

Obama's Af-Pak Policy: A Fallacy of Composition

by Ramtanu Maitra

Dec. 9—At West Point on Dec. 1, President Barack Obama presented his latest Afghanistan-Pakistan policy—the result of an extensive review, and one that would lead to the “end of the Afghanistan war,” he promised. Although not as dramatic as President George W. Bush’s landing on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003, with a banner behind him declaring “Mission Accomplished,” in Iraq, Obama chose West Point for obvious effect. But, what he delivered as his new policy was riddled with misrepresentations, and could not but have made the grim-faced cadets even grimmer.

Obama said the United States will shortly add another 30,000 troops, and a drawdown of U.S. troops will begin in the Summer of 2011. The next day, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates moved partially away from that commitment in response to a question from Ranking Member John McCain (R-Ariz.), pointing out that a further evaluation of the situation would be made in December 2010, before the drawdown date is fixed. Gates emphasized that the President has the authority to change his plans.

In his West Point speech, Obama said: “Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future. To meet that goal, we will pursue the following objectives within Afghanistan. We must deny al-Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow

the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s future. We will meet these objectives in three ways. First, we will pursue a military strategy that will break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity over the next 18 months.”

Citing the economic burden that the Afghan War has become, Obama said: “We must rebuild our strength here at home. Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy. It taps the potential of our people, and allows investment in new industry. And it will allow us to compete in this century as successfully as we did in the last. That’s why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended—because the nation that I’m most interested in building is our own.”

By Comparison

Compare this speech to the one President Obama delivered on March 27, the first iteration of his Af-Pak policy, and also to his speech on Aug. 17 to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. On March 17, Obama said: “We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists. So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That’s the goal that



U.S. Army/Tommy Gilligan

President Obama's Afghanistan speech at West Point Dec. 1, while not as preposterous as George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" blunder in 2003, in Iraq, nonetheless egregiously fudged the facts about what the U.S. faces in the Af-Pak theater.

must be achieved. That is a cause that could not be more just. And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: *We will defeat you.*"

To achieve those goals, Obama recommended "a stronger, smarter and comprehensive strategy," adding that "to focus on the greatest threat to our people, America must no longer deny resources to Afghanistan because of the war in Iraq. To enhance the military, governance and economic capacity of Afghanistan and Pakistan, we have to marshal international support."

On Aug. 17, Obama told the Veterans of Foreign Wars: "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. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al-Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans."

The President's Dec. 1 speech was devoid of the "We will defeat you" statement, and similar emphatic rhetoric such as, "This is not a war of choice; this is a war of necessity." One may wonder what accounts for the change in tone. One thing is certain: The situation on the ground in Afghanistan—or in Pakistan, for that matter—has not changed for the better. On the contrary. The insurgents, despite being hit again and again, appear to be resilient enough and determined enough to weaken the foreign troops in Afghanistan; and Islamabad's ability to subdue the home-grown insurgents within its own borders has grown more doubtful.

And one can reasonably conclude from the goings-

on in Washington, before and after the speech, that the United States has realized that the Afghan War cannot be won. If Washington chooses to stay in Afghanistan with the motto "We will defeat you," American troops will remain there for decades—if not forever.

Bravado aside, it has perhaps also been understood that Pakistan cannot be stabilized just because Washington would like it to be stable. What needs to be done in Pakistan to halt the trend toward non-governability, is beyond Washington's ability or means. Therefore, the only policy options Washington has toward Pakistan are strong-arming of the pro-U.S. faction in the Pakistani military; pumping in more money to ease Pakistan's collapsed

economy; and sweet-talking Islamabad to stay "on course."

In fact, the real worry in Washington is not the Afghan Taliban or al-Qaeda; it is the prospect of Pakistani nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the "nasty" elements within Pakistan's military and intelligence, and from there, finding their way into the hands of Saudi-funded, viciously anti-U.S., opponents of sovereign nation-states.

Fudging the Facts

But while Obama's West Point policy speech was, to a certain extent, an acknowledgment of reality, it nevertheless misrepresented that reality. This is not simply the President's doing; to be fair, the way Afghan War was conceived and fought was all wrong from the outset. Here are some of the salient points:

- When the U.S. went into Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001 to unseat the Taliban, a Pushtun-led organization, and to capture the al-Qaeda leaders, it was with the help of the Tajik-Uzbek-dominated Afghan political grouping known as the Northern Alliance. Hamid Karzai, himself a Pushtun and, therefore, representative of the majority community in Afghanistan, was set up as President in Kabul; but no effort was made to organize the non-Taliban or anti-Taliban Pushtuns to support the government. For the sake of exigency, the top Uzbek warlord, Abdur Rashid Dostum, and many top Tajik warlords, of whom Mohammad Fahim stands out as the most

powerful, were attached to President Karzai. Dostum and most, if not all, of the Tajik warlords were beneficiaries of huge drug-trafficking operations begun in a big way after the Red Army left in 1989. Under the circumstances, Karzai's complete dependence on the Uzbek and Tajik drug warlords made the Kabul government—by necessity, not by choice—a corrupt administration. Some Pushtun warlords, particularly in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, who continue to support Karzai, had to be given access to drug and other illicit money, further widening the corruption ring.

- By the time the U.S. Special Forces had begun their operation in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban was a spent force. Less than 5% of Pushtuns, and none of the minority communities (the Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazaras, among others) had anything to do with the Wahhabi-influenced Taliban. This weakened state of the Afghan Taliban was the reason that the U.S. Special Forces and the Northern Alliance, despite having to also battle Pakistani army personnel and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), won a quick victory. Acting like the proverbial blind men of Hindoostan, however, Washington refused to acknowledge that, while all Afghan Taliban were Pushtuns, all Pushtuns were not Afghan Taliban. Of course, many Afghan Taliban hid among the non-Taliban Pushtuns; but instead of pursuing a policy that could build a Pushtun majority unsympathetic to the Afghan Taliban, the U.S. chose to depend on air strikes on Pushtun villages to eliminate the insurgents. The result was to turn the Pushtuns against the United States en masse and push them into active assistance to the Afghan Taliban—a known devil. The process also further weakened President Karzai. Pushtuns saw him as an “American stooge” who could not defend the innocents of his own community.

- As a way of getting out of Afghanistan and cutting losses in money and manpower, Washington began building the Afghan National Army (ANA). While the idea was not wrong, its implementation has been skewed by Washington's pervasive misunderstanding of Afghan realities. First, the composition of this army is predominantly non-Pushtun; it is dominated by the Tajiks and some Uzbeks. Out of a total of 92,000 members on a sunny day, more than 80,000 are Tajiks. What has not been comprehended is that, while



DOD/Tech. Sgt. Francisco V. Govea II, USAF

Only if the United States joins the emerging alliance among the three great Eurasian powers, India, Russia, and China, will the Afghanistan-Pakistan quagmire be resolved. Here, U.S. Army soldiers on patrol in Chabar, Afghanistan, Dec. 3.

the Tajiks and Uzbeks are, historically, hostile to the Pushtuns, they never “worked” for foreign forces to fight the Pushtun majority among whom they have always lived. That is why U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal could corral no more than 600 ANA personnel when he sent 4,000 U.S. Marines to Helmand province, which is dominated wholly by the Pushtuns. Even these 600 did not fight; and some of them dropped their guns and told the Pushtuns that they were just visiting Helmand.

When Obama talked on Dec. 1 about training the ANA in a jiffy (18 months) to take over Afghanistan's security, it was almost laughable.

- At the time the U.S. came into Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban had brought down annual opium production, from the year 2000 high of 4,400 tons, to 600 tons. During the eight years since, opium production has soared to 8,200 tons annually. In fact, a total of 44,000 tons of opium, which is then converted into heroin, has been produced under the U.S. and British watch. After years of double-talking by the Bush Administration, aided by U.S. think-tank experts, it was finally acknowledged that drugs translate into weapons, and that the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, among others, were beneficiaries of this booty. In his speech to the Military Academy, Obama showed that he has no policy to curb the drugs that are flowing out of Afghanistan, and are helping the insurgents and terrorists everywhere, including Russia. Although Obama repeatedly utters his resolve to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat

the insurgents, one key element—the production of drugs—is given the usual go-by.

