

Why Europe fears Petraeus's urge to surge

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By Ahmed Rashid

For weeks there has been a spectre haunting European corridors of power. That spectre is David Petraeus. Since he stepped in last month as head of combined US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, many European governments have feared the US general would try and extend the time and scope of the military surge to give US forces a better chance of winning over the Pashtun population in the south and delivering a knock-out blow to the Taliban.

That is exactly what he is signalling in his first media interviews since taking over - and precisely what most European countries do not believe is possible.

In discussions with European generals, diplomats and officials - each involved in their government's Afghan policy - a common fear emerges. That US president Barack Obama will not be able to refuse demands from Gen Petraeus to extend the surge well beyond July 2011; that the general will continue to push for a continuation of military strategy; and that he will decline any suggestion of opening negotiations with the Taliban - something that many Europeans are very keen on.

Every European government faces pressure to withdraw or reduce troop numbers, whether because of defence cuts, recession, public anger or parliamentary opposition. Similar factors are also turning many in the US Congress, particularly Democrats, against the war. The latest NBC and Wall Street Journal poll found that seven in 10 Americans did not believe the war would end successfully.

But no government says it wants to cut and run. Everyone realises there is too much at stake, not just in Afghanistan but also for the region and Nato credibility. An overhasty withdrawal could lead to a Taliban takeover and leave in the dirt tens of thousands of Afghans who have supported western forces. What Europe wants is a negotiated endgame and regional settlement - and that must include talking to the Taliban.

European officials are coming to the consensus that they would like the Nato summit and Mr Obama's Afghan policy review - both at the end of the year - to reach a position where negotiating with the Taliban is the political strategy around which military strategy is determined.

Troop withdrawals, which Mr Obama says will start next July, would then take place according to the pace of talks between the US, the Taliban and the Afghan government; not on the basis of hard-to-gauge battlefield success. Europe also wants the US to press Afghanistan's neighbours not to interfere in its affairs.

Gen Petraeus wants to convince Washington, Nato and Europe to do just the opposite, determining withdrawals on the basis of the military, not the political, situation.

In his interviews, he casts doubt on whether he would advise Mr Obama to stick to the July deadline. "The president didn't send me over here to seek a graceful exit," he told The New York Times on Monday. He told NBC that he saw "areas of progress" and that "we've got to link those together, extend them".

Many Afghans and Europeans, however, see problems increasing. The war has escalated in the north and west; there are fresh contradictions between the US and Hamid Karzai, Afghan president, over governance; and fears that September's parliamentary elections could become a debacle akin to the

2009 presidential poll.

Moreover, following Pakistan's devastating floods and infrastructure breakdown, any expectations Gen Petraeus might have had that the country's army would deal with the Afghan Taliban leaders and their Pakistani bases must be dashed. The danger is that the Pakistani Taliban will use the floods to seize territory.

Even rare good news is beset by doubt. The Afghan army, for example, is at full strength of 134,000 men three months ahead of schedule after a US injection of money and training but how effective it will be is unclear.

European officials fear that saying No to Gen Petraeus - whose strategy turned round US fortunes in Iraq and who co-wrote the counterinsurgency manual that forms the blueprint for today's war - would be difficult for a US president who has already sacked two commanders in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Mr Obama faces a raft of domestic and foreign policy problems - not least the fear that the Democrats will lose out in November's midterm elections. Robert Gates, his respected defence secretary, is considering stepping down after next July's planned troop withdrawal. It is a difficult time for the president to disagree publicly with his senior general.

Last winter, in the nine cabinet meetings Mr Obama held to discuss the policy review that led to the surge, there was a preoccupation with the military equation. Europeans fear he will be persuaded to spend this December's review, too, discussing the surge rather than grappling with a political strategy: talking to the Taliban; testing the waters for a meaningful power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and Mr Karzai; and creating an effective regional agreement.

Things are still far from that. So the spectre of Gen Petraeus continues to haunt Europe's corridors of power.

The writer's latest book is 'Descent into Chaos'. A revised, 10th anniversary edition of his bestseller, 'Taliban' (IB Tauris), has just been published

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