

US Endgame in Afghanistan: The Evil of Three Lessers

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Global Research, September 14, 2010
14 September 2010

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)
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In his school-boyish Oval Office “Mission accomplished!” speech 31 August, United States President Barack Obama heaped faint praise on Bush’s invasion of Iraq, averring that no one could doubt Bush’s support for the troops, love of his country and commitment to its security when he wrote this most “remarkable chapter in the history of the United States and Iraq”. True, it was written at a “huge price” to the US (apparently it was provided free of charge for the fortunate Iraqis).

He vaguely talked of “a transition to Afghan responsibility”, vowing to stick to his promise to begin withdrawal of troops next year, reiterating the Obama Doctrine: “American influence around the world is not a function of military force alone. We must use all elements of our power — including our diplomacy, our economic strength, and the power of America’s example — to secure our interests.” The fact that as a senator, he opposed Petraeus, the mastermind behind the surge in Iraq in 2007 and the one Obama is now staking his presidency on in Afghanistan, was not raised.

The lack of fighter jet and battleship for his “Mission accomplished!” sound byte was just as symbolic as was Bush’s bomber-jacket hubris. Obama is looking more and more like a White House caretaker, a prisoner of the Pentagon, if in fact he ever had any policy freedom in the first place. Hillary famously cracked “Whatever Stanley [McChrystal] wants, give it to him.” Now, with the unceremonious dumping of McChrystal, Dave will most certainly get what he wants, and an early exit from Afghanistan is not on his check list. On the contrary he now wants to surge the surge with an extra 2,000 troops. So what are Obama/Petraeus’s real options?

There is little to differentiate McChrystal and Petraeus apart from the latter’s pomposity. He oversaw the preparation of the Army-Marine Corps’s counterinsurgency field manual and its application in Iraq, and will try to smoke out the “enemy” just as did his predecessor. Obama droned on, so to speak, about Al-Qaeda (counterterrorism in Washington-speak), but made clear the current surge was really to stem the Taliban hordes (counterinsurgency or COIN in Washington-speak). Counterterrorism elements “are absolutely part of a comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign”, Petraeus told wired.com, meaning he, like Obama, still confuses Taliban and terrorism, or rather tries to confuse anyone bothering to listen.

McChrystal’s unpopular (among GIs) order for troops to stop killing civilians at random will continue: “You cannot kill or capture your way out of a substantial insurgency.” He has sort-of endorsed Karzai’s attempt to “win Afghan hearts and minds” through the new High Peace Council which would lead to “reintegration of reconcilable elements of the insurgency,. This

has been [tried now](#) for two years [without any success](#). It looks like a repeat of the Iraqi Sunni Awakening movement of 2005, which paid former Sunni resistance fighters as ad hoc militias, which had nothing to do with Petraeus, being a spontaneous development by local sheikhs. Whether it was successful is still debatable.

Trying to apply this to Afghanistan is a pipe dream in any case, where hostile mountains, warlords and a decentralised state were and are the norm, unlike pre-2003 Iraq. Apart from the dubious surge theory, there is nothing that Petraeus adds to the equation, nothing to suggest he will have any chance of budging the Taliban from their bottom line: the unconditional exit of all foreign troops and evacuation of all bases. None of this remotely reflects the so-called Obama Doctrine of diplomacy vs military solutions to international problems, talking vs killing, but hopes for Obama long ago dried up. His tired Oval Office spiel neither surprised nor disappointed. It induced only yawns.

The man in control, Petraeus, is himself in need of an awakening. Someone should tell him his surge, COIN and whatnot are too late: the Taliban are already the de facto government. NGOs seriously working in Afghanistan have known this for quite a while. The tragic deaths of ten International Assistance Mission (IAM) staff recently in Badakshan province was a direct result of forgetting this important political fact. At 44, IAM is the longest serving NGO in Afghanistan, and has successfully manoeuvred the various royal, republican, communist, Islamist regimes for over four decades by scrupulously avoiding any identification with local government and occupation forces, acknowledging whichever side is in power, and sticking to its relief work. But NATO abandoned the area in July just as new aid workers were arriving, and this time the new volunteers got caught in the transition. Says IAM director Dirk Frans sadly, "They were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The case was all the more poignant as there has been increasing cooperation with the Taliban and fewer targeted killings of aid workers as a result of NGOs reaching out to the Taliban and respecting their right to govern. Mullah Omar even wrote a letter of approval for one aid group. "The chain of command is more coherent in 2010 than 2004," says Michiel Hofman, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) rep in Afghanistan. MSF has access to Taliban-controlled areas so long as its employees wear clearly marked vests with the group's insignia, front and back, to differentiate them from the occupiers.

UNICEF and the World Health Organisation work with both the Taliban and Karzai officials to provide polio vaccinations, once condemned by clerics as a conspiracy to poison or sterilise Muslim children. Volunteers carry a precious letter of approval from Mullah Omar. Red Cross spokesman Bijan Famoudi told April Rabkin at *npr.org* that Red Cross workers coordinate with the Taliban almost daily concerning their movements and can reach Taliban leaders within hours if there is a problem.

The Taliban are not the ogre they are made out to be by the Western media. They respect genuine international aid workers, unlike foreign fighters from Chechnya, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, who have a "reputation much tougher when it comes to foreigners", notes Hofman. But then the MSF honcho could say the same of the other foreign fighters, the occupiers, who in a desperate bid to use such workers as human shields, have increasingly insisted on NGO cooperation as part of their effort to "win hearts and minds". The US and German military have put conditions on grants to aid organisations, requiring them to work with the occupiers. Caritas refused a chunk of \$12.9m worth of aid because it would have been part of the German army's reconstruction work.

Karzai too tries to pressure NGOs. In April, he had Italian and Afghan employees of the Italian aid organisation Emergency, which ran a hospital in Helmand, charged with “terrorist activities”, including plotting to assassinate the governor. The charges were nonsense, a case of sour grapes, as the group successfully negotiated the release of a foreign journalist, no thanks to Karzai et al.

The US has three choices at this point: the easy one is to just pull out and leave the Taliban to disarm the Western-created warlord militias and to work with the less odious members of the Karzai regime to create a viable regime in a peaceful, if very poor and devastated country. There are genuine NGOs on the ground now that can help coordinate a non-imperialist international aid effort. Yes, some heads will roll, but the sooner the process gets underway, the fewer deaths there will be all round. This is what Pakistan and Saudi Arabia want, leaving them in the driver’s seat.

Its second option is to let the regional governments take over in stabilizing the current regime. This, however, would require a revolution in US thinking: mend fences between it and Iran. Iran is eager and willing to do just this and has been since it provided the US with valuable assistance in routing the Taliban after 9/11. Iran supports the Karzai regime, which is dominated by the Persian-speaking Tajiks, and strongly opposes making any deals with the Taliban. In a meeting in New Delhi in August, Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Ali Fathollahi said, “Empowering the military forces of Afghanistan and also the police of Afghanistan are points on which countries of the region should help, and Iran voices its readiness to help in this regard.... We don’t have any doubt in the capability of the government of Afghanistan.”

Sounds like Petraeus/ Obama, right? The US plans to spend \$11.6 billion next year and another \$25b by 2015 precisely to create an Afghan army and police force to support Karzai. Iran has offered to help do this. It holds the fate of this US endgame in its hands. The advantage of this option is that peace would break out in the region without US occupation of Afghanistan and subversion of Iran, and the US would still have quite a bit of influence in post-pull out Afghanistan. Both India and Russia would be solid supporters of such a scenario and the latter would ensure the support of the “stans” on Afghanistan’s northern borders. Pakistan and the Saudis would have no choice but to tag along.

Its third option is a lame compromise between the above. Council for Foreign Relations President Richard Haass suggests partitioning Afghanistan, handing over Pashtun areas to the Taliban and arming the other ethnic groups to defend themselves. Syed Saleem Shahzad reports in *Asia Times* that the US is finally talking to the Taliban commanders, including Sirajuddin Haqqani, mediated by Pakistan and the Saudis, offering to cede control of the south to the Taliban while keeping control of the north. This is a recipe for unending civil war too horrible to contemplate.

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