

Making war and peace in Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid asks what impact the Nato-led assault in Afghanistan's Helmand province and recent arrests of Taliban leaders in Pakistan could have on the volatile region.

The continuing Marjah offensive is an important test both for Western and Afghan military forces.

But it will also test the Afghan government's ability to deliver speedy governance and provide services to people in areas dominated by the Taliban for years.

The make-up of "the government in a box" promoted by US commanders is precisely what was missing when the first Provincial Reconstruction Teams were set up outside Kabul in 2002.

There was no countervailing Afghan authority to provide services to the people after Western forces were deployed.

That failure is only now being addressed.

But the military situation will remain fraught for some time. The staggered Taliban resistance, their use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mine warfare will ensure the area remains unsafe for months. And small Taliban groups will return to ambush military convoys as they bring supplies to Marjah.

Despite the promise of continued deployment of US and Nato forces, many population centres and agricultural regions have to be cleared and held in the months ahead if the Taliban are to be decisively rolled back - particularly around Kandahar and Kabul.

Manpower still appears limited and careful decisions will have to be made as to what areas are important because not every area will be possible to clear.

There is still a strong belief in Washington that before any dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban can take place, Western forces have to diminish the militants' capabilities.

Hardening stance

But a series of reported arrests of senior Afghan Taliban leaders in Pakistan has opened another intriguing front.

The US is yet to be convinced that the arrests signal a major U-turn by the Pakistani military, which has been accused of harbouring militants since 2002.

On the face of it, for Pakistan to abandon them just as a major offensive unfolds against the Taliban in Afghanistan would be enormously beneficial.

However, instead there is growing concern that the Pakistan military and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is hardening its terms for a major say in a new round of the Afghan political merry-go-round, as power-brokers prepare for an end to the conflict in the next 18-24 months.

Senior US officials say the arrest of the powerful second-in-command Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Karachi in early February was accidental, after the CIA pinpointed the location of a meeting of Taliban commanders where Baradar was found.

“ War and peace making in Afghanistan is likely to get more complicated in the months ahead ”

The Pakistan military has admitted to holding only Baradar, although between five and eight other Taliban leaders have also been arrested.

Once the arrest was leaked several days after it took place, the Afghan government asked for Baradar and four other Taliban to be extradited to Kabul for questioning.

However, the Lahore high court restrained the government from handing them over to Kabul after a petition was filed by a retired ISI officer, Khalid Khawaja.

Despite repeated requests, US officials have been given only limited access to question Baradar and even less access to others under arrest.

In itself, the arrests have dealt a serious blow to the Taliban's long-term ability to counter the US-Nato offensive in southern Afghanistan.

Baradar was the key logistician and overall political chief for Taliban commanders inside Afghanistan.

Saudi negotiations

But despite his sanctuary, Baradar was at odds with the ISI over the issue of opening a dialogue with Kabul.

“ The Obama administration is still far from accepting the idea of negotiating with the Taliban leadership ”

Baradar was known to have been in touch with representatives of the Kabul regime, including the brothers of President Hamid Karzai. Both Mr Karzai and Baradar hail from the Popalzai tribe of the Durrani Pashtuns in Kandahar.

Kabul and the Taliban had enlisted the help of Saudi Arabia in this - but the ISI was not involved.

Over the past 12 months Saudi Arabia has been intermittently involved in helping the two sides hold informal talks that so far have not led to more serious negotiations, although they have the potential to do so.

Senior Pakistani military officials subsequently claimed that Baradar was already on the CIA payroll, having been paid \$5m by the Americans to begin talks with Mr Karzai. US officials deny any such payments were ever made.

Moreover, the Obama administration is still far from accepting the idea of negotiating with the Taliban leadership.

The US and Nato have agreed to fund the reintegration of Taliban fighters who want to give up arms, a key element of their current offensive - but not reconciliation.

Senior US officials were annoyed at Mr Karzai in the aftermath of the recent London conference when he went beyond reintegration to offer the Taliban leaders - including Mullah Omar - talks and reconciliation.

The Obama administration is divided over the issue of talking to Taliban leaders.

Politicians and civilian officials insist the Taliban have to be significantly diminished through military offensives over the coming year before any such talks between Kabul and Taliban leaders can be encouraged.

The US Defense Department is more sanguine, believing that talks could be held at the same time as the US military neutralises the Taliban.

All US officials agree that the Taliban has to first make a decisive break from their operational alliance with al-Qaeda.

Pakistani stance

Pakistan's fear of being superseded in any future negotiations stems from the belief that it has more at stake in a stable Afghanistan than any other neighbouring country.

Pakistan's most strident demand is that India's role in Afghanistan be drastically reduced. And it wants a say in how power will be shared in Kabul and the critical Pashtun belt in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

There are twice as many Pashtuns living in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, and Pakistan is for the first time waging a successful war against its own Pashtun Taliban.

