

Why the U.S. must talk to the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

While the Obama administration is watching the battlefield in Afghanistan, hoping for a quick weakening of the Taliban, regional powers are ratcheting up tensions in and outside that country. Pakistan and Iran in particular want to ensure that by the time the United States is ready to talk to the Taliban, the region's future will already be shaped by local powers, limiting Washington's options. Afghanistan's ethnic and sectarian divisions are being exacerbated in the process.

The United States still sees the battle in Afghanistan as a two-sided counterinsurgency, and its focus is on the military situation. In fact, Afghanistan is facing multidimensional threats involving all of its key neighbors. Afghanistan and its neighbors are convinced, despite President Obama's references to a gradual withdrawal, that U.S. and NATO forces will begin a total pullout next summer.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently visited Kabul, making clear that Tehran will jockey for influence after the Western withdrawal. Russia and the Central Asian republics are making themselves visible in wanting to discuss the eventual future of Afghanistan. But the most dangerous signal of instability on the subcontinent is the dramatic escalation of the proxy war between India and Pakistan in the past few weeks. Events are reminiscent of the 1990s, when the bloody Afghan civil war was fueled by an alignment of India, Iran and Russia, which backed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Today, however, the stakes are much higher. India and Pakistan are nuclear powers. Al-Qaeda and its extremist allies in Pakistan and elsewhere are on the loose. NATO's gains in Afghanistan are fragile. Afghan ethnic divisions already weaken the country; a divide fueled by neighboring states could spark a political and security meltdown.

The United States and NATO have said they support "reintegrating" low-level Taliban adherents with the Kabul government, but the Obama administration has not decided about the main demand of Afghan President Hamid Karzai: talking to the Taliban leadership. NATO countries, whose populations increasingly oppose the war in Afghanistan, have already publicly supported this move.

India, Iran and Russia have long been averse to any dialogue with the Taliban that could give Pakistan greater leverage in the region or with Washington. All see the various extremist groups based in Pakistan as threats to their security. India is working to rebuild the regional alliance that opposed the Taliban and Pakistan in the 1990s. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited India last Thursday, partly to discuss a common strategy on a post-U.S. Afghanistan. Senior Indian officials have met with Karzai in Kabul and are due in Iran later this month.

Yet Pakistan's military clearly wants a role in shaping Afghanistan. Islamabad had given the Taliban leadership sanctuary since 2001, but in recent weeks the military has arrested several key Taliban leaders who went around the generals and the intelligence service and were using Saudi Arabia as an intermediary to talk to Kabul. Still left alone, however, are Taliban hard-liners who could promote Pakistan's security needs in future dialogues with Kabul.

On a visit to Islamabad last week, Karzai acknowledged that Pakistan has legitimate security concerns in Afghanistan but also demanded that those arrested Taliban members be extradited to Afghanistan. Privately, senior Afghan officials were incensed, claiming that Pakistan was "sabotaging and undermining" their efforts to talk to the Taliban. Karzai is trying to persuade Washington to back talks with Taliban leaders through him rather than through the Pakistanis. Some Taliban leaders have indicated to Western and Arab interlocutors that their talks with Karzai are a stepping stone to talking to the real power: the United States. In interviews with me, Obama administration officials have discussed whether to talk to the Taliban, but a final decision has not

been made because of internal divisions.

Meanwhile, threats and covert violence are increasing between India and Pakistan. Just a day after their Feb. 25 talks in New Delhi failed to make any substantial headway, seven Indian civilians and two army majors were killed in a terrorist attack on hotels in Kabul. Afghan officials promptly blamed Pakistan-based groups. In early March, four Pakistani workers were killed in Kandahar. Pakistani police officials attributed those deaths and the nine bomb blasts that devastated Lahore on March 12 -- killing nearly 60 -- to India, even though the Pakistani Taliban asserted responsibility for the attacks.

A terrorist incident in Pakistan or India along the lines of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai would almost certainly put both nations on a war footing. The long-sought Pakistani military campaign against extremist Taliban fighters in the tribal areas, which has only recently begun bearing fruit, would end.

The Obama administration must start asserting major diplomatic pressure to ease regional tensions. It needs all of Afghanistan's neighbors to agree on a common position of non-interference. The longer the United States and NATO delay about whether to talk to the Taliban, the greater the turmoil will be in and around Afghanistan. Risks of a wider conflict will grow, an opening that al-Qaeda and other extremist groups will press.

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