
US COMMANDER WARNS OF RUSSIAN, IRANIAN, PAKISTANI INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

- 13.02.2017

VOA, February 11, 2017

The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan says Russia, Pakistan and Iran are pursuing their own agendas with regard to the fragile country, complicating the fight against terrorism and extremism.

"We're concerned about outside actors," General John Nicholson told VOA's Afghan service in an interview.

Russia, which had an ill-fated intervention into Afghanistan that started in 1979 and ended nearly a decade later, has been trying to exert influence in the region again and has set up six-country peace talks next week that are excluding the United States. Nicholson worries about Russia's links with the Taliban.

"Russia has been legitimizing the Taliban and supporting the Taliban," he said. "Meanwhile, the Taliban supports terrorists. I'm very sorry to see Russia supporting the Taliban and narcoterrorism." Moscow denies that it provides aid to the Taliban and says its contacts with the group are aimed at encouraging them to enter peace talks.

Taliban role in peace efforts

Despite the Taliban's history of violence and extremism, Nicholson didn't rule out a role for the Taliban in the peace process, saying there were elements in the group that appeared to be more pragmatic about the country's prospects for peace.

"Many of its leaders see a better life for all Afghans," he said.

Meanwhile, he said Iran appeared to be supporting extremists in western Afghanistan.

"But the situation is more complex than with Russia," Nicholson said. "There needs to be a relationship" between Afghanistan and Iran, which have seen a resurgence in trade that has partially compensated for a decline in Afghan economic activity with Pakistan.

President Donald Trump's new administration has made a flurry of contacts with top Afghan and Pakistani officials in recent days as it formulates a new policy in the region. That clearly involves pressure on Islamabad to do more to crack down on terrorist groups that hide out near the Afghan border in Pakistan's volatile tribal areas.

"We want cooperation from Pakistan against all terrorists," Nicholson said. "We must have pressure on external sanctuaries in Pakistan."

Rooting out terrorists would help ease Pakistan's concerns about further attacks on its turf that are

seen by many as a penalty for the country's support for the U.S. war on terrorism, he said.

"We all hope for a change in Pakistani behavior," Nicholson said. "This is in Pakistan's interest."

Congressional appearance

The general spoke shortly after appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday, where he said he needed "a few thousand" more soldiers to bolster the 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Nicholson told VOA that the extra troops would serve as advisers, extending that role from the core of the Afghan military down to the brigade level to help the country's troops in what he called a "very, very tough fight" to foster peace.

"The enemy is trying to seize cities," he said. "It's a new dimension to the fight."

The Afghan military has suffered heavy losses as a result. More than 6,700 of its soldiers were killed last year through November 12, according to a quarterly report from the U.S. government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, up from 6,600 for all of 2015.

Nicholson discounted recent figures that indicated the Taliban has gained more territory this year and now holds about 15 percent of the land, saying it was the result of a revised Afghan government strategy to focus on protecting urban areas.

"This was a wise decision by the government," he said, adding that it had provided greater protection for most of the people. "There's a difference between territory and population. Many areas are sparsely populated."

Propaganda war

U.S.-led forces also have been losing ground in the propaganda war waged by the Taliban and the 20 terrorist groups that operate in Afghanistan, who aggressively use social media, often with false reports that put the international mission in a bad light, Nicholson said.

He sought advice from VOA journalists on the best ways to counter the extremists' message and recruitment efforts, saying "the enemy" was doing a better job than the government and its allies at reaching the Afghan people. "We're trying to be more proactive in communications," he said.

The U.S. has been in Afghanistan for more than 15 years and has committed to at least four more years. But Nicholson said even though the internal fight is currently at a "stalemate," the battle is worthwhile. He added that he did see a peaceful future for the country.

"I believe it will end well for the Afghan people," he said. "Our Afghan brothers and sisters are worth our support."

Kaynak/Source: