NO END IN SIGHT

Obama Policy Will Kill Many More U.S. Troops in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

Having inherited a no-win war from his predecessor, the 44th U.S. President, Barack Obama, has decided to invest more money and fire-power in Afghanistan, a policy guaranteed to make the war in the coming days not only financially and physically more costly, but a gruesome one, in the same way the Vietnam War was. His new commander of U.S and NATO troops in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, a special ops veteran, is known for his ruthlessness toward the enemy, but is weak on strategy. He has already bumbled into the Taliban-controlled Helmand province, putting 4,000 U.S. Marines in a death trap. Since he took over in June, the months of June and July were the worst yet for the U.S. and NATO troops. More lives were lost in these two months than any other similar period, since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001.

President Obama should be thankful that his broader engagement policy, "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda" in Afghanistan, has gone virtually unchallenged in the United States. Given the turmoil he is facing at home over his economic and health-care policies, no one, except those whose loved ones are facing death or grave injury in Afghanistan, seems to be paying any attention to what Obama's policy in Afghanistan really means.

Since not many Americans are interested in challenging the Administration over its self-defeating policy in Afghanistan, the White House, and its slew of advisors and hangers-on, are free to act with impugnity. However, more soldiers are now coming back in body-bags, and as the Administration continues to put more and more young Americans in harm's way, in order to accomplish their God-knows-what objectives, this will not only blow up on the Administration, but will further polarize an increasingly divided nation.

What's the Objective?

The Administration has not shown any willingness to reveal what it wants to achieve in Afghanistan. A group of senior (age- and protocol-wise) advisors, engaged in crosstalk, try to convey, through the media, that the objective of putting more and more troops in Afghanistan is not for the purpose of "winning" the war, since it is pretty much established by now that this war cannot be "won," and, in fact, no one can even define what "winning" means in this context, but for winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, and creating a secure-enough condition where an acceptable-to-Washington government in Kabul can function. In order to confuse those who would like to know what the Administration plans to achieve by continuing with the war, the Administration calls for reviews by "experts." Already, six of those expert reviews have been produced, and the seventh, by McChrystal, is already in, or will be shortly.

However, the choice of McChrystal as the commander to win the hearts and minds of the people, seems to be a non-starter. At the beginning, in the Winter of 2001, the invading U.S. troops had the hearts and minds of the Afghans delivered to them on a platter. The popu-

DOD/Staff Sgt William Greeson, US Marine Corps

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the new commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, thinks he can "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people, by bringing thousands of additional troops into the country. But history tells us that an invading force will never accomplish that. Here, Afghan National Army soldiers and U.S. Marines conduct a road reconnaissance patrol in Helmand province, Aug. 1, 2009.

lation hated the Wahhabi Taliban, which had been created as a joint project of the Pakistani ISI-British MI6, and the Saudi faction of Prince Turki al-Faisal. It is for this reason that U.S. troops took less than two months to take over Kabul. Moreover, the United States also began to win over the hearts and minds of the Pakistani Army and the ISI (the Pakistani intelligence agency), when it repatriated a few thousand Pakistani soldiers, who had been fighting for the Taliban against U.S. troops.

How Not To Win Hearts and Minds

But what happened subsequently? Years and years of air strikes to eliminate the "Taliban and al-Qaeda" (many of these are Pushtun or other insurgents, but are conveniently labelled "Taliban" or "al-Qaeda") resulted not only in the deaths of thousands of Afghan men, women, and children ("collateral damage" is the accepted euphemism), but sealed the fate of the Afghan War. It took almost five years for the Afghan insurgency, now emerging as the Pushtun resistance, fighting the foreign occupiers, to re-assert itself. The insurgents may have lost virtually every military clash, but they have expanded their area of influence, from 30 of Afghanistan's 364 districts in 2003, to some 160 districts by the end of 2008, while insurgent attacks increased by 60% between October 2008 and April 2009 alone.

