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FULL

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, March 29, 2011 1:49 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Follow up to our conversation

Fyi - Paks are thinking there is disagreement on reconciliation between you and military.

From: Nasr, S Vall R
Sent: Tuesday, March 29, 2011 08:33 AM
To: Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: Follow up to our conversation

Jake,

The OpEd below by Maliha Lodhi (former pak ambassador to DC and London and Kayani and Pasha's confidant) in The News is probably is channeling Kayani. It speaks directly to what we discussed yesterday: the confusion caused by escalation of military action in the wake of Feb 18 speech.

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The growing turmoil in the Middle East has overshadowed a number of developments relating to Afghanistan. But it has not obscured an emerging international consensus that the war in Afghanistan should be brought to an end by a peaceful political settlement involving talks between all parties to the conflict.

Top US military leaders however have yet to buy in to the idea of talks with the Taliban preferring instead to pursue a course of military escalation to gain an upper hand and dictate rather than negotiate the terms of an eventual settlement. There have been renewed warnings from Pentagon officials and military commanders of "fierce fighting" ahead. There have also been calls for a large military footprint beyond 2014, the date set by Nato's Lisbon summit for an end to combat missions by coalition forces.

Amid the uncertainty produced by these utterances, two recent pronouncements have significance for the evolving situation in Afghanistan as July 2011 looms, when the first batch of US forces will pull out from Afghanistan.

The announcement by President Hamid Karzai is more symbolic than substantive but it indicates the direction in which things are headed. Last week, he unveiled plans for his forces to take charge of security in seven areas in July. This is intended to lead to the assumption of all security responsibilities in 2014.

Although Karzai's announcement mainly involves non-insurgent regions or areas where a heavy deployment of foreign forces is ready to come to the aid of Afghan security personnel, it marks the first formal step in a three-year transition of responsibility to Afghan authorities. But a negotiated peace will be needed to make this transition feasible especially as multiple problems plague Afghan security forces and cast doubt on their ability to act independently of foreign troops.

The second and more significant announcement came in a speech delivered by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the Asia Society on February 18, 2011. This set out in the clearest terms so far what she described as "a new phase" of America's diplomatic efforts on Afghanistan. Referring to the two surges that had been underway, a military offensive and civilian aid to undercut the insurgency, she said these had prepared the ground for the third: "an intensified diplomatic push to bring the Afghan conflict to an end".

Clinton explained that the diplomatic surge aims to "support an Afghan-led political process" which "history and experience tells us is the most effective way to end an insurgency". She pledged that 2011 would see strong US-backing for a "responsible reconciliation process led by the Afghans and supported by intense regional diplomacy".

Declaring US readiness to "reconcile with an adversary" she spelt out three "red lines for reconciliation" with the Taliban. "They must renounce violence abandon their alliance with al Qaeda, and abide by the Constitution". Then came a significant shift. The three redlines were no longer described as pre-conditions but as objectives - as

"necessary outcomes of any negotiation". What had been privately conveyed to Pakistani officials by the Obama Administration a few months earlier was now being publicly affirmed. Secretary Clinton acknowledged "For reconciliation to succeed Pakistan will have to be part of the process".

The promise held out by her speech to move to a political strategy narrows the gulf with Pakistan, which has long insisted that the war can only be brought to an end by political, not military means. It also closes the gap with America's Nato allies in Europe who have been privately calling for talks with the Taliban to secure a political resolution.

For months Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has urged top US officials not to set pre-conditions for a dialogue but to turn their three 'redlines' into end-objectives to be achieved through a process of negotiations. He has also suggested that a political process be launched without delay to ascertain who among the Afghan opposition is reconcilable and who is not.

The Clinton pronouncement offers Washington and Islamabad an opportunity to more closely align their strategy in Afghanistan. But what remains unclear is whether the civilians in the Obama Administration and its military leaders are on the same page on the timing and scope of what Clinton calls a diplomatic surge.

The top US commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus and the Pentagon, have yet to accept the notion of talks with Taliban leaders. So far they have only embraced a policy of "re-integration", which aims at splitting and weakening the Taliban, and not "reconciliation" which means negotiating with them. A European diplomat depicted this stance rather graphically: "the US military only want to talk with their boots on the Taliban's neck".

Recent interviews and Congressional testimonies by General Petraeus, far from indicating any winding down of the military effort, signal that more fighting is in store in Afghanistan. Petraeus has also been giving upbeat assessments of the progress made by the surge strategy and claiming that the Taliban momentum has been "arrested" in much of the country, even if he has described these gains as "fragile".

This narrative of progress provides a useful rationale to switch course to a political track. Whether or not this is supported by ground realities the impression of gaining a military advantage provides a face-saving way to move towards negotiations. But this has yet to happen. Instead the US military is pushing ahead with a strategy aimed at killing Taliban leaders rather than talking to them.

With a more intense phase of combat planned in coming months this strategy is at odds with what Pakistan believes to be the best way forward. Islamabad would prefer a de-escalation of violence as a first step to launching a credible reconciliation process. This would create the political space and conditions for diplomatic efforts to succeed. Conversely, stepping up the military campaign would contradict the pursuit and attainment of a political solution.

Pakistan's views on a political settlement now find greater traction abroad. Opinion in the West has increasingly congealed around the idea that the only viable strategy to end the war is a negotiated solution, and that the time to launch diplomatic efforts is now. A recent report by the Century Foundation, an American Think Tank, makes this case and calls for talks with the Taliban. "Re-integration" it states will "not provide the political resolution that peace will require". Headed by Lakhdar Brahimi, former UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, and Thomas Pickering, a former US undersecretary of state, the taskforce that wrote the report proposes a high-level peace process and outlines a potential settlement.

A cross-party report issued by a Parliamentary select committee in Britain goes even further. It critiques the present US-led military campaign in Afghanistan and deems the present strategy as flawed. Not only is this counterinsurgency effort not succeeding, it could be counter productive and unravel efforts to secure a political solution. Expressing fears that the ten-year Nato operation in Afghanistan could end in failure, the report calls for a "political surge" in which the US holds direct talks with the Taliban.

These reports come aimed rising war weariness among the public in Western countries. A recent Washington Post-ABC poll found that nearly two-thirds of Americans now believe that the war in Afghanistan is no longer worth fighting. Similar majorities in Europe want an end to the conflict and the withdrawal of their combat troops.

Can the Obama Administration summon the political courage to prevail on its military to accept the primacy of a 'political surge' and get behind a diplomatic effort? Much hinges on an answer to this question.

A settlement could take years to negotiate and would likely see incremental progress in the first instance. That should urge urgency to start such a process. Prevarication on the political track and the continued pursuit of a military strategy can complicate, even derail efforts towards lasting peace in Afghanistan.

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