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America's Involvement in Afghanistan

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Abstract

I launched my series of briefs on Afghanistan in the belief that it will matter a great deal for South Asia how the long-enduring conflict in that country takes shape in the coming weeks and months. Two South Asian countries – Pakistan and India – are deeply involved in Afghanistan, and so is the United States with which South Asia has a constantly evolving relationship. The United States' failure or success will have consequences for South Asia. The two previous briefs were concerned with the presidential election held in the country on 20 August 2009. The result is still not known and the counting of votes is going on slowly.

While the Afghans and the world wait for the result, the Americans have carried out yet another review of their strategy in the country. It was authored by General Stanley A. McChrystal, the new commander of the American forces in Afghanistan. His report is still working its way to the White House but it has been reported that it recommends a significant change in the United States' strategy. The strategy suggests that while the Americans should provide more resources for winning the Afghan War, it should focus not just on defeating the Taliban but on winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. How the latter should be done will be an issue that will occupy the attention of the American policymakers for some time to come. While taking a pause in my "Afghanistan elections" Briefs, I will examine in this paper where the debate in America may take its Afghan policy, how it might influence the rise of Islamic extremism in Pakistan and how it could impact the rest of South Asia.

Introduction

This is an awkward time for the United States in Afghanistan. The number of soldiers the country is losing in the war in Afghanistan's notoriously difficult terrain is constantly increasing. These losses have begun to undermine the support for the American effort in Afghanistan. Political support for the war in Afghanistan has weakened, and was never very high in Europe. The Taliban, considered vanquished in December 2001, have gained in strength as they are able to draw more recruits and learn new ways to fight a better equipped army. Washington changed its commander in the summer of 2009, replacing General David

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D. McKiernan, who was regarded as being wedded to a conventional approach with General McChrystal, who had been tested in Iraq and was regarded a success in that operation. With a new commander in the field, the Americans began carefully studying the evolving situation with a view to defining their approach in the country. This review was conducted at a time when the approval ratings of President Barack Obama had begun to fall and his administration was distracted by a number of other items on its crowded agenda. This paper will examine the developing situation with a brief reference to the dynamics unleashed by the presidential election in Afghanistan, the complications created by the large number of civilian deaths in the country because of the tactics used by the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies to fight the insurgency. It will also discuss the changing tactics adopted by the insurgents, the evolving strategy being adopted by the Obama administration in light of the reviews carried out by senior military commanders and their civilian bosses, and the position being adopted by the government in Pakistan concerning the insurgency on its side of the border.

The Presidential Election

On 20 August 2009, the Afghans went to the polls to elect the country's president for a five-year-term. There was some expectation that the election will diminish the strength of the Taliban by introducing another element in the decision-making process of the ordinary Afghan citizen. As discussed in three ISAS Briefs,² this hope has not been realised and it appears at the time of this writing (mid-September, 2009) that the way the polling was conducted, the already restive Pushtun population was further alienated from the evolving Afghan state. The Pushtun community, which makes 45 percent of the population and lives in the south of the country where the insurgency is the fiercest, feels that the election, rather than bringing it into the main stream of politics, has further disenfranchised it. The community regards President Hamid Karzai as being unable to protect the economic and social interests of the community. According to one well-informed observer, "Pushtun elders, who occupy commanding positions as opinion leaders in their villages, were initially happy that a fellow Pushtun [Karzai] emerged to lead the country following the ousting of the Taliban's austere theocracy in 2001. Indeed, it was only because Karzai was Pushtun and drawn from a leading family that he was able to become a president at all. Yet, the past eight years have sown deep divisions between members of the Pushtun tribes who have captured dominant positions in provincial governments and the security apparatus, and those who feel excluded. Fractious at the best of times, the Pushtun are increasingly split". What is extremely troubling for the Pushtun leaders who feel excluded is the increase in corruption under President Karzai in what has come to be referred to as the "royal court in Kabul". "Elders accused the president's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, the governor of Kandahar province, of orchestrating ballot-rigging to ensure he stayed in office – a comfortable platform for running a business empire. Mr Wali has always denied involvement in the drug trade, saying that it is propaganda spread by his opponents. Yet rival Pushtun tribes feel he runs a predatory state bent on subjugating them. He is nicknamed 'the king of the south'".³

² Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan's Presidential Election of 2009: Developments since the Fall of Taliban" ISAS Brief No. 123, 17 August 2009; Shakti Sinha, "The Afghan Presidential Elections: Dangerous Portends", ISAS Brief No. 125, 19 August 2009; and Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning", ISAS Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009.

