

THE ENDGAME IN AFGHANISTAN: U.S./NATO STRATEGY AND ITS IMPACT ON PAKISTAN'S SECURITY

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The fog of war not only clouds the sky over Marjah, the dusty town in Helmand where 15,000 U.S./NATO troops are battling the Taliban. What is also shrouded in mystery is the shape of the things to come, as the endgame in Afghanistan approaches. There is a broad consensus among most analysts that the eight-year war in Afghanistan is in the process of moving towards its logical end; yet, what shape this process would eventually take, still remains obscured by the dizzying speed of events. There is nevertheless an across-the-board agreement regarding the following two points.

First, the war in Afghanistan is poised at a critical juncture today. Secondly, the direction and thrust of the international effort in Afghanistan is predicated, at the moment, on the policy options confronting the Obama administration. On December 1, 2009, President Obama, in a speech at the West Point Military Academy, outlined his strategy for Afghanistan, curiously titled "The way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan." The strategy announcement culminated a three-month-long painstaking review process. President Obama alluded to this difficult process several times during the speech:

"This review is now complete. And as Commander-in-Chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan."

However, more than the widely expected troop surge, it was the following announcement which caused a great stir within Afghanistan and among U.S. partners:

"After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home."

The clear commitment to a fixed timetable for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan scrambled the president's advisors to appear on various media platforms in order to allay fears that America is already considering the endgame in Afghanistan. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made quick public statements diluting the president's message and assuring allies that the U.S. was not considering any early retreat from Afghanistan and any draw-down of forces would depend on the ground conditions in Afghanistan, eighteen months from now.

However, as the president further elaborated on the core elements of the strategy in the speech, it became evident that the strategy in fact was a wholesale endorsement of the Commander, U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal's assessment of the Afghanistan war effort:

"These are the three core elements of our strategy: a military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan."

POLITICAL MAP OF AFGHANISTAN

Source: <http://www.mapsofworld.com/afghanistan/maps/afghanistan-map.jpg>

The draft of this assessment, deliberately leaked to the press in September 2009, drew heavily on the counterinsurgency framework and called for enhanced military and civilian resources in order to reverse the downward trends of the U.S.-led war effort in Afghanistan.

In order to fully understand the true implications of the President Obama's West Point policy speech, it is important to understand the backdrop against which this decision was arrived at. This endorsement of the McChrystal plan and the announcement of 30,000 more U.S. troops to be largely deployed to the southern and eastern war fronts came after a period of intense deliberations within the American policy making circles. Although this intense debate mostly centred around the issue of the right number of troops needed to change and arrest the downward spiral, the review also managed to unleash a process of soul-searching; various sections of U.S. policy making circles grappled with the consequences of past failures and of missed opportunities that have marked the last eight years of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan.

However, by the time President Obama stood up in front of the cadets at West Point to announce the 30,000 troop surge in the first week of December, two important developments on the ground had already defused the significance of the eventual number of troops that were to be deployed in Afghanistan. The first was the discourse and the discordant views thrown up by the intense process of evaluation within the U.S. security establishment. The president himself hinted at this very fractious discourse when he said:

“Years of debate over Iraq and terrorism have left our unity on national security issues in tatters, and created a highly polarized and partisan backdrop for this effort.”

This dissension found its final expression in the stark discord of views between the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, and General Stanley McChrystal, over the issue of troop surge and the counterinsurgency plan. However, it is the second development, the flawed re-election and eroded legitimacy of President Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan, which has raised critical questions that go beyond the tactical issues, such as the actual number of troops required to implement the McChrystal strategy.

The elections have raised issues regarding the very wisdom of persevering with a counterinsurgency strategy when such a strategy itself has called for an intense partnership with a legitimate and accountable Afghan national government. Such a government was to function as a necessary Afghan indigenous interface between the U.S./NATO military and the communities, at least at the district level. If one thing the election process has revealed, that is that such an accountable and legitimate Afghan national government would remain a pipedream in the near future at least.

It is against this grim backdrop, marked with a fog of contradiction and dissension, that President Obama, on December 1, 2009, through his speech announced his endorsement of the "COMISAF Commanders Strategic Assessment on Afghanistan".

GENERAL McCHRYSTAL'S PLAN, AUGUST 2009

General McChrystal's Afghanistan assessment plan draws heavily on the counterinsurgency framework, with a liberal peppering of "nation-building" concepts. The strategy utilizes the counterinsurgency perspective to prioritize tasks rather than as a specific code of conduct. The strategy is structured around the pivotal idea of a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign, in which the chief priority is protecting the population, not killing the enemy. The idea is to win over the people with security and services attentive to local needs, thereby depriving insurgents of popular support, dividing them from the people, and eventually affording an opportunity to kill or "reconcile" them.

Since 9/11, the proponents of COIN (counterinsurgency) have been vying for influence within U.S. strategic policy making circles and have spent much of the past decade exhorting the American military and government to embrace the strategy in the global war on terrorism. COIN strategies underlay the "surge" in Iraq in 2007, and its claimed success in reducing violence earned its military proponents a dominant role in strategic thinking. The best known COIN proponent is General David Petraeus, who is credited with designing the surge and now oversees the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as head of the Central Command. General Petraeus also co-authored the latest edition of The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, or FM 3-24, 2006, which is considered a seminal book within the counterinsurgency community.

The McChrystal strategy for Afghanistan proposes to secure the bulk of the Afghan population by protecting key cities and towns in south and eastern Afghanistan. By securing population centres, the strategy aims to foster responsible governance within the secured areas and, wherever possible, to persuade the Taliban fighters through pressure and incentive to lay down arms.

The strategy of securing the population centres must not be confused with an "urban" strategy. It is a population-centric strategy which requires deploying soldiers to where there is a concentration of people. As a large number of Afghans live along the Helmand River in Helmand Province, so the focus is on the agricultural communities in the green zone there. Most of the population of Kandahar province lives in Kandahar city, so logically the strategy urges the concentration of forces and effort in and around Kandahar to secure Kandahar city. The underlying rationale being that the Taliban can only remain an existential threat to Afghanistan when they have influence over the population and economic centres. Once they are cut off from support and funding and driven into the barren countryside, they would become irrelevant and easier to be neutralized later.

Although the strategy aims to focus on all large concentrations of populations such as the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and Herat in the west, there is a prioritizing of effort in the insurgency-hit areas in the south and southeast. Most of the 30,000 additional troops approved by President Obama are likely to be despatched to the dangerous insurgency-hit areas in Regional Command or RC (South) and in the Greater Paktia area of RC (East).

Regional Command (South)

In RC South, critical population concentrations lie mainly in the two Pushtun-dominated southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. In the Helmand province, critical population concentrations lie along the Helmand River Valley, mainly around the towns of Sangin in the north to Garmsir in the south. The estimated population of this area is around 650,000-700,000. Coalition and ANSF Forces on the ground in Helmand as of January 2010 include 13,000 U.S. Marines. Out of the 9,500 British soldiers who are serving in Afghanistan, 6,200 are deployed in Helmand province. The coalition troops there also include 700 Danish soldiers and 1,800 Afghan National Army soldiers. All in all, there are already more than 20,000 coalition troops and trainers in Helmand as of January 2010. By March 2010, a further addition of two Marine Brigades is likely to boost the U.S. marine contingent in Helmand to roughly 20,000-plus. With the deployment of a new Afghan Army Corps in Helmand in support of the coalition forces, the troop levels in the province would approach the 25:1,000 ratio of forces to locals that the McChrystal strategy specifies is required to win a counterinsurgency campaign.

ISAF REGIONAL COMMANDS & PRT LOCATIONS

Source: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/images/oef_isap_aor_09.jpg

The other vital province in RC South, Kandahar, is also likely to see a deployment of 15,500 additional U.S. troops (roughly 4.5 brigades) by August 2010. The additional troops are likely to target the concentration of population in the Kandahar province around Kandahar City of approximately 1 million. This combined population of around 1,650,000 concentrated in an area of approximately 450 square miles in and around Kandahar and approximately 800 square miles in Helmand province, is likely to be the main target and focus of counterinsurgency operations and greater force induction as outlined in the McChrystal assessment. The planned troop surge is also likely to provide security cover to the city and environs of Tarin Khowt, the provincial capital of Uruzgan which forms the northern tip of the axis of the RC South. Tarin Khowt has an estimated population of around 95 thousand, along with an additional 750 thousand people widely dispersed along small villages and hamlets that often serve as Taliban sanctuaries and support zones.

Regional Command (East)

COIN efforts are also likely to be reinforced in RC (East) as greater number of troops becomes available in 2010. The RC East spans 14 provinces in central and eastern Afghanistan with a combined U.S. and coalition troop strength of 24,000. However the new military strategy focuses on the contested population centres in greater Paktia region (Loya Paktia) which include the three eastern provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika or the P2K region.

These three eastern provinces which border the restive FATA region of Pakistan are likely to see an increase in the number of U.S. and coalition forces. The combined

population of these three eastern provinces is around 650 thousand which is dispersed over an area of 3,500 square miles. This area abuts Pakistan's North and South Waziristan agencies and provides a number of infiltration points for Afghan Taliban aligned primarily with the Haqqani network, which operates bases on both sides of the border. Many villages and mountainside hamlets provide support and sanctuaries to the Taliban.

Currently, there are around 4,000 U.S. troops in the P2K area along with 4,200 Afghan National Army soldiers. The U.S. troops in this sector are spread around Camp Salerno in the area around the city of Khost and Camp Hariman in the south Paktika region. In the RC East also lies the important province of Nangarhar which abuts the vital transportation route through the famed Khyber Pass and the Khyber Agency in Pakistan's FATA region. Nangarhar, due to an early and enduring pact between the pro-Karzai influential Arsalai family and the local warlord, Commander Hazrat Ali, had been relatively peaceful with limited Taliban presence, until at least 2008. The past two years have however seen a steady encroachment of Taliban influence, especially in areas controlled by the Khogiani tribes.

