

AFGHANISTAN

London Pushes U.S. into New Vietnam: Is Obama Paralyzed?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Sept. 3—U.S. President Barack Obama is under massive pressure from the American population not only on his two domestic issues—the health-care reform and the cap-and-trade bill—but also on the increasingly dangerous Afghan War. On the Afghan War front, London has become more and more outspoken, advising the U.S. President to commit more troops, using arguments heard over and over again during the failed Vietnam War, which lasted about ten years and took over 58,000 American lives, and more than 1 million Vietnamese.

Weakened by his own follies, such as pushing a domestic agenda demanded by imperial financial circles, President Obama has already made himself vulnerable to the British drive for war. On Aug. 17, just before he headed off on vacation, Obama addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) convention in Phoenix, Ariz., and referred to the ongoing war in Afghanistan. He said, echoing the former Administration on the Iraq War: “We must never forget: *This is not a war of choice. . . . This is a war of necessity.* Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again” (emphasis added). He staunchly defended his “new” war strategy for Afghanistan, saying American troops have adopted new tactics that include protecting the Afghan people and improving their lives. “The insurgency in Afghanistan didn’t just happen overnight. And we won’t defeat it overnight. This will not be quick. This will not be easy,”

Obama warned the VFW.

Emphasizing the importance of the Afghan War, he said: “This is not only a war worth fighting,” but, “this is fundamental to the defense of our people.” Referring to his “new, comprehensive strategy,” unveiled last March, he said: “This strategy acknowledges that military power alone will not win this war—that we also need diplomacy and development and good governance. And our new strategy has a clear mission and defined goals: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies.”

Britain Endorses McChrystal Strategy

Subsequently, the U.S. and NATO Commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, submitted his assessment of the Afghan situation, and the figures of American casualties in the month of August were posted. In this almost eight-year-long war, the U.S. lost the most soldiers in Afghanistan in August, followed by July and June. Already, in 2009, more U.S. soldiers were killed there, than in all of 2008, which was itself a very bad year.

McChrystal’s assessment has not been made public, but the general has said to the media, “The situation in Afghanistan is serious, but success is achievable and demands a revised implementation strategy, commitment and resolve and increased unity of effort.” In his report, which was prepared for military leaders, media



White House/Pete Souza

President Obama and his commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal (right), have been drawn into a no-win land-war in Asia, by the same London circles who brought us the Vietnam War.

reports indicate McChrystal did not specifically recommend a troop increase, instead spelling out plans to intensify development of Afghan security forces, improve the country's government, and refocus economic development initiatives, according to a description by NATO officials. But among military officials, McChrystal is widely expected to seek extra troops; and observers claim that his assessment would almost certainly lead to such a request in coming months.

How many more troops does McChrystal need? The *Washington Post* Sept. 3 cited a senior military officer, who said recently that the U.S. would need a force of 100,000 to carry out a new strategy. Some observers point out that even 100,000 troops are not necessarily enough. The surge strategy in Iraq required 160,000 U.S. military personnel—in a country with fewer people and a third less land area than Afghanistan. Remember Vietnam? No amount of troops was ever enough.

But the British don't care about that—their objective is to use this war to destroy the United States.

So, on Sept. 2, the City of London's *Financial Times*, in its lead editorial, "Obama's dilemma over Afghanistan," wrote, "Barack Obama will almost certainly have to decide in the next few weeks whether to send more US troops in order to defeat the Taliban. The decision is set to be one of the most difficult he has faced since becoming president."

The British establishment mouthpiece endorsed McChrystal's statement that "success is achievable," adding, "Mr. Obama, for now, would be right to heed his demands. . . . In part, the president has no choice, since he only recently put the man in the job. But Gen. McChrystal is also forging a sensible strategy. He has framed the mission in the right terms, emphasizing the need to team up the Afghan National Army in bigger numbers. He has stressed the need for allied troops to get among the people, rather than just killing Taliban insurgents in large numbers."