³ Mathew Green, Pashtuns lose patience with the court of King Karzai", *Financial Times*, 5 September 2009, p. 11.

If a lesson is to be learnt from the American experience in Vietnam – a situation with which the war in Afghanistan is now being increasingly compared – it is that fighting insurgency in cooperation with corrupt leadership is exceedingly difficult. The other lesson is that civilian deaths also make it easier for the insurgents to swell their ranks with fresh recruits. Both conditions are undermining the American effort in Afghanistan. Both need to be addressed if America is to succeed in a country where so many foreigners have failed.

The Fall-out from Kunduz

Sympathy for the Taliban is increasing as civilians suffer seriously as a result of what the Americans call “collateral damage” – deaths of civilians caught in the area where fighting is taking place. Civilian losses occur when missiles are fired from distant platforms, including the unmanned Drone Aircrafts and large bombers, such as the B1, that drop their arsenal from great heights. Civilian losses have been heavy as the Americans and their NATO allies have adopted a more assertive posture since the advent of the Obama administration in Washington. Afghan counts of civilian deaths are generally disputed by the United States but there is agreement that at least four other strikes before the one in Kunduz took a heavy civilian toll. On 8 July 2008, up to 47 civilians were killed in a wedding party by an airstrike in Deh Bala district in Nangarhar province, which borders Pakistan. On 22 August 2008, in Azizabad in Herat province on Iran’s border, 70 to 90 civilians were killed in an airstrike targeting a Taliban commander. On 15 January 2009, air raids in Laghman, also in Nangarhar, left 16 civilians dead. On 8 May 2009, up to 140 civilians were killed in an airstrike in Granal in the western province of Farah close to the Iranian border.⁴ Strikes such as these have helped the Taliban more than hurting them. They have become effective propaganda tools against the Americans and their allies. What makes the Kunduz incident even more important is that it has led to controversy among the Western allies.

I will use the airstrike on Kunduz as a case study of the difficulties the NATO forces are facing in Afghanistan as they seek to expand their involvement in the country. In August 2009, General McChrystal severely restricted the use of airstrikes, arguing that America risks losing the war if it did not reduce civilian casualties. Robert Gates, the United States Defence Secretary, also ordered his commanders to be particularly mindful of the impact on the civilians. The Kunduz incident happened a few days after these instructions were issued. It is a perfect illustration of the problems posed by the Afghan conflict, in particular for those who are fighting the resurgent Taliban in the country.

Later, on 4 September 2009, an air strike ordered by a German commander killed 90 persons who had gathered around the two NATO oil tankers that got stuck in a riverbed in the northeastern part of the country bordering Tajikistan. The attack took place in Kunduz province, a once peaceful area that has seen growing militant activity. This is about the most the various people involved in the incident can agree upon. The Afghan villagers say they went to the site where the tankers were stuck to siphon off fuel when bombs began raining on them from the sky. The German commander maintains that the people who had gathered in the area were insurgents who may have been planning to use the tankers as vehicles for suicide attacks on the German positions nearby. The American commander believes that the Germans took too long to reach the site and, by the time they got there, a narrative controlled by the insurgents had begun to develop. German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung said in a

⁴ These details are from Anand Gopal and Yochi J. Dreazen, “Afghanistan civilians hit, straining US alliance”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 September 2009, pp. A1 and A9.

television interview on 7 September 2009 that “if there were civilian casualties or injuries, of course, we deeply regret that. At the same time, it was clear that our soldiers were in danger. Consequently, I fully stand clearly with my commanders”. On 4 September 2009, an American journalist on the site heard the German commander of the Kunduz base, Colonel George Klein, say that he honestly believes that not visiting the site “was a mistake”.⁵

The Kunduz incident began to reverberate in German politics. “The German mission in a hitherto peaceful part of Afghanistan has come under repeated attacks recently. The notion of German soldiers fighting – and killing – on foreign soil has proved controversial in a country that still bears the stigma of having provoked the most devastating war in human history. Gregor Gysi, parliamentary head of the radical left party, the only party to campaign for an immediate withdrawal of the contingent, said ‘the death of civilians in an airstrike requested by the *Bundeswehr* [armed forces]...is unjustified and inexcusable”.⁶ The Kunduz incident forced Chancellor Angela Merkel to defend her commander’s actions at a specially convened session of the German parliament a few days before her nation went to the polls. According to one assessment, the Kunduz airstrike “is likely to stroke debate in the run-up to the German national elections on 27 September 2009. Polls have consistently shown that a majority of Germans are opposed to Germany’s presence in the NATO mission. There are 4,200 German soldiers in Afghanistan and Chancellor Angela Merkel is under steady pressure to pull those troops out”.⁷ The disagreement among the NATO partners operating in Afghanistan will have consequences for the Western effort in that country.