ISAF/NATO REGIONAL COMMANDS

AFGHANISTAN

Source:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/Afghanistan_Regional_Commands_with_Provinces.png

The recent announcement by the powerful Shinwari tribal elders vowing to keep the Taliban out of their areas in Nangarhar is an indication that promises of aid (in the Shinwari tribes case it is \$1 million in development aid to be directly channelled through the tribal elders) and exploiting local conflicts with the Taliban, can be successful.

The situation in the northern part of the RC East which spans the border provinces of Kunar and Nuristan is far more complex. The United States has withdrawn its troops

from its four key bases in Nuristan, which lies close to the border with Pakistan, leaving the north-eastern province as a safe haven for the Taliban-led insurgents. The U.S. has retained some forces in Nuristan's capital, Parun, to provide security for the governor and government facilities. The U.S. position concerning the withdrawal is that due to winter conditions, supply arteries are choked, making it difficult to keep forces in remote areas. The U.S. has pulled out from some areas in the past, but never from all four main bases.

The move by the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, followed the death on October 3, 2009, of eight American soldiers as well as a number of Afghan National Army forces, when their outpost in Kamdesh was attacked by more than 300 militants. Earlier, on July 13, 2008, nine American soldiers were killed when their outpost in Wanat was attacked by local Taliban. The province is now under the effective control of the network belonging to Qari Ziaur Rahman, a Taliban commander with strong ties to Bin Laden. This makes Nuristan the first Afghan province to be controlled by a network inspired by al-Qaeda. While the U.S. is still maintaining its forward operating bases in the Kunar province which borders the troubled Bajaur Agency in Pakistan, it is unlikely that it would add more troops in this sector of the RC East.

Training of Afghan security forces

A central part of McChrystal's strategic assessment is the acceleration of the training of Afghan security forces so that the coalition troops can effectively partner with them and eventually hand security over to the Afghan forces. The priorities here include training of the Afghan National Security Force which includes the police and the army.

a) Afghan National Army (ANA)

As of June 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Defence had 103,475 authorized personnel, with 89,521 actually assigned. The Afghan National Army operational units had 66,406 soldiers authorized, with 53,417 assigned to around 80 kandaks or battalions. The remaining personnel are assigned to civilian posts in the Ministry of Defence and serve in the headquarters, infrastructure, ministerial and general staff positions, training and transfer accounts.

There have been claims by various independent sources questioning the reliability of the official figures regarding the turnover rate in the Afghan Army. According to the U.S. Department of Defense reports to the U.S. Congress on Afghanistan in January and June 2009, the AWOL (Absent without leave) rate is running at around nine per cent. However, this figure is contested within the Department of Defense itself. Published data by the U.S. Defense Department and the Inspector General for Reconstruction in Afghanistan reveals that one in every four combat soldiers quit the Afghan National Army (ANA) during the year ending in September 2009. With the total strength of ANA in 2009 estimated to be 103,475, according to this calculation, the turnover rate among Afghan soldiers is as high as 25 per cent. However, both the turnover and the recruitment rates are likely to improve with the improved pay package announced in December 2009.

Still, doubts remain regarding about the level of training imparted to the hurriedly expanded Afghan Army as also the duration of such training. Also, scepticism has risen that the new targets set by President Karzai during the London conference would ever be met. In the final communiqué issued after the London Conference, the participants also committed to providing the necessary support to the phased growth and expansion of the ANA in order to reach the figure of 171,600 personnel by October 2011, as approved by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board on January 20, 2010.

b) Afghan National Police (ANP)

“The Afghanistan National Police is Afghanistan’s frontline of defence against insurgency and organized crime. Yet, despite early \$10 billion in international police assistance, the Afghan police are riddled with corruption and incompetence and are far from the professional law enforcement organization needed to ensure stability and development.”

These words mark the opening paragraph of the 2009 report published by the United States Institute of Peace. While detailing the past failures and current challenges facing the international police assistance programme in Afghanistan, the report draws the conclusion (shared by other stakeholders) that the police have been ineffective and often act to encourage the greater spread of insurgency through their corruption and penetration by militias and insurgents. Despite the impressive growth in numbers, the

expenditure of \$10 billion on international police assistance, and the involvement of the United States, the European Union, and multiple donors, the ANP is riddled with corruption and generally unable to protect Afghan citizens, control crime, or deal with the growing insurgency.

The European Union has replaced Germany as the lead partner for police reform, but the United States has the largest police programme which is directed by the U.S. military. Putting soldiers in charge of police training has led to militarization of the ANP and its use as a counterinsurgency force.

Using improperly trained, ill-equipped, and insufficiently supported ANP patrol men as “little soldiers” has resulted in the police suffering three times as many casualties as the Afghan National Army. The police are assigned in small numbers to isolated posts without backup and are targeted by the insurgents. Beyond funding the Taliban, the explosion in Afghan narcotics production has fuelled widespread corruption in the Afghan government and police. Drug abuse by police officers has become increasingly common as have other forms of criminal behaviour.

As outlined in General McChrystal’s assessment, the new strategy aims to radically improve the training and effectiveness of the ANP with more resource inputs, partnering with mentors and better equipment and salaries. The London Conference communiqué also focused on the need for the qualitative and quantitative improvement in the ANP and committed the Afghan government to the expansion of the police force to the strength of 134,000 personnel by Oct. 2011.

