

## Viewpoint: Strategy shift for smooth Afghan transition

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By Ahmed Rashid.

As Nato forces prepare to exit Afghanistan in 2014, the relevant players need to change tactics to ensure a peaceful future for the country, writes Ahmed Rashid.

Around the world and even in Afghanistan, there is an epic level of despondency and despair about the country's future, as US and Nato forces prepare to leave by 2014.

Pundits and politicians, as well as think-tanks and military officers have been full of doom and gloom. They predict continuing civil war, ethnic strife and the fragmentation of the Afghan army. They also see hordes of hungry Afghans streaming across borders, the unrest spreading to Pakistan and Central Asia.

Afghans themselves are voting with their feet. The wealthy are buying apartments in Dubai and government ministers are moving their families out.

Such analyses and fears are very similar to what happened in 1989 before the Soviet troops departed. I was one of few journalists who at the time dismissed the US CIA assessment that the Afghan communist regime would last just three weeks.

Then too there were predictions about civil war, the army fragmenting, the break-up of the country and ethnic bloodshed. In fact, the communist government lasted three years and only fell apart when its main benefactor, the Soviet Union, collapsed.

Today there are still alternatives to a better future if all the players realise the gravity of the situation and adopt strategies, with the major aim of stabilising Afghanistan and the region rather than cutting corners and concentrating on the military aspects of withdrawal.

### Internal rivalries

The most important required change is for Washington to have a more strategic vision than it has shown so far.

Despite this summer's bloody Taliban offensive, I still firmly believe that the Taliban do not want the continuation of the war beyond 2014, nor do they want to seize total power. Yet the Obama administration, beset by internal rivalries, has refused to prioritise the on-off two-year-long dialogue it has had with the Taliban.

The US military has failed to offer meaningful, confidence-building measures that could reduce the conflict and taper down the violence from both the US and the Taliban side.

The next US president will have 18 months to make talking to the Taliban his number one priority and aiming for a ceasefire with them before 2014.

This is only possible if the US has the will and a comprehensive strategy that brings in neighbouring powers, the UN and all the Afghan factions.

Moreover, the US and Nato also have to ensure a detailed dialogue with the Afghan government on constitutional and legal issues which will ensure a fair, fraud-free presidential election in 2014.

Likewise, President Hamid Karzai has to prioritise preparations for the elections which are way behind schedule

- a move that is only intensifying speculation about his true intentions. Filling the empty places in the Independent Election Commission, the Supreme Court and registering voters all need to happen in the next eight weeks.

### **Security crisis**

Mr Karzai has to build confidence through a national consensus with parliament, leaders of major ethnic groups and the warlords to agree on the terms and conditions for the election, but there is no sign as yet that he is doing so.

The longer he delays the preparations for elections, the weaker he will become internally in the months ahead. The potential crisis within the 350,000 security forces, which suffer from 90% illiteracy and a 20% desertion rate, as well as the recent killings of Nato soldiers by Afghan soldiers, need to be rapidly addressed.

Recent recruits deemed dangerous need to be quickly re-vetted, while the government needs to foster a national spirit in the army and inspire the officer corps.

Mr Karzai has so far failed to take sufficient interest in building up the army esprit de corps. Serious US-Taliban talks could also lead to a dramatic reduction in such deaths because clearly, many of these killings are orchestrated by the Taliban.

The US and Mr Karzai have also failed to build what Mr Obama promised in 2008 - a regional consensus among Afghanistan's neighbours not to interfere in the country's internal affairs after 2014. With present US tensions with Pakistan and Iran - its two most influential neighbours - building such a consensus needs to be farmed out to the United Nations or any other global body as quickly as possible.

### **Taking initiative**

The Pakistan military and its Inter-services Intelligence (ISI), which decide on Pakistan's Afghan policy also need to change their attitude, as most Taliban leaders live in Pakistan and fuel the insurgency from there.

Rather than sit on the sidelines until 2014, the Pakistani military needs to take the initiative, pushing the Taliban into talks, containing their activities and logistics and giving them a deadline by which they must return home.

But this cannot be done in isolation without the US military also winding down their military operations.

More than any other neighbour, Pakistan has the ability to both ensure a final settlement or to sabotage one. There are signs that the Pakistan military is ever so slowly trying to change course. Productive discussions have taken place between army chief, Gen Ashfaq Kayani, and senior US officials.

But the military also needs to understand the overwhelming dislike of Pakistan that now affects Afghans of all political stripes, including the Taliban.

The army must act humbly and in a modest way that genuinely places the Afghan government in the driving seat.

Until now Islamabad has produced bluster and rhetoric about helping the peace process, but in reality it has delivered little.

Iran needs to be quickly brought into dialogue despite the tensions between Tehran and the West over its nuclear program.

If the US is unable to talk to the Iranians, others like trusted Nato allies who have a dialogue with Tehran or the UN can do so.

Clearly what is needed for a peaceful outcome by 2014 is a change in strategy, tactics and a more visionary approach by all players. Although recognising that many of these desirable policy changes are still a wish list,

all of them can be relatively easily implemented.

There is no rocket science involved. All these issues have been talked about and discussed for years in countless forums. What is needed now is implementation.

The players need to trust each other and help fulfil the political rather than the military needs of the next 18 months. Above all, the next US president needs to make a peaceful Afghan settlement his top foreign policy agenda and Mr Karzai needs to prepare his departure with grace, elegance and consensus.

That way he goes down in history books as the father of modern-day Afghanistan, living at peace with itself and its neighbours.

*Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Pakistan on the Brink: The future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West.*