The Afghan politicians reacted furiously to the deaths in Kunduz, questioning NATO’s use of air power. “The NATO forces could have sent troops by land to the village where the oil tankers were, instead of bombing them”, said Qari Niamatlullah, a member of the Afghan parliament from the province. He called for the German commander who ordered the strike to be prosecuted.⁸ It seems that the Kunduz incident will have significant consequences on the willingness of the Western alliance to put up a vigorous fight in Afghanistan.

The Insurgents’ Changing Tactics

The Taliban are changing their tactics, learning all the time from the experience of the militants in other parts of the world, as well as from the changes in the way the Americans and their NATO allies are conducting their effort. Iraq was a major laboratory for drawing lessons. The Afghan Taliban learnt from the experience of the Sunni insurgents in Iraq who, in their operations over a period of six years, were able to kill 4,328 American soldiers in the period between April 2003 and August 2009. They borrowed some technological developments from the insurgents in Iraq who, in turn, were tutored by the Iranians. Foremost among these were the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that initially inflicted heavy damage on United States equipment and took many lives. Ultimately the Americans were able to strengthen their vehicles and the impact of the IEDs was reduced. Experts studying the development of the insurgency in Afghanistan believe that the militants in the country

⁵ Frank Jordan and Jason Straziuso, “Germany, U.S. differ in airstrike assessment”, *The Washington Post*, 7 September 2009, p. A6.

⁶ Bertrand Benoit, “Merkel faces parliament on Afghanistan air strike”, *Financial Times*, 8 September 2009, p. 8.

⁷ Anand Gopal and Yochi J. Dreazen, “Afghanistan civilians hit, straining U.S. alliance”, *The Wall Street Journal*, *op. cit.*

⁸ Mathew Green, Chris Bryant and Daniel Dombey, “Afghan fury rises at Nato air tactics”, *Financial Times*, 6 September 2009, p. 4.

have adapted some of the Iraqi techniques to the peculiar situation in Afghanistan. They are taking advantage of the geographic and ethnic differences in the country to tailor their response to the pressure being put on them by the Americans and their NATO allies.

Eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan has become a laboratory where the insurgents are developing their skills. This area is under the influence of Jalaluddin Haqqani, one of the seven commanders who defeated the Soviet Union in the 1980s. According to *The Washington Post's* Karen DeYoung who, along with her colleague Rajiv Chandrasekaran, has closely studied the Afghan conflict and extensively interviewed American and NATO officials directing the war effort, "to many of the Americans it appeared as if the insurgents had attended something akin to the United States Army's Ranger school, which teaches soldiers how to fight in small groups in austere environments...As attacks in the east have increased this year, some [American] officers have speculated that the insurgents are getting more direct help from professional Arab and Central Asian fighters. These embedded trainers play the same role as United States military training teams that live with and mentor Afghan government forces."⁹ Amongst the techniques the Taliban have begun to use are mortars to force United States troops into defensive positions where they are hit by with rocket propelled grenades, rifles and machine guns. Insurgents have also learned to maintain "radio silence" as they change their positions to avoid being spotted from the air. They also wet down the ground to prevent dusty recoil that would make them targets of the much better-equipped American troops. There is no doubt that the insurgents will benefit as the Americans and other NATO countries become increasingly reluctant to use airpower to hit the opposition. The fallout from Kunduz will help the insurgents.

In other areas of the country, the militants have adopted different tactics. Where the Americans have put in serious resources in improving the lives of the citizens through development work, the insurgents have targeted such assets as schools, clinics, roads and bridges. The message they are sending out is clear – the foreigners may be able to develop economic and social assets but they do not have the ability to protect them. In other words, longer-term development would only come if the population supported the Taliban.

The Afghan Taliban are also winning the public relations war as more information surfaces about the corruption and misdeeds of the government headed by President Karzai. At this time (mid-September 2009), it seems very likely that the president will be able to avoid the run-off election by getting more than 50 percent of the votes cast. However, his electoral triumph will come at the expense of the legitimacy of the government he will head, which will no doubt be exploited by the Taliban.

America's Evolving Strategy: Afghanistan is now Obama's war

The insurgency in Afghanistan began to take a heavy human toll on the Americans in the summer of 2009. In August 2009, the deadliest month, thus far, for the United States, 51 American soldiers were killed, bringing the total to 798. Soon after taking office in January 2009, President Obama ordered 17,000 more combat troops and 4,000 additional trainers to Afghanistan. Once all of these are in place, the number of United States troops will increase to 68,000. Another 40,000 NATO troops are also available but several governments that oversee their work in the country have laid rules of engagement that do not allow their

⁹ Karen DeYoung, "Taliban surprising U.S. forces with improved tactics", *The Washington Post*, 2 September 2009, pp. A1 and A11.

participation in offensive combat. They can fight only when attacked. This means that the Americans carry the burden of the growing conflict. As already indicated, the Kunduz incident was likely to bring about a significant change in the way the Germans participate in the Afghan conflict.

While contesting for the nomination of the Democratic Party and while campaigning for the country's presidency, Obama took a position on the Afghan conflict that clearly distinguished him from his two rivals, Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's nomination and John McCain for the presidency. Both Mrs Clinton and Mr McCain had voted for the Iraq war resolution. While not in the Senate at that time, Obama gave a speech in which he strongly opposed the war, arguing that there was no reason for the United States to get involved in Iraq. It was Afghanistan where it had to fight the Al-Qaeda that was responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He called the Iraq conflict a war of choice and the one in Afghanistan a necessary war. If elected president, he promised that he would pull America out of Iraq while getting more deeply involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. Once he became president, he stuck to his position.

He ordered a significant increase in the number of American combatants in Afghanistan. However, the increasing involvement of the American troops inevitably led to a higher number of casualties. By the summer of 2009, the United States reached an important decision point in Afghanistan. Would the American political system allow President Obama to lose more American soldiers in Afghanistan without clearly defining what Washington expected to achieve in that difficult country? The sentiment against the continuous involvement of the United States in Afghanistan was growing, and while the president was fighting on a number of other fronts, particularly in trying to get Congress to reform the health system, he did not have much political capital left to spill on Afghanistan. Already his approval ratings had fallen precipitously, faster than that of any other president in the first six months of their tenure. What, then, were the choices left for President Obama in Afghanistan?

One suggestion offered was that President Obama should draw a leaf from the book of a former Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson who, almost singlehandedly won the support of the Democratic legislators who were deeply troubled by the Republican President Ronald Reagan's involvement in the civil war in the Central American country of Nicaragua. Wilson persuaded his fellow Democrats that while the involvement in the Central American country was against the United States' interests and illegal, the war against the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan was just and in America's strategic interest.¹⁰ As one observer of the evolving Afghanistan story asked, "Will President Obama prove to be the Charlie Wilson of this story, confident of what he has been saying all along about Afghanistan and committed to victory over the Taliban?...As the United States withdrawal from Iraq proceeds and the challenges to Afghanistan mount, it won't be long till we learn the answer".¹¹

The Charlie Wilson analogy is interesting since it would mean having President Obama clearly identify the enemy – in Wilson's case, it was the Soviet Union – and clearly spell out the United States mission – in Wilson's case, it was to throw the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

¹⁰ This particular episode in American history is told in riveting detail by George Crile in his book, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003.

¹¹ Stephen G. Rademaker, "Barack Obama as Charlie Wilson?" *The Washington Post*, 5 September 2009, p. A21.

In August 2009, President Obama seemed to be moving in that direction. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban who had supported it in the 9/11 attacks on the United States were the enemies and their removal, not only from Afghanistan but also from Pakistan, were the twin missions America had to undertake. Speaking at a meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Phoenix, Arizona, on 16 August 2009, the president could not have been more explicit. “We must never forget,” he said of the conflict in Afghanistan. “This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity.” The United States would now “take the fight to the Taliban in the south and the east”, in effect to the borders of Pakistan. The area of American involvement was expanding. It was now both Afghanistan and Pakistan – the region for which the policymakers in Washington already had a shorthand, the AfPak.

