

Rudolf, Peter

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War Weariness and Change in Strategy in US Policy on Afghanistan

Peter Rudolf

Increasing war weariness on the part of the American public and in Congress has made it politically possible for President Obama to move away from the costly civil-military counterinsurgency strategy, without needing to fear criticism from the Republicans. The creeping transition to what is known as a counterterrorism strategy widens the scope for troop reduction. Militarily, this strategy hardly entails much more than the elimination of as many insurgents as possible by kill or capture operations – whether in the hope of forcing the opponent’s leaders to negotiate, or in the expectation that this will put stronger Afghan security forces in a better position to manage the remaining danger. As part of this counterterrorism strategy, the US would like to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

At the beginning of his term of office and under pressure from the military, President Obama increased the number of American soldiers in Afghanistan. He was not, however, fully convinced by the civil-military counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) favoured by the military leadership. Reports on the decision-making process, as detailed by Bob Woodward in his book *Obama’s War*, as well as public statements by the President, lead to the conclusion that Obama harboured doubts from the outset about the need for this ambitious strategy and its prospects of success. The strategy itself is based on the assumption that progress in its specific objectives – military weakening of the insurgency movement, improved governance, greater political legitimacy, economic

development, cooperation with Pakistan – would be mutually reinforcing. It had been brought to the President’s attention by the White House coordinator for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Lieutenant General Douglas E. Lute, that this strategic direction could only be successful if, against all odds, these objectives were to be met in parallel. The strategy might therefore be termed a gamble. Yet, going against the demands of the military leadership was apparently politically too risky. It was almost unthinkable that Obama would deny Commander Stanley McChrystal, whom he had appointed at the beginning of his Presidency, the troops the Commander had been demanding and reject the COIN concept favoured by the military chiefs. Obama had

tied his hands too tight politically when, during the election campaign, he started to describe the intervention in Afghanistan as a “war of necessity”.

Which strategy?

Aims, doubts, ambiguities

Early on Obama made it clear that he had limited goals in Afghanistan, which – if achieved – would provide the opportunity for withdrawing American troops. These goals were both to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan and the Taliban the capacity to topple the government in Kabul. While in the case of al-Qaeda the aim was, as Obama made clear, dismantling and defeating this organisation, the objective for the Taliban was to disrupt and weaken them to such an extent that in the future stronger Afghan security forces would be able to deal with them. In the process of a protracted decision-making process during the autumn of 2009, Obama was intent on defining an exit option and avoiding a costly embroilment with no end in sight. Therefore, he explicitly instructed General Petraeus, at the time leading the U.S. Central Command and thus responsible for Afghanistan, not to talk about counterinsurgency in public statements, but preferably about “target, train and transfer”. The President himself apparently was pinning his hopes on “targeting”. He gave the order to intensify special forces operations to kill or capture Taliban leaders and fighters – an option that is usually referred to in the U.S. debate as counter-terrorism (CT). The intensity of these operations therefore increased enormously during the course of 2010.

In the view of General Petraeus, however, counterinsurgency remained the core strategy. The increase in the number of troops by around 30,000 soldiers was intended to put the comprehensive COIN approach into practice in southern Afghanistan. Military successes could then be achieved in some areas; with this increase in force, anything less would be surprising. Improved security against the Taliban, but few successes in the

areas of governance and economic development – this was, in short, the tone of the progress report submitted by the Pentagon in November 2010. Six months later, little had changed in this evaluation: further military successes were recorded, but the chasm between the improved security situation and the slow progress in other areas continued, even though some timely political achievements were in evidence in southern and south-western Afghanistan. Progress was generally deemed to be “fragile and reversible”.

In fact, if lasting security and effective administrative and government services cannot be guaranteed at every level, and if insurgents are still able to spread fear and evade military pressure, short-term local successes in improved security count for little within the context of the COIN approach. CIA analyses, according to press reports, continue to paint a pessimistic view of the situation. In a July 2011 analysis of the status of individual Afghan districts, the talk was of a “stalemate” – and not of any “momentum” in favour of the international armed forces, as perceived by the military leadership, who underpin their cautiously optimistic assessment with the already routine announcement of the number of Taliban killed and captured – a kind of “body count”, which evokes memories of Vietnam for many observers. At least the number of prisoners has been greatly exaggerated. According to one estimate, 80 per cent of the alleged Taliban had to be released after two weeks.

