

The Vietnam Syndrome?

By a Correspondent

America has decided to go for a 'surge' in Afghanistan, increasing its troops there by over 20,000 over the next few months. The first batch, about 3,500 to 4,000 troops from the Third Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, New York, are scheduled to arrive next month, with the remainder arriving over the following 18 months. This is nothing more nor less than Barack Obama promised to do when elected President i.e., to withdraw (partially) from Iraq in order to focus on Afghanistan, and on Pakistan as well.

The war in Afghanistan has been going badly for America and its allied forces, and Anthony Cordesman commented bitterly in the *International Herald Tribune* of 25 November : "Leaks of a new National Intelligence Estimate have shown that we are now losing the war for several reasons: a lack of Afghan competence; a halfhearted Pakistani commitment to the fight; a shortage of American, NATO and International Security Assistance Force troops; too few aid workers; and nation-building programs that were designed for peacetime and are rife with inefficiency and fraud. This is why General David McKiernan, the top commander in Afghanistan, and other military leaders have called for 20,000 to 25,000 more troops and warned that even those reinforcements may not be adequate."

The current situation for American strategists in Afghanistan is very far from good: "In an illustration of the growing challenge for the US in Afghanistan, an international think tank estimated in a report released Monday that the Taliban has a 'permanent presence' in nearly three quarters of the country. The International Council on Security and Development said the Taliban presence has grown from 54 percent of Afghanistan a year ago to 72 percent today. "

The additional troops will bring the total number of foreign troops in Afghanistan to 73,000, there being currently some 53,000 NATO-led troops from 27 countries serving in Afghanistan, including 32,000 US troops. On the part of the other 26 countries, however, enthusiasm for the war in Afghanistan has been steadily waning and it is more than likely that their numbers will decrease. This month (December 2008) for instance, Canada -which has 2,500 troops under British command in Helmand Province lost its 100th soldier. The unpopularity of the war among the Canadian electorate has caused the Canadian government to announce that it will be pulling out of Afghanistan in 2011. Other NATO countries, such as Germany, refuse to allow their troops to be sent into the more dangerous areas. The result is that this 'surge' is likely to be a rather damp squib. Quite apart from that, all countries are hit by the economic crisis and it only makes sense to reduce expenditure on a war effort that is clearly getting nowhere.

Furthermore, it should be remembered that the Soviet Union was unable to pacify Afghanistan, even though it had 120,000 troops in the country, the support of a relatively strong Afghan government, and a great deal more popular support than US and its cohorts have today. In only one thing is US ahead of its Soviet predecessors, and that is in firepower and sheer brutality. But that 'superiority' is in fact a weakness as it drives the Afghan masses unfailingly into the hands of the Afghan resistance, helping them to overcome their distaste for religious fundamentalism where necessary, in their determination not to bow down to foreign domination.

The Soviet experience has proved that it is impossible for US to win in Afghanistan with the number of troops it has available. Even to try would be highly unpopular in the western home countries, where surging death rates among troops could lead to popular backlash among the masses who are already for the most part opposed to

these wars. Hence the need to try to get local troops to fight America's war. Unfortunately for US, the numbers don't crunch. According to Ahmed Rashid and Barnett R Rubin, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has announced a plan to increase the size of the Afghan National Army from 70,000 to 122,000, as well as adding 82,000 police, for a total of 204,000 in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). "Such increases, however, would require additional international trainers and mentors - which are, quite simply, not available in the foreseeable future and maintaining such a force would far exceed the means of such a destitute country. Current estimates of the annual cost are around \$2.5 billion for the army and \$1 billion for the police. Last year, the Afghan government collected about 7 percent of a licit GDP estimated at \$9.6 billion in revenue - about \$670 million. Thus, even if Afghanistan's economy experienced uninterrupted real growth of 9 percent per year, and if revenue extraction nearly doubled, to 12 percent (both unrealistic forecasts), in ten years the total domestic revenue of the Afghan government would be about \$2.5 billion a year. Projected pipelines and mines might add \$500 million toward the end of this period. In short, the army and the police alone would cost significantly more than Afghanistan's total revenue."