However, strong misgivings have been expressed in a number of quarters regarding the quick expansion and training of the ANP. The U.S. has been overseeing a reform programme called Focused District Development, but as of February 2009, it had given training to and was reforming only 55 of the 265 districts, while work in another nine districts were still in progress. Corruption and ineffectiveness in the ANP is compounded by inadequate equipment which comes in the way of their playing an effective law enforcement role. The Afghan uniformed police carry only light weapons and have very few armoured vehicles, so they are often outgunned by the insurgents. Without a functioning judicial system to anchor the police to law enforcement activities at the district level, the police have been invariably used as a counterinsurgent military force.

Community Defence Initiative (CDI)

In order to circumvent some of the above-mentioned problems hindering the quick “Afghanisation” of security, the McChrystal strategy calls for a number of different initiatives to set up tribal militias and other community defence forces. Already launched in Helmand, Nangarhar, Paktia and Kunduz, the militias are being organised around Pukhtun tribes who are ready to take on the Taliban, prompting hopes of a large-scale tribal rebellion against the Taliban. The U.S. Afghan officials hope that the Community Defence Initiative would bring together thousands of armed guards to protect their neighbourhoods from Taliban insurgents.

The American plan echoes a similar movement that unfolded in Iraq, beginning in late 2006, in which Sunni tribes turned against Islamist extremists. That movement, called the “Sunni Awakening”, brought tens of thousands of former insurgents into government-supervised militias and helped substantially reduce the violence in Iraq. A rebellion on a similar scale seems unlikely in Afghanistan, in large part because the tribes here are so much weaker than those in Iraq.

Militias have been formed and have begun taking up arms against the Taliban in several places, including the provinces of Nangarhar and Paktia. However, different approaches are being followed by U.S., British and Afghan forces that are training these militias:

- The U.S. has been working with the Shinwari tribes in Achin district in Nangarhar, to form militias to resist the Taliban. A recent feud between the Taliban and the Shinwari elders caught the attention of American officers who sent a team of Special Forces soldiers to the valley. The first phase was carried out by U.S. special operations group that had been helicopter-dropped in areas where locals had indicated willingness to set up these militias. Initially, the U.S. provided assistance in food, training, and equipment. The second phase involved the provision of communication equipment to the militia to enable them to coordinate with the Afghan Police and the military. According to reports, since December 2009, the U.S. has initiated plans to set up a military base in this Shinwar district of the Nangarhar province. In January 2010, the tribal jirga which represents the 400,000-strong Shinwari tribe formally announced the formation of the tribal lashkar to resist the Taliban activities in their area.

Also in the Paktia province of eastern Afghanistan, Chief Ajmal Zazai, an Afghan Canadian, announced the formation of a tribal police force by uniting the 11 Zazi tribes that owe him allegiance. Recently, Ajmal Zazai spent a month's fellowship at Johns Hopkins enrolled at the Central Asian-Caucasus Institute's Silk Road Studies Program. During his visit to the U.S., he met a number of important personalities including former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. After a tour of Washington discussing the need for a tribal role in bringing peace and stability, Zazai formed the tribal police force in June 2009.

Both south-eastern Nangarhar and the P2K area in the RC East have recently seen a strong resurgence of the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Encouraging the formation of militias through these community defiance initiatives is an integral part of the new McChrystal strategy to undercut the rising force of insurgency through informal militias until the expansion of the regular Afghan national security forces. However, it remains doubtful how enduring and meaningful this militia-building exercise would prove to be in time. The Shinwari territory in the Nangarhar province spans the important transport lifeline that makes its way through the fabled Khyber Pass in Pakistan. The trucking and transit trade on both sides of the border is directly and indirectly managed by pro-Taliban networks. It is not altogether clear how these anti-Taliban militias are going to uproot such enduring common financial interests which bind power brokers on both side of the border in complex economic and political relationships.

- The British have largely endorsed the Arbaki model. Arbakai, the Pashto word for militias, has been an idea which has met with a lot of criticism and scrutiny and has been controversial. The Arbaki came to attention the first time in 2003 when the Mangal tribes around Gardez in Paktia announced that they were forming a militia to keep peace and security in the area in support of the efforts of the Afghan government. Although some analysts believed at the time that the Arbakai provided a roadmap for stemming the violence elsewhere in the country, the lack of government outreach to the tribal areas and lack of payment to the Arbaki soon led to the abandonment of the whole idea. However, interest in the idea has been revived by the strong resurgence of Taliban.

In Helmand, the British have been training local youth from the communities who are being offered the opportunity to train in the new Police Training Academy in Nad Ali district of the province. Here, local youth are being given the opportunity to train alongside the British and the ANA personnel. Concerns revolve around these forces as they may create new warlords out of their leaders as also that tribal Pashtun rivalries could be reignited. There are hundreds of Pashtun tribes, so there is also the question of who to arm and how to control these militias.

