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Decision Time in Afghanistan

By Patrick Seale

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Overshadowed by the dramatic events in the Arab world, the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to be approaching a dangerous turning point. Should the United States and its NATO allies continue making war on the Taliban, or should they urgently seek a political solution?

As if still hoping for better news from the battlefield, Western leaders—President Barack Obama chief among them—seem reluctant to face up to the urgent need for a clear decision at this juncture.

Washington's strategy has been to keep up the military pressure on the insurgents, and to attempt to disrupt and destroy its leadership by air strikes on Taliban safe havens across the border in North Waziristan, while beginning a drawdown of US troops this summer. The hope is that by 2014, the situation will be sufficiently stable for US combat troops to leave after security responsibilities have been handed over to Afghan forces.

The fact is, though, that this might not be realistic.

There are currently 143,000 NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, of whom 98,000 are American. Poland is to withdraw all its 2,600 troops this year, while Germany will also start to draw down its 4,700-strong contingent. Britain has said it will withdraw its 9,000 troops by 2015.

However, a report released last week by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee sharply criticised the British government's handling of the war. The campaign wasn't succeeding, the report said, and lacked a clear national security purpose. Arbitrary deadlines and further military operations were said to be setting back the prospect of a peace deal, which the report described as 'the best remaining hope' of achieving 'an honourable exit from Afghanistan.'

So will this sensible report be heeded? Most independent analysts appear to agree that only a negotiated settlement can put an end to the West's wanton waste of lives and resources. The decision now facing Western leaders is therefore whether to continue with the current strategy of military attacks and leisurely withdrawals, or instead make a strong and sustained push for negotiations with the Taliban.

In recent months, the insurgents have given ground in the face of large-scale NATO-led assaults in Helmand Province and in Kandahar and its environs. But spring is coming to the Afghan mountains—and with it the probability of an upsurge in lethal Taliban hit-and-run operations.

In the meantime, the Taliban have continued their widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IED), which have taken a significant toll on NATO troops, sharply constraining their movements. At the same time, rather than face NATO troops in battle, the insurgents have also increasingly resorted to suicide bombings and the assassination of those tribal leaders who dare consort with foreign forces.

Public opinion among the United States' NATO allies—and indeed in the US itself—has grown impatient and despondent. Security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to be deteriorating. The costly 10-year war is far from won (and indeed could well be lost) despite the attempt by Gen. David Petraeus to put a brave face on what is looking an increasingly grim situation.

And yet, there's still a glimmer of hope—if only Western leaders will seize it. According to reports, Turkey seems ready to play a mediating role in the conflict. A spokesman for Afghanistan's 70-man peace council, which President Hamid Karzai established last year, has been reported as saying that Turkey was ready to facilitate talks between the warring parties by providing the Taliban with a representative office—that is to say an 'address' on Turkish soil—where contacts and talks with the Afghan government could eventually take place. But any such initiative might first require a pause in military operations, perhaps even an informal ceasefire.

So far, the United States hasn't offered public support for the Turkish suggestion. This perhaps isn't surprising given the precedents—Washington hasn't welcomed earlier Turkish mediation efforts, such as its effort with Brazil to defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear activities, or its bid to make peace between rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas.

Meanwhile, profoundly destabilised by the Afghan war, neighbouring Pakistan seems to be trembling on the edge of an abyss that threatens to engulf President Asif Ali Zardari and his ruling Pakistan People's Party.

Pakistani-Indian rivalry lies at the heart of the problem. Afraid of losing ground to India in Afghanistan, Pakistan feels it needs to maintain contact with insurgent Islamic groups—the very groups that most bitterly oppose the US presence, and which have recently turned their guns on Pakistan itself.

Ferocious anti-Americanism and a rise of extreme Islamic militancy are today the most striking features of both the Pakistani and Afghan scenes. In both countries, the killing of civilians by NATO air strikes has aroused significant rage and a thirst for revenge.

Last week, nine young boys said to be collecting firewood to heat their homes in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan were killed by fire from NATO helicopters. It was the third incident in ten days in which the Afghan government has accused NATO of killing civilians. Air and ground attacks from February 17 to 19 were said to have resulted in 64 civilian deaths. The toll this takes on the Western image among Afghans is not hard to guess.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, CIA drone attacks continue to inflame the local population. Among the many indications of Pakistan's fierce anti-American mood is the insistence that there can be no diplomatic immunity for Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor accused of killing of two Pakistanis. The Pakistani public is clamouring for him to hang.

And there are other alarm bells ringing over Pakistan, including the growing intolerance demonstrated by the murder in January of Salman Taseer, the liberal governor of Punjab, and this month of Shahbaz Bhatti, a Roman Catholic, who was federal minister for minorities. Both men appear to have been murdered because they favoured amending the 1986 blasphemy laws, which prescribe a mandatory death sentence for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Unwilling to confront public opinion, the Pakistan government's response to the killings has been tepid in the extreme.

The impact of anti-Americanism is also being felt outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. On March 2, two US airmen were killed and two others seriously wounded by a 21-year-old Muslim Kosovar. Three of the four victims were members of a security team en route from Britain to Afghanistan, via the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, a logistical platform for US operations in Afghanistan.

It's clear as the casualties of the Afghan War—both direct and indirect—mount, that it's long past time for the United States and its NATO allies to utilize regional states such as Turkey to help conclude a negotiated settlement that will allow the full and speedy withdrawal of foreign forces.

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan deserve a break from lethal Western military meddling, whatever the strategic interests that are supposed to be at stake.