

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S POLICY ON AFGHANISTAN

*Amina Khan **

With every new administration there is always a window of opportunity to recalibrate relationships. The expectations of change associated with President Obama are huge and the challenges are no less. However, one does not see any dramatic change in the U.S. policy, as Obama will be no less compromising in the pursuit of American interests, particularly when it comes to Pakistan and the war in Afghanistan.

Although president Obama has yet to develop a comprehensive policy for the entire region, and undertake a full review of the situation in Afghanistan, he has started by appointing Richard Holbrooke, as his special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan. This appointment underlines the significance the new administration attaches to the region it calls one of "the worlds hotspots" (the other being the Middle East) in winning the US's War on terror. Holbrooke's task will be to push both Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate with each other as well as with NATO and the US, to defeat extremist elements – mainly the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the region.

Afghanistan

President-elect Barack Obama has said that he wants to focus attention on Afghanistan, which, unlike Iraq, is the more legitimate front in the War on Terrorism.

The Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, hailed the inauguration of Barack Obama as the start of a "promising new era of understanding" between Afghanistan and the US. However, both Obama and Holbrooke have been critical of Karzai and his government for being ineffective and corrupt. Despite failure on the part of the international community- the Afghan government is equally to blame. Afghanistan's elected President, Hamid Karzai, has been unsuccessful in providing security or good governance. Over the passage of time, there has been growing dissatisfaction – and resentment towards Karzai. Public support has plummeted. Both domestic and International criticism has increased regarding the governments policies on human rights and its lack of good governance. As indicated in an International Crisis Group report, "President Karzai's government still lacks the political will to tackle a culture of impunity and to end political interference in the appointment and operations of police."

President Karzai

The government of Hamid Karazi, has so far been unable to provide either security or good governance. Initially welcomed by the masses, the Karzai government has, within a short period of time, drawn internal and international criticism. Public support for Karzai has diminished. In fact since late 2006, Karzai has been, losing the support of the international community and it would seem that the search is possibly on for a new Afghan President with the former finance minister, Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai and former

* *Ms. Amina Khan is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

interior minister, Ali Ahmed Jalali as likely candidates. Although it is too soon to predict but keeping in mind the state of affairs in Afghanistan and the fact that the international community has invested heavily in Karzai, he is widely expected to get a second term in office. Therefore, Obama may not have an alternative but to work with Karzai by putting pressure on him to deliver, stressing on making:

- His government stronger and effective
- rooting out corruption,
- providing governance,
- dealing with the growing opium trade / cultivation-
- Also to work more closely with Pakistan in dealing with the militants.

Military Assistance

To counter the growing insurgency of the Taliban at a time when they have a permanent presence in 72 percent of the country, President Obama has decided to send an additional 30,000 troops as a part of a "surge". However, despite an additional 30,000 troops, President Obama, will not be able to deploy the number of troops the US military commanders have demanded to quell the growing insurgency in Afghanistan. Even with the arrival of the US troops, the number of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan will reach about 100,000-still short of 400,000 troops that NATO and the US need to completely secure and stabilise Afghanistan. Neither the US nor its reluctant NATO allies are able or willing to provide as many troops for Afghanistan. This reluctance is feeding into doubts whether the military option is still viable for winning the war in Afghanistan

Economic Assistance

Unlike the Bush administration, President Obama is expected to focus not only on military commitment but to back it by a vigorous and long-term investment policy focusing on reconstruction, development and improving the lives of the Afghan people. With an expected additional \$1 billion in non military assistance each year – efforts will be focused on improving and supporting education, basic infrastructure and human services.

Afghan Forces

In order to quell the Taliban insurgency Obama is expected to focus and invest in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan police, (which currently stand at 70,000) by getting well-trained Afghan security forces to do the fighting. Part of the military commitment is an expected proposal of investing \$20 billion over the next 5 years (2009-2013) to strengthen and increase the size of the ANA to an ethnically balanced force of 134,000 with airlift capability, including more joint NATO/Afghan Army operations, and a national police training plan that is effectively coordinated and resourced.

