

Bridging a gap for India and Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Visits from three senior U.S. officials in three weeks indicate troubles in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Washington has failed to deliver on the regional strategy it promised this spring, and friction with Pakistan seems to be contributing to the long delay in announcement of a new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Pakistan is critical to any Afghan strategy the Obama administration undertakes. Pakistanis hope that President Obama will push his state guest this week, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, to be more flexible toward Islamabad. But Pakistanis, too, must compromise if there is to be hope for Afghanistan and South Asia.

In their recent visits, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, national security adviser James Jones and CIA chief Leon Panetta promised to push the Indians on regional issues. But the Pakistani army does not trust American promises and has leaned on the civilian government in Islamabad to scale back its largely pro-U.S. positions.

Any surge of U.S. troops into Afghanistan would depend on the Pakistani army's help to protect the truck convoys that would supply the extra Western troops in landlocked Afghanistan. Washington would need even greater clandestine cooperation from the Pakistani military in targeting terrorist hideouts along the border.

Pakistan's army, which is overshadowing the elected government on regional policy, does not want U.S. forces to pull out of Afghanistan. But neither does it want a massive surge of U.S. troops, which it fears will ultimately drive more Afghan refugees into Pakistan or boost morale for the Pakistani Taliban.

The army is finally fighting decisively against the Pakistani Taliban on several fronts in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and has had some success in driving the Pakistani Taliban out of its main stronghold in South Waziristan. Yet the army is loath to even acknowledge the presence of the Afghan Taliban leadership that is based in Baluchistan province and North Waziristan.

U.S. troops cannot roll back the Taliban in southern and eastern Afghanistan without the Pakistanis cutting off the men and materials the Afghan Taliban can draw on.

If U.S. and NATO troops stay on in Afghanistan and beat back the Afghan Taliban in the next few years, the Pakistani military is likely to cooperate with the West.

If, however, President Obama speaks soon of an exit strategy, as many in the United States and Europe want, the Pakistani army is likely to push Afghan President Hamid Karzai to accept a Pakistani-brokered deal to form a pro-Pakistan government with the Taliban in Kabul.

The Pakistani army has no love for Islamic extremists now, but it differentiates between the Afghan Taliban, which it sees as a potential ally in a pro-Pakistan Afghanistan if U.S. efforts there fail, and the Pakistani Taliban, which is viewed as a threat to the state to be eliminated.

In reality, the two Taliban groups and al-Qaeda are closely allied. Both Taliban groups acknowledge the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar as head of the essential jihad against Western forces in Afghanistan. Even though Afghan Taliban leaders are careful not to fight alongside their Pakistani brothers in South Waziristan, they would be happy to see larger parts of the NWFP controlled by the Pakistani Taliban so that their own base areas could expand.

Pakistan's military insists that any U.S. surge will lead to havoc along its border. In fact, since 20,000 additional

U.S. troops started arriving in Afghanistan in March, more and more Afghan, Pakistani and Central Asian fighters have left Pakistan and gone to Afghanistan to take on the Americans. Summertime fighting raged in Helmand in the south, where 10,000 Marines are based, but in the previously peaceful west and north of Afghanistan, where the additional Taliban manpower has helped it expand its territorial control.

The Pakistan military's primary interest in a U.S.-led regional strategy was that the Americans would help restart Indo-Pakistan talks on Kashmir and other disputes that ceased after the terrorist attack on Mumbai last year, and negotiate a reduction of India's influence in Kabul, which Pakistan now blames for a host of ills (some imagined, some real).

Washington pledged in March to involve all of Afghanistan's neighbors and regional powers to help secure peace. India pointedly snubbed the United States and its regional strategy and demanded that Pakistan first eliminate terrorist groups targeting India from Punjab and Karachi. Iran, Russia and China presented other setbacks to the U.S. initiative.

Now India and Pakistan are both playing for broke. Pakistan says it will support a U.S. regional strategy that does not include India, while India is talking about a regional alliance with Iran and Russia that excludes Pakistan. Both positions -- throwbacks to the 1990s, when neighboring states fueled opposing sides in Afghanistan's civil war -- are non-starters as far as helping the U.S.-NATO alliance bring peace to Afghanistan.

To avoid a regional debacle and the Taliban gaining even more ground, Obama needs to fulfill the commitment he made to Afghanistan in March: to send more troops -- so that U.S.-NATO forces and the Afghan government can regain the military initiative -- as well as civilian experts, and more funds for development. He must bring both India and Pakistan on board and help reduce their differences; a regional strategy is necessary for any U.S. strategy in Afghanistan to have a chance. The United States needs to persuade India to be more flexible toward Pakistan while convincing Pakistanis to match such flexibility in a step-by-step process that reduces terrorist groups operating from its soil so that the two archenemies can rebuild a modicum of trust.

The writer, a Pakistani journalist, is the author of "Taliban" and "Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia."