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Insight: Pakistan influence on Taliban commanders helped Afghan breakthrough

By Frank Jack Daniel and Mehreen Zahra-Malik

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Pakistan's powerful military has played a central role in convincing Afghanistan's Taliban rebels to hold talks with the United States, U.S. and Pakistani officials said, a shift from widely held views in Washington that it was obstructing peace in the region.

U.S. and Taliban officials were due to meet in Doha, the capital of Qatar, in the next few days, raising hopes for negotiated peace after 12 years of war between American-led forces and the Islamist insurgents.

Neighboring Pakistan's role in the war has been ambiguous - it is a U.S. ally but has a long history of supporting the Taliban as its proxy in Afghanistan, part of its wider jockeying with regional rival India.

Western officials believe Pakistan may now calculate that its interest is better served by helping to broker peace that would lead to the emergence of a friendly government in Kabul capable of stabilizing Afghanistan and preventing chaos spilling over the border.

Several military and civilian officials told Reuters Pakistan helped persuade the "relevant Taliban commanders" to talk to the Americans and Afghans and also sought to convince them that getting into talks was in their interest.

"It would not have been possible without our facilitation. Convincing the Taliban that it was in Afghanistan's interest and also convincing the other parties that this is what the Taliban actually have in mind," one senior army officer said.

He spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Pakistan has a civilian government but the military has ruled the nation for over half of its 66 years of independence and holds sway over large areas of policy, including relations with neighbors.

A meeting between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan military chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani in Brussels in April was a turning point in arranging the talks in Doha, said a former senior Pakistani official.

"The key was the trilateral meeting hosted by Kerry in Brussels," said the former official.

Pakistan helped get Taliban leaders to a series of secret meetings with representatives of the Afghan government in Europe in recent months that helped pave the way for the planned talks, Pakistan's foreign ministry told Reuters.

"Many of them travelled to Doha and other places and things started moving. We hope this will move on to its ultimate phase where there will be an inter-Afghan dialogue," foreign ministry spokesman Aizaz Chaudhry said.

TERRORIST ORGANISATION

The Taliban movement was born in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet Union's 1979-1989 occupation of Afghanistan. In 1996, Taliban soldiers swept through their nation and took control of Kabul, many say with the support of Pakistan's army and its ubiquitous spy agency, the ISI.

After the 9/11 bombings and under pressure from Washington, then-president Gen. Pervez Musharraf officially distanced Pakistan from the Taliban and threw its lot in with the United States, making it a strategic ally in the "global war on terror" despite misgivings among his top military brass.

But as late as last year, Washington said the Taliban, and the Haqqani faction linked to it, were allied to elements in Pakistan and the ISI. It declared the Haqqani group a terrorist organization in September.

"There has in the past been skepticism about their support, but in recent months I think we've seen evidence that there is genuine support," a senior U.S. administration official told reporters on Tuesday about Pakistan's involvement.

"The government of Pakistan has been particularly helpful in urging the other side - that is, the Taliban - to come forward and join in a peace process," another U.S. official said.

With the U.S. troop drawdown in Afghanistan firmly underway, U.S. officials have abandoned long standing demands that Pakistan crack down on Taliban safe havens, and instead sought to enlist Pakistan's help to promote dialogue.

Pakistan military officials say they want to seal a deal in Afghanistan to avoid the risk that instability after the foreign combat mission ends in 2014 will spill across the border and energize a stubborn insurgency by Pakistani militants.

However, the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai remains deeply suspicious, fearing Pakistan's military remains wedded to a time-worn strategy of backing militant proxies such as the Taliban and that it is extending minimal cooperation merely to appease the West.

WARY OF INDIA

Afghan officials are also concerned that Pakistan might use its influence over the Taliban to steer the shape of any future settlement of who comes to power in Kabul. Pakistan is wary of the close relations between Karzai's government and India, Islamabad's old rival.

Privately many Pakistan officials admit the country's past support for Taliban came at an unbearable cost in blood and finance. Pakistani troops are now fighting an insurgency by the Pakistan Taliban, which wants to replace democracy with Sharia law.

But some hawks in the security bureaucracy may cringe at the idea of supporting dialogue unless they can be certain that any future settlement will limit the influence of India in Kabul.

Pakistan has also sought to bolster its influence in Afghanistan by building bridges with the Northern Alliance, a constellation of anti-Taliban warlords who have traditionally been implacable critics of Islamabad.

"You cannot afford to side with one faction, then you turn everybody else against you," one senior member of the security forces told Reuters.

Pakistan is keen to stress that it will remain neutral in substantive peace talks -- several officials said Pakistan did not want to sit at the negotiating table, and that such talks would be "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led."

"Pakistan will go all out to support this process," said Col. Abid Askari, a spokesman for the armed forces, but added: "We don't want any region or country, including Pakistan, to impose a solution."