These limited successes were obviously insufficient to convince the President not to start reducing troops, which, as he had announced in December 2009, was to begin in the second half of 2011. In June 2011 Obama decided that 10,000 soldiers were to be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2011 and that by September 2012 the U.S. military presence was to be reduced by 33,000 soldiers. The White House justified this decision by stating that the threat level had changed: no terrorist threat had emerged from Afghanistan for

eight years and the activity of the 50 to 75 members of al-Qaeda associated with the Haqqani network, the second strongest insurgency group, was limited to Afghanistan. There was no evidence that international assaults would be planned from Afghanistan and, as it was expressed, the reduction of troops would not affect the existing “counterterrorism architecture”. The decision to reduce troops could be interpreted politically as a defeat for General Petraeus and the proponents of the approach he favoured within the administration, namely Secretary of Defence Gates and Secretary of State Clinton, and as a victory for Vice-President Biden and the counterterrorism approach he had been propagating from the outset.

In effect the decision to reduce troops to this extent implies that in eastern Afghanistan the ambitious COIN strategy favoured by the military will not be pursued. There will not be enough forces to implement the so-called “clear, hold, and build”-strategy, which means clearing areas of insurgents, holding these areas through the presence of a sufficient security force, and building administrative, political, legal and economic structures. Instead, a form of offensive “war of attrition” will take place in the eastern regions of Afghanistan, with the aim of weakening the Haqqani network, which militarily poses the most dangerous threat, operating from areas in Northern Waziristan where it enjoys backing and support from Pakistan.

The implementation of a comprehensive COIN strategy will basically be limited to Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. As a complex civil-military approach, COIN has not officially been abandoned, but in practice its “enemy-centred” dimension will predominate. Although publicly never clearly articulated, the following appears to be the rationale: 1. to eliminate as many Taliban as possible, in particular those referred to as “high value targets“, including not only high-ranking Taliban leaders, but also those at middle-ranking and lower levels; 2. to further expand Afghan security

forces; 3. from a position of strength to bring at least some of the Taliban leaders to the negotiating table, who, by the time Bin-Laden had been killed, finally might have realised what fate could await them in any seemingly safe location, and thus perhaps to achieve the necessary political solution to the conflict.

“Targeted killing” on a grand scale has, so it appears, become the last hope in Afghanistan. However, this could be deceptive. The expectation that the insurgents will be drastically weakened is based on the assumption that the Taliban could not replace their losses at command level because the recruitment pool would eventually dry up. On the contrary, vengeance is a significant motivating force, inspiring Afghans to fight. This has been demonstrated by a widespread interview-based analysis of the prospects for a negotiated solution, conducted by Matt Waldmann on behalf of the U.S. Institute for Peace. Within the framework of the Pashtun tribal society and the traditional moral code, the intensified programme of killing will have a motivating effect, that is, an effect that encourages recruitment and therefore increases violence. Speculation about a “tipping point” needing to be reached to bring the Taliban leadership to the point of negotiation could therefore prove to be mistaken. As long as the Taliban are able to replace positions and retrain new field commanders, this approach remains highly questionable. It is striking that estimates of the numerical strength of the Taliban have not changed, despite reports of the multitude of combatants killed. At the beginning of 2011, there were 25,000 combatants according to NATO’s calculations – exactly the same as in the previous year, prior to the start of the American offensive in southern Afghanistan. If these certainly very rough estimates contain any truth or significance and are not simply a stab in the dark, then the insurgents appear to be able to make good their losses, at least in numerical terms.

Initial negotiating feelers

The Obama administration was indeed aware from the outset that the conflict in Afghanistan could not be resolved by military means alone, but required a political settlement. The administration therefore wanted to signal, from a strengthened position, a willingness to talk. But first the insurgency's "momentum" had to be broken. Only then – it was speculated – would there really be any benefit in dialogue. In her speech on 18 February 2011, Secretary of State Clinton expressed the Obama administration's willingness to negotiate. She announced a "diplomatic surge" intended to bring the conflict to a peaceful end through a process of reconciliation under Afghan leadership. Clinton did not set the familiar "red lines" as pre-conditions for talks, but rather described them as the indispensable result of negotiations: renunciation of violence, abandonment of the alliance with al-Qaeda and recognition of the Afghan Constitution (which includes the protection of women's rights). As Secretary Clinton made clear, military pressure was intended to force the Taliban to choose: either to break with al-Qaeda, renounce violence, accept the Afghan Constitution and thus become part of Afghan society again, or to feel the effects of what it means to remain associated with an enemy of the international community such as al-Qaeda.

It was commensurate with this announcement that representatives of the Obama administration held exploratory talks with representatives of the Taliban. Mid-ranking US officials were thus dispatched for discussions with a former aide of Mullah Omar, which took place in Qatar and Germany in early 2011. Discreet encounters such as these, which involve establishing initial contacts but not yet substantive discussions, reportedly did not only take place with the section of the Taliban led by Mullah Omar, but also with the Haqqani Network, whose links to al-Qaeda many in Washington consider to be too close for discussions to have any prospect

of success. The US special envoy to Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, who is supposed to focus his efforts on a negotiated solution in line with the ideas of the White House, will not himself be attending these meetings, according to reports, until progress has been achieved and the Afghan government is involved. Any formal negotiating process will take place under the leadership of President Karsai and the US sees itself simply in a support role. Since the release of prisoners and the future of the international military presence will be central points in negotiations, however, the US will nevertheless have a decisive role in any discussion process.

In the meantime, the policy of the US administration appears to be at a stage in which diplomatic initiatives are being seriously pursued. The regional approach involving Afghanistan's neighbouring states, which was initially planned under Obama, but did not prosper, is to be resurrected. A Core Group has therefore been established, in which representatives of the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan meet. Nothing has been published on the substance and status of these discussions. It can only be stated with certainty that Pakistan, despite long years of pressure from the US, has not abandoned the Taliban as an instrument for securing influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's security establishment, now that the "end game" has begun, wants to ensure that it is involved in any political settlement. Thus it is rather unlikely that the Obama administration will successfully press the Pakistani security establishment to act against the Haqqani network and other insurgent groups operating from safe havens in Pakistan. Whether the new tough approach in dealing with Pakistan and the threat to intensify US operations against insurgent targets on Pakistani territory will foster or impair the already dim hopes for a political settlement remains to be seen.

Doubts and weariness

Only a short time ago, Obama could have expected heavy criticism from Republican ranks for any decision that ran counter to the preferences of the military. On the Afghanistan issue, Obama now no longer needs to fear the accusation of showing signs of weakness and pursuing an appeasement policy by signalling a willingness to negotiate. Since the end of 2010, the domestic context has changed. The public and Congress have become war weary. They have grown tired of a conflict whose human costs – over 1,400 soldiers killed up to the end of 2010 – may only affect a small proportion of American society, but whose financial burden, at a time of high national debt, affects every tax payer. In fiscal year 2011, the cost is estimated at 113 billion US dollars. Every soldier serving in Afghanistan costs the taxpayer around 1 million dollars a year. The Afghan security forces are also a long-term financial factor and handing over responsibility for security in Afghanistan depends on their number and quality. In October 2011, according to current plans, the number of security forces will reach 305,000. An increase to 378,000 forces is at least under consideration, if not already planned. However, this would mean that the US would need to spend more than the 12.8 billion dollars on the Afghan security forces currently budgeted for the 2012 fiscal year. Since Kabul is already unable to maintain the existing strength of the security forces without external financing (the annual budget of the Afghan government is 1.5 billion), for the US this would mean assuming substantial financial obligations for years to come.