There are voices in the policy establishment who have begun to question these assumptions and the strategy based on it. “Wars of necessity must meet two tests”, wrote Richard N. Haas, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations in a newspaper article published in September 2009. Haas had written a book on America’s two Iraq Wars and was involved in both as an advisor. The first was launched by President George Bush in 1991 to expel President Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait in 1991. This was a short needed engagement. The United States could not afford to have Iraq control the oil fields of Kuwait and be in a position to threaten those in Saudi Arabia. The Americans pushed the Iraqis out of Kuwait but President Bush did not go into Iraq; stopping his forces at the border. Haas calls that operation one of the necessary wars his country had fought. The second Iraq War was started by the younger Bush in 2003 for no apparent reason.¹² It is still not over six years later. This was a war of choice.¹³ The wars of necessity “involve vital national interests and second, a lack of alternatives to the use of military force to protect those interests. World War II was a war of necessity, as were the Korean War and the Persian Gulf War. In the wake of 9/11, invading Afghanistan was a war of necessity. The United States needed to act in self-defence to oust the Taliban. There was no viable alternative...But even if the United States were to succeed in Afghanistan – with ‘success defined as bringing into existence an Afghan government strong enough to control most of its territory’ – terrorists could still operate from there and put down roots elsewhere. And Pakistan’s future would remain uncertain at best...Afghanistan is thus a war of choice – Mr Obama’s war of choice. In this way, Afghanistan is analogous to Vietnam, Bosnia, Kosovo and today’s Iraq. Wars of choice are not inherently good or bad. It depends on whether military involvement would probably accomplish more than it would cost and whether employing force is more promising than the alternatives”.

Haas believes that at this point the war in Afghanistan has become a war of hard choice. There are alternatives available which Washington should try so as to limit the possibility that Afghanistan could ever be used to launch another attack on the United States. Pakistan could also be saved from collapsing if non-military tactics were deployed, including strengthening democracy and the country’s economy. Pakistan’s military could be motivated to go after the militants as it has done with some success in Swat. The United States could aid in that effort by providing training, intelligence, equipment and occasional support from the air by the use of unmanned Drone Aircrafts. “If Afghanistan were a war of necessity, it would justify any

¹² George W. Bush’s Iraq war is the subject of a number of well argued books including the four part series authored by Bob Woodward including *Bush at War* (2002), *Plan of Attack* (2004), *State of Denial; Bush at War, Part III* (2007), and *The War Within: A Secret White House History* (2008). The four books were published by Simon & Schuster, New York.

¹³ Richard N. Haas, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

level of effort”, Haas continued. “If it is not, it does not. It is not certain that doing more will achieve more. And no one should forget that doing more in Afghanistan lessens our ability to act elsewhere, including North Korea, Iran and Iraq. There needs to be a limit to what the United States does in Afghanistan and how long it is prepared to do it, lest we find ourselves unable to contend with other wars of choice or of necessity, if and when they arise”.¹⁴

There is no doubt that the discussion about the Obama presidency in the summer of 2009 forced the administration to take a careful look once again at American interests in Afghanistan. Even some strong Obama supporters such as Zbigniew Brezinski, who had served President Jimmy Carter and had suggested a strong American response to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, had developed doubts about the way the president was approaching the Afghan War. Mr Brezinski has argued that negotiations with Taliban elements are not an increased war effort and grand goals of military victory may be the key to a more stable Afghanistan. He says, “I would have to be convinced that we are going to be driven out or defeated if we don’t increase forces – but if the increase in forces is designed to achieve some sort of victory, then I think it is the wrong path...Is becoming more and more engaged in a conflict which involves not just Afghanistan but Pakistan in the long range interests of the United States?”¹⁵

The administration of President Obama has carried out a number of assessments of the situation in Afghanistan since it took office in January this year. The first of these was conducted under the direction of General David Patreus, who was responsible for rewriting the script in Iraq during the concluding days of President George W. Bush. That review led to what came to be called the “surge” as more American soldiers were sent to expand the resources available to control the insurgents in Iraq’s major cities, particularly in Baghdad. The new strategy also required the Americans to stay in the areas in which they had cleared the insurgents so that they would not return once the United States troops vacate.