On Aug. 30, in his column in the *Financial Times*, entitled "Afghanistan is now Obama's war," columnist Clive Crook pointed out that public opinion in the United

States has already gone against the war. This is indicated by a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll showing that 51% now say the war is not worth fighting. Among Democrats, it's seven out of ten. Crook also pointed at a recent *Economist*/YouGov poll which found that only 32% agree with sending more troops—something the Army is expected to request imminently.

Endorsing induction of more troops, Crook added: "I think, Mr Obama is right not to quit just yet—but to improve his chances of success he must bring his ends and means into closer alignment. . . . A rule of thumb for counter-insurgency operations is that you need one soldier for every 50 inhabitants. For Afghanistan, this gets you to well over 500,000 troops even before you start taking account of the terrain. That number is unthinkable. Counter-insurgency is never quick even when it succeeds, and the US is impatient."

Vietnam, CORDS, and Afghanistan

General McChrystal has not yet demanded more troops, although the word is going around in Washington's power corridors that he will be seeking 20-25,000 more. He now has about 103,000 Western troops under his command, due to increase to about 110,000 by the end of the year. About two-thirds of them are American. At least on one occasion, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert

Gates noted that the Soviets had about 120,000 troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and said he was concerned that too big a force could alienate the Afghani people.

In addition to the anticipated induction of more troops, McChrystal is planning to send home 14,000 support staff and underutilized soldiers, and replace them with combat-ready infantry units. Forces that could be swapped out include units assigned to non-combat duty, such as guards or lookouts, or those on clerical and support squads. "It makes sense to get rid of the clerks and replace them with trigger-pullers," said one Pentagon official, speaking to the media on condition of anonymity, because the plans have not been announced. It is evident that whatever the general may say, these "trigger-pullers" will not be brought into Afghanistan to "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghan population.

On the other hand, McChrystal has often spoken about the need to change the focus, from hunting insurgents to protecting the population, the main tenet of the counter-insurgency approach developed for Iraq by Gen. David Petraeus, now McChrystal's boss at Central Command. McChrystal also emphasizes non-military objectives, and his review is likely to call for a beefed-up and more coherent civilian-military effort to improve how Afghanistan is run, with extra Western civilians deployed into the provinces. This would probably involve greater effort to direct international aid through Afghan government channels at the central and regional level, and more support for measures to fight corruption.

Instead of remaining wholly tuned to his White House staff and London, if President Obama were to read about the build-up of troops to the level of 500,000 in Vietnam, at the later stage of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency, he might begin to wake up to where he is being led. That those 500,000 troops in Vietnam could not achieve, what "experts and advisors" coaxed the late-President for years to believe, is not a conjecture. It is a fact. Now, London and its co-thinkers in Washington are back again to advise President Obama on why it is necessary to escalate troop-presence to "win" the war in Afghanistan.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. set out, not only to win a military victory, but also to "win the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese. This was the second part of the Vietnam campaign, and it was ostensibly designed to bolster popular support for the South Vietnamese government against the Viet Cong. According to Marc

Leepson, writing in the April 2000 *American Foreign Service Journal*, the program "centered on assistance and development programs worth billions of dollars to the war-ravaged Vietnam."

So, the powers-that-be at the time decided that there must be a unified structure that combined military and civilian pacification efforts in Vietnam; an organization called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) was launched in 1967 with much fanfare. It took charge of the then-claimed "disjointed and ineffective civilian pacification programs" (not much different from how Washington now describes Afghan President Hamid Karzai's Administration in Kabul) under the military. CORDS gave the pacification effort access to military money and personnel, allowing programs to expand dramatically. In 1967, there were about 1,000 advisors involved in pacification, and the annual budget was \$582 million; by 1969, that had risen to 7,600 advisors, and almost \$1.5 billion. This rapid expansion was possible only because CORDS was a streamlined system under Defense Department control.

