Talks are the only route in Afghanistan

Los Angeles Times. 11/27/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

A military victory against the Taliban is elusive; a better, lasting peace requires talks and some sort of power-sharing arrangement.

At last week's summit in Lisbon, at which NATO agreed to hand over security to Afghan forces by 2014, there was an elephant in the room that no one mentioned: talks with the Taliban. NATO leaders spoke about ending the war, but nobody offered a suggestion of how that would happen. One way would be through defeat of the Taliban. But another possibility is through negotiations with the Taliban, which could bring peace even before the 2014 deadline.

At this point, the issue is something of a sticking point between Afghanistan and the United States. President Hamid Karzai is adamant that only talks with the Taliban can end the war. Gen. David H. Petraeus, the American commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, is highly skeptical and says the Taliban must first be thoroughly subdued militarily.

I recently traveled to Afghanistan, where I met with Karzai, Petraeus and four former Taliban leaders now living in Kabul. It was clear that the various parties all view the situation through different prisms, but there were also some causes for optimism.

In separate interviews, the four former Taliban leaders all voiced a similar message: Serious talks are possible, but only if Taliban leaders are able to operate from a neutral venue. They see Afghanistan as being under U.S. occupation, and Pakistan's intelligence agency, they say, tries to manipulate the Taliban there. They believe the group needs to operate from a more neutral country, and they raised several options, including a Persian Gulf state such as Qatar or Sharjah, part of the United Arab Emirates, or countries such as Turkey, Germany or Japan.

The four men I spoke with are all former senior Taliban officials who occupied high office in the late 1990s, when the group ruled Afghanistan. They did not want to be identified for security reasons. Some had been captured and held for several years by U.S. forces before being freed, and they all now live quietly in Kabul under heavy government guard.

It is well known, however, that they remain in touch with the clandestine Taliban leadership, and the Kabul regime has used them as go-betweens in the past.

Since 2008, the interested parties have been discussing (in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere) the possibility of talks. But they have not moved forward into serious negotiations. Publicly, Taliban leaders based in Pakistan still mostly deny that talks have taken place and insist that the U.S. will be defeated in Afghanistan.

But the four former Taliban leaders in Kabul acknowledged that conversations have occurred and offered similar suggestions for moving them forward. They called for the release of Taliban prisoners in U.S. custody at the military detention centers at Bagram airfield near Kabul and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. They also called for removing the names of Taliban leaders from a list maintained by the United Nations.

Those on the list — created by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1267 in 1999 — are subject to a travel ban and to having their assets seized. The list currently has 433 suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban names on it, after 45 people were recently removed at the request of the Afghan government in a sign of good faith toward the Taliban.

In an interview at the presidential palace, Karzai told me that he too would like to see talks move forward. He said he had been trying to persuade President Obama to move beyond merely supporting Afghan government talks with the Taliban and getting the United States involved directly. That, he said, is what the Taliban has told him it wants.

Petraeus told me he believes that the Taliban will negotiate in good faith only when it has been weakened through military action. He said the movement also must publicly disassociate itself from Al Qaeda. In the meantime, he said, the relentless U.S. surge should continue to pound the Taliban. The strategy, he said, has depleted Taliban leadership in the south and east of the country. Petraeus said that in a three-month period ending in mid-November, NATO and U.S. forces killed or captured 368 Taliban mid-level leaders and killed 968 foot soldiers.

But aspects of the troop buildup have put the U.S. at odds with Karzai, who told me he wants night raids and the targeting of Taliban leaders stopped immediately.

NATO's hopes of withdrawing most of its forces by 2014 — expressed clearly at the summit last week — depends on the still-uncertain capability of the Afghan army and police to take over by then. Though improving somewhat, the Afghan army and police forces are plagued with high rates of desertion, illiteracy and drug use. This year the United States will spend $12 billion on training and equipping the Afghan army and police force.

Many Americans are skeptical about why the Taliban would want to talk now rather than simply wait until NATO's planned withdrawal by 2014 and try to seize power then. But the leaders I spoke with said that although the Taliban has had some successes and still has a large pool of potential recruits, it is exhausted by the war, having taken heavy casualties, and would like to see peace.

There have been strong hints that the Taliban is ready to forsake jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda, that want to use Afghan soil for nefarious ends, something the U.S. is likely to require as a precondition of talks.

The most sensible among the Taliban recognize that they were unable to run the country in the 1990s and that they would face a similar problem today. Better than trying to grab power now and being isolated by the international community and denied money and aid, they would support a power-sharing agreement with Karzai.

Such a deal could be reached at an international conference like the one in Bonn in 2001 that bought Karzai to power but excluded the Taliban. The former Taliban leaders said they would have no objections to international mediators participating in such talks.

Of course, talks between the two sides would have to be preceded by confidence-building measures to increase trust and help bring the Taliban leaders in from the cold. These overtures would then be followed by negotiations about the shape and form of the next government.

There would certainly be thorny issues, including such things as the role of Sharia law; how exactly to share power, both in Kabul and at the provincial level; the role of women; and what type of education system should be built.

In Washington, the Obama administration remains sharply divided between civilian advisors pressing for an exit strategy and the Pentagon, which is pressing for a clear military victory. But the latter is highly unlikely, and the former will require negotiations to be successful.

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