- The Afghan government has used a different approach. They are channelling assistance to large armed groups, especially those around Kunduz. These groups are not formed around tribal structures but are based around Uzbek or Pushtun commanders who are ready to raise militias against the Taliban. In Kunduz, there have been reports that these militias, after evicting the Taliban from some villages, imposed their own taxation on the people. That is raising concerns in all relevant quarters.

Targeting development projects to key population centres

Another critical element defined in the McChrystal assessment is the importance of using aid as a tool to win over hearts and minds in insurgency-hit areas. In his own words, on page 5 of the assessment, he states:

“We must also prioritize resources to those areas where the population is threatened, gain the initiative from the insurgency, and signal unwavering commitment to see it through to success.”

And, again on page 22 under the heading “economic support to counterinsurgency”, he states:

“ISAF has an important asymmetric advantage; it can aid the local economy, along with its civilian counterparts, in ways that the insurgents cannot.”

This strategic application of aid to achieve counterinsurgency objectives, so clearly articulated in the commander’s assessment, has subsequently been reflected in the USAID policy report for budgetary justification for the financial year 2009 for Afghanistan. It is stated in the report:

“...the U.S. Agency for International Aid will fund new stabilization programs that will strengthen counter-insurgency (COIN) efforts in critical and priority districts.”

These “critical and priority districts” are identified in the preceding paragraph: “The United States will continue programs to build governance capacity at the national level and enhance sub-national programs in the South and East.” This “enhanced” focus on the insurgency-hit south and east of Afghanistan is what has given rise to allegations that USAID allocations have been disproportionate.

Aid agencies have increasingly been expressing concern about the “militarization” of aid to Afghanistan by big donors such as the U.S. Humanitarian organizations such as CARE International and Oxfam International argue that too much aid has been diverted to counterinsurgency activities and to areas where donors have troops. NGOs have particularly accused the U.S. and Canada of diverting more and more aid through military channels and primarily for military and political purposes.

This extreme securitization of aid has led to the degradation of the security environment in the relatively peaceful north and west. A large portion of the over \$7 billion spent by USAID on civilian development and humanitarian activities in Afghanistan has gone to the insurgency-hit south and east of the country.

Some sources claim that 50 per cent of all USAID budget in 2008-09 was allocated to the three insurgency-hit provinces in the south and east. This perception has given rise to resentment in the central, northern and western more peaceful parts of Afghanistan where the lack of focus has made people feel that they are being inadvertently penalised for being peaceful.

The recent rise of instability in the once peaceful northern provinces is also being attributed to this lopsided focus of the development effort in Afghanistan. Working in high-risk zones also means that a great portion of the aid amount is actually spent on the security of the various aid providers and civilian embedded experts who have to operate in a danger zones. The recent, much publicised military operation in the Taliban-held town of Marja in Helmand province is a case in point when we can see a contrast between the coalition focus in the south and the situation in the north-western border provinces of Badghis and Kunduz. The two northern provinces have seen

security deteriorate sharply over the last year as lack of reconstruction and economic generation have led to grievances which are being exploited by a resurgent Taliban who are fast gaining a foothold in the north. The two different accounts of the situation on the ground by The Washington Post and the Stars and Stripes read like the famous opening lines of A Tale of Two Cities by Dickens.

However, the following excerpts from a Washington Post report give an idea how the U.S. and coalition forces are focused on mobilization of all resources to make the then upcoming operation in Marja, Helmand, a success:

“For this invasion, military officials said, each Marine battalion will be partnered with an Afghan one. Several hundred Afghan paramilitary police officers also are ready to be deployed in Marjah once areas are cleared of insurgents, the officials said. The U.S. government has designated a civilian reconstruction team to move into Marjah when the fighting subsides. An American team also is working with the Karzai government to deploy a contingent of Afghan civil servants. To encourage Afghans to serve in Marjah, the government plans to increase the average monthly salary for such personnel from \$60 to about \$300.”

This ‘militarization’ of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan has also been widely criticised by the United Nations officials in Afghanistan. With reference to the latest military operation, officials have stated that the U.N. agencies would not participate in the military’s reconstruction strategy in Marjah as part of its current offensive there. General McCrystal’s post-operational plan for providing quick governance to Marjah, referred to by some detractors as “government in a box”, has been criticised and not endorsed by U.N. officials.

IMPACT ON PAKISTAN

The London Conference on Afghanistan, held on January 28, 2010, has created the hope in Pakistan that the Western military coalition’s willingness to reach out to the Taliban is an indication that an endgame in Afghanistan is in sight. The Pakistani government and people are keenly awaiting a resolution as the eight-year war in Afghanistan has had a cataclysmic impact on peace and security inside Pakistan. The country today appears preoccupied with an existential struggle; it battles insurgencies

on its north-western tribal belt that borders eastern Afghanistan, whereas its people reel from almost daily terrorist strikes on soft targets within its cities. No regional or international actor, for that matter, is more likely than Pakistan to suffer the full impact of how the coalition war effort against the Taliban unfolds in Afghanistan. However, the early optimism regarding the London Conference has to be weighed against the actual wording of the detailed communiqué issued at the end of the meeting. The most important part of the communiqué dealt with the security situation. In this section, the communiqué focused on three important aspects;

- The training and the expansion of the Afghan Security Forces – the ANA and the ANP;
- The “Afghanisation” of security; the-step by-step, province-by-province transfer of security to the Afghan forces from the coalition troops; and
- The “reintegration” of the reconcilable Taliban under a well-funded peace and reintegration trust fund.”