The strategy worked and the level of violence decreased significantly and reached the point where the Americans began to pull out of the country’s cities, including Baghdad. One of the military commanders responsible for the American effort in the concluding phase of the Iraq conflict was General McChrystal. He was appointed the commander of the American forces in Afghanistan in early summer 2009. The latest review of American policy was authored by him, and while not immediately made public, it was said to recommend the deployment of more American troops along with a greater focus on winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans, who were not totally committed to the Taliban and also bringing development to the country that had been savaged by war and poor governance. In making his case for a significant reorientation of the United States policy in Afghanistan, General McChrystal is said to have relied on the ‘Matador Doctrine’, that is, “a beast charges pointlessly at the bullfighters cape, exhausting itself and suffering small wounds, until it succumbs to a weaker opponent. [The American and NATO troops] have been acting like a powerful bull lunging after insurgents; without a change in tactics, NATO may yet have its ears cut off by the Taliban...The commanders’ priorities are to protect the Afghan population rather than kill or capture insurgents; build Afghan forces; boost the legitimacy of the government in Kabul; and improve the coordination of civilian aid. The Taliban and the Western-backed Afghan government are fighting for the allegiance of the Afghan people, says the General; the people will decide who will win”.¹⁶ However, the way the presidential elections were conducted

¹⁴ Richard N. Haas, “In Afghanistan, the Choice is Ours”, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2009, p. A27.

¹⁵ Daniel Dombey, “President procrastinator” *Financial Times*, 8 September 2009, p. 9.

¹⁶ *The Economist*, “McChrystal in the bull ring”, 5 September 2009, p. 45.

seems to indicate that the odds were in favour of the Taliban since the legitimacy of the government that will take office will, at best, be highly questionable.

While the McChrystal report was working its way through the administration's review process, some of the senior officials were already redefining the goals of the American effort. Robert Gates, Secretary of Defence, argued that the United States goals were clear – "Success is the Afghan national security forces assuming a greater and greater role in controlling and protecting their own territory as we recede into an advisory capacity and ultimately withdraw", he said in early September 2009. This was the strategy the United States adopted under Mr Gates in the final days of the administration of President George W. Bush.

Significance of America's Afghanistan Strategy for Pakistan and the rest of South Asia

In order to save itself from another military embarrassment, that is, for instance, not to repeat the Vietnam or Iraq experiences in Afghanistan, some analysts have begun to suggest that a more appropriate strategy would be not to put "boots on the ground". This inevitably leads to deaths and casualties which may not be practical and politically acceptable. It is hard to say at this time (mid-September 2009) which of these two options a weakened Obama administration would go for. Would it opt for increasing the number of troops available to the commanders beyond the increase President Obama initially allowed after taking office, or would he opt for conducting mostly an air war, focusing on long-distance attacks on the enemy targets? If he chose the latter, it will no doubt have an enormous consequence for Pakistan and possibly for the rest of South Asia. After having been ambivalent about the threat posed to its integrity as a nation-state by the Islamic extremists, Pakistan had taken the decision to confront them militarily. There was an expectation that the United States would not waver in its resolve to use force to overpower the extremists in Afghanistan.

One of the more important decisions taken by President Obama soon after taking office in January 2009 was to recognise that the growing presence of Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan was a linked phenomenon – one fed on the other. The new president appointed a special representative to the two countries to deal with the problem. The Americans, always fond of linguistic shortcuts, gave the geographic area for which Richard Holbrooke, the special representative, had responsibility, a new name – the AfPak region. The first review done for the Obama regime – it was led by General Petraeus – suggested that the same approach should be followed on both sides of the border. The military was to be used more effectively but, at the same time, the Americans were to concentrate on two other areas – economic development and improving the image of the United States in this part of the world. Since Pakistan has one of the world's largest armies, fighting the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda was to be left to it. The American involvement would be limited to three things – helping to train the Pakistanis in counter-insurgency operations; providing the Pakistani military with the equipment it needed to become more effective in carrying out counter-insurgency operations; and, if the need arose, using the unmanned Drone Aircrafts to fire missiles into the areas where intelligence suggested that the insurgents were either present in large numbers or some of their senior leaders were within the reach of the missiles. It was the last of these three limited American engagements that killed Baitullah Mehsud sometime in the end of July 2009.¹⁷ He was Pakistan's most wanted extremist leader who was believed to have mounted a number of suicide attacks in several Pakistani cities. He

¹⁷ Ishtiaq Ahmed, "Taliban Leader Baitullah Mehsud is Dead: Is it the Beginning of the End of Terrorism", ISAS Brief No.122, 11 August 2009.

was also held responsible for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007 at Rawalpindi's Liaquat Bagh after she addressed a largely attended election rally.