The Bush and Obama administrations have told the American people that the Afghan "Taliban," helped by the Pakistani "Taliban" and aided by the Pakistani Army and the ISI, were trying to put the Afghan "Taliban" back in power. No one in Washington wants to admit that the hearts and minds of the Afghans were lost forever because of the brutishness of the Bush and Obama administrations, and their weak sister NATO, against the Afghans, in general, and the Pushtuns, in particular. It is this Pushtun connection that has brought the Pakistani Pushtun tribes along the Durand Line (the non-demarcated border between Pakistan and Afghanistan) to harbor, shelter, arm, and support their fellow Pushtuns on the other side of the border. Neither the Pakistani Army nor the ISI could stop this process, which has occurred again and again.

Further fueling animosity toward the foreign troops, was the fact that they had looked away, or even helped, the poverty-stricken Afghan economy to become a narco-economy, creating hundreds of drug warlords. These drug lords became the new tormentors of the poor Afghans, and especially the Pushtuns.

Now, Washington has presented a new avatar, General McChrystal, to "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghans. McChrystal headed the Joint Special Operations Command, whose functional modalities are known to only a handful of insiders. In Iraq, he was praised (and inadvertently "outed" as commander) by President George W. Bush in June 2006, after McChrystal's special-ops team located and killed Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. He also played a major role in the post-surge period in Iraq, in support of the then-Commander (now Centcom Chief) Gen. David Petraeus. While his success in eliminating targetted individuals cannot be denied, McChrystal had little contact with the public, because of the nature of his job.

Insurgents Outmaneuver McChrystal

In fact, leaders of these behind-the-curtain operations usually do not have much contact with people (even the military people), and it is said that, for a brief period of time, McChrystal's name was left out of the Pentagon

phone books. That is because, of course, he was the general officer of a number of units which the Pentagon stubbornly refuses to admit the existence of, even though popular culture and selective leaks have made them quite famous and much admired. It seems the general is an unlikely candidate to win over a population.

In early July, McChrystal poured 4,000 Marines into Afghanistan's Helmand province in Operation Khanjar (khanjar is "sword" in Arabic), to last for five years, to try to wrest the poppy-filled river valley permanently from the Taliban. For outsiders, the operation seemed to make a lot of sense. Helmand produces more than 4,500 tons of Afghanistan's annual 8,000-plus tons of opium. The "Taliban" control this southern Afghan province bordering Iran, and benefit immensely from the drug trade that moves opium and heroin to the south, north, and east from this large province. It also should be acknowledged that since the invasion of Helmand province seemed a good idea to one and all, it was quite natural that the Taliban was anticipating it as well.

At the launch of the offensive, McChrystal offered only the following explanation: that his intention is to "clear, hold, and build" in Taliban strongholds, like Helmand. As one analyst enquired, what exactly does "clear" mean? If it means to kill, these young U.S. Marines will have to distinguish between Taliban and non-Taliban Afghans, to avoid more civilian casualties. This is a difficult task for anyone, particularly since, unlike the U.S. Marines, Taliban fighters do not wear a uniform or carry membership cards. They carry weapons, but so do Afghan civilians, who do so to protect their families, the analyst pointed out.

It is now more than six weeks since Operation Khanjar was launched. Except one report of the seizure of 66 pounds of opium, and a lot of poppy seeds, not much has been heard about the "success" of this operation. In reality, Operation Khanjar is an unmitigated tactical failure. The Taliban, which controlled most of the villages in the province, drove the villagers out before the foreign troops could arrive. They mined the dirt roads that are the only way in or out of the remote villages that the U.S. Marines first "captured," and now patrol regularly. Some of these Marines are stepping on those mines and losing their limbs, and some are dying.

Where, then, are the "Taliban"? They are nearby, harassing the Marines, and planting more mines. Many of them left to move eastward and westward to take full control of Kandahar city and the province, and Herat city as well. Meanwhile, in the sweltering 110° F temperatures, the U.S. Marines are battling the ghosts of war, appearing in the form of mines under their feet, and sniper shots from the lurking "Taliban" snipers. The mined dirt roads are blowing up gun-mounted armored vehicles and Humvees.

In other words, the Pushtun insurgents have pinned down the Marines in Helmand. That was exactly their strategy; and McChrystal, who is more adept in covert search and destroy operations, has been left holding the proverbial bag.

