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Chapter 11: President Obama's New Direction for the Afghan War

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On December 1, 2009, President Obama announced his decisions on the way forward in Afghanistan in a televised address before an audience of Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. We do not believe that his announcements change the strategic issues discussed in the previous article, but they were significant and deserving of comment in this setting. The following article will review the changes he proposed and their implications for the conduct of the war in Afghanistan and for the region. Only time will tell whether the changes proposed will put the U.S. on the path to “victory,” somehow defined. This will become clearer by the time the president proposed to start pulling forces out, in July of 2011. *The National Strategy Forum Review* will revisit this issue around that time.

Background

In September, 2009, General Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, requested 40,000 additional U.S. troops to conduct a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. The goal was to reorient the military focus from conventional “kinetic” operations (although they would continue) toward protection of the population. In his view, there were insufficient troops to hold territory once local enemies were defeated, let alone build infrastructure. His preferred strategy of “win, hold, and build” required more boots on the ground to have a chance of success. Whether those boots were American, allied, or Afghani was less important than their numbers and training, but the large majority of reinforcements could only come from the U.S. President Obama undertook an intensive review of strategies and options in preparation for the decisions announced on December 1.

Presidential Decisions

The president's announcement was summarized in a December 1, 2009 White House press release as follows:

The President has decided to deploy an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. These troops will deploy on an accelerated timeline to reinforce the 68,000 Americans and 39,000 non-U.S. ISAF troops already there, so that we can target the insurgency, break its momentum, and better secure population centers. These forces will increase our capacity to train effective Afghan Security Forces, and to partner with them so that more Afghans get into the fight. And by pursuing these partnerships, we can transition to Afghan responsibility, and begin to reduce our combat troops in the summer of 2011. In short, these resources will allow us to make the final push that is necessary to train Afghans so that we can transfer responsibility.

Details on how the additional forces would be used were sparse, although more detailed statements of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and General McChrystal can be expected to clarify their intentions in this regard. While the rate at which combat forces would be withdrawn will be conditioned by facts on the ground, the plan now is to start pulling them out in July of 2011. No firm date for a complete transition of security responsibility to the Afghan forces was given, so the commitment remains open ended.

An important part of the plan is a "surge" of civilian experts to help develop governmental institutions and rebuild the economy. The Afghan government will be expected to fight corruption and encouraged to seek rapprochement with elements of the Taliban who will renounce al Qaeda and participate in the political process.

What the President Did Not Address

Not all important considerations were addressed in a speech that was relatively brief and necessarily general. These include the following:

- The expected pace of troop withdrawal and a target date for its completion (although it is hard to fault the president for not knowing now what the situation will be 18 months from now and beyond).
- Benchmarks by which military success will be judged.
- Criteria for assessing the success of the Afghan government in meeting its responsibilities for security enhancement and corruption reduction. The Afghan government is weak and unstable in Kabul, and its reach does not extend to all the other 31 Afghan provinces. Government stability requires time and money to achieve, neither of which is being given to Afghanistan under the new plan. The culture of corruption is deep-rooted and it is unlikely that government corruption can be eliminated or substantially diminished within 18 months.

- How the new counterinsurgency military strategy will differ from the old and the precise ways in which the forces will be used.
- Expectations for the significant reduction in poppy growing and ways to accomplish this. The Afghan economy is based upon income derived from the drug trade. The transition from poppy growing to a broad-based agriculture within 18 months is unrealistic. It would weaken, rather than strengthen, the Afghan government.
- Ways to encourage and compel the Pakistani government to take the steps necessary to confront its own Taliban problem and to cooperate more extensively with the U.S.

Analysis

The speech included a thoughtful review of historical and regional considerations relevant to the decision. It is clear that the president is aware of the connection between success in Afghanistan and the larger strategic concerns over the border in nuclear-armed Pakistan. The active cooperation of Pakistan is essential for the ultimate goal of destroying elements of al Qaeda now active in the tribal areas of that country. The likelihood of such cooperation was greatly enhanced by terrorist attacks in Pakistani cities and overreaching by Taliban forces that posed a threat to the Pakistani government, but few Americans believe the Pakistanis are doing all they could in the common effort.

The plan announced was a compromise between implementing an exit strategy immediately and giving General McChrystal the forces he wanted. As is often true with good compromises, no one is completely satisfied. The president had to consider several realities in his decision:

- The deteriorating military situation in Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban, who provided sanctuary for the al Qaeda elements that organized several attacks against the U.S. and our allies – most notably September 11.
- The need for significantly increased forces to implement the counterinsurgency strategy that proved useful in Iraq. (Given the president's previous criticisms of the Iraq War and the way it was fought, he did not tie this decision explicitly to the utility of counterinsurgency in Iraq.)
- The difficulty of surging massive numbers of troops, given that the Army and Marine Corps are already overstretched and current commitments in Iraq cannot be drawn down immediately.
- Declining public and political support at home and abroad for the Afghanistan conflict.
- Limited funding available in view of competing domestic priorities. The U.S. spends approximately \$40 billion annually at the 68,000 troop level. The addition of 30,000 troops will cost approximately an additional \$30 billion annually. Over the next 18 months, the U.S. will expend in Afghanistan an estimated \$105 billion, plus an estimated \$35 billion for a six-month withdrawal period, totaling \$140 billion to defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. (This \$140 billion estimate for Afghanistan compares to the \$787 billion U.S. economic stimulus appropriation.)

- Realistic expectations about what can be accomplished in Afghanistan. There is no possibility of transforming that country into Switzerland and expectations for a Western democracy among a people who have had no prior concept of it need to be restrained. It will be enough if there is a curb on rampant political and economic corruption.

The two most controversial aspects of the new plan are the numbers of troops and the announcement of when they might be withdrawn. Given political realities, it was necessary to minimize domestic opposition to the plans by discussing an exit plan and indicating the timing. This has occasioned much negative comment among those who support a more aggressive response in Afghanistan. They argue that the Taliban (and to some extent al Qaeda) forces can go to ground and wait the U.S. out. This is a genuine concern, but in addition to increasing flagging U.S. support for the war there it should focus the minds of leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the fact that they must prepare to carry a much greater share of the security burden. Also, while insurgent forces are relatively inactive, much progress can be made by U.S. and allied forces to dilute their support among the people and attack elements that are identified.

The president's new strategy will tie up large numbers of already overstretched forces for a period whose extent has yet to be determined. Should the plans go well and significant numbers of forces be withdrawn beginning in 18 months, it will ease the burden on the military and make forces available as a hedge against contingencies elsewhere. The process of withdrawing U.S. troops is complex. It involves the transition of U.S. mission responsibility to Afghan security forces. The U.S. must either give its military equipment and bases to the Afghan security forces, or destroy them to ensure that they will not be acquired by the Taliban.

The counterinsurgency tactic is based on winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people through providing security. Many military experts believe that a minimum period of three years would be required to make significant progress in a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, and it will be a project of a decade or more to finish the job. Meanwhile, the ability of the Afghan government to operate effectively is questionable. The motivation for the government of President Karzai to make political changes within the next 18 months should be strong. However, experience suggests that even well-intentioned reform is a slow process. An additional barrier to Karzai's government stability is that the ethnic Pashtuns have been excluded from his government. They reside in the area of Kandahar which is the heartland of the Taliban. If the Pashtuns are not included in the Karzai government, this will diminish the likelihood of defeating the Taliban in this critical area.

Regional considerations are crucial in analyzing the problems in Afghanistan and devising means to combat them. The most important strategic consideration is Pakistan and the security of its nuclear stockpile. Further, Pakistan, Iraq, India, and Saudi Arabia all have a direct stake in the Afghanistan outcome. They would benefit from a stable and strong Afghan government and the suppression of the Taliban. However, they are minimally concerned about the al Qaeda threat to the U.S. homeland because they recognize that al Qaeda can operate from any ungoverned space

and threaten their respective homelands. Iran seeks an unstable Afghanistan because regional instability is in their interest.

Conclusion

The grand wager of the new U.S. strategy is that, within 18 months, Afghanistan will be making significant progress toward political stability and economic prosperity, and that Afghan security forces can suppress the Taliban. Simultaneously, the hope is that Pakistan will get its own domestic insurgency under control, while maintaining civilian control of their government and—crucially—its nuclear stockpile.

Overall, the president's strategy is a reasonable start, but success is not assured. The devil, of course, is in the details of implementation and the resulting facts on the ground. Perhaps it can be said that the plan is among the least bad options, there being no truly good ones.