It is therefore not surprising that, in the meantime, the American public has become highly critical of the continuing war in Afghanistan. In December 2010, the negative benchmark reached that of the Iraq war for the first time. According to a survey commissioned by the *Washington Post/ABC News*, 60 per cent of Americans then thought that it was not worth pursuing the war in Afghanistan. This mood

was based on the view of a majority of Americans that things were going relatively badly for the US in Afghanistan and the costs of the war were making it more difficult to tackle problems back home. In April 2011, according to a survey also initiated by the *Washington Post* und *ABC News*, a majority (49 vs. 44 per cent) for the first time no longer approved of the way in which Obama was handling the war in Afghanistan. And almost two thirds (64 per cent) – and this was an all-time high – no longer considered the war worth continuing. After Bin-Laden was killed, doubts about the war in Afghanistan appeared to have weakened. At the beginning of June 2011, according to a new inquiry by *ABC News/Washington Post*, the number of those who considered the war to be no longer worth continuing fell to 54 per cent. In mid-June 2011, a survey by the Pew Research Center, however, resulted in a majority (56 per cent) for the first time in favour of a withdrawal of troops as fast as possible. Disquiet and resentment over the war in Afghanistan are pronounced, particularly among Democrats, but also among the group of independents that are important for Obama's re-election.

The altered mood is also reflected in the US Congress. After the defeat of numerous moderate to conservative members of Congress in November 2010, the Democrats in the House of Representatives overall became more liberal and more critical of the war. In the Senate, such an important figure as John Kerry, the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, is still supporting the President – again, despite doubts about the counterinsurgency policy, the questionable assumptions and prospects of which all too clearly evoke memories of Vietnam in his mind, when the US supported a discredited, corrupt regime to no avail. This war weariness is no longer limited to those on the left, but has been spreading. The members of the Armed Forces Committee in the House of Representatives supported the war unreservedly for a long time. After the death of Bin-

Laden, critics of the costly COIN strategy within this committee also piped up and wanted to seize the opportunity to focus on a counter-terrorism strategy in the future. The clearest expression of the growing war weariness in the House of Representatives were the 204 votes in May 2011 – 178 Democrats, 26 Republicans – cast in favour of an amendment demanding an accelerated troop withdrawal and an exit strategy. Just ten months earlier, in July 2010, a similar proposal had only received 162 votes. A change in mood can also be felt in the Senate. In mid-June 2011, 27 Senators from both parties expressed this new sentiment in a letter to the President, pointing out: America has achieved what it wanted to achieve, al-Qaeda no longer poses any threat in Afghanistan, Bin-Laden is dead; America is no longer able to pay the costs that nation-building in Afghanistan would require. As this shows, backing for the costly war in Afghanistan is also waning in the Republican Party. No longer do Republicans follow their traditional instinct to support everything the military leadership wishes for bringing a war to a successful conclusion.

Given the change in mood among the public and in Congress and against the background of concerns about the country's economic and financial situation, Obama has gained leeway for gradually reducing the military deployment in Afghanistan without risking being accused by the Republicans of showing weakness over national security. All the more so since the attitude of the Republican Party has changed, not least under the influence of the fiscally conservative Tea Party movement, Republican presidential hopefuls now have to bear this new mood in mind.

Creeping change in strategy

The Obama administration wants to reduce the costs of the war. In the form preferred by the US military and reflected in the NATO strategy, the COIN strategy will likely be phased out. The Pentagon's last two

progress reports, dated November 2010 and April 2011, differentiate between US strategy and NATO strategy. A clear distinction can be seen here between the President's preferences (US strategy) and the concept preferred by the US military, as epitomised in NATO's strategy. According to the *ISAF Operations Plan 38302* (fifth version of 31st December 2010) NATO "conducts comprehensive, population-centric counterinsurgency operations in order to: protect the Afghan people; neutralize insurgent networks; develop Afghan National Security Forces; and support the establishment of legitimate governance and sustainable socio-economic institutions." The chasm between declared NATO strategy and operational American strategy will grow if CT operations become central to the US approach.

