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Pakistan, US play waiting game

By Abubakar Siddique

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Think of Pakistan and Afghanistan as a giant chessboard. General Stanley McChrystal, commander of United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan, and General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani, head of the Pakistani army, sit on its opposing ends.

And both men are waiting for each other to make the next move.

The two allies await each other's promised offensive against Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington has encouraged Pakistan to move its forces into North Waziristan, where powerful Afghan Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and an assortment of Pakistani, Arab and Central Asian militants wield tense control.

But regional expert and author Ahmed Rashid tells RFE/RL that the Pakistanis are unlikely to move into North Waziristan until they see the outcome of NATO's much-talked-about offensive in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar.

Perceptions in Islamabad are shaped by this spring's smaller NATO offensive in Marjah - a key insurgent and smuggling crossroads in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province. Marjah's capture by coalition troops has failed to end the local Taliban's campaign of assassinations and intimidation, which keeps local people wary of the Afghan government and has stalled the coalition's rehabilitation and development projects.

'Worrying the Americans'

Rashid says Islamabad sees the Marjah offensive as unsuccessful and this colors its reading of the current situation and its plans for action.

"Why should Pakistan endanger its forces and commit more forces in what is already, according to them, a losing military campaign?" he asks. "And this obviously is worrying the Americans enormously because Kandahar can't be a success unless you stop some of the recruits and logistics and weapons and manpower that are being shunted into Afghanistan by the Afghan Taliban [from Pakistan] in support of their resistance to the Kandahar offensive."

Former Afghan interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali questions the notion that the two campaigns are tightly interlinked. He says that Kandahar and North Waziristan require distinct military interventions.

Jalali, a professor at Washington's National Defense University, suggests that Kandahar is still under tenuous Afghan government control but Pakistan's North Waziristan region is the de-facto headquarters for al-Qaeda and allied extremists.

"What is needed in Kandahar is to establish full control of the government so that it can protect the population and deliver services," he says. "While in Waziristan, it's totally different. You have to remove the bases of extremists and terrorists who are launching attacks not only in Pakistan but mostly across the border in Afghanistan."

Indeed, full government control is the declared aim of the slowly unfolding Kandahar campaign. Speaking to tribal leaders in Kandahar on June 13, Afghan President Hamid Karzai urged them to cooperate fully with a sustained operation to clear the region of insurgents and criminals.

"I want your cooperation in this operation," Karzai told Kandahari elders. "It is something definite and I won't accept any excuses."

'Pivotal' campaigns

Julian Lindley-French, a military affairs expert who closely watches developments in the Afghan theater, tells RFE/RL that this summer's military campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan are "pivotal".

Lindley-French, a professor of military operational science at the Royal Military Academy of the Netherlands, suggests that a successful US-led NATO campaign in Kandahar would compel Pakistanis to go against extremist havens inside their country.

"The first critical step for the coalition is to make sure that the space it effectively seeks to control is under its control," he says. "[This is] because all other elements of the campaign, be they political military or whatever - stabilization, governance, rule of law, justice - they all flow from that.

"It would also extend the writ of the Afghan government and will give some of the discussions that took place in the peace jirga [council] some chances of traction on the ground."

McChrystal, the man in charge of Western military efforts in Afghanistan, says that he has a cooperative relationship with Kiani, the Pakistani military chief. In an interview with RFE/RL's Afghan and Pakistani services last week, McChrystal said the two sides regularly coordinated their operations, which has recently led to progress on the long and porous border between the two countries.

'Complex effort'

McChrystal says coalition forces have killed or captured a significant number of Haqqani network commanders in the southeastern Afghan province of Khost across the border from North Waziristan. But he says that the coalition is not pressuring Kayani to go after Haqqani's stronghold in North Waziristan.

"There is not a large pressure from me to kick off operations in northern Waziristan," he says. "I speak to General Kiani frequently and in-depth and we talk about each other's campaigns and syncing them.

"I've been very pleased and impressed with the work that he has done. He has a complex effort going in multiple areas: southern Waziristan, Orakzai, Bajaur, Swat Valley. So I am confident that his timing and his focus is good and it works well with ours."

But Jalali, the Afghan military expert, suggests that even regular operational cooperation is not tantamount to strategic cooperation. He says that regional powers, in particular Islamabad, are vying for a future role in Afghanistan because they sense an imminent US withdrawal from the country. As he announced a major troop surge in Afghanistan last year, US President Barack Obama also announced he would begin withdrawing forces in July 2011.

"If the United States stays in this area for a long time, then that will be different," Jalali says. "If it is going to leave, Pakistan would like to have some of these [extremist] elements as allies. And they do not want to alienate some of these forces just for the sake of Washington, which is about to leave the area - or the perception is ... that it is about to leave this area."

Such perceptions prompt Western analysts to read Pakistani intentions with great suspicion. Islamabad vehemently denied claims made in a controversial London School of Economics "discussion paper" last weekend that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) "orchestrates, sustains and strongly influences" Afghan insurgent networks.

Wake-up call

Speaking to RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal, Pakistani military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas even rejected claims that the report was based on in-depth interviews with unidentified insurgent commanders.

"Those are not credible sources and can't substantiate themselves in the open," he said.

Rashid, Pakistani author and long-time observer of Islamist militancy in South Asia, says that the rising internal threat from extremists might give Pakistan reasons to move into North Waziristan. He suggests that the recent high-profile attacks in Pakistan's most affluent and populated eastern Punjab province by the so-called Punjabi Taliban should serve as a wake-up call for Pakistani leaders.

"The fact is that many of these Punjabi groups are hanging out in North Waziristan and you can't tackle these Punjabi groups without first tackling the issue in North Waziristan," Rashid concludes.

This summer, observers will be closely watching to see whether McChrystal and Kiani can team up and turn the tables on extremists both have publicly described as their common enemy - or whether they will continue to play an unending, unwinnable chess game.