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U.S., Pakistan Need to Bridge Afghan Divide

By Malou Innocent

US President Barack Obama recently met the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan to discuss their full commitment to fighting terrorists in their region. Media coverage of the three-way talks cast the president's efforts in a favourable light, even as conditions in the region were being described, in his own words, as "increasingly perilous".

Mr Obama deserves credit for leading the meeting. Unlike his predecessor, he fully appreciates the seriousness of America's top foreign-policy challenge. The US public, however, must separate the man from the policy. Pakistan's frontier region along the Afghan border stands fully "Talebanised". Pakistan's military, for whatever reasons, has ceded state sovereignty, police and education to militants in areas of the north. And Afghan President Hamid Karzai is widely perceived within Afghanistan as being thoroughly corrupt.

It's an open secret that elements of Pakistan's military-dominated national intelligence agency assist the jihadist insurgency which US and Nato troops are fighting in Afghanistan. If the strategic chasm persists between Islamabad and Washington, the military campaign in Afghanistan will fail.

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In eastern and southern Afghanistan, the insurgency has some indigenous support, but the commanders ensconce themselves across the border in Pakistan.

Hawks within Pakistan's military and intelligence services use the insurgency to blunt the rising influence of their rapidly growing nemesis, India, which strongly supports Mr Karzai's regime.

While high-level Pakistani commanders have their own agenda, security forces on the ground could have their own. Pakistan's paramilitary force, the 80,000-strong Frontier Corps is charged with law enforcement in the Federally Administered Tribal Area and the adjoining Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Last October, the US approved the Security Development Programme to "train the trainers" and improve security along the 2,600km border with Afghanistan. But most soldiers are recruited locally from the Pashtun-dominated provinces and may be unwilling to fight Pashtun militants.

Because Pakistan's security forces have proved unable ^{to} and, at times, unwilling ^{to} to uproot militant havens, Washington has decided to tackle the problem itself. Mr Obama has continued his predecessor's policy of Predator drone missile strikes, which have exacerbated radicalism and pushed militants deeper into Pakistan.

Aerial strikes and other stop-gap measures will do little to close the strategic drift between Washington and

Islamabad. Unless Mr Obama can reassure hawks in Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus that India no longer poses a threat to their country (a promise impossible to guarantee) then the stalemate in Afghanistan will persist. Mr Obama must accept the reality that, if the US and Nato want to win in Afghanistan, they need a partner that fights its enemies, not friends.

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