

'DISRUPT, DISMANTLE AND DEFEAT': THE US/NATO POLICY ON AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

*Simbal Khan**

President Obama unveiled the broad outlines of the new US/NATO policy for Afghanistan and Pakistan on March 27, 2009. Several elements of this new policy are consistent with Pakistan's stated positions and are viewed as positive. On the other hand, certain aspects of the revised strategy are being viewed with serious concern in Pakistan.

The initiatives which have found resonance with Pakistan's stated positions are:

- Planned civilian surge in Afghanistan.
- Greater focus on reconstruction and development.
- Willingness to negotiate with insurgent groups.
- Increase in the capacity and size of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police.
- Eliminating the narcotics trade.

However, President Obama while announcing the strategy stated in no uncertain terms that the defining purpose and goal of the US/NATO mission in Afghanistan is to:

- Disrupt, Dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan and Afghanistan and prevent their return to either country in the Future.

While agreeing to the broad aims contained in this core element, Pakistan feels that there is a need to further deconstruct what is really implied by this strategy, when seen in Afghanistan's context.

There is a danger that the narrow focus on the destruction of safe havens would detract the US and NATO from following strategies based on broader principles of 'counter-terrorism'. There are apprehensions that these 'Counter-Haven strategies' might replace more population centric counter-terrorism measures, which have been employed with some success in Iraq in 2007.

In the context of this strategy some fundamental questions need to be addressed. Some of these questions are— is the US/NATO embracing a more limited counter-terror mission by identifying this as the core element of their strategy? Does it imply that a qualified destruction of Al Qaeda safe havens from Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions would lead to an end of the US/NATO mission in Afghanistan? Or is the mission committing itself more fully to nation-building by pursuing long term solutions to the problem of ungoverned spaces?

* *Ms. Simbal Khan is Acting Director (Research) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

The clarity on these questions is critical as regional states like Pakistan, Iran and India are likely to predicate their future course of actions based on such calculations.

However, Pakistan has reasons to view with alarm this growing insistence by the US that the center of gravity of the threat actually lies in the safe havens and sanctuaries in Pakistan. Under this new strategic game plan FATA and Pakistan's western borders are increasingly being considered as the frontline of war.

For the past two years Pakistan has suffered the brunt of this counter-haven strategy on two fronts; in the first instance are the relentless Drone attacks on al Qaeda targets. The frequent and lethal Predator strikes against targets in the FATA have inflamed public opinion in Pakistan and further destabilized the region. Drone attacks have been only nominally successful in decapitating Al Qaeda: (Of the 60 predator strikes carried out from January 14 2006 till April 8 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted Al Qaeda leaders. While the strikes caused 687 civilian casualties). Pakistan is insistent that any tactical benefits associated with drone strikes must be weighed against the costs in terms of broad counter-terrorism goals. Among these goals is winning over the Pushtun tribal elements whose support is critical if we are to win a decisive victory against al Qaeda.

This 'counter-haven' focus of the new approach is also increasing dangers of military escalation in Pakistan. International forces in Afghanistan are expected to increase pressure on Pakistan to militarily root out Taliban sanctuaries on its soil. There is a clear and present danger that the new policy will lead to the broadening of the theater of war to include Western Pakistan.

Pakistan acknowledges the fact that the insurgents are provided some support from sanctuaries based on its territory, but at the same time Pakistan disputes the degree of its impact on the success of the Taliban insurgency. Islamabad has long insisted that the core of the problem actually lies in Afghanistan, and the increasing chaos in FATA itself is a direct result of the total security collapse in Afghanistan.

This narrow two track approach of targeting al Qaeda safe havens and Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal belt, has strained US-Pak relations at this critical juncture. The widespread public resentment caused by the drone strikes has made it difficult for the Pakistan government to agree to more proactive strategies to fight Al Qaeda-such as accepting greater technical support, cooperation and even joint operations on the ground with US forces in Fata. On the US side, this mutual lack of trust on the issue of Taliban sanctuaries has prevented it from equipping Pakistan with the sensitive technologies which would enable it to take on the terrorists on its own.

