

TROOP SURGE IN AFGHANISTAN: PERILS AND OPPORTUNITIES*

*Simbal Khan***

Afghanistan's Security environment

The years 2006-2008 saw a fast deterioration of the security environment in Afghanistan. There emerged a broad consensus among various stakeholders that the Taliban increased their control over Afghan territory during 2008. According to a report by the International Council on Security, by November 2008, Taliban groups had a permanent presence in almost three-fourths of Afghanistan. Also, surveys conducted by the Asia Foundation and other organizations revealed that there was a significant drop in the sense of personal security of Afghans in the same period.

This sense of general alarm about the war in Afghanistan defined the presidential campaign during the US elections. In March 2009, President Obama presented the draft of a new US policy on Pakistan and Afghanistan which aimed to address this security slide with a spate of new strategies. The corner stone of Obama's Afghanistan policy is the troop surge. The US forces in Afghanistan are set to increase from 33,000 to around 68,000 by the end of the year. The increase in force levels is aimed at improving the fast deteriorating security environment in the South and South-Eastern border regions of Afghanistan. After the surge is complete, total Coalition/NATO troop commitment to Afghanistan is expected to increase to approximately 90,000 troops.

Troop Surge: Strategic Objectives

The aims of the expected troop surge are three fold: to deny transnational terror groups the ability to use physical space to plan and prepare for attacks on the US and the Western states; to attack and destroy Taliban ability to operate and control territory, and attack coalition troops; and to provide security for reconstruction and development activities, especially in the Pushtun-dominated South and South-Eastern Afghanistan.

Tactical Goals

According to plans, the additional troops would be used to secure major highways, expand coverage of populated regions, reduce the flow of insurgents from across the border and train the Afghan military and police force. Most importantly, the troop deployment patterns are likely to incorporate counterinsurgency and stabilization doctrines such as the concept of 'clear, hold and build'. This idea, simply put, means that Afghan and coalition troops move into new regions only when forces are available to hold on to them thereafter. Earlier, coalition troops would pull out once a given search and destroy mission was complete, leaving the Taliban to flow back into the area and killing all those who had cooperated with the coalition troops.

Perils and Shortcomings

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

There are certain dangers inherent in this troop surge which if not addressed through policy adjustments, may increase conflict and stall the stabilization process in Afghanistan:

1. Over-reliance on the military component: One danger in the troop surge is that it might reinforce dependence on the military as a change agent rather than working to develop grass root civilian forces. The basic problem with the counter-insurgency concept of 'clear, hold and build' as well as the what was once known as the "ink blot" strategy, is an over-reliance on the military component. One good example is the case of the PRTs or the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The few PRTs that exist in the South and the East are led by military personnel who remain directly involved in initiating and undertaking reconstruction activities in place of civilian development workers or international donors. This is problematic in regions where the coalition troops are involved in active combat. This situation itself creates problems for stabilization as aid and the reconstruction process itself is seen as partisan.

2. Absence of an Afghan civilian interface: Another factor that is likely to impact the effectiveness of this military surge is the virtual absence of an Afghan civilian interface between the coalition troops and the Taliban. In the troubled Southern and Eastern regions, almost no Afghan administration exists at the district level. The newly conscripted police are corrupt or inefficient; the judicial system is dysfunctional or not present. In such an environment, the military itself becomes the agent to dispense administration and reconstruction rather than a facilitator for civilian indigenous forces.

3. Taliban's sophisticated knowledge of Pushtun politics: As compared to the Afghan State's limited outreach in the South and the Eastern Pushtun areas, the Taliban are successfully using their sophisticated knowledge of Pushtun politics to approach and co-opt local communities and their leaders. The tribal structures have been severely damaged by the 30-year conflict. Contrary to the idea that the tribes can be drawn upon to resist the Taliban, the Taliban have been more successful in exploiting the tribal structures than the Afghan state, as we have seen in the eastern province of Khost.

On the other hand the Afghan State/coalition-led initiatives to fill the 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.

