

Extended AfPak War under Obama: Slouching towards Balkanization

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

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Happy Days are here again. It's as if the George W Bush years in Afghanistan had never left, with Washington still wallowing in an intelligence-free environment. A surge is coming to town – just like the one General David Petraeus engineered in Iraq. A Bush proconsul (Zalmay Khalilzad) wants to run the show – again. A hardliner (General Stanley McChrystal) is getting ready to terrorize any Pashtun in sight. A new mega-base is sprouting in the “desert of death” in the southern Afghan province of Helmand. And as in Bush time, no one's talking pipeline, or the (invisible) greatest regional prize: Pakistani Balochistan.

Bush's “global war on terror” (GWOT) may have been rebranded, under new management, “overseas contingency operation” (OCO). But history in Afghanistan continues to repeat itself as farce – or as an opium bad trip.

Zalmay does Pipelineistan

It was hardly stunning that Bush's pet Afghan hound Zalmay Khalilzad, a US citizen born in Afghanistan and former envoy to both Afghanistan and Iraq, would now be angling – via his pal President Hamid Karzai, who tried to get President Barack Obama on board – to become the unelected CEO of Afghanistan, or a sort of “unofficial” prime minister. Any Afghan that believes the West is not behind this racket must be a stone statue in the Hindu Kush.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Obama's AfPak envoy Richard Holbrooke are supposed to be very excited about the scheme. Karzai and Khalilzad have had what the New York Times quaintly described as “a long and sometimes bumpy relationship”. Khalilzad certainly has CEO experience – acquired as US ambassador to Afghanistan (2003-2005), when he was the real power behind Karzai's shaky throne (as much as he was totally blind to anything happening outside of Kabul).

Karzai has always denied – including to this correspondent – he was a minor Unocal employee plus entertainer of Taliban delegations visiting Houston and Washington in 1997. Khalilzad's relationship is less murky: he was a certified Unocal advisor. The “prize” – from president Bill Clinton to Bush and now Obama – is still the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline, then known as TAP and now known as TAPI, with the inclusion of India (See Pipelineistan goes Af-Pak Asia Times Online, May 14, 2009).

Khalilzad was a key player in setting up the Afghanistan-America Foundation in the mid-1990s, a lobby that during the Clinton administration became very influential because of its spinning of TAP, hyped as a key pipeline to bypass both Iran and Russia.

Karzai's brother Qayum was on the advisory board, along with Khalilzad and Ishaq Nadiri,

who later conveniently became “economic advisor” to Karzai. Qayum and another Karzai brother – Mahmoud – owned a Baltimore-based restaurant chain in the US (that’s why people in Kabul and western Pakistan call Karzai “the kebab seller”). Hamid got a lot of kebab money during his exile in Quetta right up until the end of 2001, when he was miraculously parachuted into Kabul by US special forces.

Khalilzad, as Bush’s Afghan pet, was absolutely key in convincing suspicious former mujahideen, many of them Tajiks, to have Hamid (from a minor Pashtun tribe) installed as “interim” leader of Afghanistan after the Taliban fell in December 2001. The mujahideen wanted King Zahir Shah. With the puppet guaranteed in power, Karzai, Pakistan’s president General Pervez Musharraf and Turkmenistan’s Saparmurat “Turkmenbashi” Nyazov signed an agreement to build TAP in December 2001. The pipeline, now TAPI, is an absolutely key plank of Washington’s Central Asia strategy. Khalilzad as CEO will move mountains to make sure that TAPI defeats its much more sound rival, IPI, the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, also known as the “peace pipeline”.

It will be a bumpy ride. And – tragedy of tragedies – it will eventually lead to Khalilzad having to talk pipelines with the Taliban all over again. Karzai does not even control Kabul, not to mention the rest of a ravaged country ranked as the fifth-most corrupt in the world by Transparency International. The more Karzai’s local governors get corrupted, the more the Taliban advance village by village and tribal clan by tribal clan, propelled by their nasty mix of outright threats and hardcore punishment. The Taliban, on top of it, have struck alliances with myriad criminal groups, and are supported by their Pashtun cousins in the Pakistani tribal areas.

The helpless Karzai, profiting from the good services of Islamabad and Riyadh, is trying to talk to everybody – from the neo-Taliban to the historic Mullah Omar-commanded Taliban and also old Saudi/Pakistan favorite Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. And this while Obama’s strategic advisers spin that the war is “winnable” if Washington captures – with a lot of cash – the hearts and minds of tribal Pashtuns.

Some of this new US cash flowing into Afghanistan has been diverted to the Orwellian Afghan Social Outreach Program, which builds anti-Taliban local councils, while the no less Orwellian Afghan Public Protection Force has started to build Sunni Awakening-style militias. Arming Pashtun militias who will inevitably turn against the Western occupiers does not exactly qualify as brilliant counter-insurgency.

Balochistan revisited

Meanwhile, Balochistan, the biggest prize in the region (see Balochistan is the ultimate prize Asia Times Online, May 9, 2009) remains totally under the radar of the frenetic US news cycle. Numerous Balochi readers pointed out to this correspondent that it is now in fact a 50% Balochi/Pashtun province. Most Pashtuns live near the Afghan border. And many happen to be neighbors of Afghanistan’s Helmand province – the key site of the upcoming Obama surge.

In case of a hypothetical balkanization of Pakistan, Balochis and Pashtuns would go separate ways. Quetta, the provincial capital, in terms of population and business activity, is already dominated by Pashtuns.

Balochistan’s internal politics are complex. Balochis and Brahvis are separate nationalities

- with different spoken languages and culture. Quite a few Balochis do not accept Brahvis as Balochis. What all Balochi tribal leaders agree on is to demand maximum autonomy and control over their natural resources. Islamabad always responds with firepower.

What is now Balochistan and Sind in Pakistan was conquered centuries ago by the Balochi Rind tribe. They never submitted to the British. During the Ronald Reagan 1980s, Balochis tried - in secret - to strike a deal with the US for an independent Balochistan in return for the US controlling regional Pipelineistan. Washington procrastinated. Balochis took it very badly. Some decided to go underground or go for armed struggle. Islamabad still doesn't get it. Washington may.

If the Pashtunwali - the ancestral Pashtun code - is still king (don't threaten them, don't attack them, don't mislead them, don't dishonor them, or revenge is inevitable), Balochis can be even more fearsome. Balochis as a whole have never been conquered. These are warriors of ancestral fame. If you think Pashtuns are tough, better not pick a fight with a Balochi. Even Pashtuns are terrified of them.

The geopolitical secret is not to antagonize but to court them, and offer them total autonomy. In an evolving strategy of balkanization of Pakistan - increasingly popular in quite a few Washington foreign policy circles - Balochistan has very attractive assets: natural wealth, scarce population, and a port, Gwadar, which is key for Washington's New Great Game in Eurasia Pipelineistan plans.

And it's not only oil and gas. Reko Diq (literally "sandy peak") is a small town in the deserted Chaghi district, 70 kilometers northwest of already remote Nok Kundi, near the Iran and Afghanistan borders. Reko Diq is the home of the world's largest gold and copper reserves, reportedly worth more than US\$65 billion. According to the Pakistani daily Dawn, these reserves are believed to be even bigger than similar ones in Iran and Chile.

Reko Diq is being explored by the Australian Tethyan Copper Company (75%), which sold 19.95% of its stake to Chile's Antofagasta Minerals. Only 25% is allocated to the Balochistan Development Authority. Tethyan is jointly controlled by Barrick Gold and Antofagasta Minerals. The Balochis had to have a serious beef about that: they denounce that their natural wealth has been sold by Islamabad to "Zionist-controlled regimes".

Washington is focused on Balochistan like a laser. One of high summer's blockbusters will be the inauguration of Camp Leatherneck, a vast, brand new US air base in Dasht-e-Margo, the "desert of death" in Helmand province in Afghanistan. Quite a few of Obama's surge soldiers will be based in Camp Leatherneck - a cross-border, covert ops stone's throw from southeast Iran and Pakistani Balochistan.

