

## Death of the Taliban chief starts a dangerous power struggle

Financial Times - The Exchange, May 24, 2016

Ahmed Rashid

The killing of [Mullah Akhtar Mansour](#), the Taliban leader, by American drone missiles in a remote corner of [Pakistan](#) has certainly broken the year-long deadlock over prospective peace talks between the Taliban and the Kabul government. However, this unprecedented US intervention has also forced neighbouring countries, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups to reset their strategies.

American drones struck the car in Pakistan's Baluchistan province in which Mansour was travelling, allegedly on his way back from meeting Iranian officials and those Taliban now living in Iran. It was the first such US strike there as Pakistan has never given permission for US attacks in the southwestern province, which is also home to the Taliban headquarters and leadership council.

Mansour was chosen as the Taliban leader following a power struggle last year that arose after the death of Mullah Mohammed Omar, Taliban founder. He then ruthlessly consolidated his position by crushing those Taliban who favoured peace talks with Kabul; elevating Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the deadly Haqqani group, to the position of deputy leader of the Taliban; and launching a large-scale offensive this year that has put one-third of Afghan districts in Taliban hands.

When he was elected leader last year in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, at an assembly of 5,000 Taliban, Mansour had the support of the Pakistan military. That support may have lessened in recent months given his refusal to open talks with Kabul at the urging of a four-nation peace committee made up of Pakistan, China, [Afghanistan](#) and the US.

For more than a year Pakistan has been promising the other nations and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that it would bring the Taliban to the table for talks. It failed to do so and patience has been running low in the west and Kabul. Pakistan has long held the belief that its national interest requires it to retain some influence over the Taliban; but that influence is either waning or it is deliberately not being used. Meanwhile Mr Ghani faces a complicated political crisis at home, with warlords increasing in strength and a strong political opposition that believes he has spent too long waiting for concessions from Pakistan.

The stalled peace talks, Pakistan's refusal to move away from giving sanctuary to the Haqqanis and other extremists, and its unwillingness to put pressure on the Taliban by halting their supply lines from Pakistan, have all infuriated the Americans, who want to pull out most of their 10,000 troops by next year. Washington has now broken the deadlock, which might buy Mr Ghani and his beleaguered army some time as the Taliban squabble over the election of a new leader and countries in the region reset their strategies.

Yet the killing of Mansour has created acute problems whose outcome is unpredictable. There is almost certain to be an [intense power struggle](#), and possibly further fragmentation, within the Taliban; the extremists are likely to vow to take revenge for Mansour's death and step up the war while others push for a leader willing to open talks with Kabul. Almost certainly there will be several contenders for the leadership.

In addition al-Qaeda is once more an important actor in Afghanistan, and its cadres will doubtless support a hardline Taliban leader, as will other groups in Pakistan and central Asia being sheltered by the Taliban.

Likewise there will be an intense regional power struggle. Iran is already giving sanctuary to some Taliban groups from western Afghanistan in order to undermine Pakistan's influence with the militants' leaders. Pakistan accuses India of backing Iran and having its own relations with the Taliban, which India denies. Russia has opened a dialogue with the Taliban according to diplomats from central Asia. An intensification of regional rivalry is reminiscent of the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, which was fuelled by all of Afghanistan's neighbours, each backing one side or the other.

Meanwhile Pakistan made it clear that it considered the US attack a violation of its sovereignty. The military – which runs foreign and increasingly domestic, policy – accuses the US of siding with India against Pakistan's interests. Relations sank to a new low recently after US Congress refused to give loans to Pakistan to buy F-16 fighter jets and voted to block an estimated \$450m in aid.

Meanwhile there is no doubt that the US is growing nervous as President Barack Obama's term comes to an end and there is no let-up in the Taliban offensive. The last thing Mr Obama wants is to be forced to commit more troops to Afghanistan just as he is trying to convince the world that Afghanistan is a US success story.

The Nato summit in Warsaw in early July and another important EU meeting in early October will consider what strategy the west should pursue, both military terms and in financial terms, to improve the desperate economic plight of Afghanistan.

The Americans have shaken the kaleidoscope of problems – how it ultimately comes to rest is both unpredictable and dangerous for Afghans who have been in a permanent state of war since 1979.