The only notable political initiative the international community has on offer is the upcoming presidential election. President Karzai, who is expected to win a second term, enjoys little credibility with either the Afghan people or the international community itself. In short, the troop surge, which has already started, is not pegged in with any new game-changing political plan.

4. Personal security and increase in civilian casualties: A 2008 Asia Foundation survey indicates that 50% of Afghans fear for their personal security and they are concerned about a range of threats and not just the insurgency. Insecurity is most acute along the arc that includes Western, Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. These are the regions that are likely to see greatest surge in troop deployment.

More troops on the ground mean more targets for the insurgents and increase in search and destroy missions, reliance on aerial strikes resulting in greater collateral

damage and civilian casualties. The recent air strike in the western province of Farah in the Bala Baluk district which reportedly killed 140 civilians including women and children is a grave reminder how difficult it is to win hearts and minds when combat operations are undertaken to fight an enemy often embedded among civilian populations.

5. Counter-haven strategies and instability in Pakistan: There is a serious danger that the intensification of military operations inside Afghanistan may destabilize Pakistan. The focus on counter-haven strategies to root out Taliban sanctuaries and al Qaeda havens in Pakistan's troubled FATA region is critically increasing instability in Pakistan. There are fears that the troop surge is likely to push the Taliban and al Qaeda into Pakistan and increase the pressure on the embattled state already engaged in fighting the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) and other militant outfits.

There is a likelihood of increase in the vulnerability of NATO-US supply routes through Pakistan to attacks as the traffic is likely to increase manifold. Currently, the two transit routes through Pakistan supply 40% of fuel and 80% of all non-fuel supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan; already we have seen intensification in terror attacks as reprisals for the army action against the militants. This broadening of conflict which has engulfed western Pakistan has already produced 2.5 million internal refugees and numbers are expected to increase as the military moves on to South and North Waziristan agencies in the FATA region.

Opportunities for Stabilization

Despite the challenges, the planned troop surge offers certain opportunities for the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan and provide security to the Afghan population.

1. Prioritizing the provision of personal security to the Afghan civilians: Protecting the Afghan population also means minimising civilian casualties which appear to have pushed locals towards anti-state actors such as Taliban. The deployment of thousands of new U.S. troops in Afghanistan can lessen the reliance on air strikes that sometimes kill civilians and undermine support for the fight against the Taliban. More troops are likely to translate into more precise ground operations to lesson a dependence on air power which can reduce the costly civilian casualties and reduce the moral and strategic vulnerability of the NATO/coalition presence.

2. Protecting highways and facilitating transport and mobility: Safety of transport routes and road travel remains increasingly curtailed in most of Afghanistan as 61% of Afghans felt insecure while travelling inside Afghanistan in 2008. Incidents of kidnapping have increased as Taliban, other militant groups and criminal syndicates increasingly set up unregulated check posts on all major and minor roads. Additional troops can be deputed to check and provide security along major highways.

3. Border check posts and monitoring: The trans-border nature of the insurgency in Afghanistan has made the Pak-Afghan border a dangerous and contentious place as the two countries often trade allegations regarding unchecked movement of insurgents and terrorists along this porous border. There is hope that with additional troops, more border check posts can be set up on the Afghan side. Currently, only 150 border check posts exist on the Afghan side as against 850 set up by Pakistan. Better monitoring of and tracking militant traffic across the border is less costly in terms of civilian casualties as well.

4. **Facilitate the process of 'Afghanisation'**: The process of indigenization or 'Afghanisation' of security in Afghanistan is an important element of the new policy. With the troop surge, the number of trainers for the Afghan military as well as the Afghan National Police Force is expected to increase significantly. In the past few years, there has been heavy criticism of the level and kind of training offered to the Afghan National Police whose performance has been criticized widely.

Under the new plan, in the next two years, the numbers of Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police are expected to be raised to 134,000 and 82,000, respectively. According to Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, Minister of Defense, Afghanistan, the much trumpeted increase in the numbers of the Afghan National Police is only illusory as, according to his figures, the police force is already 99% of its expected strength. In order to arrest a fast degrading security environment and provide effective policing to communities plagued by common criminals and narco-traffickers, the projected numbers of ANA must be increased.