Under McChrystal, the new US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization top commander in Afghanistan, one should expect a continuous summer blockbuster of death squads, search-and-destroy missions, targeted assassinations, bombing of civilians and all-out paramilitary terrorization of tribal Pashtun villages, community leaders, social networks or any social movement for that matter that dares to defy Washington and provide support for the Afghan resistance.

"Black Ops" McChrystal is supposed to turn former Chinese leader Mao Zedong upside down - he should "empty the sea" (kill and/or displace an untold number of Pashtun peasants) to "catch the fish" (the Taliban or any Afghan opposing the US occupation). There couldn't be a

better man for the counter-insurgency job assigned by Obama, Petraeus, Clinton and Holbrooke.

American journalist Seymour Hersh has detailed how McChrystal directed the “executive assassination wing” of the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command. No wonder he was a darling of former vice president Dick Cheney and secretary of defense Rumsfeld. The Obama administration’s belief in his extreme terrorization methods qualifies as no more than Rumsfeldian foreign policy.

And McChrystal still has the luxury of raising any amount of calibrated hell in neighboring Balochistan to suit Washington’s plans – be they to provoke Iranians or incite Balochis to revolt against Islamabad.

According to Pakistani writer Abd Al-Ghafar Aziz, writing for al-Jazeera’s Arabic website, Balochistan has been accused by the US for years of “supporting terrorism and harboring the leaders of the Taliban and al-Qaeda”. US Predator drones “have been striking ‘precious targets’, resulting in the death of over 15,000 people”. Aziz described Balochis as “orphans without shelter and without protection”.

Neighboring Iran is taking no chances; it is testing sophisticated border patrolling techniques this week in its southeast province of Sistan-Balochistan, along the 12,500 kilometers of border with both Afghanistan and Pakistani Balochistan. One of Tehran’s ultimate national security nightmares is US-cross border covert ops launched from Pakistani Balochistan, the kind of stuff that’s music to McChrystal’s ears.

Slouching towards balkanization

There’s little doubt Obama’s surge will fail. Washington’s plan B is also lame – it boils down to some kind of arrangement with the Taliban, something that Saudi Arabia has been frantically mediating.

The problem is the military/Inter-Services Intelligence nexus in Islamabad will continue to support the Taliban in Afghanistan – no matter what Washington concocts – because the only possible outcome in their minds is the defeat of the “pro-India” Northern Alliance, which is the de facto power in Kabul with Karzai as a puppet. The Northern Alliance will renege on its alliance with India over their dead bodies. And backed up not only by India but also Iran and Russia, they will never allow the Taliban in power.

In the long run, Obama’s AfPak strategy may acquire its own relentless, volatile momentum of addicting the military in Islamabad to make war on their own people – be they Pashtuns or Balochis. So Washington may in fact be setting the slow but inexorable march towards the balkanization of Pakistan. If Pashtun cousins on both sides of the border – 26 million in Pakistan, 13 million in Afghanistan – would eventually find an opening to form a long-dreamed-of Pashtunistan, Pakistan as we know it would break up. India might intervene to subdue Sind and Punjab, keeping both under its sphere of influence. Washington for its part would rather concentrate on exploiting the natural wealth and strategic value of an independent Balochistan.

Thus a Pakistan not unlike an Iraq still under US occupation – broke up into three parts – now starts to emerge as a distinct possibility. Unless an improbable Pakistani popular revolt, backed by middle-ranking Pakistani soldiers, rumbles on to make the top heads of the

army/security/politico establishment roll. But drones, not guillotines, are the flavor of the moment in AfPak.

Pepe Escobar is the author of Globalistan: How the Globalized World is Dissolving into Liquid War (Nimble Books, 2007) and Red Zone Blues: a snapshot of Baghdad during the surge. His new book, just out, is Obama does Globalistan (Nimble Books, 2009). He may be reached at pepeasia@yahoo.com.

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