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The National

US 'realises it cannot win' Afghan war

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The US government has come to the realisation that the conflict in Afghanistan cannot be won militarily

Some Pakistani officials are convinced that the United States' ongoing military surge against the Taliban in Afghanistan is doomed, and that the diminishing western appetite for the war will position it as the key to a future political settlement, Pakistani analysts said.

Pakistan's foreign policy leaders, notably its powerful army chief, consider the June 23 exit of Gen Stanley McChrystal as the commander of US forces in Afghanistan as

indicative of a growing acceptance by the Obama administration that the conflict cannot be settled by force, they said.

“It’s the realisation that you cannot win,” Imtiaz Gul, the chairman of the Centre for Research and Security Studies, an independent think-tank based in Islamabad, said in a recent interview.

“For Pakistan, history has moved full circle. For the third time in as many decades, Pakistan is likely to be used to provide a face-saver for the US in Afghanistan,” he said.

Mr McChrystal was ostensibly forced to resign after he and his aides made disparaging remarks against key figures of the Obama administration in an interview with Rolling Stones magazine.

However, the episode has been viewed in Islamabad in the context of the failure of US-led Nato forces to gain the support of the Afghan population during operations this year in the Taliban heartland of southern Afghanistan, the analysts said.

The military surge has been accompanied by a three-fold increase in violence, according to a recent United Nations’ report.

The lack of military progress prompted Gen David Richards, the British army chief, to suggest in a June 27 interview with BBC Radio that talks with the Taliban should start “pretty soon”.

Vincent Desportes, a senior French general, was less subtle in a July 2 interview with Le Monde, saying the surge was “not working” and that the situation in Afghanistan “is worse than ever”.

“The British and the French have come around to what the Pakistani government has been saying all along: the military option is not going to get you anywhere,” said Mr Gul, who is the author of a book about Pakistan’s tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, *The Most Dangerous Place*.

That interpretation of events in Afghanistan is finding voice in a more assertive Pakistani posture on issues in which its interests conflict with those of the US, the analysts said.

Those include plans to acquire two nuclear power reactors from China, Pakistan’s closest strategic partner, and import natural gas by pipeline from Iran.

The US has spoken cautiously on both projects, rather than opposing them outright.

Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, speaking to reporters in Islamabad on June 20, advised Pakistan to read the fine print of tough new unilateral US sanctions targeting Iran’s energy and financial sector before “over-committing” to the pipeline.

The US and other members of the 46-member Nuclear Suppliers Group also sought “clarification” from China on the nuclear reactor deal at the organisation’s annual meeting in New Zealand in June.

China did not respond to the pressure at the meeting, but its embassy in Washington told the US media on July 4 that the proposed supply of the two nuclear reactors, yet to be formally announced, is an extension of an existing deal under which Pakistan has already acquired two reactors for its Chashma Barrage power complex.

Such US pressure, however subtle, is typical of the mistrust that characterises US-Pakistan relations, analysts said.

“While we are ‘allies’, the nuclear issue, along with India and terrorism, continues to cast a shadow,” said Tanvir Ahmed Khan, a former secretary to Pakistan’s ministry of foreign affairs.

The analysts said Pakistan would leverage its influence among militant groups in Afghanistan, vital to any negotiated settlement, to deflect such pressure, as it had done during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Al Jazeera television reported in June that a meeting had taken place between Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, who heads one of three major militant networks fighting Nato and Afghan government forces.

Mr Haqqani is based in Pakistan’s North Waziristan tribal region, prompting repeated calls from the US for a Pakistani military operation to be launched there. Pakistan has refused, saying its forces are overstretched because of operations against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan militants in other tribal regions.

The report said the meeting had been arranged and attended by Gen Ashfaq Kayani, the Pakistani army chief, and Gen Shuja Pasha, the head of the Inter Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), Pakistan’s spy agency.

All the reported participants have denied any meeting took place.

However, the analysts acknowledged that Pakistan was still not able to give up its militant proxies because of lingering fears that the US could hurriedly depart from Afghanistan because of a lack of support from its international coalition partners.

They said the government also recognised that maintaining a strategic partnership with the US remains a priority for Pakistan, both to keep the country’s fragile economy afloat through aid dollars and deflect diplomatic pressure from India.

Mr Khan, who chairs the Institute of Strategic Studies, an Islamabad-based government think-tank, said Gen Kayani had instilled “more realistic thinking” among his commanders to support greater intelligence sharing and security cooperation with the US.

“He recognises US pre-eminence and is trying to give the army a more realistic view of the world,” he said.

“But the army still feels it could have influence in Afghanistan.”