

AFGHANISTAN

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Perfect Paralysis

WHEN GENERAL STANLEY MCHRYSTAL'S STRATEGY review recommended more troops in October, United States President Barack Obama's administration found itself caught between a rock and a hard place. The new strategy for Afghanistan announced by the President in early December showed just how high is the rock and how hard the place below. Against McChrystal's request for forty thousand more troops and a commitment to stay in Afghanistan for at least three more years, he has sanctioned thirty thousand, and given him, initially, only another eighteen months.

The reasons for his equivocation are not hard to understand: he has to carry a country that is sick of receiving body bags week after week from distant, unheard of places and is experiencing a powerful desire to cut its losses and withdraw. And he has to deal with a Democratic Party that has committed itself

Bringing the troops home requires a political solution in Afghanistan. A concern no doubt at the London conference this month. The Taliban could be persuaded to talk and join an inclusive government, but only if NATO and the United States agree to a ceasefire and then to withdraw. A new group of regional powers including India, Iran and Turkey could make this possible.

so unreservedly to undoing the damage that President George Bush's administration did, that it would rather do anything than be accused of committing America to another unwinnable war.

Within these constraints Obama has done as much as he can to support McChrystal. He has unreservedly backed the change in military strategy the general has proposed: from finding and killing terrorists to protecting the people of Afghanistan from them. He concurs with McChrystal that this will not only reduce the distance between US troops and the population but also between them and the Afghan national army and police.

He has also accepted McChrystal's exit strategy. This is based on the assessment that most Pashtun people have not forgotten the purgatory they passed through under the Taliban, and are therefore not opposed to President Hamid Karzai's regime, but live in fear of the Taliban. The goal of future military operations should therefore be to wean them away by protecting them from the Taliban; step up economic reconstruction and change the Pashtun perception of American and western troops and aid givers sufficiently to dry the pool from which the Taliban are drawing recruits.

GIVE IT TIME

This change of approach is long overdue. Why then have only a third of the Americans polled approved of it, and why is the response in Europe equally lukewarm?

The answer is that Obama has not given his new strategy the one ingredient that is essential for success. This is time: time to wear out the Taliban, to build up confidence among ordinary Pashtuns in the International Security Assistance Force and the Afghan government and, above all, to fashion a new political settlement that will bring the Pashtuns back into the political mainstream.

It has been apparent from the very beginning that no Afghan government will be stable if it does not include the Pashtuns. Because of a succession of blunders that followed the ousting of the Taliban from Kabul in 2001, Karzai's government failed this test and came to be regarded as an American puppet. The task therefore needs to be addressed all over again.

The change from an offensive to a defensive, protective, role that McChrystal intends to adopt is an essential first step towards Pashtun inclusion. But this will only be completed when there is a new power

sharing arrangement between all Afghan ethnic factions – perhaps forged in another grand traditional national assembly, or Loya Jirga, from which the Taliban are not excluded.

OFFER THEY CAN'T REFUSE

Would the Taliban join a peace conference? Despite their loose organisation and frequently conflicting aims, they have firmly spurned all offers of peace through negotiations. But this could be because they have never been offered the one thing they cannot refuse without risking a split in their ranks and a sharp contraction in their support base. This is the offer of an immediate cease fire, followed by a phased withdrawal of foreign troops and an augmentation of aid if they join another Loya Jirga and work out a new power-sharing agreement, possibly based on some form of ethnic federalism, with the other Afghan factions.

The need for an explicit quid pro quo to get peace talks moving has been apparent for at least the last three years. In September 2007 the New York Times, reported that when the US ambassador to Pakistan asked Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the mentor of the original Taliban, to support a government led by the late Pakistan politician Benazir Bhutto, he immediately agreed to do so provided Bhutto committed herself to asking the US to leave Afghanistan. Without such a commitment from Bhutto, he said, supporting her would turn even him into a target, especially for the new brand of Taliban leaders that had emerged after September 11 2001.

