their wake will be al Qaeda and other global jihadist groups ready to destabilize Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. A great deal is at stake.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the bestselling books "Taliban" and "Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan."