

A Reinvigorated Anti-Taliban Alliance?

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By Ahmed Rashid

After years of false starts, are we on the brink of a breakthrough in improving relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the Taliban and al-Qaeda on both sides of the border suffering an array of defeats and deaths? For years the Pakistani military has been accused by the Afghans, the Americans and Nato of playing a double game - helping the Nato-US coalition in Afghanistan on the one hand, but at the same time allowing al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban to seek refuge and garner logistical support in Pakistan.

Even the killing of Osama Bin Laden by US special forces in Abbottabad, a military garrison town in Pakistan, did not push the military into changing its tune, which was always one of denial that it supported the Afghan Taliban. Many leaders of the Afghan Taliban have lived in Pakistan since 2001.

These accusations dogged Pakistan's new army chief General Raheel Sharif when he visited Washington for 10 days last month - particularly that in the past six months of a military offensive in North Waziristan the Pakistan army had failed to capture or kill a single prominent militant leader.

But now those assumptions may be changing and the complex three-way relationship between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan could be on the cusp of undergoing a dramatic improvement.
United against al-Qaeda

For the first time in nearly 10 years the Pakistan army has killed a high-level leader of al-Qaeda. Adnan el Shukrijumah, a naturalised American citizen, was killed during a raid by Pakistani forces at a compound in the South Waziristan tribal agency close to the Afghan border on 6 December. He was accused of involvement in planning several failed attacks in the US and Britain nearly a decade ago and had been hiding in the tribal belt along the border ever since.

The following day, reports said a US drone had killed Umer Farooq, another top al-Qaeda leader in the North Waziristan tribal agency. A Pakistani national, he was allegedly al-Qaeda's operational commander in charge of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Suddenly both Pakistan and the US appear to be collaborating to root out al-Qaeda in a manner not seen since 2002-2004 when the Pakistan army killed or captured many al-Qaeda operatives.

The US has begun obliging Pakistan too. For the first time the US is targeting Pakistani Taliban insurgents who had earlier taken refuge in Afghanistan from where they carried out strikes into Pakistan.

According to senior Afghan sources, they were clandestinely being supported by the government of former Afghan President Hamid Karzai in a tit-for-tat revenge game for Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban.
A surprising repatriation

The US has now begun targeting those Pakistani Taliban for the first time and significantly the Afghan authorities are not objecting. A US drone strike on 7 December killed nine suspected Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan's Kunar province. The dead included a senior Pakistani Taliban commander, police said
An earlier US drone strike had tried to target Mullah Fazlullah, the current head of the Pakistani Taliban, who is also thought to be living in Kunar province. Pakistan has been asking the US and the Afghans to carry out such attacks for more than a year, but only now - after gaining Pakistani co-operation on other fronts - is Washington obliging Islamabad.

Clearly, Washington is pleased the way the Pakistan army is reacting. Pakistan has been further rewarded by the US. On 7 December the US military confirmed that it had handed over three Pakistani Taliban, including Latif Mehsud to the Pakistani authorities. Latif Mehsud had been the second-in-command of the Pakistani Taliban under its previous leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, who was killed in a US drone strike last year.

Latif Mehsud was seized by US forces in October 2013 in eastern Afghanistan as he tried to broker deals between the Afghan authorities and the Pakistani Taliban living on Afghan territory. The Pakistani authorities view him as a danger to the country and have been insisting on his prompt return. His sudden repatriation - again with no objections from Kabul - is a signal of improved relations.

So far, there is a change of direction and much greater co-operation on the ground in military terms between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan. But will this bring about a real change in political attitudes?

The Afghan government will now be waiting to see how the Pakistani military obliges Kabul. The Afghans will also be looking to see if the Pakistanis use their clout to try to rein in Taliban attacks in Kabul. The most important thing Islamabad can do is to allow Afghan negotiators to meet the Afghan Taliban leaders who are living in Pakistan. That could be the most significant move of all and start the long process of ending the war in Afghanistan.

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- His latest book is Pakistan on the Brink - The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan
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