In 1967, much of USAID's work was also integrated into the CORDS program, which became the most well-known component of its presence in Vietnam. The CORDS program was the brainchild of Robert ("Blowtorch") Komer, President Johnson's special assistant for pacification in Vietnam. Komer was responsible for the government's non-military efforts to "pacify" Viet Cong-controlled areas and return them to South Vietnamese government control. Included in the CORDS was the controversial Phoenix program, which was designed to eliminate the rural Viet Cong infrastructure. Under Phoenix, which began in July 1968, South Vietnamese and American pacification intelligence operatives gathered information on suspected guerrillas, and then worked to capture, and convert or kill them.

That program ended in 1972. Among those USAID people was Richard Holbrooke, one of the provincial advisors in those days in Vietnam, and now, President Obama's Special envoy to Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak). How did the CORDS program do in Vietnam? It depends on whom you ask. Although almost all would admit that it did not achieve anything significant, and that it led to a lot of "unnecessary killing" of Vietnamese people, many would try to justify its potential with the proverbial "ifs": "If that had not happened"; "if we had done that"; "if someone else but "Blowtorch" Komer, had been in-charge"... It goes on.



DoD/Lance Cpl. Philip Elgie, USMC

Despite McChrystal's pie-eyed assessment that "success is achievable," already, in 2009, more U.S. soldiers were killed in Afghanistan, than in all of 2008. Shown, U.S. Marines in Helmand province, Aug. 29, 2009.

But Obama must note that the bottom line is, that with 500,000 troops, a stay of ten years, and CORDS, the U.S. did not prevent the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese from taking over the country.

Afghan Policy: Clear as Mud

Those in Washington who, today, do not want to accept the adverse outcome of the ten-year-long Vietnam War, which divided the U.S. population, and partly destroyed a generation of Americans, are in league with the British campaign to lead the United States into a quagmire. The Vietnam War was fought to prevent the "domino-effect" which would allegedly allow the Communists to sweep through Southeast Asia. That did not happen, because the Vietnamese were fighting a war, not on behalf of the Communists to spread Commu-

nism everywhere, but to reunify their country. And, that is precisely what they did when the last American soldier left Vietnam.

On the other hand, the Afghan War was launched in the Winter of 2001 to eliminate al-Qaeda, the alleged mastermind behind the 9/11 attack on the United States, and to rout the Taliban because they had provided al-Qaeda a home in Afghanistan. The Taliban was routed spectacularly within a few weeks, and al-Qaeda, along with the Taliban, fled into Pakistan. Eight years later, Washington no longer talks about the presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. But much of Afghanistan is now under control of Afghan Taliban—at least that is how the Afghan insurgents are labeled in the mainstream media.

Now the question one may ask is: Would the United States have invaded Afghanistan if al-Qaeda had not been there? According to what the Americans were told at the time to justify the invasion, the answer is no. Then, why are the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan at a time when it is being taken over by the Afghan Taliban, and al-Qaeda is no longer there?

Some point out that the fight in Afghanistan is not about nation-building, or turning a tribal state into a fully functional parliamentary system. The goal is to provide enough stability and Afghan support to prevent the country from, once again, becoming a sanctuary for terrorists who could attack the U.S. In short, this is a fight in the United States' strategic interests, they claim. In reality, however, during these eight years of war in Afghanistan, and six years of the Iraq War, there have been many countries around the world which have been willing to shelter al-Qaeda. Somalia, Yemen, and Nigeria, to name a few, have already accommodated al-Qaeda members and leaders, and they have many other homes now. Then, why is it so important to sacrifice young lives and oodles of money to cleanse Afghanistan, and further undermine America's credibility among the nations of the world?

President Obama must also take time to note that Afghanistan is not Vietnam. Those Vietnamese who fought against the U.S. troops did so to unify the country. They saw that the United States was trying to create two Vietnams, the way two Koreas emerged. In Afghanistan, they just want the foreigners off their land. Sooner or later, all Afghans will unify on this. Already some non-Pashtun warlords, who were formerly "friends" of the United States, have switched sides to fight the foreign occupiers.