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Taliban will let guns do their talking

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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KARACHI - Amid a growing furor in Britain over the deaths in the past few days of eight British servicemen in Afghanistan, the initiative to seek dialogue with the Taliban at the highest level of their leadership is gaining pace.

Taliban leader Mullah Omar is now the focus of attention, with the Pakistan military reportedly saying that it is prepared to act as a middleman to help the administration of United States President Barack Obama in a "new diplomatic overture to find an end to the long-running conflict" in Afghanistan.

Mullah Omar, however, is not believed to be in any mood to talk. Over the past few months, he has consolidated his grip over the various scattered but powerful resistance groups across Afghanistan and in [Pakistan's](#) tribal areas. His ultimate objective, as it has been since the Taliban were ousted in the US-led invasion of 2001, is for military victory against foreign forces.

In Helmand province in Afghanistan, the main theater of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) troop surge, 15 British soldiers were killed in the first 11 days of July - including eight in 24 hours on Friday - taking the British military death toll in the country since October 2001 to 184, five more than the lives lost by British forces in Iraq. In most cases, the deaths have been the result of improvised explosive devices and remote-controlled bombs, rather than guerrilla attacks.

The British casualties have sparked a political row about the future of Britain's role in Afghanistan. Liam Fox, the shadow defense secretary, said that Prime Minister Gordon Brown had "catastrophically" under-equipped the armed forces.

In the provinces around the Afghan capital Kabul, the Taliban have once again established a firm grip in the vital provinces of Ghazni, Logar and Wardak, virtually paralyzing the control of the local administrations.

On Saturday, the governor of Ghazni province narrowly escaped a Taliban-led attack. In border provinces such as Kunar and Nuristan, where only a few months ago NATO and Pakistani security forces (on the Pakistani side in Mohmand and Bajaur agencies) had claimed victory over the Taliban through Operation Lion Heart, the Taliban are resurgent.

At this crucial juncture, and with national elections scheduled in Afghanistan next month, Pakistan's military establishment has stepped into the fray. It has in the past few years been reduced to the role of a client state of Western countries to clean up the mess in the Pakistani tribal areas, which serve as a springboard for the insurgency in Afghanistan.

Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the [United States](#) and the subsequent launch of the "war on terror", the Pakistan military and intelligence communities had played a mainstream role in Afghanistan, with close links to the Taliban and other jihadi organizations.

Last week, Major General Athar Abbas, a spokesman for Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), in an interview with CNN, said that not only is "the Pakistan in contact with Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, but it can bring him and other commanders to the negotiating table with the United States".

Abbas said that in return for any role as a broker between the US and the Taliban, Pakistan wanted concessions from [Washington](#) over Islamabad's concerns with rival [India](#), which it fears is gaining undue influence in the region.

In response, Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said, "There's long been allegations that there are continued contacts [between Pakistan and the Taliban]. And I think it's a step forward for the Pakistanis to say publicly what everyone has always assumed," CNN reported. Holbrooke did not rule out the possibility of talks with the Taliban.

This decision, though, depends on Mullah Omar.

The re-emergence of Mullah Omar

Different intelligence agencies, including Pakistan's, categorized the Afghan national resistance as being under the command of various groups. These include the Qari Ziaur Rahman group in Kunar and Nuristan in Afghanistan and Mohmand and Bajaur in Pakistan; the Haqqani network in Ghazni, Paktia, Paktika and Khost and Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area; Anwarul Haq in Nangarhar, besides the network in northern Afghanistan led by commanders loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

It was generally agreed that Mullah Omar, although the spiritual and symbolic leader, had been reduced to being a regional commander of the southwestern Afghan provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Urzgan, Zabul and Farah. Despite the spread of the resistance across Afghanistan, it was thought that the central command structure that the Taliban had acquired in 2006 had been lost and that coordination within the resistance groups was at a minimum.

This occurred at a time when NATO sent additional troops to Afghanistan early this year, in tandem with joint operations with the help of Pakistan to stop cross-border infiltration. Military operations in Pakistan's Mohmand and Bajaur agencies significantly reduced the number of militants launched into Afghanistan.

Unmanned Predator drone attacks in the tribal areas helped keep militant and al-Qaeda leaders on the run, while operations against Pakistani Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud and militants in the Swat area caused a lot of damage to the Taliban-led resistance.

In the process of running from pillar to post, though, the militants sought each other's help and established new lines of cooperation and coordination - and Mullah Omar once again became active.

A grand *shura* (council) was convened in the southwest, bringing together big and small commanders, including Abdullah Saeed, al-Qaeda's commander-in-chief for Afghanistan.

Mullah Omar, a source from the al-Qaeda camp told [Asia Times Online](#), emphasized that each group should set up a coherent fighting strategy, and their preference should be Afghanistan.

Significantly, a major role was envisaged for al-Qaeda and the Afghan war will now be its prime goal. Al-Qaeda will continue to shift its manpower from the Middle East to the [South Asian](#) war theater, especially from Iraq. These men bring with them vast experience, especially in the field of improvised explosive devices and ambush techniques.

The *shura* also integrated several small commanders from Logar and Kabul provinces into the larger structures of the Taliban. Previously, these players had received a minimum of funding, but now, due to their strategic position, they will receive funds and human resources from bigger commanders like

Sirajuddin Haqqani. The aim is to jointly launch attacks on NATO's main arteries, such as the supply line from Jalalabad to Bagram air base just outside the capital Kabul.

In light of these developments, there is little place for the idea of a dialogue process with anyone - let alone the United States.

Last year, Saudi Arabia sponsored efforts to reach out to the Taliban. This peace initiative, though, consisted mainly of former Taliban and people who were not involved directly in the armed insurgency in Afghanistan.

This year, the Saudi efforts seemed about to enter a significant phase when Saudi intelligence chief Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz became directly involved in the mediation process.

An Afghan-American, Daoud Abedi, a close aide to Afghan commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, became involved in negotiations with the Americans (see [Holbrooke reaches out to Hekmatyar](#) Asia Times Online, April 10, 2009.) Prince Aziz planned to contact Mullah Omar through the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef. Despite much effort, this did not happen, although contact was made with Mullah Bradar, Mullah Omar's anointed supreme commander of the Taliban and his most trusted lieutenant.

The dialogue developed to the point where al-Qaeda leaders began to feel threatened - many Taliban commanders in the southwest were desperate to strike peace deals with NATO and talked of al-Qaeda as a liability. Prince Aziz was optimistic enough to say that by the end of the year the stage would be set for the US and the Taliban to begin discussing peace formulas.

Following the grand *shura* and the military consolidation in Afghanistan, though, Mullah Omar has sent a clear message to Prince Aziz that a military victory is the only option for the Taliban and that nothing can stop the war except a clear defeat of the Western occupation armies in Afghanistan.

Perhaps that is why Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations felt obliged to issue a statement that "strongly denied" the remarks made by Abbas "that the Pakistani military is in contact with Taliban leader Mullah Omar and it can bring him and other commanders to the negotiating table".