Pakistan was forced by the Americans to abandon the Taliban – a group it had helped to create and which had gone on to establish a government in Kabul that enforced, to the surprise of Pakistan, a version of Islam that was not known to the Pakistanis – following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Having taken that position that it counted on the Americans to carry out their part of the bargain – which was to create conditions on the Afghan side of the border, which the militants, who had come under pressure from the Pakistani military, would not slip out of and find sanctuaries in Afghanistan. This approach was called the ‘hammer and anvil’ strategy with the ‘hammer’ being initially used in Afghanistan with Pakistan as the ‘anvil’. However, after the Pakistani military became active against the insurgents operating in its territory, Pakistan was now the ‘hammer’ and Afghanistan the ‘anvil’. Any suggestion that the American military would get less engaged in Afghanistan would surely lead to a re-examination of the entire strategy in Islamabad. As some on the left of the American political spectrum – President Obama's natural constituency – began to press for limiting the scope of the United States engagement in Afghanistan, there were those, mostly from the right, who were alert to the problems that would be posed for Pakistan and, by implication, for the rest of South Asia. One of them, Frederick W. Kagan, was right in pointing out the challenges that such a shift in Washington's approach would pose for Islamabad. “The 9/11 attacks caught Pakistan by surprise and forced a radical change in Pakistan's policies...But United States pressure to act in Pakistan's tribal areas and the inexorable logic of the conflict led Pakistan to take actions that brought it into conflict with some of the insurgent groups. Those groups, in turn, came to see Pakistan itself as their main enemy...By 2009, [the insurgency] had metastasised to the point where Punjabis and not just the Pushtuns were fighting the Pakistani government”, he wrote in a newspaper article. Pakistan, partly as a response to United States pressure and partly as a result of its own recognition that the growing insurgency posed an existential threat for the country had finally taken action, using the military to deal with the threat. Any change in America's strategy would seriously complicate Pakistan's task. “Pakistan's stability cannot be secured solely within its borders any more than can Afghanistan's. Militant Islam can be defeated only by waging a proper counterinsurgency on both sides of the border”, concluded Kagan,¹⁸ an assessment with which I fully agree.

Conclusion

Of the many conclusions that can be drawn from the foregoing analysis, one of the more important ones is that the Americans, in formulating their approach towards Afghanistan, must involve at least two South Asian countries before defining their position. At this time, Pakistan and India have different approaches to the Afghan problem. In the spring of 2009, when the Taliban began to expand the areas under their control and advance towards Islamabad, Pakistan, which was prodded by the Americans, decided to act. Its military was able to clear most of the district of Swat of the insurgents. It also announced its intention to extend its operations into the tribal belt, in particular, into South Waziristan, the stronghold of the slain Taliban leader, Mehsud. That operation appears to have been put on hold as Islamabad watches the development of the American strategy. The Indian approach has been to develop close working relations with the Afghan government headed by President Karzai.

¹⁸ Frederick W. Kagan, “A stable Pakistan needs a stable Afghanistan”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 September 2009, p. A13.

This is part of the old strategy to keep Pakistan occupied with its western neighbour. The presidential election in Afghanistan is not likely to produce a government in Kabul that would have full legitimacy in the eyes of many people in the country, particularly among the Pushtuns. In view of that, it cannot be in India's interest to stay closely associated with such a regime. In light of the developments in Afghanistan and the encroachment of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, both countries need to work together and develop a common Afghan policy. It is in their common interest that they do so.

Any scaling down of the American effort will produce a reaction in Pakistan which will most probably include an attempt to cultivate once again those among the Taliban who are prepared to work with the government in exchange for some commitment to bringing Islam formally into the way Pakistan is governed. This would be a major setback for those who have been working to modernise the country and improve relations with India. It may also deflect the government in its effort to bring under control the numerous groups that have developed in the country who advocate Islamisation as the only way of saving Pakistan. If Pakistan moves in that direction, there will be enormous consequences for the rest of South Asia.

The main conclusion of the analysis presented here is that the Afghan problem cannot be – in fact, must not be – treated in isolation. Which way it goes in the next few months will have an enormous impact, not only on South Asia, but also on the rest of the world.

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