NATO

Afghanistan has, and continues to be a critical test for the 26 member alliance. Afghanistan remains NATO's first out of area combat mission and a failure in the Afghan war would risk the Alliance's credibility as a successful organization, particularly in external operations. The US and NATO's mission in Afghanistan is a case of a 'large space and insufficient force ratios'. During the last NATO summit in Romania in April 2008, apart from disagreeing over Georgia and Ukraine as possible future NATO members, there were differences of opinion regarding NATO troop's expansion and deployment in Afghanistan, with particular differences on troop deployment in the combat zones in the north and south of Afghanistan. Although NATO has always been reluctant in sending troops to meet the growing security challenges in Afghanistan, NATO member states must be prepared for US calls to do more regarding troop expansion and deployment particularly in the combat zones. The United States would like NATO to provide more troops and participate more in policing, drug interdiction, poppy eradication, and combat operations than its member states are apparently willing to offer. The worsening security situation has prevented NATO member nations from contributing extra troops needed to curb the growing Taliban insurgency. NATO-led ISAF operations have constantly been hindered by national caveats that restrict the operations of many units deployed in Afghanistan. Such restrictions limit deployment areas and types of missions for particular national contingents or impose other criteria that reduce the effectiveness and flexibility of ISAF operations. In fact many are of the view that Afghanistan is being viewed by the US as a litmus test of whether the Europeans can be taken seriously as strategic partners. However, Obama will, without a doubt, find resistance on the subject of getting more troops from NATO allies(with the exception of the UK) and will find it difficult to secure removal of caveats on the employment of troops already present in Afghanistan.

While Britain has always contributed troops as well as advocated for other NATO members to contribute more significantly towards/in the ISAF in Afghanistan, other NATO countries, particularly Germany and France, have been less enthusiastic. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel has insisted she would not send German troops to the volatile north and south. President Nicolas Sarkozy has also implied that further French deployment in Afghanistan would be difficult as French troops are already involved in ongoing operations in Chad, Kosovo, Congo and Lebanon.

NATO member states already provide around half of the 50,000 strong ISAF force in Afghanistan with the British, French, Germans and Dutch making the principle contributions. However, NATO's role and commitment in Afghanistan will only become clear after the next NATO summit in April 2009, when the US is likely to urge a recession-hit Europe to send more troops and spend more money on Afghanistan.

Taliban

President Obama's views regarding the Muslim world sent strong signals reflecting his apparent willingness to improve relations with the Muslim world. The gesture was in fact welcomed by the Taliban. The Taliban spokesman, Yousuf Ahmadi said that the group had "no problem with Obama" as long as he pulled US forces out of Afghanistan. He also advised the new US administration to learn lessons from the mistakes of the

former US president Bush and the Soviets. With the Taliban making a strong and steady comeback, actively operating in more than half of the country, Obama is expected to focus on talking to the Taliban and reconciling with those elements of the Taliban that are relatively moderate –those that can be separated from the most hard-core elements. Unlike the Bush administration, Obama knows that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized unless the issue of Pashtun alienation is addressed. Unless a sincere and legitimate political reconciliation effort is initiated there can be no peace in Afghanistan.

Hence trying to make a breakthrough with the Taliban will be a top priority. However, Obama has not talked about negotiating with al-Qaeda. Therefore speaking to Al-Qaeda elements might take some time, as at the end of the day the international community knows that the real enemy is Al-Qaeda. Under a 2002 amnesty program that was highly criticized by many in Afghanistan and the West, President Karzai managed to convince many Taliban to lay down their arms and reconcile with the government, out of which quite a few were elected to the Afghan parliament and senate. Hence Obama is expected to encourage such programs, and focus more on understanding, cooperating and reconciling with the tribal structures by working with local leaders to ferret out militants. Proposals of providing tribal councils with more opportunities for economic development and greater autonomy in running local affairs are being considered. By empowering tribal councils, tribes would be able to recruit men for "local security forces" by evicting insurgents rather than provide them shelter thus weakening the Taliban's ability to exploit tribal rivalries.