All the above three elements are a central part of the McChrystal strategy and have raised concerns that the London Conference’s dominant theme of reconciliation with the Taliban was actually a smokescreen, an indirect effort to achieve an international endorsement of the McChrystal strategy. Although the discussions in the one-day conference revolved around President Karzai’s plans for a process of political reconciliation to include the Taliban, leading to a peace jirga, the final Communiqué only referred to “re-integration”.

No consensus has yet emerged on the issue of pursuing a negotiated settlement with the Taliban to end the war in Afghanistan. Despite the divergence of opinion within the policymaking circles within the U.S. security establishment, it is evident from the statements from American officials such as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that the U.S. is not ready to commit itself to pursuing political negotiations with the Taliban leadership. While distinguishing between reconciliation and reintegration, she said that the U.S.:

“..Will be pursuing military action, going aggressively against the Taliban but at the same time, creating an opportunity for Taliban who choose to leave the battlefield ... and to ... re-enter society.”

It is evident from the above statements that despite the strong internal debate within the U.S. security establishment regarding the timing and modalities of dialogue with the Taliban, for now there is some consensus. There is a clear endorsement of the view shared by General McChrystal that meaningful dialogue can only take place once the Taliban are under pressure and can be negotiated with from a position of strength.

That brings us back full circle to the situation as it was when the strategic review was ordered in August 2009. It is clear that the London Conference does not signify a deviation from the McChrystal plan endorsed in President Obama's West Point speech on December 1, 2009. Pakistan today is grappling with the number of challenges thrown up by the continuing war in Afghanistan. Understanding how and pre-empting the full impact of the next phase in the U.S./NATO-led war effort, is of critical importance. The Marjah operation in Helmand province is the first rung of General McChrystal's strategic plan. Certain core elements of the McChrystal COIN strategy, detailed below, are likely to have a complex impact on Pakistan's security.

Pakistan's border security and the troop surge

The population-centrism of the McChrystal plan is wedded to the idea that the counterinsurgency doctrine of "clear, hold and build" can only succeed if large population centres in Afghanistan are secured from insurgent activity and the populations are provided security. That in effect means that along with the additional 40,000 troops requested by Gen. McChrystal, the U.S. and NATO forces already on the ground in Afghanistan are to be redeployed, drawing some of them away from the forward operating bases and command out-posts in the sparsely-populated border zones. Some drawing down of troops from the border zones has already occurred. The U.S. troops have recently vacated border posts from Nuristan and Kunar provinces in the north and Paktika province in the east.

Some early misgivings have been expressed by the Pakistan military command engaged in battling the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan in South Waziristan to Gen. McChrystal, as he made an unannounced trip to Islamabad after Hillary Clinton's visit to reassure Pakistani officials of the American resolve. Despite these early warnings, the true impact of this strategy on Pakistan's struggle to establish the State's writ in its border zones is yet to be fully appreciated on all sides. The McChrystal plan which

envisages the concentration of U.S. forces in population centres, creating islands of security, is likely to leave large swathes of Afghan territory under the unchallenged sway of the Taliban.

The impact of this re-configuration of U.S./NATO troops on the southern and eastern borders of Afghanistan, on Pakistan's security, is likely to be complicated. The threats that Pakistan faces are of varying levels and nature, depending on different trajectories of various areas of instability, lying on the 2,500-km-long Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Pakistan's State and military have different sets of relationships with different groups fighting along the border.

Certain Afghan Taliban groups based around the north-eastern Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan have closely cooperated with anti-State organisations such as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and the Tehreek-i-Nifaz Shariat-i-Mohammadi which have battled the Pakistan law-enforcement agencies Swat and Bajaur. Thus, the drawdown of U.S. troops from the forward operating bases in the northern border regions inhabited by anti-Pakistan Taliban is likely to provide greater space for manoeuvre for such groups.

Since the U.S. forces have vacated their forward operating bases and border posts in the area, Kunar and Nuristan have recently seen the much publicised return to Taliban rule under the leadership of Qari Ziaur Rahman, an Afghan Taliban commander who battled Pakistani law-enforcement agencies in Bajaur last year. These two Afghan provinces border the troubled Bajaur and Mohmand Agencies in FATA which have recently seen a spike in militant activity, with the militants re-engaging the law-enforcement in kinetic operations which had been suspended last year. Reported contacts with Maulana Fazalullah, the dreaded leader of the Swat Taliban, by the BBC Urdu Service, from locations inside Afghanistan, support such analysis. It is widely believed in Pakistan that most of these forces are aided and supported by regional players interested in seeing Pakistan destabilized.

