

If the Afghan civil war worsens, Pakistan's allies China and the US will lose faith in Islamabad's intentions

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The next round of four-party talks to be held in Islamabad on Monday could well be the last if Pakistan fails to deliver the Taliban to the table. According to a statement released by the Taliban on Saturday, the group is refusing to sit in for direct peace talks with the Afghan government in the framework of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) due to the deployment of US troops in Afghanistan and the ongoing air strikes.

China, the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan have held multiple rounds of talks, which have so far failed to convince the Taliban to take part and talk peace with the Kabul government.

If there is another failure, the consequences could be fearful for the entire region - Afghan President Ashraf Ghani will face a vicious political backlash at home, a stepped-up Taliban offensive in the spring that could capture a major province within weeks, and a collapse of international trust with Pakistan, which has played both sides in the Taliban game.

Domino effect

The Taliban have met with the Kabul regime only once - last July - but those talks quickly collapsed because news of the death of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar two years earlier was released.

Since then, there have been several meetings of the QCG aiming to bring the Taliban into the peace talks. Instead, the Taliban have launched a wave of devastating and demoralising attacks on Afghan forces and civilians throughout the winter.

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Now, the Taliban are on the verge of capturing the southern province of Helmand - and if that falls, there could be a domino effect which would see more southern provinces fall into their hands.

The crux of the crisis as far as Kabul and the international community are concerned is Pakistan's failure to put real pressure on the Taliban to reduce the level of violence and consider talks. The Taliban leadership lives in Pakistan; its supplies and many of its recruits are generated from the 2.5 million Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan; and its fundraising, which includes control of the narcotics trade, is also partly generated through Pakistani militants.

Despite the claims of the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the army to be fighting all terrorist groups, the fact is that the Afghan Taliban have been left well alone in their Pakistani strongholds in Quetta and Peshawar since 2001, when they retreated into Pakistan after being defeated by the Americans.

Pakistani admissions

Recently, for the first time, a Pakistani official admitted as much in Washington.

"We have some influence over them [Taliban] because their leadership is in Pakistan and they get some medical facilities," said Saad Aziz, Pakistan's adviser on foreign affairs. "Their families are here. We can use those levers to pressurise them to say, 'Come to the table.'"

Such admissions have been made in private before to the Americans and the Chinese, but never publicly. What is less certain is whether this signals that Pakistan will now put real pressure on the Taliban, such as cutting off Taliban supplies into Afghanistan or even giving the Taliban leadership a deadline to leave Pakistan, which would force them into talks with Kabul.

It is also unclear whether Aziz's admission is a sign of Pakistan's helplessness, frustration or even continued refusal to tackle the Taliban. Over the past few months, Pakistan has taken a belligerent line vis-a-vis Kabul, insisting that Kabul first capture hundreds of Pakistan Taliban hiding out in Afghanistan's eastern provinces and regularly launching attacks from there on the Pakistan army. However, the reality is that these provinces - Nangarhar, Kunar and Badakhshan - are barely under the control of the Afghan government.

Moreover, the Pakistan Taliban is being hosted by the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Without such hosting, the Pakistan Taliban could not survive on Afghan soil. Yet, until now, Pakistan has been satisfied as long as the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan remain dormant and do not attack Pakistani forces.

A successful outcome in these talks would lead to a serious dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul, an eventual ceasefire and a detailed political roadmap as to how the Afghan Taliban could be integrated into the government. Such hopes have sustained the talks so far but will not for much longer if there are no results.

Afghanistan is facing a multidimensional civil war with the Afghan Taliban now being aided by groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechens, and multiple Pakistani groups. Morale is low among Afghan officials, troops and commanders and many officials are trying to secure deals with the Taliban.

ISIL recruitment

In the eastern provinces bordering Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan army are also separately fighting ISIL, which is trying to recruit from among dissatisfied Taliban members. ISIL also has a presence in Pakistan, which could increase if these talks fail to bring results.

If the civil war dramatically worsens, it would also force close allies of Pakistan, such as China and the US, to lose trust in Islamabad's intentions. At stake for Pakistan is also a \$46bn infrastructure investment by China over 10 years and continued

International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans for its crisis-hit economy.

Another danger is that Ghani is fast losing support at home from the majority of Afghans who are angry at his trust of Pakistan. If talks fail to deliver, Ghani could face political threats undermining his presidency.

A new US commander, Lieutenant-General John Nicholson, has just taken over the command of 13,000 NATO forces, which include 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan.

He recently told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the security situation in Afghanistan was "deteriorating". More US Special Forces, drones and aircraft have been deployed to southern Afghanistan, which faces the greatest Taliban threat. Pakistan's army chief General Raheel Sharif has pledged to fight terrorism on all fronts, not to be selective towards groups the army once favoured, and to foster peace in Afghanistan. The army has already done much to reduce terrorism at home by going after terrorist groups in the south and north of the country, including the Pakistan Taliban.

Most Pakistanis want to believe General Sharif that the army is serious about eliminating all forms of terrorism. That must include getting rid of the Afghan Taliban and sending them back to Afghanistan as part of a peace plan. Success or failure of these talks could determine the future stability of South and Central Asia. The outcome will be critical.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of five books on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. His latest book is "Pakistan on the Brink".