- In his Dec. 1 speech, as well in his earlier speeches, Obama failed to acknowledge the fact that U.S. and NATO troops are presently fighting (that is, when they are forced to fight by the insurgents) not the Afghan Taliban, but the entire Pushtun community, which is now joined by some Tajik and Uzbek commanders as well. This is really not a secret. This fact was pointed out by the former Afghan Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, a conduit between Taliban supremo Mullah Omar and the Afghan government. Zaeef recently told an Associated Press correspondent that the militant leadership now refers to its forces not as Taliban, but as “mujahideen,” a throwback to the Afghan “holy warriors” who ousted the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. The reason is that only one out of ten militant fighters is a true “Taliban.” The rest are ordinary Afghans, Zaeef said.

The reality is that Taliban leader Mullah Omar has now emerged as the Pushtun warrior who has fought the foreign troops with a great deal of success. When the foreign troops choose to leave Afghanistan, President Karzai will have to abandon his post to a “better Pushtun,” Mullah Omar that is, who fought for the Pushtun community and kept Afghanistan free of foreign “occupiers.”

Additional Truths

There are additional truths that have become clear to students of Afghanistan by now. For instance, it is evident that the Afghan Taliban were never involved in any anti-U.S. activities outside of Afghanistan. Not a single Afghan Taliban was ever found involved in Iraq or in Palestine. Afghans like to stay home—unless they are driven out. Then they seek refuge in Pakistan with the hope of returning home some day.

One example of the monumental incompetence exhibited by the White House since the Bush days, has been its unwillingness to reconcile Kabul with Islamabad. These two are the main ingredients in Obama’s Af-Pak broth, and yet they have remained extremely hostile to each other since 2001. Karzai’s father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, who fled to Quetta, Balochistan, after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, was Deputy Speaker of Parliament during King Zahir Shah’s days. Washington knew, and deliberately ignored, that according to President Karzai, his father was assassinated in Quetta by the Pakistani ISI/al-Qaeda in 1999. Washington also knew that weeks before the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Karzai, who was residing in Pakistan, claimed the ISI had told him his

visa would not be renewed and he must leave by Sept. 30.

Yet, with so much bad blood between Karzai and Islamabad, Washington did nothing. Pakistani President Musharraf continued trashing Karzai for years, and Karzai made clear that he was convinced that the Pakistani establishment was continuing to interfere with his administration, and was shoring up the terrorists working against him, and the United States and NATO. One wonders in what place Washington had its head up!

Further, from what we know about Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the alleged mastermind of 9/11, he had brought his family from Saudi Arabia and settled them in Karachi as far back as 1997, and was using it as his operational base. It should be noted that Karachi is located in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. It is a foregone conclusion that al-Qaeda supremo Osama bin Laden would not have moved into Afghanistan without being facilitated by either Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. It is one of those open “secrets”—like the airlifts of Pakistani army personnel, ISI operatives, and Afghan Taliban commanders from Kunduz, Afghanistan, in 2002, when they were about to be captured by U.S. troops and Northern Alliance warlords. On that occasion, Musharraf got the deal through with the help of President Bush and Vice President Cheney.

Finally, it is not clear what President Obama meant when, on Dec. 1, he said: “We’ll have to use diplomacy, because no one nation can meet the challenges of an interconnected world acting alone. I’ve spent this year renewing our alliances and forging new partnerships. And we have forged a new beginning between America and the Muslim world—one that recognizes our mutual interest in breaking a cycle of conflict, and that promises a future in which those who kill innocents are isolated by those who stand up for peace and prosperity and human dignity.” A similar statement was embedded in his March 27 speech: “But this is not simply an American problem—far from it. It is, instead, an international security challenge of the highest order. . . .”

Yet, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sent a proposal to Washington, following his meeting with the Indian and Chinese foreign ministers in Bangalore last October, suggesting a regional effort would include Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian “stan” countries, to contain Afghanistan, it was ignored. Obama talks about a “new beginning between America and the Muslim world,” but he seems unaware that the Muslim world, beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, also contains Iran and the “stan” countries, as well as parts of Russia, India, and China.