

The Pentagon echoes with the hubris of Vietnam

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By Ahmed Rashid

The difference one year makes. A year ago America was celebrating the death of Osama bin Laden and Barack Obama had earned his spurs as a martial president. Now, as the endgame approaches and the US and Nato prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, the situation there has deteriorated rapidly.

What is clear is that the US needs to devote all its resources and strategic will to ending the war through the year-long talks with the Taliban, before US forces withdraw in 2014. And yet, increasingly, feuding in the Obama administration has become the main obstacle to progress in such negotiations.

The Pentagon's insistence on fighting robustly even as the endgame unfolds precludes what Mr Obama himself has called for - the talks. Much of this should be

put down to the hubris of the US military, which at the back of its mind still believes there are battles, if not a war, to be won; Taliban to be killed; and at least some success to be gained. They are wrong.

The talks have stalled, partly because the US military has for months blocked the first confidence-building measure the Taliban proposed, and which the US had initially accepted. This was the release of five Taliban leaders from Guantánamo Bay in exchange for Taliban concessions.

First, the Pentagon threw up technical reasons to delay the release - asking who would guarantee that the freed prisoners would not rejoin the Taliban. Then there was talk of first releasing two prisoners and later the other three. Now, senior officials say, the Pentagon insists anything to do with Gitmo is off-limits as a confidence-building measure - and the prisoners should stay put.

Everyone knows how important prisoner releases are for the Taliban - they have carried out spectacular attacks on Afghan jails to free their prisoners - and other US officials now face the task of explaining to the Taliban why Washington is reneging on its reconciliation policy. Taliban mediators are angry at the delay and embarrassed because their battlefield commanders want to know why talks are happening; as a result they were even reluctant to return to the battlefield this spring.

Unfortunately, in a familiar Washington narrative, although officials in the state department and the White House have vigorously pursued the idea of talks, they have not proved able or forceful enough to trump the Pentagon. It now looks unlikely that there will be any movement on the talks before the November election, as Mr Obama's team will be reluctant to invite Republican jibes that it is soft on the Taliban. So, once again, the US election timetable overrides the real issues of war and peace.

All this leaves the Pentagon virtually in control of policy until the presidential inauguration at the start of 2013 - less than a year before the withdrawal. This implies that we will see, in the year ahead, not talks to bring the war to a gradual end but a continual deployment of force. That will only make neighbours such as Iran and Pakistan more nervous and liable to arm their Afghan proxies.

What the US military seems to forget is that the Taliban initiated the talks because they too fear another civil war. Although many Afghans doubt the Taliban's sincerity about talks, the only way for the US to test this is to continue the dialogue and take the initiative in offering measures that can reduce the day-to-day violence and eventually lead to a ceasefire.

Mr Obama arrived with much promise that his presidency would pursue political solutions to global problems rather than military ones. Instead, as the US military calls the shots, anti-Americanism in the region will grow. There is no way of knowing whether, when the Americans are ready to talk again, hardline Taliban will reject the offer. But I believe the US will have only one chance for the talks to succeed. If that opportunity is lost,

hardliners backed by al-Qaeda are likely to usurp the leadership and intensify the fighting once US forces leave.

The policy of militarisation at the end of an occupation was the policy in Vietnam - we all know what happened to American hubris there.

The writer's latest book is 'Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan'