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European Languages

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Spiegel Online

Coup in Pakistan 'A Real Possibility'

11/12/2010

Western countries would like to negotiate with the Taliban, but Pakistan would rather they didn't. US terrorism expert Bruce Riedel spoke with SPIEGEL ONLINE about just how explosive the situation currently is in Pakistan and how much influence al-Qaida still has.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Mr. Riedel, there is increasing talk of trying to negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to achieve a political settlement. How can this be achieved?

Bruce Riedel: We are all war weary, we are all looking for a way out, we would all like a political solution. The question is: Is the Taliban capable of the kind of process of compromise and negotiation that we want? And can it be separated from al-Qaida? There is every reason to test those propositions, and we have nothing to lose by testing them. But we also have to be honest with ourselves. The odds are good that the answer is no and that the ties between the two are too strong at the operational and ideological level. In the US last year, we had an attempted attack on the Metro system in New York City which was al-Qaida sponsored but in which the terrorists had been given to al-Qaida by the Afghan Taliban. So in this sense they were involved in recruiting for a terrorist attack on America. That suggests it is going to be very, very hard to break up this connection.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Officially ,the Afghan Taliban regularly insist that they are not interested in international terrorism and would instead like to establish good neighborly relations with Afghanistan's neighbors. Does this mean the Afghan Taliban is not as monolithic as it claims to be?

Riedel: The Afghan Taliban is composed of several networks and it is not clear how monolithic even these networks are within themselves. But there is a broader phenomenon going on inside all the militant groups based in Pakistan, which is a radicalization. The idea of global Jihad is becoming more and more popular at the grassroots level. Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, who traditionally had a domestic agenda, are increasingly buying into the idea of globalized terrorism.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: One possible negotiating partner within the Afghan Taliban would be Mullah Baradar, who made it known he was ready to discuss the idea of holding talks. But he was arrested by Pakistan. Was this an attempt by Pakistan to stop negotiations altogether?

Riedel: That is in fact another dimension of this complicated problem. Pakistan does not want direct negotiations between the Afghan Taliban and the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai or between the Afghan Taliban and the West. It wants to control the process so as to ensure it gets its preferred outcome, which is a satellite state next to Pakistan. When Mullah Baradar started to talk about talks, the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) had him arrested. He is, from what I understand, under some sort of friendly house arrest now. But he is being used by the ISI as a signal to the other Taliban to prevent them from taking independent action.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan may very well be legitimate, but they become less important when Pakistan itself is becoming instable...

Riedel: Pakistan today is already in the midst of a small scale civil war. Last year 25,000 Pakistanis were killed or wounded in terrorism-related violence, and that's just civilians. That's three times the number of civilians killed or wounded in Afghanistan in the same year. It is a very fragile, very volatile and very combustible country right now. In many ways it is the strategic prize in this whole equation. What happens in Afghanistan will have huge ramifications for what happens in Pakistan. A jihadist victory in Afghanistan would have enormous reverberations and could even signal a take over by jihadist forces in Pakistan.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Some people believe a jihadist takeover is already more likely in Pakistan than in Afghanistan.

Riedel: I don't think it is imminent or inevitable. It is probably not even the most likely outcome. But for the first time, it is a real possibility. It could come in one of two ways. The Pakistani Taliban insurgency could grow and grow and grow, or, more likely, you could have a coup from inside the military by jihadist sympathizers. There is a lot of unrest in the Pakistani army because of their ongoing operations against militants. We could wake up one morning and have another Zia ul-Haq in power in Pakistan, a committed jihadist, only this time without the Soviet Union as his enemy.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: It is interesting to note that al-Qaida not only has relations with the Afghan Taliban but also with the Pakistani Taliban, which almost seems to be acting as a kind of al-Qaida proxy.

Riedel: The reason is that al-Qaida learned an important lesson in Iraq: If you put foreigners in the front line, they will eventually turn the population against them. So in Pakistan, the front line is the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e Toiba, all these Pakistani faces. Witness for example the rise of Ilyas Kashmiri, a long time Pakistani terrorist fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Now he is the face of jihad in Pakistan. The same is true for Afghanistan. Al-Qaida doesn't lead the fight in Afghanistan. They let the Taliban lead it. But behind the scenes they provide support.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Given the complexity of the problem, what should be the international community's first priority?

Riedel: We have to make sure this is an Afghan-led process. Secondly, we need to send a clear message to Pakistan that it can be part of the process, but it cannot be the dominant power. Afghanistan cannot be a satellite state of Pakistan.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What is the relevance of the al-Qaida leadership in all this? What would happen, for example, were Osama Bin Laden to be killed by a US drone?

Riedel: It would have a tremendous symbolism. He would become an instant martyr for militant Jihad. And it would have consequences on the ground, too. We shouldn't think of bin Laden as living in a cave. He is actively engaged in controlling a global terrorist organization. I don't mean that he runs everything. But he provides strategic direction. The truth is, we don't have a clue where he is. We haven't had eyes on High Value Target Number One since 2002. We believe he is in Pakistan, it is a pretty good bet. But the largest manhunt in human history has so far produced no shred of evidence as to where he is.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What about recent reports, attributed at the time to an anonymous NATO official, allegedly saying that bin Laden lives in a comfortable house in North Waziristan?

Riedel: I think that's a reasonable guess, but that's all it is.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: There are rumors on Jihadist websites and elsewhere that al-Qaida is already transferring cadres to Yemen, assuming that they can't hide in North Waziristan much longer given the US drones and the prospect of a military invasion there.

Riedel: Judging from the history of al-Qaida, they will prepare and plan ahead. I am sure they are putting key cadres in places like Yemen and Somalia, but also moving them around in Pakistan, where you can hide easily -- even in slums adjacent to the big cities, especially Karachi.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Al-Qaida has proven to be rather resilient.

Riedel: Yes, al-Qaida has indeed proven to be very agile and resilient and it is a learning organization. It adapts to new circumstances and learns from mistakes. They are also very patient. They have invested years in planning their more spectacular operations. They can wait. So on the whole, this is far from over. Al-Qaida today remains a very dangerous foe and must not be underestimated.