

Rifts emerge over tackling the Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore.

Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid on the growing rift between the US and Pakistan over fighting the Taliban.

There are serious differences emerging between the US and the various power centres in Pakistan which could adversely affect the entire region.

At stake are the upcoming Afghan elections, the US offensive in Helmand province in Afghanistan, curbing the Taliban in Pakistan and a potential worsening in Islamabad's relations with both Kabul and Delhi.

The differences emerge as the US, Britain, France and Nato stake an enormous amount of political prestige on rapidly improving the security situation in Afghanistan and receiving more co-operation from Pakistan on combating the Taliban in both countries.

When Pakistani and Indian leaders met in Egypt on 16 July, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani handed over an intelligence dossier to his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh outlining India's alleged role in destabilising Pakistan from Afghanistan.

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This included funding and training Baloch militants for the separatist insurgency in Balochistan province and providing support for the Pakistani Taliban, in particular its leader Baitullah Mehsud.

The Pakistani dossier was almost certainly a retaliatory move following US and Nato allegations that Pakistan's military continues to provide sanctuary to the top leadership of the Afghan Taliban including Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Adm Michael Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on 23 July that al-Qaeda's leadership is also in Pakistan.

Meanwhile India accuses Pakistan of continuing to harbour extremist groups in Punjab province including Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is accused of carrying out the Mumbai attacks of last year.

The dossier has worsened the long running tit-for-tat accusations between India and Pakistan and expanded their differences to now involve the US and Nato. That in turn puts at risk the entire security of the region.

The dossier is also a sign of the growing ascendancy of the military in Pakistan over the civilian government in the making of foreign and national security policy.

Military's view

In the past President Asif Ali Zardari has taken a pragmatic, conciliatory line towards both India and Afghanistan saying Pakistan has no enmity with them. He has also pledged to clamp down on all "terrorists" regardless of their origins.

However now the government appears to be quietly going along with the military's view of the region.

Western diplomats say that the Pakistani dossier was followed up by a series of hard-hitting briefings by the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for selected foreign journalists and diplomats, blaming the Americans for refusing to curtail the so-called Indian subversion of Pakistan through Afghanistan.

The ISI also denied there were Afghan Taliban on Pakistani soil and instead accused the joint US-British offensive in Helmand province of worsening the security situation for Pakistan because fleeing Taliban will escape into Balochistan.

Western diplomats have responded by reminding the Pakistanis that ever since their defeat in Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban have been given sanctuary in Balochistan.

The military is also insisting that the US stop bombing Pakistan's tribal areas with drone-fired missiles and instead share the technology and intelligence with Pakistan.

The military has become even more incensed after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton discussed supplies of nuclear reactors and new fighter jets to India during her trip there in late July.

These tensions could have the most impact in Afghanistan where presidential elections take place on 20 August with no sign of a Taliban let-up in their bid to disrupt the polls.

The US offensive in Helmand province is meeting stiff resistance and if the fighting continues there is little chance of the Afghan public coming out in large numbers to vote in the southern provinces.

A high number of US and British soldiers have been killed in the first three weeks of July.

Uncertain

In 2004 before the first presidential elections, former President George W Bush successfully exerted pressure on President Pervez Musharraf and the ISI to reign in the Taliban for two months so that elections could take place peacefully.

US attempts to register a similar deal now have been denied by Pakistan, who insist that there are no Afghan Taliban in Pakistan.

It is also uncertain if the Pakistanis have the same kind of influence with the Taliban as they did in 2004.

Meanwhile India has made it clear to the US that it will not resume normal relations with Islamabad until there is a clamp down against Lashkar-e-Taiba and other Punjab-based militant groups.

Only the civilian government is in favour of such a clamp-down.

Meanwhile after driving the Pakistani Taliban out of the Swat valley but failing to kill any of the Taliban commanders, the army is under pressure from the government, the public and the US to go after the Taliban leadership in the tribal areas.

So far it has declined, citing tensions with India and the need to keep the bulk of its army on the Indian border.

Western diplomats say Pakistan is choosing to fight only those Taliban who threaten the government, but refusing to act against those groups who are fighting in Afghanistan.

The rising differences between the US, Europe and India on one side and Pakistan on the other is cause for growing concern as Islamic extremism shows no signs of abating in the region.

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