

President Obama begins the Draw Down in Afghanistan-Implications for Pakistan

By
Simbal Khan

President Obama on Wednesday night announced his plan to withdraw all the 33,000 surge troops by September 2012. The plan which will see the drawdown of 10,000 troops by the end of 2011 and the remainder 23,000 by September 2012 fell short of the slower withdrawal timetable demanded by his military commanders which would have allowed two "fighting" seasons with the bulk of U.S. forces still available for combat operations.

Before his address President Obama called President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari to intimate him of the details of the plan. One look at the text of his speech reveals the ominous ways that Pakistan figures in this plan for the next stage of this decade long war. The plan marks a clear shift from a troop heavy Counterinsurgency strategy which included large scale military operations in the Southern Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar. The speech frames the already discernable shift into a Counter Terror framework, as the earlier objective of degrading the Taliban strength is replaced by:

"The goal that we seek is achievable, and can be expressed simply: no safe-haven from which al Qaeda or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland, or our allies."

This renewed focus on Al Qaeda and affiliates is likely to shift the momentum of war to Eastern Afghanistan. And with that comes the predictable next step, in the Presidents words:

"Of course, our efforts must also address terrorist safe-havens in Pakistan." And that "... there should be no doubt that so long as I am President, the United States will never tolerate a safe-haven for those who aim to kill us: they cannot elude us, nor escape the justice they deserve."

Coming in the wake of already spiraling US-Pak relations in the aftermath of the OBL incident, this tactical shift in US war plan in Afghanistan has some serious implications for Pakistan. The first is, as Pakistan moves to limit US access to its military infrastructure, Shamsi Air Base etc. and to reduce its intelligence and security presence inside Pakistan, the US is likely to enhance its troop presence and basing capacity on Pak-Afghan Eastern borders. We are likely to see an intensification of Drone strikes in NWA and SWA, and even an expansion of the strike coverage to Kurram and Mohmand Agencies.

Secondly, this Eastward shift in the battlefield also has implications for the as yet fragile and reversible peace process. This essentially means that the operating strategy of "talking and fighting at the same time" is likely to continue. And that the US will still like to "pick" and "choose" those Taliban groups that it considers reconcilable. The peace process for at least

another year to come is not likely to be as inclusive as hoped for by Pakistan. The Al Qaeda 'affiliate' that the US is likely to fight in Eastern Pak-Afghan border is the Haqqani Network that Pakistan hoped would be allowed to join the peace process. During his recent visit to Islamabad, the US Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Frank Ruggiero was asked by Pakistani officials to explain this 'deliberate ambiguity' and lack of clarity which shrouds the peace process. The preliminary contacts between with Tayyab Agha, Mullah Omar's deputy, and state department officials have also taken place outside of the designated Core Group (Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US) constituted to undertake this very task. It is not clear how long the US will be able to keep Pakistan on board the Peace Process as it moves to intensify its military campaign against those Taliban groups in the East which Pakistan considers central to any lasting peace settlement.

Lastly, this Counter Terror narrative also ties in neatly with efforts to explain to an increasingly skeptical American public and a reluctant Congress the necessity of signing a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan. In the Presidents words, the US intends to: "...build a partnership with the Afghan people that endures – one that ensures that we will be able to continue targeting terrorists and supporting a sovereign Afghan government." Such an agreement would oversee the basing of a residual US military presence of approximately 25,000 troops beyond 2014 and commit to long term economic support to the Afghan State.

* *Simbal Khan is Director Afghanistan and Central Asia at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*