

Viewpoint: Obama's second chance to secure Afghan peace

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore.

It will take a lot of persuading to convince the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan that the re-election of President Barack Obama is on the whole a positive development for the South Asian region.

Few countries in the world have been so hostile to the president during his first term in office. The rebuilding of a relationship between the US and Pakistan and Afghanistan is going to require more than just deft footwork by President Obama if peace and stability is to be restored in this strategically important region.

Just look at the present day reality.

Pakistan is emerging from a nine-month breakdown of all dialogue with the US - the lowest point in their relationship for 60 years. Many in Islamabad think the US under President Obama has no strategy in Afghanistan, is hostile to Pakistan and is aiming to reduce its nuclear potential.

Anti-US anger.

The US thinks Pakistan is lying as it continues to harbour extremists and is escalating global nuclear tensions by increasing its arsenal despite a severe economic crisis.

President Obama has frequently called Pakistan his biggest headache, but he has been unable to come up with a satisfying remedy. There is little doubt that Pakistan has been paralysed by the continuation of the three-way fight between the army, the judiciary and the government.

It has stymied decision-making to the extent that nobody in the establishment is prepared to commit to an offensive against the Pakistani Taliban after the shooting of [Malala Yousafzai](#), the girl student in the Swat valley who generated such enormous public loathing for the Taliban.

Now whatever military operation occurs will be a cosmetic rather than a serious attempt to deal with the problem - and will inevitably lead to continuing US pressure to do more. However, one hopeful sign is that a few weeks before the US elections a new dialogue started between the military and senior US officials on the extremist threat as well as Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan a war of words persists between President Obama's officials and those of President Hamid Karzai - recently Washington told the Afghan president to refrain from criticising the US and be grateful for the sacrifices that the US is making.

For his part President Karzai keeps reminding everyone that he enjoyed better days with former President George W Bush and that President Obama is constantly trying to undermine him.

But there are other reasons why President Karzai and President Zardari view President Obama's first term so negatively. Both take exception to his periodically-used carrot or stick tactics to drag Islamabad and Kabul into line and both are upset by what they see as unilateral US moves taken without prior consultations.

[The killing of Osama Bin Laden](#) was a shining example of this from the Pakistani viewpoint, as was the start of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the refusal to provide the Afghan army with heavy weapons from Kabul's viewpoint.

In Washington the problems have been magnified by internal rivalries. President 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.

Taliban talks.

More important political strategies such as talking to the Taliban, promoting free and fair elections in Afghanistan and Pakistan and trying to revive relations with Islamabad have been run by what some argue is a weak State Department held back by lack of presidential support.

But with his re-election, the president now has a second chance.

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

Many Taliban leaders are advocates of a political settlement rather than a bloody power grab for Kabul - because they fear a multi-dimensional civil war after 2014 which they know they cannot win when non-Pashtun groups in northern Afghanistan are now much stronger compared to the late 1990s when the Taliban last wielded power. Last year's US-Taliban talks broke down because critics say they were undermined by the military and the CIA in Washington.

Now US officials say all parts of the administration are on board for talks. The president needs swiftly to compose a high-level team of experts and diplomats and enlist the help of some European countries - who have better relations with Iran and Pakistan - to talk to the Taliban with the aim of reducing violence and securing an Afghan ceasefire.

The regional diplomacy pursued by former US diplomat Richard Holbrooke - subsequently abandoned - needs to be revived by the US, which also needs to promote the idea of a non-interference regional pact that would protect Afghanistan from the machinations of its powerful neighbours.

Pakistan role

In the same way a clear US strategy to talk to the Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan would also be attractive to all parts of the Pakistani establishment. 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 ceasefire in Afghanistan that includes Pakistani participation may act as a glue to help bind the bickering Pakistani establishment and help it to take the tough decisions required to secure peace.

With that in mind the new administration needs to re-engage with Pakistan on all fronts - particularly in helping it deal with the growing internal jihadist threat. That includes helping Islamabad devise a comprehensive policy to disarm anti-Indian extremist groups that inhabit the strategically-important province of Punjab.

On its own and without financial help Pakistan is 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. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is going to remain critical for US foreign policy in the next four years - but even more so for a region where war and peace for the future decade could well be decided in the next few months.

Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Pakistan on the Brink: The future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West.