

September 11 - One Year On New Wars To Fight

One year after the September 11 attacks, domestic conditions in most of Central and South Asia continue to make the region a fertile breeding ground for terrorists.

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By Ahmed Rashid/Washington

One year ago, the notion that a terrorist organization based in Afghanistan would rise up and change the world was the stuff of conspiracy theorists and underappreciated intelligence agents. Until September 11. When a troop of terrorists hijacked four aircraft and succeeded in crashing three of them into buildings that symbolized American wealth and security, all eyes turned to Afghanistan, home of Osama bin Laden and his Taliban hosts.

Readers of this magazine already knew of the continuing civil war in Afghanistan and the dangers brewing under the Taliban and the autocratic regimes of Central Asia. Readers also knew that this region has been misunderstood or simply ignored by much of the world, most notably by policymakers in Washington.

So when the United States began its assault on the Taliban and on bin Laden's Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, and began to build strategic alliances with neighbouring regimes, there was hope here that the area's general pattern of autocracy and oppression would at last be addressed.

But America's target was bad guys, not bad government. Apart from paving the way for the establishment of a more credible leadership in Afghanistan, Washington has done little to improve the environment that made Central Asia a breeding ground for militants. Instead, it has likely made the breeding ground even more fertile.

One year after the September 11 attacks, in the aftermath of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, there is growing instability and domestic political crisis in every country in Central and South Asia. The coming 12 months, and the success of the war against terrorism, will be shaped more by the outcome of these crises than by U.S. progress in destroying the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Though not all of these crises are direct results of U.S. action, all of them will depend on some degree of American intervention to resolve.

"The region is a hotbed of insecurity and instability caused by internal crises coming to the forefront as a result of the war against terrorism, issues the Americans have failed to address," says Arif Nizami, editor of the Pakistani daily, The Nation.

poised for trouble

In a region where dictatorship is the norm, it is ironic that Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai, who was thrust into power by a hastily constructed democracy, is the most legitimate leader. The defeat of the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces last December has ensured that they no longer pose a military threat to the Afghan government or the region. Al Qaeda has lost its command centres in Afghanistan, though tactical failures by U.S. forces have allowed several thousand Al Qaeda militants to escape, and terrorists are likely to strike again in Western capitals. Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders are still at large, though while on the run they pose little immediate threat.

But Karzai is not secure: Though foreign support to oust the Taliban was fast and furious, nine months after the regime's defeat there is no credible, well-supported political and economic strategy to help stabilize Afghanistan. Karzai has yet to extend the writ of Kabul's authority across the country and find a political formula to rein in the warlords outside the capital, who grow stronger and more defiant of central authority by the day.

There are now signs that the Pentagon is attempting to redefine its priorities in Afghanistan. In an interview at

the Pentagon, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz told the Review, "I do think increasingly our focus is shifting to training the Afghan national army, supporting the International Security Assistance Force, supporting reconstruction efforts-those kind of things that contribute to long-term stability."

Across the Afghan border, in Pakistan a promised transition to democracy has been stifled by the self-appointed president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf. The military ruler faces increasing opposition as he tries to pre-arrange the outcome of general elections in October. And while tensions with India over Kashmir have abated, the threat of war remains. Add to that Al Qaeda cells and militant groups sowing instability inside the country, economic recession and division between secular democratic parties and Islamic groups. Pakistan's army, with its go-it-alone strategy that ignores civil society and political parties, is unlikely to be able to maintain political equilibrium.

An unstable Pakistan torn apart by political tensions or war with India could give Islamic militants the opportunity they want to establish an Islamic state. Likewise, in the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia, increasing oppression and rising discord, in an era of seething economic malaise and an absence of democratic alternatives, are strengthening Islamic militant groups.

In these five Central Asian republics, whose leaders still hold Soviet-style elections where the ruler is the only candidate and the vote is rigged, the question of legitimacy has never been more prominent. Since last October, Uzbekistan, Kirgystan and Tajikistan have hosted Western military forces for the war in Afghanistan. They have also used their new-found importance to the West as a convenient excuse to step up repression of their political opponents.

The silence from Washington has allowed Central Asian leaders to intensify their crackdowns on secular parties, thereby giving underground Islamic extremist parties such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir further justification in their calls for toppling leaders by force.

