

THE AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY FOR 2009: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES??



The war in Afghanistan has gone on for thirty years, a period of time comparable to that encompassed by the beginning of World War I to the end of World War II. Despite the doubling of NATO and Afghan troops and operations in the past four years today, the military situation is deteriorating and Afghanistan appears to be spiraling downward into civil war and state failure. In mid-2005, the West tried to correct its four-year mismanagement of the Afghan military mission by doubling US, NATO and Afghan troops over the next three years. But this troop surge has only produced a quantum leap in the incidence of violence, including suicide attacks and roadside bombings which are at an eight-year high, as are civilian casualties; in addition, the legitimacy of the central government of Hamid Karzai and popular support for NATO's mission are at all-time lows. Meanwhile, the Taliban have multiplied exponentially inside both Afghanistan and Pakistan and Al Qaeda has become further entrenched in

the borderlands of western Pakistan. "The bottom line here is," as US Vice-President Joseph Biden said recently, "we've inherited a real mess."

Against this gloomy backdrop President Barack Obama, prioritizing Afghanistan for the first time in eight years, has outlined a tri-partite plan in Afghanistan: 1) a military surge of 17,000 US combat troops and 4,000 trainers, complemented with 5,000 more NATO troops aimed at the providing adequate local security and stabilization but at the least, to achieve a stronger position from which to negotiate with the insurgency; 2) increased resources for governance, economic and social and development for both Afghanistan and Pakistan to rectify the striking imbalance in which in the first seven years military appropriations dwarfed these civilian projects by a factor of more than ten; and 3) an acceptance of negotiations with the some Taliban leaders and a call for regional diplomacy among Afghanistan's neighbors—especially the West's ambivalent ally, Pakistan with its influence over the Afghan Taliban.

Additional elements of a revised strategy aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan and eventually drawing down the international military missions there include the following: a general consensus among western militaries and government officials that there is NO purely military solution to ending the Afghan insurgency or stabilizing Pakistan; increased support for some sort of carefully crafted negotiations and reconciliation process with the Afghan insurgency, backed by the US and NATO, but led by Kabul; a renewed commitment to developing an effective Afghanisation program; increased efforts to improve coordination and effective strategies along the critical Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which is the locus of much of the Taliban activity and infiltration into Afghanistan; a consensus that Pakistan is a critical if not the key player and that a more nuanced and complex strategy needs to be formulated (as well as dedicating more aid to economic and social—particularly educational—development).

Finally, there is increasing talk in all quarters-- from academics to diplomats to Barack Obama-- of the need for a regional strategy; i.e., a regional dialogue or contact group which would create the conditions for a positive involvement of Afghanistan's neighbors in seeking solutions to the crisis. The challenges in promoting a regionally-based international effort are indeed great for an international community which has yet to find an effective way to coordinate its own role in Afghanistan. The neighbourhood of Afghanistan and its greater region is fragmented and complex, including several weak countries and mutual suspicions and resentments. Moreover, there is no consensus on what kind of Afghanistan is acceptable to all countries having a stake

A key aim of this regional dialogue would be to engage Pakistan on a variety of economic and national security issues in order to convert Islamabad into a more effective ally of the international community in Afghanistan and ultimately to dampen the fires of the insurgency in Afghanistan. However, a major paradox in the "Af-Pak" conundrum is that the key to settling the crisis in Afghanistan is a state whose army is working with the enemy it is being funded by the US to fight and defeat. Moreover, in a sense

that in playing the Pakistan card in Afghanistan, we are asking a failing state to stabilise a failed state. Since Pakistan's inception in 1947, the army and its close partner the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has defined the nation's national security primarily in terms of the threat from India. Nuclear weapons are thus indispensable. Pakistani forces should be amassed in the east along the Indian border, rather than on the western border with Afghanistan. And a collaborative relationship with Afghan Taliban and Islamic terrorists is deemed essential by significant factions of the army and ISI so as to check Indian ambitions in both Kashmir and Afghanistan. Support for Afghan militants has certainly been the case since Pakistan became the main sanctuary and source of logistical support for the mujahedeen in their battle to expel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The existential question hovering over the current Pakistani army campaign against the militants in the Swat Valley is whether it represents a fundamental break with past national security assumptions, and if so, do the army and the ISI now have the will and the capacity to deal forthrightly with the militant Islamic threat?

Pakistan is a nuclear-armed nation of 170 million, the majority suspicious if not hostile to the US. Its army and security apparatus still operate on a firmly embedded, half century-old strategic vision, with its attendant assumptions about India and the usefulness of Islamic nationalism. In these circumstances, becoming a regional proxy for the US does not appear politically viable. The government may declare its solidarity with the US and the West as they did after September 11, but it is unlikely that even the US has the leverage to modify its bedrock attitudes toward Afghan and Pakistani militants.

While this revised strategy is measurably broader than the approach of the past eight years, its centerpiece is still military: a surge doubling the number of US soldiers, together with smaller and more temporary increments from NATO countries' armed forces. The intensified military push is designed to retake, secure and hold areas currently under Taliban control while providing for ongoing stabilization, protection and development of these zones. At a minimum, it is hoped that the new military component will enhance NATO's position in any future negotiation with the insurgency.

However, so far, there is no convincing argument why we should expect the current surge to produce any more positive results than the three-year troop increase did. Moreover, 1) a military "surge", with attendant civilian casualties from both air strikes and ground operations, risks undermining whatever new non-military development package is essayed in Afghanistan and Pakistan and 2) an increased military presence with cross-border operations into Pakistan risks destroying the possibilities of a regional dialogue.

The Taliban, who believe they are already winning, will likely opt for more war and less negotiations to enhance their own bargaining position. And they are aware that a conventional army must win in order not to lose; a guerrilla movement only has to avoid losing in order to win.

A decision by the US or NATO to pull up stakes in Afghanistan seems to be unthinkable-- mainly, it is argued, because of the blow it would deal both to the credibility of US power and to the alliance's military efficacy. However, like the US fate in its Vietnam war, NATO's credibility may eventually be more seriously damaged by gambling the alliance's prestige on staying the course in Afghanistan than it would have been by beginning to withdraw now.

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