

## Obama can't neglect Pakistan for four more years

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Pakistan and Afghanistan look on the spectacular landslide re-election of Barack Obama for a second term as US president with some trepidation. Pakistan has just come out of a nine-month breakdown of all talks with the US, the worst state the two countries relationship has been in for 60 years. Pakistan thinks the US under Mr Obama has no strategy, while the US thinks Pakistan lies as it continues to harbour extremists. Mr Obama has frequently called Pakistan his biggest headache but he has been unable to come up with a satisfying painkiller.

In Afghanistan, a war of words has persisted between Obama officials and President Hamid Karzai. Washington has in effect told the Afghan President to be quiet and be grateful for the sacrifices that the US is making. Mr Karzai keeps reminding everyone that he enjoyed better days with George W. Bush and that Mr Obama has tried to undermine him.

For leaders of both countries, Mr Obama's first term has been the worst of all possible worlds, periodically using carrot or stick to drag Islamabad and Kabul into line, but often using threats without clear strategic goals. Moreover, acts declared as victories by the US such as the killing of Osama bin Laden, the start of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan or the refusal to provide the Afghan army with heavy weapons have been viewed with enormous suspicion by Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In Washington, the problems have been magnified by internal rivalries. Mr Obama had allowed the US military to run his policies towards Pakistan and Afghanistan - starting with the surge in Afghanistan in 2009 and then planning for the US withdrawal in 2014. More important political strategies such as talking to the Taliban, making sure free and fair elections are held in Afghanistan and Pakistan and trying to revive relations with Islamabad have been run by a weak state department, stymied by the lack of presidential support.

Now Mr Obama gets a chance to do things differently. What should he do?

Well, for starters, everything.

If the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 is high on his agenda than he should prioritise talks with the Taliban that would aim for a ceasefire between all sides before troops depart and before Afghan presidential elections are held in April of that year.

Many of the Taliban leaders have become advocates for a political settlement rather than a bloody power grab for Kabul that the Taliban know would prompt a civil war they cannot win.

Last year's US-Taliban talks broke down, partly because the military and the CIA in Washington undermined them. Now US officials say all parts of the administration are on board. Mr Obama needs to swiftly compose a team of experts and diplomats and enlist the help of some European countries to talk to the Taliban with the aim of reducing violence in Afghanistan in a step-by-step process that could lead to a ceasefire. Another major diplomatic effort is also needed to revive talks with all neighbouring states, including Iran and Pakistan, about a non-interference regional pact that would protect Afghanistan.

Despite the country's internal chaos, a clear US strategy to talk to the Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan would be attractive to the warring military, judicial and political factions. That is especially so for the military, which is now feeling the heat from the growing threat posed by the Pakistani Taliban. A US dialogue to achieve a cease fire in Afghanistan that includes Pakistani participation may act as a glue to help bind the bickering Pakistani establishment.

The new Obama administration needs to re-engage with Pakistan on all fronts but particularly to help it deal with the growing internal jihadist threat and that includes helping Pakistan devise a comprehensive policy to disarm the anti-Indian extremist groups that inhabit the important province of Punjab. On its own and without financial help Pakistan is presently incapable of devising any such strategy. And if left out of any peace equation in Afghanistan, its intelligence agencies will be tempted to act as spoilers rather than healers.

At the beginning of his first administration Mr Obama took several positive steps to try and ease tensions between the US and the broader Muslim world but there was no follow through by the White House or the State Department. Events such as the Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria and the worsening relations with Iran overwhelmed those early initiatives. There was no effort to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire.

What is needed is a more consistent, more deeply engaged and well led political-diplomatic effort by the US in the broader Muslim world in which the newly elected President Obama is more involved in than what he has been in the past four years.