'Stay the Course'; 'There Is Light at the End of the Tunnel'

The Obama Administration and its bevy of experts are now divided on what to do in Afghanistan. Two views seem to have been established. First, this war cannot be won militarily using the present level of firepower; and, second, the United States is not going to leave Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. The policymakers in the Obama Administration do not accept that the military option to win the war does not exist. In fact, 21,000 more U.S. troops will be in Afghanistan before this year ends, and, given what McChrystal's advisors are openly suggesting, many more U.S. soldiers will be waiting in the wings, ready to move at some point in time.

Note carefully what two of McChrystal's policy advisors are saying now. While Anthony Cordesman makes clear that he believes the war can be won with adequate effort, McChrystal's counterinsurgency advisor, David Kilcullen, couches his advice with an "either/or." Kilcullen says the U.S. will be able to reconquer Afghanistan, and would "turn the corner" by 2011, adding that a victory would ensure that U.S. forces will remain in Afghanistan for years. Should the U.S. not prevail within two years, despite a surge in troops and funding, Kilcullen says the U.S. and NATO should admit defeat, and leave. In other words, Kilcullen believes that with adequate resources, the U.S. will be able to break the back of the Afghan insurgents.

In the present context, Kilcullen's theory is identical to Henry Kissinger's during the end-phase of the Vietnam War. Kissinger wanted the United States to stay the course in Vietnam, and Kilcullen is telling Washington to do the same in Afghanistan.

In a recent article, "More troops, fewer caveats; let's get serious," posted Aug. 10 on the London *Times* online, Cordesman pointed out that, "to be effective, it [NATO/ISAF (International Security Assistance Force)]

must eliminate as many national caveats and restrictions on troops as possible, and add a substantial number of additional U.S. combat brigades.... Experts differ, but this could mean anywhere from three to nine brigades above the 21,000 additional forces that President Obama approved in the spring of 2009," he wrote.

In addition, Cordesman suggested the NATO/ISAF "must create a larger and more effective mix of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Many experts believe this means roughly doubling the targets from 134,000 to 240,000 troops for the army, and from 82,000 to 160,000 for the police, by 2014. Equally important, member-nations must provide the trainers, mentors, and money to make this force effective. They must put them in the lead as soon as possible to show the Afghan people that security has an Afghan face, that it can last, and that every step is being taken to limit civilian casualties."

Although the final decision on the new surge in Afghanistan has not been made yet, analysts are reporting that McChrystal will request some 45,000 (that is about the nine brigades that Cordesman suggested) additional U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The country's top American military commander will also ask the Obama Administration to double the number of U.S. government civilian workers who are in the country. The request for additional civilian resources will be part of a 60-day assessment of the strategy in Afghanistan. McChrystal's plan also will outline how the military wants to revamp the relationship between civilians and the military, so that soldiers could shift economic and political development work to civilians.

On the other hand, enough evidence has emerged to suggest that the Obama Administration is planning a long stay in Afghanistan, come what may. Rowan Scarborough, in his article in *Human Events*, "U.S. Adds Eight Bases in Afghanistan," dated Jan. 7, 2009, said the U.S. Army is building eight major operating bases in southern Afghanistan, in an expansion that underscores a new, larger troop commitment to try to defeat the stubborn Taliban insurgency. Citing his defense sources, he said the Fluor Corp. will build eight of the largest Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in Afghanistan, in the Kandahar area and other southern Afghanistan locations, close to both Pakistan and Iran borders. The FOBs are to be used as launching pads for troops to attack enemy forces that move among villages trying to retake territory, and ambush allied forces. "The earlier bases were meant to hold hundreds. These will house thousands," one source told Scarborough. The price tag: about $400 million.

There is already of network of FOBs in eastern Afghanistan, where coalition forces are trying to plug the infiltration of Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists from Pakistan's virtually ungoverned tribal region. One of the most notable FOBs in the South is the former compound of Mullah Omar, the reclusive Taliban leader who fled the country during the initial U.S. invasion. That base is used by secretive special operations forces and the CIA.