

## Obama's South Asia challenges

BBC News - 25 /11/2008

By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid says US President-elect Barack Obama will face some of his trickiest foreign policy challenges in South Asia.

The extraordinary electoral victory of Barack Obama will hopefully tilt the world away from what many see as the ruinous unilateralism of George Bush's policies towards greater multilateralism.

Mr Obama's parentage and upbringing straddle so many identities that they can only be of benefit as he sets about formulating new policies to deal with the burgeoning crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan while ensuring that India helps rather than hinders the peace process in the region.

The world's euphoria at Mr Obama's victory will initially give him a honeymoon period around the world.

"For the first six months no European leader will be able to say no to any demand Mr Obama makes," a European foreign minister tells me.

"If he asks Europe for more troops for Afghanistan or money for Pakistan, it will be difficult to refuse." So far Mr Obama's plans have been policy sound bites, more to do with electioneering rather than then dealing with real problems on the ground in South Asia.

However there are signs from Mr Obama's South Asia team that has been working on policy issues over the past few months in Washington, that he wants a comprehensive and interlocking strategy in South Asia.

### Sensitive

Thus Mr Obama's promised surge of US troops in Afghanistan will be matched by an all round comprehensive surge that includes better reconstruction, development and extending the reach of the Afghan government into the provinces.

The US military has already indicated that it is prepared to fight against extremist Taleban but talk to more moderate Taleban.

There will also be sensitive political issues to be resolved.

Will President Obama back the re-election of Hamid Karzai as president of Afghanistan when and if elections take place in October 2009?

Will it back the new Afghan government plan to arm local Pashtun tribes to better resist the Taleban? How much will Mr Obama push Nato and the European Union to provide more troops, trainers and money for Afghanistan?

### Pakistan issues

Pakistan has the severest political and economic crisis in its history.

It also faces a jihadist insurgency that is spreading beyond northern Pakistan, an army that is still hesitant to cede too much power to a civilian government and an ubiquitous intelligence service that runs a state within the state.

There is also a division within the establishment.

Traditionally the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party has been close to the Democrats, while the army has always preferred the Republicans - perhaps because Republican presidents rarely question military rule.

Despite the efforts of President Asif Ali Zardari, the US-Pakistan relationship is at a low ebb due to the US belief that the army is not fully confronting the jihadist threat.

Mr Obama will need a comprehensive policy for Pakistan that both strengthens democracy, woos Pakistan's main street by a more people-orientated aid program, while ensuring that the army remains a US ally and is not alienated.

Mr Obama will have to combat the deep anti-Americanism that Mr Bush's policies created amongst the public, media and the army.

This anti-Americanism is being exploited by the jihadists who attack democracy, women's rights and other freedoms as belonging to Western rather than Islamic value systems.

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan will have to also wake up to another reality.

Gone are the Bush days when US government aid was doled out with little accountability or few conditionalities.

Eighty per cent of the \$11.8bn funnelled to Pakistan since 2001 was gobbled up by the army with an unprecedented lack of transparency or accounting by either Islamabad or Washington.

Some of the over \$20bn of US aid to Afghanistan has been siphoned off to fuel local corruption, pay expensive American consultants or carry out over-billed development projects.

While the international financial crisis will make every US penny count, the new Democrat administration has pledged to better monitor and account for all US aid.

A bill introduced before Congress by now Vice President-elect Joe Biden, which promises Pakistan \$1.5bn a year for development aid for five to 10 years is heavy with conditionalities.

The aid money will only flow if Islamabad strengthens democracy and fights terrorism.

India rattled

India is waiting to see how President Obama deals with the nuclear agreement signed with Bush.

India has already been rattled by a comment by Mr Obama on CNN that the US should help resolve the Kashmir dispute.

The Indian media has criticised an essay that I wrote with fellow Afghan analysts, Barnett Rubin in Foreign Affairs magazine this month urging the US to pressure Delhi to do more to resolve its disputes with Islamabad so that the Pakistan army could feel less threatened by India and divert more resources to fighting militancy.

India's foreign ministry is now sending a delegation to meet with the Obama transition team.

India has traditionally refused to accept outside pressures on improving its relationship with Pakistan, but negotiations on resolving the Kashmir issue have been paralysed since the 2004 ceasefire - largely because India refuses to discuss the issue.

However if Mr Obama is to pursue a comprehensive strategy to help Pakistan and Afghanistan combat jihadism, India will have to play a role and be part of the solution.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of the recently published *Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*.