

Deepening military rift between the US and Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

The deep public rift between the intelligence agencies of the US and Pakistan has now extended to the military.

The US officer who has done the most to build up ties with the Pakistan military has criticised it openly.

Adm Mike Mullen, the top US military official, has visited Pakistan more than 20 times, and invested an unusually large amount of time to build a relationship with Pakistan's army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani.

Gen Kayani has invested an equal amount of time and energy in maintaining a close relationship with the US military, despite differences ever since the Afghan Taliban were defeated in 2001.

From the start, the Pakistan army objected to the occupation of Kabul by the Afghan Northern Alliance, the initial domination of the government by non-Pashtuns, and the refusal of the Americans to involve Pakistan in helping rebuild the Afghan army.

More differences arose after Pakistan gave sanctuary and support to the leadership of the Afghan Taliban who relaunched their insurgency in Afghanistan in 2003.

Since then the Taliban insurgency has grown to cover all of Afghanistan.

The US-Nato alliance has had to deploy 150,000 troops and the war has spawned the Pakistani Taliban, which the Pakistani army did not initially see as a danger but now sees as a major threat.

Yet throughout this time, as the relationship has changed, shaped by events on the ground and in Washington, the two men have remained close friends and have tried to understand the reasons for the strategy adopted by the other.

Each one has had to defend their relationship among their colleagues.

Adm Mullen has been criticised by Congressmen, the CIA and even his military colleagues for being too soft on the Pakistan army.

Real differences

Gen Kayani too has had to defend the army's relationship with the US as anger has grown about excessive US penetration of Pakistan's government and security establishment - even though some of the anti-Americanism has been whipped up by the military itself.

Yet the differences are real enough and seemingly unbridgeable.

The Pakistanis fear that US intelligence will use what it gathers to undermine Pakistan vis-a-vis India and

penetrate its nuclear weapons system.

The Americans fear that Pakistan's refusal to clamp down on certain extremist groups will lead to more terrorist attacks in the US and Europe, which would be followed by demands for swift military retribution against Pakistan.

There is ample evidence that many thwarted terrorist attacks in the West and India over the past few years have had a Pakistani Taliban or Lashkar-e-Taiba (Soldiers of the Pure) connection.

This strategic divergence has been there since the beginning of the US-Pakistan relationship despite the billions of dollars that the US has spent on the Pakistan military, and the services in the Middle East and Afghanistan that the Pakistan army has provided the US in the past.

The relationship broke down when Pakistan went to war with India using American weapons in 1965.

It broke down again when Pakistan went to war in East Pakistan in 1971 and it collapsed for the longest period in the 1990s when Pakistan went ahead with its nuclear weapons program.

Strategic divergences

The saddest man is Adm Mullen because he gives up his job in the summer and the legacy he has tried to forge of a good working relationship between the two armies has not panned out.

Gen Kayani has another three years in office.

Both men have tried in their own way to first understand the other, and then change the strategic direction of the other, but neither succeeded.

The US has failed to convince the Pakistani army that befriending some terrorist groups and fighting others is a policy that is detrimental to global and domestic security.

Nor has the US been able to convince the army to befriend India, even though the civilian government, the political parties, civil society and the business community are now very much in favour.

Pakistan has failed to convince the Americans that its strategy and tactics in Afghanistan have been wrong, whether it was expanding the war in the south, or building the Afghan army, or allowing India too much of a presence.

The Pakistan army believes that the Americans have only further destabilised the region by their actions.

Such strategic divergences cannot be papered over and they are now too far exposed to go back to what existed before.

So major corrections are needed in order to salvage the relationship, which is still possible.

The first correction needed is that many of the secret deals agreed upon by both sides in the aftermath of 9/11 need to be renegotiated.

Common agenda

This has to include issues such as the use of US drones, the deployment of the CIA and contractors inside Pakistan as well as the Pakistan army's attitude to extremist groups such as that of Jalaluddin Haqqani and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The second is that both sides need to find a common agenda to bring peace to Afghanistan and the region.

Such an agenda is now there for the asking because both governments and armies believe that talks with the Afghan Taliban are essential for peace.

But so far, instead of being transparent with one another on the need for a dialogue and working towards a common goal together, each has tried to out-trump the other.

The world needs peace in Afghanistan. Only Pakistan working in co-operation with the US, Nato and all other regional neighbours can bring that about.

That is a common agenda that can bring the US and Pakistan into a real partnership that is meaningful for the Pakistan army and the people of the region.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13168965>

Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.