



Afghanistan: Stocktaking, May 2009

by Karl Harbo & Klas Marklund

The decision to deploy an additional 17,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan is the first concrete action by the Obama administration regarding the country. The troops will undoubtedly have an effect on the situation on the ground as they constitute a substantial increase in the troops available for operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Domestic Politics

The main event on the Afghan political calendar this year is the presidential election scheduled for August 20. The term of the incumbent, Hamid Karzai, will expire on May 21 according to the Constitution. The question of who would be in power during the interim period has been intensely debated. Recently, the Supreme Court decided that Karzai can remain in power until the election. In the long term, the timing of the presidential election as set in the Constitution will have to be reviewed since it is virtually impossible due to climatic reasons to conduct elections in a large part of the country during March.

President Karzai is widely expected to be a candidate for reelection. However, there has been widespread dissatisfaction with his performance even among his most vocal backers over poor management and widespread corruption within his government. A number of other candidates have either already announced or are expected to announce their candidacy. Among them are two former ministers of finance with a Pashtun background. More ethnic candidates are also expected. In a country with no political parties, so far, this is the only way for such groups to judge their strength. According to the election laws a candidate must receive at least 50% of the votes to win outright. Otherwise there will be a runoff between the two with highest number of votes within one month. In 2004 Karzai won in the first round with a considerable majority. This is not likely to happen this year. Nevertheless, he must still be considered the favorite but a second round cannot be excluded.

The credibility of the election process and the outcome will depend on the ability of the Afghan authorities and security forces to have the election carried out in all parts of the country. It was possible in 2004-5 partly due to the lack of interference of the Taliban. It is doubtful, that the situation will be the same in August. The Taliban might use the opportunity to demonstrate to the world that it controls a large part of the country. The Coalition has announced plans to deploy at least 20,000 additional troops, especially in the insecure areas in the east and south. If the elections cannot be conducted in at least 80-90 districts, the legitimacy of the election outcome could be questioned. Nevertheless, it would still be a preferable solution than having a special jirga (assembly) select the new president as was discussed last year.

Insurgency

A number of different insurgency groups operate in Afghanistan and the Pakistan borderlands. They are often referred to as Taliban, although, the majority of the fighters have more in common with the mujahedin from the Soviet invasion era than with the original Taliban movement from the 1990's. The differences are in both composition of the insurgency as well as in their ideological approach. In Afghanistan the Taliban tends to be recruited among farmers of the Pashtun population in the south and east. The Taliban movement does not seem to be a coherent organization but instead have local



commanders, ranging from moderate to rigid as to the political policy and religious laws. Nevertheless, the matter of firm Islamic conviction and sharia laws still is very much a focal point. The existence of local variations of the movement contributes to the rising nationalism. Hence, the aim of evicting foreign troops from Afghan soil appears today to constitute the strongest binding ideological tie in the illusive landscape of Afghan insurgency of 2009.

The support for the Taliban among the population comes from the failure of the government and Allied forces to provide security, with the Taliban being able to fill a void in the everyday life in rural parts of Afghanistan.

A notable development in the Afghan insurgency of 2009 is the restored position of many former actors from the days of the civil war in the 1990's, and even from war against the Soviet in the 1980's. The Hizb-I-Islami (Islamic party) is still led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the main beneficiaries of the support channeled by Pakistan to the anti-Soviet guerrillas in the 1980's, which has sided with the Taliban. The members of Hizb-I-Islami are considered to be more educated than the illiterate farmers recruited by the Taliban. Besides Hekmatyar's group and the Afghan Taliban there are also other groups, driven by religious conviction and desire to throw out the foreigners.

Narcotics

The new Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, has stated that the counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan has been the largest foreign policy failure for the U.S. with billions spent without any effect.

The narcotics trade finances the Taliban and contributes directly and indirectly to the corruption of all levels of the Afghan administration and society. So far, the counter-narcotics effort has not played any significant part in recent political discussions in Washington about the new strategy in Afghanistan. But there is little doubt that it is high on the political agenda, being superseded only by terrorism and Al Qaeda.

NATO has decided to launch a new policy regarding the Afghan drug problem; it allows military forces to attack drug chiefs, laboratories, and traffickers.

There is little doubt that the active participation of the military can significantly reduce the heroin production and

flows across borders. The UNODC has expressed cautious optimism over its ability to register another reduction in production on a par with last year's fall in production.