In Saudi-mediated contacts a few months later Taliban leader Mullah Omar is reported to have laid down the same condition. Finally in the 'big tent' meeting on Afghanistan at the Hague last April, the Iranian foreign minister surprised the US by offering to promote peace in Afghanistan, but warned that its efforts would come to naught if it could not promise an early withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

NEIGHBOUR'S INITIATIVE

The strongest card the US and NATO have left to play is the offer that they will cease hostilities the moment all Afghan factions agree to hold a peace conference, and withdraw rapidly, in an orderly manner, once a new government has taken power. But if this is not to be seen as yet another attempt by NATO to get at the conference table what it could not wrest on the field of war, the offer needs to be made jointly by a group of countries not engaged in





THE IDEA OF A NEIGHBOURS' INITIATIVE IS NOT NEW, BUT IT NEVER GOT OFF THE GROUND BECAUSE OF THE WEST'S REFUSAL TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH IRAN, AND PAKISTAN'S VISCERAL AVERSION TO AN INDIAN ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghan hostilities but commanding sufficient influence and able to muster enough force, if necessary, to ensure all parties to the new deal honour their side of it. Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan might fill the bill, but they would gain infinitely in strength if they were to be joined by India and Turkey.

The idea of a neighbours' initiative is not new, but it never got off the ground because of the west's refusal to have anything to do with Iran, and Pakistan's visceral aversion to an Indian role in Afghanistan. Both these hurdles have grown perceptibly smaller in recent months.

Dealing with Iran was unthinkable until Obama came to power. This is no longer so but both the European Union and the US have yet to realise that they might do better to ignore a distant, and still largely hypothetical threat – that of Iran going nuclear – to deal more effectively with an immediate and extremely potent one.

Getting Pakistan and India to work together may also no longer be an insurmountable hurdle. For the past year Pakistan has been at war with the Taliban. In recent weeks the death toll has

climbed to nearly four hundred a week. Civil society has finally woken up to the dire threat the Taliban poses to its very existence, and this awareness has also begun to permeate the army.

One byproduct, so far unacknowledged by India, is that for the first time in a decade it has not suffered a single terror attack for more than a year since that on Mumbai in November 2008. The level of cross-border incursions into Kashmir has also reached an all-time low.

India's home minister is holding quiet talks with Kashmir separatists and has announced the withdrawal of several battalions of troops from the valley. Only domestic politics in the two countries still stands in the way of their working together on Afghanistan.

This is where the US can help through quiet, constructive intervention. Obama's decision to talk to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, as part of his contact group of nations on Afghanistan, and his stern admonition to Pakistan to curb the little temptation that still remains to use militant groups as instruments of foreign policy, are steps in the right direction. But India too needs to be persuaded to resume the dialogue with Pakistan that was interrupted by the Mumbai incident and to refrain from threatening retaliation if it comes under attack again, because this only hands the key to South Asia's future to the very people who are out to destroy both countries.

To turn his 'contact group' into an effective tool for mediation in Afghanistan, Obama needs to drop Russia and China and bring-in Turkey. Turkey is not a neighbour, or even a near-neighbour, nor does it have the long standing links with most Afghan factions India does. But it is a moderate Islamic country that enjoys immense respect in Afghanistan and India, and has very close ties with Pakistan. It is, above all, the country that most Pakistanis want to emulate. Its presence in such a coalition would calm Pakistan's fears of Indian domination, and make it easier for it to cooperate in framing an alternative Afghan policy.

Its inclusion would also solve one of the most difficult problems such a post-NATO Afghanistan would face: providing a core of military power for the new regime to deal with likely challenges to its authority.

On the other hand, Russia's presence in the neighbours' mediation group would only reopen old wounds. Since China has made building up Pakistan against India the pivot of its South Asia policy, its presence in such a group would effectively end whatever slim possibility of cooperation there might otherwise be.

