

A Deadline We Can Believe In?: Advantage: Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid

WHILE President Obama deliberated three months before releasing his new Afghan surge strategy, his decision actually muddied the waters as far as American credibility in Afghanistan and Pakistan is concerned, and created misapprehensions in Europe.

Many NATO allies were thunderstruck at the deadline announcement. The British, who have the second-largest contingent in Afghanistan, have said their 10,000-troop presence in Helmand Province will not be affected by any timeline. Senior administration officials have spent the last week in Europe and in Afghanistan and Pakistan rowing back on what the president said, insisting that the plan is flexible.

In the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, most people are of two minds. They would like the Americans to leave soon, but don't want to lose their front-line status in the war on terrorism, which brings vast amounts of American aid. Despite widespread anti-Americanism on the streets, the ruling elites are nervous about being dumped by America, as they were in 1989 after the Soviets withdrew.

Much of the confusion was the fault of President Obama himself. He should have devoted far more time in his West Point speech to thoroughly explaining the 18-month timeline. It seems almost as though his speechwriters got no input from the Afghan experts working for Richard Holbrooke, the American envoy here, who could have told them how poorly it would play in the region.

On the battlefield, there is no doubt that extra troops deployed in the east and south of Afghanistan will help in retaking areas now held by the Taliban. But the fear is that the Taliban will melt into the north and west of the country, where NATO troops operate under caveats that limit their ability to go on the offensive. Meanwhile, President Hamid Karzai has contradicted the Obama plan by saying that the Afghan Army and police will not be ready for five years.

Nor has President Obama outlined exactly what the civilian surge hopes to achieve. He has ruled out nation-building, but that is precisely what Afghanistan needs. Most important is building a functional Afghan economy with permanent jobs in place of the temporary positions provided by the present donor-driven development projects.

Pakistan remains the biggest problem. While President Asif Ali Zardari has said all the things Washington wants to hear, there is no agreement as yet from the Pakistan military to go after the Afghan Taliban strongholds in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Provinces. The Pakistan military is unlikely to act unless there is a parallel movement by the Americans to defuse Indo-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir, and unless India is more willing to reduce its forces on Pakistan's eastern border.

We can understand the president's serious domestic constraints – the economy, health care and Congressional elections next year. But this is all the more reason to make sure that the United States and NATO can deliver success in the next 18 months and get all the nations in this region to back their efforts. All this could have been done without an arbitrary timeline.

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