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Afghanistan war is fuelled by pride

By Linda S. Heard

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There is a growing consensus among senior military commanders and diplomats that in the absence of a feasible military solution to the nine-year-long Afghanistan conflict, a negotiated peace settlement should be pursued. Now, Robert D. Blackwill, a former US Deputy National Security Adviser, says President Barack Obama's policy "seems headed for failure" and the US should "accept that the Taliban will inevitably control most of its historic stronghold in the Pashtun south".

It is evident, too, that Afghan President Hamid Karzai is anxious to bring the insurgency to a peaceful close so that foreign troops can leave. His efforts in this direction are being blessed or, perhaps, even facilitated by Pakistan which, according to its Foreign Minister Abdul Basit, would welcome a Nato withdrawal.

Obvious failure

As each blood-spattered day passes, it becomes increasingly harder to ignore an unpalatable reality. From the perspective of the US and its Nato allies the war in Afghanistan has been and still is a spectacular failure. Not a single one of its original aims have been achieved.

Osama Bin Laden has not been "brought to justice". Taliban leader Mullah Omar is still on the loose. And far from being eradicated, the Taliban have been steadily gaining popularity and strength. A recent Pentagon assessment finds that the Taliban have expanded their influence and are sympathetically supported by 92 out of the 121 districts identified by the US as essential to the country's stability.

Indeed, Washington has little to boast about. Far from being a country that would be the envy of the region, as was promised by the Bush administration, today's Afghanistan runs on drugs and corruption with Afghans having shelled out \$1 billion (Dh3.68 billion) in bribes last year alone.

With over 1,920 coalition military fatalities and mounting Afghan anger over civilian casualties it's about time that Obama heeded the advice of those in the know. If there is no military solution, then why does he insist on sending in more troops when what he should be doing is engaging in direct or indirect negotiations with the various insurgent groups? Peace talks are inevitable, so why should they be delayed to allow foreign soldiers to strut their stuff for no tangible purpose against the omnipresent risk of being maimed or killed?

And if peace and reconciliation is ever to be the cards, he should definitely reconsider appointing General James Mattis as head of US Central Command. In 2005, Mattis enthused about shooting "guys" in Afghanistan, saying "it's a hell of a lot of fun ... it's a hell of a hoot. It's fun to shoot some people ..." Hardly hearts and minds-winning rhetoric!

When US government spokespersons are asked what US and Nato troops are still doing in Afghanistan, they invariably answer that Afghanistan cannot be allowed to become a safe haven for terrorists out to attack western capitals. This is, of course, a crock designed to keep an increasingly sceptical American public on board a failed endeavour. Together, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have manufactured far more anti-western hatred around the world than previously existed, along with a slew of Al Qaida clones and wannabes.

There is no reason for this war to drag on when just about all involved want it over — or is there? Like those who once considered themselves to be the fastest gun in the Old West and who were prepared to take on all challengers to prove their superiority, the US has a reputation to maintain. A superpower armed with sophisticated fighter jets, attack helicopters and drones cannot be seen rolling over in the face of Kalashnikov-wielding bandits whose time is split between planting poppies and home-made improvised explosive devices.

Before Washington can pull its military machine out of Afghanistan it needs a 'win' — or something that can be dressed up to look like a win. That's easier said than done; firstly, because nobody in the US government has been able to describe what a win might look like and, secondly, because the foe isn't an army but rather proponents of an extremist ideology who are able to flit in and out of the shadows.

Domestic implications

Furthermore, if the US was seen to be cutting and running without being able to show tangible results, the families of those sent home in flag-draped caskets and the public at large will question why their finest were sacrificed in the first place.

Obama must choose between maintaining this charade indefinitely no matter what the cost in terms of lives and treasure and cutting his country's losses before Afghanistan becomes America's Vietnam Mark II. Should he attempt to preserve the myth of America's invincibility or preserve American lives? That's the real bottom line!