

## Afghan crunch time: Obama must decide whether to talk to the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

Before President Hamid Karzai arrives in Washington next month, President Obama has to make clear key decisions on the course of war and peacemaking in Afghanistan.

Neighboring countries and most Afghans believe that the endgame has begun for a post-U.S. Afghanistan. There are just 14 months for the U.S. military surge to show results while Washington simultaneously prepares to begin its July 2011 troop withdrawal and handover to the Afghan government. Already, efforts to jockey for future control of Afghanistan have been seen among Pakistan, India, Iran and even Russia. Several NATO countries eager to withdraw forces are frustrated. It is clear in the region that someone will have to mediate with the Taliban, but in the absence of U.S. leadership, a tug of war is taking place over who will do it, when, how and where.

The recent spat between the White House and Karzai -- which has cooled down thanks in part to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of international forces in Afghanistan -- largely stemmed from Karzai's growing frustration over questions about which the Obama administration has been unclear.

According to U.S. and Afghan officials, Karzai's first question when he arrives will be whether Washington supports his efforts at reconciliation with the senior Taliban leadership. In January, the United States and NATO agreed to reintegration -- bringing in Taliban foot soldiers and low-level commanders -- but Washington balked at full reconciliation, saying it wants to see the Taliban weakened militarily over the next six to 12 months before considering talks with its leaders.

Karzai's representatives, however, have spent the past 12 months holding talks about talks with senior Taliban representatives in several Arab Gulf states. Taliban leaders have made clear that they want to talk directly to the United States, and Karzai knows his discussions with the Taliban cannot go further without public U.S. support and a commitment to engage. The Afghans want a clear answer from Washington that they will lead any future negotiations.

The Obama Cabinet is set to discuss this issue, but it has been divided, including over how American voters would react to talks with the Taliban. Nevertheless, Karzai is hoping for a positive decision by the time he arrives in Washington. The issue is complicated by the Pakistani military's determination to guide or even dominate the peace process rather than leave it to the Afghans.

Pakistan holds many of the cards: Taliban leaders and their families live in Pakistan and are in close touch with the military and its Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). Some Taliban allies, such as the network led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, are even closer to the ISI. Although the military is finally hunting down the Pakistani Taliban in the Northwest tribal areas, the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani extremists in Punjab province are being left alone.

The January arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the No. 2 Taliban leader, in Karachi and the unexplained arrests and subsequent freeing of several other leading Taliban figures have demonstrated to Kabul and Washington the Pakistani military's clout.

Karzai and most Afghans fear that if Washington waits too long to decide about talking to the Taliban, control will fall to the ISI as happened in the 1980s and 1990s -- when Washington abandoned Afghanistan to Russia and Pakistan but the ISI played favorites and was unable to end the civil war among Afghan factions.

Almost all Afghans, including Karzai's Pashtun supporters, the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance and even the Taliban oppose any major role for the ISI, as do most regional powers, particularly India, Iran, Russia and the

five Central Asian republics.

When Karzai visited Islamabad on March 10 to find out why his interlocutor Mullah Baradar was arrested, he was, according to Afghan officials, bluntly told by Pakistan's generals that the Americans are bound to leave and that if he wanted Pakistani help resolving issues with the Taliban, he would first have to close Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad. Pakistani officials deny threatening Karzai and insist that they want a peaceful and stable Afghanistan once the Americans leave. But other sources have confirmed that such ultimatums were delivered.

Pakistan is convinced that Karzai is allowing India to undermine Pakistan's western border regions through its four consulates in Afghanistan and has demanded that Afghanistan close the consulates.

For a sovereign Afghanistan, this is an impossible request, but it is just the opening gambit in a looming test of wills. Pakistan's maneuvers have prompted India to try reactivating its 1990s alliance with Iran, Russia and Central Asia, which supported the former Northern Alliance in a civil war against the Pakistan-backed Taliban regime.

Pakistan's military has virtually taken control of foreign policy and strategic decision making from the civilian government. Thus Pakistan's foreign policy reflects the military's obsession with India.

The region and NATO countries are eager to hear from Washington on dealing with the Taliban. A U.S. decision is needed before regional tensions further escalate. The Obama administration must signal greater clarity about talking to the Taliban if the United States and NATO are to help the Afghans structure any future dialogue with the Taliban and if Afghans are not to feel abandoned once again to the whims of their neighbors.

***Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist, is most recently the author of "Descent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia." His book "Taliban" was updated and reissued this month.***