

Tackling the Taliban

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In an interview with Madrid11.net, noted journalist and Afghanistan expert Ahmed Rashid discusses negotiations with the Taliban and Pakistan's central role in the crisis.

In the west, the initial reaction to [Pakistani foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri's suggestion of negotiating with the Taliban was one of shock and rejection. Recently, however, the idea doesn't seem quite as preposterous. The assumption is of course that the Taliban cannot be beaten. Can the Taliban be dealt with by military means alone?

No, I don't think that the Taliban can be dealt with by military means alone, but at the same time I think we have to be very clear about what we mean when we say "negotiating with the Taliban". And that has to be that the present leadership of the Taliban is not acceptable. There has to be greater effort by the various countries involved - Pakistan, Afghanistan, western intelligence agencies - to divide the Taliban, and create a leadership that can be negotiated with, and which will be willing to accept the unitary state of Afghanistan, its sovereignty and present political structure.

The problem lies in that the west has given the job of trying to divide the Taliban to the Pakistan intelligence. What has happened in that process is that the Taliban rather than being divided have been strengthened. The extremists are being housed and given asylum and a base of operations within Pakistan. That has been the big problem.

How do you divide the Taliban? You have to prove to them militarily that they can't win. But you also have to be able to open negotiations with elements in there who may accept the present government.

The Pakistani foreign minister suggested that a similar arrangement to the one in place in Waziristan would work in Afghanistan. Is the situation in Waziristan worth emulating?

The deal signed by the Pakistani military has been signed with the extremists, with the Taliban and al-Qaida forces. It has not been signed by the tribal elders or the moderate Taliban. The extremists are already flouting it. In my opinion, the agreement has broken down.

It is totally worthless at the moment because the attacks against US and Afghan forces from Waziristan have in fact increased. The large number of suicide bombers that have penetrated into some of the cities including Kabul have also increased. They are happily killing local people who may oppose them. The agreement has already failed.

We seem to be nearing a time of uncomfortable diplomacy. If Washington does enter into negotiations or soften its line with Iran and Syria, will that heap further pressure on western officials to deal with the Taliban?

Again, I'm all for negotiations, it just depends which Taliban we're talking about. If with Mullah Omar or Mullah Dadullah or any one of the present commanders who have been killing women and children and civilians, I don't think that's possible.

With other elements of the Taliban, yes.

How would you suggest, then, that Islamabad, Washington and London approach this "moderate" Taliban you've mentioned?

Number one, Pakistan has to arrest the leading members of the Taliban who are living in Pakistan, in Quetta: Mullah Omar, Mullah Daudullah their families are here, people know where they are. I think these leaders have to be arrested and an example has to be made of them. There's no need to hand them over to the Americans, but certainly what has to be demonstrated, as a number one priority, is that Pakistan's policy has changed, that Pakistan will no longer support the extremists. If that happens, then you will also see a corresponding shift in the Taliban, when the Taliban realise that without Pakistani support they cannot survive, and they'll shift to negotiations.

So far Washington's complete failure has been its refusal - not its inability - to question [Pakistani president Pervez] Musharraf on this matter.

You've been writing quite a bit recently about how many Pashtuns in Pakistan and Afghanistan are hoping to distance themselves and their communities from their reputation as supporters of the Taliban. What role can Pashtun political organisations on either side of the border play in tackling or undermining the Taliban?

I think they're already playing a very important role. Some of these secular and more nationalistic Pashtun organisations have been in touch with moderate elements of the Taliban. They have been persuading a lot of these Afghans to talk to the government in Kabul.

The problem here again is that they're not being supported properly. The problem is in Pakistan, where the secular Pashtun nationalists are not being supported by the government, but being suppressed by the military regime. Unless they have some degree of state support in what they're trying to do, they're not going to be able to move very far.

In persuading the moderate Taliban they also have to show they have power behind them. If they are a disenfranchised group, as secular Pashtun groups tend to be because the government is not supporting them, it's very difficult to persuade moderate Taliban to break ranks.

From the perspective of Islamabad, what concerns or pressures drove the Foreign Minister to such a suggestion? Is Pakistan rethinking its participation in the war on terror?

The military makes our foreign policy in Pakistan, not civilians, and the military has a strategic conception comprised of the following:

1) The Indian presence in Afghanistan, which it sees as a grave threat. It considers that Karzai and other Afghan leaders have allowed the Indian an overwhelming presence in Afghanistan, which I think is highly exaggerated and false.

2) They have this idea of strategic depth that no government in Afghanistan that is not entirely pro-Pakistan can be allowed. That is a result of the last ten years, when since 1992 most of the governments, not all, in Afghanistan from the mujahideen to the Taliban have been pro-Pakistan. The idea of an Afghanistan asserting its own sovereignty, being independent, having foreign relations with all the other countries is not acceptable to the military.

3) The role of the local fundamentalist parties that support the Taliban. The military has very close links to these fundamentalist parties because they are also providing manpower to fight in Kashmir. The military has a 25 year long political alliance with Pakistan's Islamic parities and extremist groups, and part of that is linked to supporting the Taliban.

If the military was to go against the Taliban in any way, that alliance would be jeopardised.