The New Obama Strategy

Since his election, Obama has conducted several reviews of the Afghan situation in preparation of a new strategy. It was completed before he went to Europe for the NATO summit and the Review Meeting on Afghanistan in the Hague. Afghanistan has been subject to numerous studies and strategy reviews in the past with very little effect on the ground. Moreover, many countries are considering pulling their troops home over the next couple of years, if it would not be possible to reverse the present trend. The main elements of the new strategy for Afghanistan are:

- An announced increase in U.S troops with 17,000 to arrive in time for the elections. This is a significant increase. The current level of U.S. troops is 25,000 under ISAF command and 17,000 under OEF command. In addition, there will also be minor contingents from UK, France and Poland. The most significant aspect is that all these are combat troops to be deployed in the eastern and southern parts of the country where the number of troops has been always insufficient. It cannot be excluded that the U.S. force will be expanded by a further 13,000 in accordance with statement by Obama during the election campaign.
- Acceleration of the effort to expand the Afghan security forces to at least 250,000 by 2011, consisting of 134,000 in the army and the rest in the police. Obama also announced an increase of 4,000 troops for training and mentoring of the Afghan National Army, while the Europeans would continue to concentrate on training the Afghan National Police. The Americans also consider establishing a local militia as in Iraq.
- An intensification of the civilian reconstruction effort by both U.S. and Coalition countries. On the U.S. side a major institutional change will take place as the role of the Pentagon will be greatly reduced and more traditional agencies such as USAID will play a more prominent role. Under the Pentagon regime nearly



60% of U.S. funds have been administered by five large civilian contractors. About US\$2 billion has been allocated annually for this purpose. A major effort to limit civilian casualties will also be launched. Better coordination and relations with civilian agencies such as NGOs will also be necessary.

- A greater involvement of the countries in the regional, as indicated by the Afghan meeting arranged by the UN in the Netherlands on March 31. The new strategy envisages a close coordination with all neighbors and active involvement from them in stabilizing the situation, aiming on fostering regional cooperation and trade. Even Iran was invited to participate and the control of the flow of drugs was mentioned as being of mutual concern.

It is not surprising that the Afghan administration has expressed satisfaction with the new strategy as it addresses several concerns that it has brought up frequently in recent years. The most important is the increase in troop levels. It is a major increase both quantitatively and qualitatively. The new units have recent experience in Iraq and will be deployed in Kandahar and Helmand, where the current levels have been clearly insufficient. The increase of the national security forces has been requested for years but has been refused due to the problem of long term financing. Finally, the Afghans have managed to draw attention to the crossborder issue with Pakistan which for several years has been lingering without anyone willing to tackle it head on. It has now happened.

Pakistan

Pakistan constitutes the major new element in the new Obama strategy. For years the country has been urged gently to curb the cross border movement of Taliban fighters and other collaborators, and to improve its counter insurgency capacity. The U.S. has claimed that Usama bin Ladin and other terrorist leaders have found sanctuary in the border regions and that the Pakistan intelligence agencies continue to have relations with Taliban in Afghanistan. During the Musharraf years, U.S. criticism of Pakistan was rather mild as he was a valuable ally and strategic partner for the U.S. Relations between U.S. and Pakistan have deteriorated and the recent visits of Richard Holbrooke and Admiral Mike Mullen to

Islamabad did not go well and was seen as an outright disaster by some observers. The U.S. claims that it is being doublecrossed and that Pakistan still provides support to the Taliban, while Pakistan claims that U.S. favors India. India has become a crucial element in the U.S.–Pakistan relations. For Pakistan and especially its military, India is still the enemy. A stable Afghanistan would fall in the hands of Indian interest, which makes it necessary for Pakistan to retain some influence with the Taliban. India is also accused of supporting rebel movements in Baluchistan from Afghan territory. According to Pakistan, the problems in the Federal Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) can be attributed wholly to the presence of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Not even the new bombing campaign against Pakistan's security forces and government institutions appears to have changed that position.

Pakistan's government has expressed its satisfaction with the financial support included in the U.S. strategy but does not appreciate the conditions attached, one of which is access to the A.O. Khan network. Islamabad is extremely annoyed by the use of drones in the tribal areas due to the collateral damage and violation of its sovereignty. A proposal to hand over the drones to Pakistani control was left unanswered. A U.S. proposal for joint ground operations in the border area was not accepted. Nor did the situation improve with Holbrooke's and Mullen's visit to India, which gave Pakistan the impression that India would be an important partner in the new strategy and that the U.S. would pressure Pakistan to stop all support to groups operating across the Pakistan–India border.

The Pakistan part of the strategy to secure Afghanistan has one serious flaw in that it is not matched by a parallel Pakistan strategy for handling the growing militancy inside the country, targeting even government institutions and security forces. The incursions inside Swat have created concern both inside and outside the country. The unchecked challenge of the government's monopoly of use of force has even made U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton state that it had abdicated from its responsibility. The Frontier Corps, which is an Interior Ministry force, and local police units are hardly capable in containing the situation without assistance from the regular army, which control's the heavy weaponry as well as airlift capacity. The government has also pointed to the



need for both a stronger civilian engagement, and the financial resources to implement a large development effort in FATA. It needs to present details on how it intends to incorporate FATA into the state and how it will handle the foreign fighters, active in the area.

In general, the new U.S. Afghanistan strategy contains both positive and negative elements. The Afghan elements of the strategy are most likely to succeed as they contain an expansion of existing activities. They could be also accused of being just more of the same, and therefore are unlikely to have any effect. However, the new initiatives constitute quantum and not incremental steps. The main problems in Afghanistan in the past years have not been the strategies but insufficient resources and patience to see if they were working.

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