However, too overt a Pakistani role is likely to be rejected by Mr Karzai, Afghanistan's non-Pashtuns and civil society groups (currently opposed to talks with the Taliban), and even by many Taliban tired of fighting and who would like to end dependence on Pakistan.

Although Pakistan has legitimate security interests in Afghanistan, so do other immediate neighbours like Iran, the Central Asian states and near neighbours like India, China and the Arab Gulf states.

All of them would likely start interfering in Afghanistan if they see growing Pakistani influence.

As President Obama's deadline of July 2011 - to give more responsibility to the Afghan government to start a US withdrawal from Afghanistan - approaches, the war and peace making in Afghanistan is likely to get more complicated.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the best-selling book Taliban and, most recently, of Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Here is a selection of your comments

There is so much skullduggery going on here between the Taliban and the ISI and Pak military and the CIA that it is becoming difficult to see the wood from the trees. The Americans need to be careful how they are spending their tax payers' money. Filling the pockets with dollars of terrorists and bandits who can change allegiance at a moment's glance is frightening. The ISI and the Pak military need to be disbanded, they are extremely dangerous and will always have a fundamentalist Islamic agenda when it comes to Afghanistan and Kashmir. If this action is not taken then peace in the region will be difficult to attain. Vipul, Delhi, India.

Ahmed Rashid has rightly said there is interests of neighbouring countries, along side Afghanistan has great importance in terms of socio-economic zone. there is possibility of gas pipeline routes from central asia to south asian countries, moreover, it is market destination for the neighbouring countries. we wish Afghanistan great but independent leadership who could take care of the nation and lead the country in socio-economic development. Hamid, Kabul, Afghanistan

Afghanistan is being pulled apart by all the players. As a Pakistani Pashtun, I am saddened by this fact. Afghanistan is the land of our forefathers and our ancestors are buried there. I would request all the players to please take into account, the suffering of the Afghans while fighting for influence there. There are non who can claim any credit but are many who can be labelled as culprits. I do not think, they will they do any thing to qualify them just for the removal of their culprit label. Saadat, Edmonton, Canada

I'm disappointed. You accept also US propaganda of Marja. Nato forces just occupy a small village of few hundert people with 15000 troops. Afghanistan has 37000 such villages. The town with the name of Marja with 80000 people doesn't exsit in Afghanistan. This is just fantasy of pentagon. Azad Afghan, Jalaalabad /Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been a playground of its neighbour for years. Those who gave diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime are the least interested in Afghan citizens welfare. Which country is most hated by the Afghan people? Which country is most liked by the Afghan people? The survey results are available but no one wants to publicise them. The real question is "Should countries that continue to sponsor Terrorism be allowed to have a say in Peace talks". Afghanistan's problem is not easy to solve when a disruptive neighbour wants it to remain a

vassal state and dictate who should share Power. Fersos, India

It is a known fact that America wants to leave Afghanistan but not under the control of any independent or democratic Government which will not say 'Sir, Yes Sir' ever to US/Western demands. Any election results are acceptable unless they bring those people in power whose views are against US/Western wishes i.e. Hamas in Gaza! Though such results should make one think!. Sooner or later the US or UK has to cut a deal in Afghanistan just like Iraq. Mr Karzai, Mr Maliki & elections in both countries are part of a stage show for those hard working people around the world who go to work for a day's work so they can pay their taxes but watch news every evening with a hope that one day a child will be born in Africa for example with same facilities, resources and opportunities as the one who will be born in any other part of the world at the same time! Fahad, Lahore/London

The July 11 deadline by Obama administration has worked wonderfully in favour of Pakistan military and the triumvirate. They are pressuring the US to bring the Afghan Taliban to the table to enable early ISAF withdrawal and in so doing virtually blackmailing US to provide them with military and humanitarian aid. In the short term their gamble seems to be paying off. If US strategic histories in Vietnam and Iraq are anything to go by, a premature withdrawal from Afghanistan may result in anarchy in the region. Deadlines for withdrawal for domestic consumption would leave Afghanistan in the hands of unreliable power equations in which US may find the region worse than when it first got in. Nanni Kapoor, India

Pakistan must not be dictated by outsiders as we are the one suffering with this calamity of international drama . In all this politics ,people of Pakistan & Afghanistan suffered at the maximum. Games should be over. We had enough from this freedom of Russian Islamic States. I think frankly all this problem are created because of USA strategic goals in this part of the world , to weaken Russia .Pakistan what gained , nothing , the vision they had about Central Asian Muslim states is not there to recognize at all. Two things Pakistan must do it that 1- All taliban leaders arrested now must not be transferred to America at all cost. They must be punished in Pakistani court under Pakistan judicial system. 2 -Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran should sit on the table and find the solution of this problem, USA & India should stay away and quit from this place. If they do not do this, problem will not go with fighting all the time. Khalid Masood Rehman, Tripoli -Libya