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Coming triumph of the Taliban and Pakistan?

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Even as US military commanders seek a troop increase in Afghanistan to check a resurgent Taliban, US voter support is fast eroding. A CNN poll in September showed that 58% of Americans oppose the war while only 39% support it. Among Democrats, only 23% support the war, and the number keeps falling.

President Obama initially called the war in Afghanistan one of necessity, and proposed a big US troop increase. But with voter support slipping, Obama now says he will not rush the decision. Democratic Congressmen say in private that US withdrawal is a matter of time. One told me, "The British couldn't pacify Afghanistan, the Russians couldn't, and we can't either."

So, do not be surprised if the coming year witnesses contacts between the US and Taliban to find a face-saving formula for US exit. Afghan president Hamid Karzai has long argued for a negotiated deal with what he calls the good Taliban. He was earlier discouraged by the US, but maybe not for much longer.

Back in 2008, the Bush administration actively considered talks with the Taliban. Ashley Tellis, a former state department official, says a deal with the Taliban is possible provided it is based on US military victories that diminish rewards for insurgency. Malou Innocent and Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute point out that US security is threatened by al-Qaida, not the Taliban, and argues that the US can deter the Taliban from giving safe havens to al-Qaida if it comes to power again.

US hawks disagree strongly. They recall that a peace accord was signed by the US and North Vietnam in 1973, which was violated by Hanoi after US troops left. Nevertheless, even some conservative journals are now making the case for withdrawal.

Ralph Peters, a military expert writing in the conservative New York Post, asks, "What does the Obama administration hope to do in Afghanistan? Establish a stable democracy in a land where blood vendettas last for centuries and tribal loyalties trump all? Force a secular constitution on a society that prefers religious law? Develop a modern economy where running water is a rarity? Why?"

He adds, "Even if we achieved each of those goals, would the result be worth the cost in blood, money and time? Don't we have better things to do with our strategic capital? Al-Qaida is a global franchise, yet we're concentrating our investment on the Taliban, the equivalent of a local chain of blacksmith shops."

US hawks worry that Afghanistan will become a safe haven for terrorists if US troops leave. But Paul Pillar, former deputy chief of the CIA, has warned in the Washington Post against exaggerating the value of safe havens to terrorists.

"The preparations most important to the September 11, 2001, attacks took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States.

In the past couple of decades, international terrorist groups have thrived by exploiting globalization and information technology, which has lessened their dependence on physical havens. By utilizing networks such as the internet, terrorists' organizations have become more network-like, not beholden to any one headquarters.... Al-Qaida's role is now less one of commander than of ideological lodestar, and for that role a haven is almost meaningless."

The debate is by no means over, and US troop withdrawal is by no means certain. Yet, the will and stamina of the US has clearly been sapped, and momentum is building for an exit. For the Taliban, a comeback will be a huge victory, one that will cause much dismay in India.

This will be a fabulous victory for Pakistan too. It helped create the Taliban, through which it obtained influence in Afghanistan as never before. Pakistani military planners

view Afghanistan as strategic space in the event of a war with India, and for this they need the Taliban's cooperation.

After 9/11, Pakistan was forced by the US to disown the Taliban, cooperate in tackling al-Qaida, and curb the activities of jihadis in Kashmir. But it is an open secret that Pakistan actually gave sanctuary to top Taliban leaders, and the US winked at this. If US troops exit, Pakistan may once again encourage jihadis to stir up trouble in India, and not just in Kashmir.

Clearly, India must prepare for the day when US pressure is no longer effective on jihadis in Pakistan. India must quickly upgrade its own counter-insurgency skills and get the best technologies and institutional arrangements from the US. The future bristles with dangers.

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