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban groups aligned to the Haqqani network based mainly in North and parts of South Waziristan, and the Afghan Taliban associated with the so-called "Quetta Shura", have a neutral but ambivalent relationship with the Pakistani State and have largely confined their activities to attacking the U.S./NATO forces inside Afghanistan. The concentration of forces in the south, as outlined in the McChrystal plan, is designed to put under pressure the Afghan Taliban networks based

in North and South Waziristan, and in Balochistan's border regions. At the same time, pressure is likely to increase on Pakistan to launch law-enforcement actions against the, so far, neutral Afghan Taliban, and their physical infrastructure on the ground on Pakistani territory.

The recent arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from Karachi and subsequently of Mullah Abdul Salam from Faisalabad by the Pakistani security forces is an early indication that the pressure on Pakistan to rethink its strategic alignments in the region is having an impact. Mullah Baradar was considered as number two in the Taliban high command and the overall military commander of Taliban forces. Mullah Salam, on the other hand, was the Taliban-appointed, shadow governor of Afghanistan's Kunduz province which had seen an increased Taliban activity over the past one year.

However, at this stage, it is not clear whether the arrests signify an attempt at applying controlled pressure against the Taliban leadership to moderate their negotiating position, nudging them in line with the McChrystal strategy timelines, or a strategic turnaround for Pakistan. If the arrests signify the former, the changes desired in the Taliban position by the Pakistan security establishment are likely to include:

- 1) Their giving up the demand for the re-establishment of an emirate in Afghanistan;
- 2) More flexibility on the withdrawal of foreign troops as a pre-condition for dialogue;
- 3) More willingness to negotiate with the Karzai government; and
- 4) A shift away from Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban.

More importantly, the Pakistani State would like to remain relevant to the peace negotiations with the Taliban as the Karzai government is engaged in a multitude of secret peace talks in the region. After suffering the brunt of the fallout of the Afghan war, Pakistan does not want to be marginalized at this critical juncture when the shape of post-war Afghanistan is being decided.

On the other hand, if these arrests lead to a complete strategic turnaround in Pakistan's policy on Afghan Taliban, that would ultimately lead to Pakistan's law-enforcement

actions against Taliban interests and sanctuaries in Pakistan's troubled Pushtun belt. The already stretched military would have to open other fronts against the Afghan Taliban operating out of FATA as well as those that are based around the Pushtun border communities in Balochistan. The impact on Pakistan's security is likely to be negative and escalatory in the short term. In the long term, Pakistan will have to find new power brokers in Afghanistan (especially in the trans-border Pushtun belt) to ensure its security interests on its north-western borders as the central government in Afghanistan is not likely to be able to be the primary player within the border zones for a long time to come.

Expansion of U.S. military footprint and Pakistan's regional security environment

The second element of the strategy, that is causing serious concern in Pakistan, is the expected increase of around 30,000 troops, to be amassed largely along the southern borders of Afghanistan which are contiguous to Pakistan's troubled Balochistan Province and southern FATA region. While the U.S. military has recently abandoned a few of their forward operating bases, effectively ceding the north-eastern province of Nuristan to Taliban forces; elsewhere, especially in the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, a base-building boom has been underway. Although originally built for 12,000 people, the Kandahar military base and airfield now house between 30,000 and 40,000 – and is growing by the day.

The still-growing forward operating base, Camp Leatherneck, close to Lashkar Gah in Helmand Province has seen tremendous expansion since it became a hub of operations against the Taliban during the operations Khanjar (dagger) and Panther Claw launched in June-July 2009. In addition to the formidable sprawl of Camp Leatherneck, the forward operating base Dwyer, also in Helmand Province, is fast becoming a "hub" for air support in southern Afghanistan. To that end, Marine Corps and Air Force personnel are building runways and helipads to accommodate ever more fixed-wing and rotary aircraft on the base. The two services collaborated on the construction of a 4,300-foot airstrip capable of accommodating giant C-130 Hercules transport aircraft that increase the U.S. capability to support more troops on more bases in more remote areas. According to U.S. military sources, Camp Dwyer manages Combat Outposts, which stretch right down up to the border with Pakistan's province of Baluchistan.

This frenzied military construction activity in Helmand, as well as in Farah, Kandahar, and Nimruz Provinces, between June and September 2009, has spanned most of

Afghanistan's southern provinces. Within this short time, the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan alone established four new forward operating bases, 10 combat outposts, six patrol bases, and four ancillary operating positions, helicopter landing zones and an expeditionary airfield.

This military build-up so close to Pakistan's north-western borders is raising concerns in Islamabad. Some of these concerns centre around the possibility that increased anti-Taliban operations are likely to push more Taliban fighters across the border into Pakistani territory and complicate the ongoing South Waziristan offensive. Initially, there were fears that through this military build-up so close to the Pakistan's border the U.S. is positioning to carry out counterterrorism operations against the Taliban sanctuaries inside Pakistan, as spelled out under Vice President Joseph Biden's plan. Elements of this plan, although initially proffered as an alternative to General McChrystal's wider counterterrorism strategy, can potentially be used to supplement the population-centric strategy.

