

If we want peace, we'll have to talk to the Taliban

LONDON EVENING STANDARD. 28/07/2007

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore.

David Miliband's speech outlining a dual-track political and military strategy in [Afghanistan](#) is welcome - and long overdue.

The Foreign Secretary yesterday outlined how the Afghan government and international forces in the country should try to break the [Taliban](#) from within, through a programme of "reintegration and reconciliation" for its "moderate" elements, those conservative Pashtun tribesmen who have not been brainwashed to believe in global jihad.

The question is whether it will be enough, coming as it does in a month when Britain has already lost 20 soldiers - most of them in Operation Panther's Claw, undertaken to cleanse Helmand of the Taliban before the all-important presidential elections on 20 August.

[Gordon Brown](#) may have declared Panther's Claw complete yesterday but the war in Afghanistan is far from over.

Miliband's speech follows intensive discussions between the Foreign Secretary, [the US Special Representative Richard Holbrooke](#) and the UK Special Envoy for Afghanistan-Pakistan, Sir Sherard Cowper Coles.

Britain has long urged the Americans to beef up the Afghan government's powers to talk to moderate elements of the Taliban - something British commanders have already been doing at a local level in Helmand.

The need for such a dialogue met with little response from the Bush administration but [President Obama](#) has been more receptive.

Miliband has called for "effective grassroots initiatives to offer an alternative to fight or flight for the foot soldiers" of the Taliban.

In fact, [President Hamid Karzai](#) has had such an initiative going since 2005, but it has lacked money and support from the [US](#) and Nato. Now that may change.

What Miliband is proposing will require planning, funding and trained personnel for the Afghan government, plus an overarching mechanism from the international community to make sure that those Taliban who "come in" are not harassed or jailed and are provided with education and jobs.

The danger is that this shift of strategy comes too late, after years of missed opportunities.

Most important was the waste of resources by [President George W Bush](#) on [Iraq](#) instead of focusing on rebuilding Afghanistan between 2001 and 2004, when the country was at peace and the Afghans welcomed foreign forces. Unfortunately, [Tony Blair](#) was complicit in that folly.

After the Taliban were defeated in 2001, Britain was a key player in advising the Americans, who had little idea of what to do next.

It was the British army and General John McColl who helped organise and then lead the first peacekeeping force for [Kabul](#).

But Blair's unquestioning support for Bush over Iraq, and his refusal to outline a clear strategy for Afghanistan when British forces redeployed there in 2005, left British troops almost helpless.

The army had no idea what its mission was or what it was supposed to achieve. There was a constant unresolved battle between [10 Downing Street](#), the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. Blair showed little interest and gave no direction.

Yet in 2005, 5,700 British troops arrived in Helmand where foreign forces had not penetrated before, where intelligence about the adversary was non-existent and where the Taliban had rebuilt their support since 2001 and were ready to defend their grip on the drugs trade.

British troops were already overstretched and in Helmand were under-armed, poorly equipped and without helicopters.

Unable to seize and hold territory because of a lack of numbers, unable to launch proper offensives because of a lack of equipment, the army was forced to muddle through.

But the most critical factor was that the Government never spelled out the truth of what the war entails - nor for that matter has any other government in Europe.

Educating the public as to why Afghanistan is important to global security is vital, but you cannot do it through mere spin control.

The truth is this. Today a complex and expanded mixture of [al Qaeda](#), the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Central Asian militants and various Pakistani Punjabi and Kashmiri groups are all working together - and their number one target in the world is not the US but Britain.

Britain is still the safest place in the West to maintain underground contacts, safe houses, logistics and all the paraphernalia that terrorist groups need to spread into other parts of Europe and eventually the US.

It must be said that despite other failings, Gordon Brown and his Government have done a far better job of explaining this and being honest about the war than Blair ever did.

Brown has spent more on the military, providing better armoured vehicles, sending more helicopters and increasing the number of troops to nearly 9,000.

The army still needs more, especially helicopters, but unless there is going to be a large increase in defence expenditure - unlikely, given the state of the public finances - Brown has little room to manoeuvre.

The Prime Minister has also done some plain talking with Pakistan, something Bush and Blair absolutely refused to do.

The fact that the Afghan Taliban leaders are based in Pakistan and have been allowed to re-arm, recruit and organise their logistics from there for the past eight years, courtesy of the Pakistani army's Interservices Intelligence, has been a major contributing factor to the British army's inability to pacify Helmand.

The real tragedy is that the US surge and President Obama's commitment to rebuild Afghanistan has come so late - eight years after it should have happened. Bush should have prepared the ground for this surge last year but did nothing.

Bush should also have worked with the [UN](#) and the Afghan government and parliament last year to delay the presidential elections.

For most of this year nobody has been able to focus on long-term planning for Afghanistan because all the actors are obsessed with getting through the elections.

Afghanistan has seen terrible blunders in the past eight years but the real follies have been at home: Britain's leaders have failed to level with the public or to provide their soldiers with the wherewithal to win.

We must hope that ministers now have the courage to follow the honesty of Miliband's speech, making the tough case that Britain and its allies should start talking to the enemy. For the price of failure could be high

indeed.

Ahmed Rashid's Descent into Chaos: The World's Most Unstable Region and the Threat to Global Security, is now out in paperback, published by Penguin.