

Only talks with the Taliban can end an unwinnable war

Evening Standard, London, 19/07/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

This week's conference in Kabul to determine the future of international support for Afghanistan is critical.

The meeting, attended by Foreign Secretary William Hague, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other foreign ministers, along with the UN Secretary General, is a make-or-break effort to galvanise President Hamid Karzai into taking responsibility for his country. For Western forces have made it clear that they want to start pulling out.

It is likely that Karzai will announce tomorrow that Nato and US forces will hand over all military responsibility to Kabul by 2014, although he will stress that it will be "a condition-based and phased transition". Yesterday Defence Secretary Liam Fox said most British troops will leave Afghanistan by 2014.

Yet as ministers gather, the battle against the Taliban is becoming bloodier and more unwinnable by the day. The resistance has now spread throughout the country. Four British servicemen died within 24 hours over the weekend. A record-breaking 150 US and Nato soldiers have been killed in six weeks. No European government or US administration can sustain such losses for long.

The latest deaths can only add to the growing anti-war feeling among the British public. Meanwhile Democrats in Congress are souring on the war and refusing to vote for more aid money. For the first time, more than 50 per cent of Americans are against the war.

Thus President Obama is holding firm to his deadline of July 2011 for the start of US withdrawal. That has led to criticism from Republicans and some leaders in the region, who fear the Americans will leave the Taliban in charge.

Many Afghans fear an over-hasty withdrawal could lead to the collapse of the Kabul government, letting loose rivalries among Afghanistan's neighbours and prompting renewed inter-ethnic conflict in Afghanistan or full civil war. Regional neighbours fear neo-Taliban violence will engulf Pakistan and the central Asian republics.

The key to a dignified withdrawal is how quickly the US is ready to get involved in talking to the Taliban – something both Karzai and Pakistan have been pushing them to do.

Only a negotiated settlement and power-sharing, Karzai argues, can end the war, allow Western forces to leave in good order and bring peace to the region. Taliban leaders have said they want to talk face-to-face with the Americans and Nato. Many Afghans want the US and Nato involved in any talks to ensure that Karzai does not concede too much to the Taliban. They also want him to set up a multi-ethnic negotiating team, rather than using his own family as at present.

The Americans, though, are still averse to talks – unlike the British. The appointment of two key new military figures shows the differences that persist.

First is General David Petraeus, who now heads all 140,000 US and Nato forces in Afghanistan after the dismissal of his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal. Known as a "hard hat", Petraeus authored the counter-insurgency manual that half the world's armies use as a textbook. He promised Obama that the Afghan National Army (ANA) would be ready by July 2011 so the US could start pulling out troops. He is averse to talking to the Taliban until it has been tactically defeated.

But to many, Petraeus's aims look decidedly optimistic. The ANA and more so the Afghan police remain dubious

forces – especially after a Taliban “sleeper” in the ANA killed three British soldiers last week. The Afghan government is still far from ready to take over even the country’s peaceful regions. And achieving a tactical defeat of the Taliban anywhere right now looks unlikely.

The second military figure is General Sir David Richards, new British Chief of the Defence Staff and former commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan. Richards is strongly in favour of opening negotiations with the Taliban as soon as possible and does not believe a military victory is possible.

In the former Labour government, Richards’s views were strongly backed by David Miliband, then Foreign Secretary, and his special envoy to the region, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles. Yet this powerful triumvirate failed to convince the Obama administration to open talks.

It now remains to be seen whether Richards can help forge a common position in the coalition government and make a stronger case to the Americans. David Cameron is aware that Afghanistan is his Achilles heel: he needs to show support for President Obama at the same time as finding a resolution to the nine-year war and holding on to public support.

Last month at the G20 summit, Cameron told Obama that the alliance should be “putting everything we have into getting [Afghanistan] right this year”. British and US officials I have spoken to say everyone is getting slightly desperate and paranoid about getting it right.

This week’s conference is supposed to ensure that all donor countries are united in their approach. Yet some Nato members are already voting with their feet. Last week Canada handed over control of the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar to the US 82nd Airborne Division, holding good on its plans to withdraw all its troops next year. Also last week, the Dutch handed over the critical southern province of Uruzghan to the Americans: they too plan to withdraw.

Until now a US-led military strategy has prevailed over political needs in Afghanistan. We now desperately need a political strategy to take precedence over the military. A military strategy that is rooted in responsible political dialogue with the enemy is more likely to gain support from the Afghans, regional countries and the international community.

It would also allow Western troops to stay longer if necessary – for it yet may come to that. Power-sharing talks will not be easy or quick. As British troops die in greater numbers, that might not look a palatable choice. But Cameron and Hague must stick with it. The alternative is an ever-deepening and widening chaos in the region – and that would, in the end, do Britain no good either.

The newly revised edition of Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond* is published by IB Tauris