

Viewpoint: Karzai turns against Western allies

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By Ahmed Rashid

After a meeting with Hamid Karzai, guest columnist Ahmed Rashid considers why the Afghan leader has become frustrated with his Western backers.

Mr Karzai believes that the West and the United States in particular have been unable to bring peace to Afghanistan or secure compliance from Pakistan, which gives sanctuary to the Taliban.

He says the US wrongly blames Afghans for Washington's own past and present failures and he rejects the barrage of US criticism aimed at his government.

After a two-hour, animated discussion with Mr Karzai in the presidential palace in Kabul it is clear that his views on global events, the future course of Nato's military surge in southern Afghanistan and nation building in his homeland have undergone a sea change.

He no longer supports the "war on terror" as defined by Washington and believes that the present military surge in the south being conducted by Nato is unhelpful, as it relies on the body counts of dead Taliban.

Afghan cities have become garrisons and the people more alienated, he says.

In particular, he wants an immediate end to night raids conducted by US special forces, who in the last three months have killed or captured 368 Taliban mid-level leaders and killed 968 foot soldiers, Nato says.

Nobody knows how many civilians are included in these figures provided by the US.

He says there is a political alternative to Nato - to depend more on regional countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, to end the war and find a settlement with the Taliban.

Yet neither country has delivered Mr Karzai anything substantial in the past six months to make it easier for him to make peace with the Taliban.

Mixed messages

Senior Western and Afghan officials in Kabul say Iran has stepped up its support for the Taliban in western Afghanistan in recent months, possibly as a bargaining chip for future talks on a peace settlement.

Pakistan, which is accused of housing the entire leadership of the Taliban, wishes to be at the centre of any talks Nato or Mr Karzai has with the Taliban.

Mr Karzai's new world view is the most dramatic political shift that he has undergone in the 26 years that I have known him. Although it is partly fuelled by conspiracy theories, it is also based on nine years of frustration with the West.

He is desperately tired and angry at the mixed and multiple messages he has received for the past nine

years, first from Washington and now from Nato.

President Bush refused to provide resources or troops to secure Afghanistan for four years after 2001.

President Obama has vacillated between surging and offering dates for the start of a withdrawal.

This Nato summit will see Mr Obama drop his July 2011 date for the start of a US troop withdrawal, to be replaced by a transition to Afghan forces without a US troop withdrawal. The full transition and Nato troop withdrawal will now start in 2014.

Not surprisingly the Afghans are totally confused.

There is still no US or Nato central civilian authority implementing decisions on overall Afghan policy and delivering one clear message to Mr Karzai, although Gen David Petraeus carries out that role in the military sphere.

Meanwhile, there is deep scepticism in the White House and the CIA as to whether Gen Petraeus's surge is actually working - a message that also reaches Mr Karzai.

'Precarious' position

With his weakened position, the war escalating across the country and Western forces wanting to leave, Mr Karzai still wants to appear presidential and reassert Afghan sovereignty.

This is exactly what the communist President Najibullah did as Soviet troops began to leave Afghanistan in 1989.

Mr Karzai may want to imitate Mr Najibullah, but he has none of his assets and Mr Karzai's reassertion of Afghan sovereignty can now only come through an end to the war with the Taliban.

But he is confusing Afghans by acting as both the government and a one man opposition who often bemoans the deaths of Taliban, but not his own soldiers.

Mr Karzai is also mistaken to believe that he can rely on just the regional countries to pull him out of his present predicament. Both Iran and Pakistan are themselves in a precarious state.

Most of his ministers do not believe in his world view and continue to work well with Nato. However the massive corruption allegations that swirl about the Karzai family and his ministers continue to put them at odds with the international community.

Nato's most important task is to reassess its own successes and failures in Afghanistan over the past nine years and create a new narrative along with Mr Karzai that does not solely blame him and the Afghans for the worsening situation.

US and Nato policies must be more transparent. Hamid Karzai himself needs to listen less to conspiracy theories and more to a wider spectrum of advisers.

Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.