Although eliminating insurgents is part of the COIN approach, it is not the key element as it is within the CT approach. COIN is a comprehensive strategy, which includes nation-building. CT has a narrower, precise aim and requires fewer resources. In order to achieve a coherent policy, it would certainly be rational to take a clear decision between both approaches. However, a creeping transition towards a CT strategy is to be expected – or, as it is sometimes called, a "counterterrorism plus" strategy: a mix of "kill or capture" operations by Special Operations Forces and the protection of a few population centres. Proponents of such a strategy consider it sufficient to guarantee that the core goal can be met: eliminating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and destroying the country's status as sanctuary for terrorists. Large sections of Afghan territory would probably have to be surrendered to control by the insurgents. A moderate number of armed forces – 13,000 according to experts' estimates – would be adequate to take over the task of combating terrorism and securing the survival of the Afghan state. Stationing these forces at military bases in the north, east and south of the country would allow them to take appropriate action quickly. Opponents of

this option criticise that without a broad enough military presence, there will be a lack of informants and intelligence. Proponents of the anti-terrorism option do not consider this to be a valid objection, however, because in other countries and regions in which the American military has no extensive presence on the ground, there is not necessarily a lack of intelligence for targeted operations.

The assumption that the President has counterterrorism in mind as an approach for the period beyond 2014 is plausible. In June 2011, shortly before leaving office, Defense Secretary Gates argued that in the process of reducing troop numbers US policy will be increasingly moving in the direction of a CT strategy. COIN proponents regard this development as problematic, since such a strategy does not change the structural conditions that feed the insurgency. But is it even possible for external players to change these conditions? And this, as a study published in November 2010 by the Center for American Progress highlighted, is the real problem with the COIN strategy: Will all the tactical military successes help, if the Afghan government, which pursues a patronage policy despite all external pressure, is not willing or able to get the necessary political reforms started and set up governmental structures able to survive a reduced Western presence?

A permanent military presence

The US would like to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan even after 2014 in pursuit of a counter-terrorism strategy. The official position is that no thought has been given to permanent military bases. This kind of phrasing leaves a great deal open to interpretation. There is a US military presence in a number of countries that is not regarded as 'permanent', but which has persisted for decades. Washington's discussions with the Afghan government on a *Strategic Partnership Declaration* for the period beyond 2014 entail a longer-term presence as part of bilateral cooperation. Some items

in the negotiations appear to be controversial, including the question as to whether the US could use its residual forces against another state without approval from the Afghan government. If the use of US forces against a third party country is addressed, then Pakistan, as the country that harbours the greatest threat in terms of transnational terrorism, is probably top of the list. If the US wants to take action beyond 2014 against targets in Pakistan with drones and special operations forces, military bases in Afghanistan would be of some advantage.

As understandable as the interest in long-term military bases appears in terms of power projection, it is not necessarily conducive to stabilising Afghanistan. The *Strategic Partnership Declaration* will send a signal to the Afghans that the US will not be abandoning the country after 2014. But the impression that the US wants to maintain permanent military bases in the country could – and this is debated in Washington – give a boost to the anti-American sentiment in Afghanistan and make potential negotiations with the Taliban even more difficult.

Outlook and conclusions

There is a long way to go before Afghanistan will achieve some sort of political pacification. The government and an insurgency movement composed of various groups need to cooperate, the potential for interference by a multitude of violent actors must be limited, and regional powers, such as Pakistan and Iran, which have no clear interest in a stable Afghanistan, need to be included. Even if the details of a power-sharing arrangement can be negotiated, perhaps the even more important question remains as to whether it can be implemented and compliance monitored. As much as the US continues to place strong emphasis on peace negotiations being primarily a task for the Afghans, it will be up to the international community to construct a complex peace process, which will probably take years, during the

course of which a mediator needs to be found who will be acceptable to all parties in the conflict. It will also require a confidence-building phase. Achieving a peaceful solution through negotiation, as a number of studies have made clear, is difficult and the outcome is uncertain. In this respect, plans for a long-term military presence make sense from Washington's viewpoint. At some point the US administration might have to decide whether a long-term military presence in Afghanistan is absolutely required, or whether foregoing this option could potentially be used as a bargaining chip in a negotiation strategy. This question is already debated among experts who think about the way military and political approaches can be synchronised.

But currently it seems that an integrated comprehensive Afghan strategy is still lacking. Thus it may be worth while focusing more transatlantic attention on an overall political strategy and its implications for the military approach, including the question of whether killing as many Taliban as possible might jeopardise rather than advance a political solution.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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