The 21,000 troop surge ordered by the President Obama is likely to further escalate instability in Pakistan's border regions. Increased military engagements are likely to result in a greater trans-border influx of militants and Al Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan; Increase in the vulnerability of NATO-US supply routes through Pakistan to attacks as the traffic is likely to increase manifold; And an increase in violence in Pakistan as terrorist reprisals are likely to intensify.

In Pakistan's view, developing simplistic conceptual frameworks such as the 'AfPak' idea, which treats Pakistan and Afghanistan border regions as single theatre of war, is not only erroneous but also deflects attention from the real causes of failure in Afghanistan. The differences in historical/structural factors, causes, context and national narratives of the main political forces involved preclude the efficacy of approaches which do not take into account such vital distinctions. There is a need instead, for US/NATO in Afghanistan, to honestly address the shortcomings (and failures) of the post war rehabilitation strategy that has been followed for the past seven years, with disastrous consequences.

Unmediated involvement of regional states like India in Afghanistan has added another dangerous dimension and increased Pakistan's insecurities. Instead of responding to Pakistan's concern regarding India's hostile activities in Afghanistan the new policy recommends a greater role for India in Afghanistan, which only adds to Pakistan's fears of encirclement and goes against the prevailing wisdom of stabilizing Pakistan. Pakistan is not likely to move the bulk of its forces from its eastern borders in order to fight insurgents in the west, without a concomitant resolution of its security issues with India. Finally any attempt to attach conditions that aim to change or restructure Pakistan's security calculus without affecting a change in its security environment is bound to be resisted.

This deflection of focus to the external security environment of Afghanistan, at the cost of addressing its internal security related shortcomings is evident in many aspects of the new policy. The most important security specific element of the new strategy relates to increasing the size of Indigenous Afghan forces. According to Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, Minister of Defense, in Afghanistan, the much trumpeted increase in the numbers of the Afghan security forces-Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police- to 134000 and 82000 respectively in the next two years falls way short of the requirements. According to his figures the police force is already 99% of its expected strength. The army fares better but still falls short of the goal of indigenization of security apparatus in Afghanistan. It is difficult to imagine that the fast degrading security situation inside Afghanistan is likely to be addressed by such half measures.

The policy of filling this security vacuum by arming and training tribal militias to fight Taliban such as the Afghan Public Protection Programs (AP3) recently launched in the Wardak province must be carefully reviewed. Already there are reports that in the Jalrez district where the program has been launched, most of the recruits belong to a single tribe. Also, the government accountability office in Afghanistan has recently reported that 50 to 40% of the 370,000 weapons supplied by the US/NATO to Afghan security forces cannot be accounted for. Such proliferation of weapons and arming tribal militias can exacerbate tribal rivalries and ethnic conflicts.

Pakistan has welcomed all initiative that seeks a negotiated settlement to Afghanistan's problems. However, till to this date, no serious effort has been made to address the ethnic and factional causes of the conflict in Afghanistan. There is clear absence of a broad, intra-Afghan dialogue to address ethnic insecurities. According to some analysts the ethnic composition of the Afghan army's officer corps is a closely guarded secret. Pushtun perceptions of marginalization especially in the Afghan security forces must be transparently addressed.

The new policy also remains ambivalent on the issue of reconciling with the insurgents. The white paper on the interagency review indicates that peace overtures can be made to “non-ideologically committed insurgents”. This seems like a reversion to earlier initiatives such as PTS or the program Takhim-e-Solh introduced in 2004, and the quest for the Moderate Taliban, which have had no success. The new approach again is based on exclusionist and divisive strategies which seek to exclude organized networks of the Taliban while including breakaway local strongmen and foot soldiers into the reconciliation process. Lessons from the past suggest that such initiatives are likely to fail.

Many in Pakistan believe that the U.S efforts to adopt a broader approach to resolving the conflict in Afghanistan might actually broaden the conflict and engulf Pakistan into the vortex of war. President Obama has indicated a willingness to call for yearly policy reviews. This is a step in the right direction. The test of this strategy is going to be in its execution; how rigid or how open the architects of this policy are to the input offered by various stakeholders; such as Pakistan.