

# A New Strategy, or New Goals?



exactly welcomed by the West as the only force, that could arguably establish – although at a hefty price – some form of control over a country, torn apart by decades of savage internal struggles. From this point of view, it would perhaps be not that surprising if the ultimate solution to our worries in Afghanistan were to even-

The new strategy President Obama intends to implement for the conflict in Afghanistan is clear and intuitive enough, and in practice it represents an adaptation of the strategy General Petraeus devised and carried out in Iraq to a moderate success. There will be more “boots on the ground” (although these will still remain well below the numbers, that would be needed to ensure semi-permanent control of the whole of the country through purely military means), and in parallel a determined effort will be aimed at fracturing the insurgents’ front by effectively buying the acquiescence when not in support of this or that faction and group through lavish hand-outs in money, weapons and political concessions. It all boils down to yet another edition of the time-honoured concept of *divide et impera* of Roman memory.

It might and then it might not work. The very notion, as currently being voiced of “moderate Taliban” (that is, “reasonable fanatics”) we could do business with is an oxymoron with some perplexing practical implications, and there are no major pre-existing fault lines in the Afghan society the US could exploit to create something akin to the “Sunni Awakening” in Iraq. Yet, it would admittedly not be that difficult to find tribal leaders, on both sides of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border who deeply resent the encroachment of their traditional authority by the Taliban and despise Al Qaeda as foreigners, and who would thus need very little encouragement to take up arms against them. And, one could even think about revitalising the “Northern Alliance” that gave such stellar service in the early phases of the conflict.

On a broader perspective, however, it is quite evident that the task at hand is immensely more complex and difficult than it was the case in Iraq, as Gen. Petraeus recognises to his credit. This is due to many influencing factors such as the porous border with Pakistan and the convenient sanctuaries it offers, the continued unchallenged existence of local feuds controlled by several warlords, the very weak position of the government of President Karzai and our own doubts about what to do with him and with his successor, the not insignificant likelihood for this or any future Afghan President to move swiftly ahead of us and cut his own deal with the Taliban behind our back, and so on. The whole is then further inextricably intermingled with the drug trade as a source of not only money to support the insurgency, but also and arguably more importantly a form of pervasive control over the rural

population as well as a simple and effective tool to automatically put this population at odds with the central government and its Western backers. As I said, it might and then it might not work.

But beyond this, what strikes me as eerily bizarre is that such a new strategy is being refined and applied, without any apparent parallel effort at re-defining (or perhaps simply defining) the goals of the Western military intervention in Afghanistan, i.e. the very ultimate political results the new strategy is expected to bring about. In the face of it, it would appear that Operation “Enduring Freedom” and ISAF need no other rationale than the simple fact that they exist, and must thus be continued indefinitely for their own sake and without any need to encumber the public’s mind with considerations about where we want to go, and why.

Let’s try and fill this apparently inexplicable void. In the eight year of this conflict, I would certainly hope that we can finally drop fairy tales such as “creating a flourishing democracy” and other baloney of that sort. The US, and to a large extent Western, intervention and continued military presence in Afghanistan is in view of two main strategic goals: first, to ensure that the territory of the country could never again be used as a staging area to plan and prepare major terrorist attacks against targets in the West; and second, to open a safe route to the energy sources in Central Asia, so that oil and gas from the “Stans” could flow south for Western consumption and completely cut off the existing and planned Russian pipelines (a situation which, in addition to other benefits, would irremediably weaken Russian influence over these countries).

Now these goals have very little to do with silly dreams such as “bringing Western-style democracy to the Afghan people”, “encouraging the growth of a market economy”, and the like. All we need is a government whatsoever that a), will be in awe of the West and thus exceedingly wary or repeating the monumental mistake of Mullah Omar in offering a sanctuary to Al-Qaeda, and b) will be able to exert enough authority beyond Kabul to ensure that nobody but nobody would dare even look at the pipelines once they are laid.

The first condition will admittedly be much easier to bring about than the second one, due to the Afghani people’s traditional hostility to the very notion of a powerful central government. Indeed, this is the very reason why the Taliban were originally accepted when not

actually consist in sacrificing a puppet regime which is of very little use anyway, and handing the country back to the Taliban (oops, the “moderate Taliban”) after we have come to an understanding with them about what is permissible on their part and what is not.

This is also so, because in reality there is, or at least there should be, a third and indeed major goal to be achieved in Afghanistan: namely, stopping or drastically reducing the flow of drugs from there. I don’t wish to engage in a discussion here about whether further repression or rather liberalisation is the real solution for the drug problem in our society, but it is pretty obvious that as long as our policies in this regard remain what they are, poppy production in Afghanistan is a monumental issue to be tackled as quick as possible. Indeed, considering the ravages illegal drugs and drug-related crime are causing to Western societies, it would not be preposterous to suggest that this problem far outweighs the need to flush a band of rag-tag terrorists out of their rat-holes, and even the desire to outwit the Kremlin in a little game for the control of energy supply routes.

Now even beyond President Karzai’s true or alleged family problems, it is obvious that a Western-style democratic government, if we ever manage to install such in Kabul, would never be able or perhaps even willing to move decisively to eradicate poppy culture. The Taliban, however, are a different kettle of fish altogether. They currently live in symbiosis with the drug trade extracting protection money, but there is no doubt that if in power again they would immediately return to their previous policy of burning poppy fields and swiftly hanging anyone found in possession of drugs. Production would instantly drop to the minimal levels of the years before the Western invasion, and we would have at least a respite in our “war on drugs” albeit at the cost of some minor concession in the “war on terror”.

Needless to say, the ultimate price will be paid by the Afghani people, who in their majority do not wish to live under the Taliban’s maniacal version of Islamic law. Well, too bad.

  
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