However, a deeper concern, unofficially articulated, is related to the looming U.S. confrontation with Iran over its nuclear programme. Although it appears unlikely that the U.S. is considering military strikes against Iranian nuclear installations and the Obama administration is more likely to lobby hard for stringent sanctions on a defiant Iran, the regional situation appears increasingly critical. The Israeli threats of military strikes on Iranian targets remain real. Together with the quiet positioning of Aegis BMD (ballistic missile defence) systems on U.S. naval ships patrolling the northern Gulf, unconfirmed reports suggest that such BMD systems have also been stationed in some U.S.-allied Gulf States.

Any military confrontation with Iran instigated through an Israeli attack or otherwise, is likely to impact the ongoing U.S. war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's border regions. In such a scenario, the expanded U.S. military bases and presence in Helmand will acquire strategic significance. For Pakistan, it is of utmost importance to fully calibrate its own security contingency plans in the light of the potential fallout of long-term U.S. military presence in the region.

Both China and Iran remain critical to Pakistan's regional security environment. At the same time, Pakistan is also intensifying its strategic military relationship with the major extra-regional player, the U.S., which is currently expanding its military infrastructure in Afghanistan. It is of critical importance for Pakistan's security to understand the full

implications of its different strategic partnerships with different regional actors and how they are likely to be affected in any future military conflagration in the region.

Conclusion

The re-invigoration of the U.S. policy focus on Afghanistan led by the Obama administration has provided a frenzied momentum to developments in Afghanistan. The year 2010 promises to be eventful, and there is a broad sense of anticipation that by the end of the year the stage would have been set for a new era to begin in the war-torn country. However, the multiplicity of actors involved; both State and non-State, both regional and extra-regional; implies that the endgame would involve a very complex process of balancing various and often competing interests. Much of this process is likely to unfold in secrecy, shielded away from public scrutiny. However, the McCrystal strategic assessment for Afghanistan is likely to provide the broad guidelines and the accepted script, guiding much of the action that is likely to unfold in Afghanistan in the current year. The challenge for Pakistan will remain to find space for its own interests within the confines of a strategy whose objectives lie far beyond just ensuring Pakistan's stability.

Postscript

This study of US/NATO strategy in Afghanistan was started just after President Obama delivered his policy speech on December 1, 2009, and completed by the end of January 2010. Today, six months later, most of the conclusions drawn in the study have been validated by fast unfolding events on the ground. The dissonance in U.S. policy on Afghanistan which had divided decision makers close to the president, culminated in the very public and disgraceful exit of General McCrystal from the war front. However, some of the same critical shortcomings of the 'McCrystal plan' highlighted in the first two sections of the paper, had raised skepticism regarding the strategy, long before the publishing of the 'Rolling Stones' article.

The Marjah operation in Helmand, which was supposed to provide the template for the much larger Kandahar operation, failed in realizing counterinsurgency goals of either

'protecting the populations' or rolling out 'government-in-a-box'. Strong resistance from Afghan government's local partners and communities in and around Kandahar has led to the postponement of the operation twice. The new date recently announced is September 2010, when it is expected that all the extra troops ordered under President Obama's 'troop surge' plan will be in place.

Similarly, there is a grim realization that the Afghan Security Forces are not going to be ready to take over security responsibilities in significant parts of the country. This pessimism is reflected in various appraisals conducted regarding the levels of training and competency of the Afghan Security Forces recently. There is an across-the-board realization that the ambitious timelines set for the Afghan National Army and The Afghan National Police are still way of the mark. The coalition has admittedly failed to come up with the adequate number of trainers required for the expansion of the ANA. On the other hand, corruption, illiteracy, and low discipline among the Afghan National Police make them a nuisance for the communities where they are deployed.

Predictably, the NATO/US strategy has had a deleterious impact on the security of the north-western borders of Pakistan. The removal of Forward Operating Bases from the north-eastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan has resulted in the reinvigoration of militant activity in the Bajaur Agency which had subsided last year. Pakistan military commanders have raised the issue of support provided and camps set up for the militants of TTP and TNSM fleeing from Bajaur, in Kunar province. There has been a marked increase in militant activity in Bajaur in recent days.

Simultaneously, the Pakistan military has been placed under tremendous pressure to expand military operations into North Waziristan. As the President Karzai-led reconciliation process got underway following the London conference, the U.S. intensified efforts to degrade the Taliban militarily as well as politically by increasing efforts to marginalize and destroy the Haqqani network which has used North Waziristan as a sanctuary. These pressures reached their highest point subsequent to the failed bombing attempt in Times Square by a U.S. national of Pakistani origin. Investigators believed that Faisal Shahzad, the accused, had received training in North Waziristan, and the Pakistan military was urged to take action against the militant safe havens in North Waziristan.

However growing confidence and trust between the Karzai government and the Pakistani security establishment, increasing dissatisfaction with the Karzai

government's heightening corruption, lack of decisive military success and the inglorious departure of Gen. McCrystal from the Afghan front have all contributed to a renewed focus on the reconciliation process. This recent focus has created a greater space for Pakistan to bring about a rapprochement between the Haqqani group and the Karzai government. Although the U.S. has remained disengaged from these recent initiatives, it has not moved to disallow these tentative links between the Haqqani network and the Karzai government. These latest reconciliation initiatives have created hopes that the Afghan war is moving to the next stage which will see a greater reliance on political strategies as a means to bringing about peace and stability in the country.

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