Although there are risks involved in adopting such an approach which include difficulties in differentiating between the "reconcilable elements" from militant operatives, there is no other alternative but to try all such options in order to make any progress in securing the country. Dialogue with rank-and-file insurgents is unlikely to persuade senior Taliban leadership to renounce violence or stop recruiting. However, considering the above, Obama will face tough opposition in doing so. The Taliban, despite numerous attempts at dialogue as well as offers of top administrative posts, have stuck to their principled demand, that negotiations or dialogue would only take place provided certain pre-conditions are met, which include the complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces and the enforcement of Shariah or Islamic law. Hence, the prospects of talks with the Taliban seem quite bleak and unlikely, as the West and the Karzai regime will never agree to such demands, unless Obama decides to show greater flexibility.

Opium

Success for the US in Afghanistan also largely depends on how successful the war on opium poppies (the source of heroin) proceeds. Afghanistan produces around 93 percent of the world's opium making it the largest producer of narcotics. Since the ouster of the Taliban, opium-poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has increased dramatically. In fact the group had enforced an effective ban on poppy, virtually eradicating 42% of the crop in 2000. At present, drug trafficking accounts for some 60% of the country's economy. Crop eradication and the destruction of drug processing facilities was a high priority of the Bush administration-even though he failed miserably in doing so.

Curbing opium trade is also expected to be a high priority of President Obama. The failure of the Afghan state and international coalition forces in establishing the writ of the state has primarily resulted in the revival of the drug trade, which is believed to contribute at least fifty percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country. The narcotics trade amounts to approximately US\$ 3 billion, which sustains both the warlords as well as the Taliban insurgency. However, what will be important here is the strategy Obama intends to adopt to counter the opium trade. It is believed that he will not only support alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers- but will also exert more pressure on Karzai to deliver and clamp down on those members of his administration, (including his brother) who are involved in the illegal trade.

Regional Approach

President Obama appears set to pursue a regional diplomatic strategy that includes countries with "legitimate national interests" in Afghanistan such as Pakistan, Iran, India, the Central Asian states, China and Russia. Holbrooke has said that Afghanistan's future cannot be secured by counterinsurgency efforts alone- it will also require regional agreements that give Afghanistan's neighbours a stake in the settlement- including Iran, China, India, Russia but most important is Pakistan- which can "destabilise Afghanistan at will and has." Hence, the US administration knows that Pakistan is as much a part of the problem as of the solution to establishing stability in the region.

Therefore, it is most likely that the US will work intensively with both Pakistan and Afghanistan- pushing both to cooperate with each other as well as with NATO and the US- to defeat extremist elements in the region. Particular focus will be placed on stabilizing and securing Pakistan's border areas - FATA region. Also, more emphasis will be placed on bringing India- Pakistan closer so that they may cooperate and play a positive and instrumental role in stabilising Afghanistan.

The Obama administration is also expected to encourage and support the already existing initiatives for reconciliation with Taliban from both sides of the Pak – Afghan border. It is hoped that further progress will be made on the Pak- Afghan Jirga and mini Jirga process- which should be incorporated as an integral and pivotal part of resolving the unrest on both sides of the border.

Conclusion

The US is going to do everything it possibly can to turn the war gone wrong in Afghanistan into a more manageable and coordinated operation. It remains difficult to set an exact timeline for a possible exit, although it appears that the US will stay in Afghanistan for quite some time, most likely more than the 14years it spent in Vietnam. The war in Afghanistan can go two ways:

- The first scenario is that the US is going to concentrate on curbing the militancy- It will use the surge to ultimately defeat the Taliban and make the ANA strong enough to maintain its own security.
- The second and the more probable scenario is that it will try to bring some sort of peace and stability in Afghanistan with the ultimate aim of establishing a permanent presence in the region.

But the fact remains that whatever future course the US takes, the Taliban are not one to give up easily and will continue their fight with even more vigour and preservation. Hence the new US government in the US under President Obama really needs to rethink its policy in Afghanistan, and address key issue that the Bush administration clearly ignored. Defeating the growing insurgency depends on the coalition's commitment to increase the Afghan government's ability to improve security, deliver basic services and expand development for economic opportunity.