Although Uzbekistan and Kirgystan signed strategic treaties this year with the U.S. that clearly stipulated the need for political and economic reform, President George W. Bush's administration has declined to force the matter by making U.S. financial aid to these countries conditional on reform.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov even refused to allow the Uzbek media to publish the text of his country's treaty. In it, Uzbekistan pledged to "intensify the democratic transformation of society politically and economically," a promise that Karimov does not seem to want his people to know about.

The U.S., without a strategic vision for the region, failed to use its increased engagement to nudge Pakistan, Iran or the Central Asian republics towards greater political and economic reform. It may be a lost opportunity: Attention in Washington has shifted to the debate on toppling the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Planning an attack on Iraq has deepened the rift between the U.S. Defence Department and the State Department. Senior U.S. diplomats say that because the Pentagon dominates policymaking, its refusal to endanger the future of U.S. military bases in Central Asia has limited what Washington can do to pressure the regimes to carry out reforms.

Ironically, the Western military presence due to the war has revived hopes for greater democracy among Central Asia's secular political forces, both at home and among exiled politicians. For the first time in a decade, presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Askar Akayev of Kirgystan face opposition political movements, street protests and open calls for their resignations.

"The opposition movements are convinced, despite any real evidence, that they have Washington's attention for the first time in a decade," says Anthony Richter, director of the Soros Foundation in New York.

Turkmenistan's autocratic leader, President Saparmurad Niyazov, who tolerates no opposition at home, faces a renewed threat from a new alliance of exiled politicians who are courting Europe and the U.S. for support to topple him. Economic troubles and widespread corruption among the ruling elites have only added to young peoples' frustration with their leaders.

Yet as long as Washington refuses to use its new-found clout in the region, political crises in several countries

are inevitable in the months ahead, starting with Kirgызstan. Since May, at least five people have been killed by police during violent street protests. Opposition parties have united in calling for Akayev's resignation, and are planning countrywide protests later this month.

With no process in place for leadership change and weak or nonexistent institutions for negotiating a transfer of power peacefully, the danger of longer-term instability in Central Asia appears unavoidable.

In Pakistan, such danger is clearly evident. As Musharraf continues to support the war against terrorism and provide military bases to the U.S., Washington continues to ignore the country's domestic crisis. On August 21, Musharraf amended the 1973 constitution, giving the military a decisive role in the future political set-up, allowing the president to make all key appointments and dismiss elected governments, and setting up a National Security Council that will prevail over the future parliament and prime minister.

Almost all major secular and Islamic political parties have condemned the move, called for Musharraf's resignation and claim the army is planning to rig the elections. A political crisis appears inevitable, either just before or after the elections. Equally dangerous is the re-emergence of Al Qaeda cells in Pakistan that receive logistical support from Islamic extremist groups there.

"Clearly Pakistan has been one of the main places, but by no means the only one" where Al Qaeda is regrouping, says Wolfowitz. "We are concerned about that and concerned about the stability of Pakistan over the long term."

No senior U.S. official has raised the coming political crisis or tried to rein in Musharraf. "We have a very heavy agenda with Pakistan," says Wolfowitz. "Preventing war with India is probably at the top of the list, coordinating our activities with the war on terrorism is the second major priority." Wolfowitz acknowledges that "long-term stability really does depend on democracy," but says "there is going to be a certain amount of political turbulence, almost no matter what."

As for the conflict over Kashmir, U.S. diplomatic efforts have only gone as far as defusing immediate crises. India is bidding to hold elections in Kashmir this month in which militants will have no role. Pakistani and Kashmiri militants are opposed to the elections and are expected to try to sabotage them. Another round of tensions between the two neighbours is unavoidable. The two countries are unlikely to start talks on Kashmir without concerted U.S. pressure.

Meanwhile, Iran faces a paralyzing stand-off between the moderate government of President Mohammed Khatami and the hardline mullahs, which could erupt onto the streets at any time. Washington has declined to invest in talking to Khatami, saying his moderate policies have failed to make a difference and that the U.S. would now support the Iranian people-a vague and indeterminate policy shift that has only strengthened the mullahs. The mullahs are determined to destabilize Khatami, not just at home but by backing anti-Western Islamic groups elsewhere in the region, be they in Afghanistan, Central Asia or the Middle East.

The war against terrorism has entered a more critical and complex phase which now involves helping to rectify the gross political and economic imbalances in the region. At the first anniversary of September 11, it is clear that the West will need to make an even greater commitment to meet these challenges.