It follows that to keep Afghans dying for America it will be necessary for America, and whatever NATO countries could be pressured into doing so, to provide to Afghanistan "aid" amounting to some \$5 billion a year, on top of what is being spent otherwise on the war, a commitment that Rashid and Rubin consider to be quite unsustainable.

There is also some speculation that the US is trying to draw India into the war. India could certainly supply a vast amount of soldiery to the American effort if it were so inclined. To do so, however, would be even the inept and pro-American Indian ruling class is unlikely to descend. India has a very large Muslim population. To commit its troops to fight Muslims in Afghanistan (and probably also Pakistan) would give rise to an almighty backlash among significant sections of its home population that would greatly weaken it and threaten its territorial integrity.

In the meantime, the Taliban in the 72% of the country that it controls, is winning hearts and minds. It says it has learnt from mistakes made in the past. Ghaith Abdul Ahad writing in the *Observer* of 14 December recounts what he has learnt from spending times behind the Taliban lines in Afghanistan :

"Taliban commanders I met explained the Taliban's sophisticated network of military and civilian leadership. Each province has its own Taliban governor, military leader and shura [consultation] council. Below them are district commanders like Hemmet, who in turn divides his force into smaller units. Many say the civilian apparatus of the Taliban-run districts operates a more effective justice system than the government's, which is corrupt and inefficient. ..

"Mullah Muhamadi ... arrived later wearing a long leather jacket and a turban bigger than all the others. 'This is not just a guerrilla war, and it's not an organised war with fronts', he said. 'It' both'. He went on to explain the importance the Taliban attached to creating a strong administration in the areas it held : When we control a province we need to provide service to the people. We want to show the people that we can rule, and that we are ready for the day when we take over Kabul, that we have learned from our mistakes."

The result is that in the areas they control the Taliban are able to do what the Karzai government cannot: bring incorruptible justice to the issues of crime and land disputes.

However, besides hearts and minds, the Taliban are also achieving remarkable military successes. This month they have succeeded in a spectacular attack on an army convoy in Peshawar, Pakistan. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, "More than 100 trucks loaded with supplies for American and allied forces in Afghanistan

were destroyed Sunday by militants in Peshawar, a Pakistani city that serves as an important transit point for the Afghan war effort.

"It was the third major attack by Taliban militants on NATO supplies in Pakistan in less than a month, and served to expose the vulnerability of the route from the port of Karachi through Peshawar and over the border into Afghanistan. The United States relies on the route for an overwhelming proportion of its supplies for the war in Afghanistan." That "overwhelming majority" in fact amounts to 80-90%. It is not impossible for America to get supplies through via Pakistan, but the operation is becoming more and more dangerous, with the Taliban in de facto control of the famous Khyber Pass through which all supplies have to travel.

So Washington is endeavouring to develop an alternative, which is to bring supplies through from the north, but even this is fraught with difficulties: "In recent months, NATO has tried to develop other supply routes into Afghanistan. One of the possibilities is a northern overland route that would carry supplies by rail through Russia and the Central Asian nations to northern Afghanistan. Although Moscow has given its consent, NATO is still negotiating with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan countries that are not proving to be very co-operative.

The US is also hoping to be able to make gains on the hearts-and-minds front by new elections to be held supposedly in 2009, intended to plant illusions that somehow the weak, corrupt and ineffective Karzai government can be replaced by something altogether more dynamic and efficient. As a means of inspiring the masses, it is hard to imagine that such elections could have any effect whatsoever in conditions such as prevail in Afghanistan. In any event, the elections—if they are held at all—will not run in the areas controlled by the Taliban. A senior UN official who has been in Afghanistan for decades told Nir Rosen of Abu Dhabi's *The National* "The Americans are gung-ho about elections. If you have enough money, you can have elections, but what is the meaning? They got away with flawed elections in 2004 and 2005, but now a deeply flawed election will only make things worse. The 2004 elections were good enough, remarkably successful, but politically flawed. What will be the impact of a deeply flawed election? Karzai only won 56 per cent of the vote in 2004. I can't imagine he would do better this time, so the elections would need a second round. It will further exacerbate ethnic tensions and divisions." The main problem is that in a country where the Pashtuns form the majority of the population, the only acceptable president at the best of times has to be a Pashtun—but it is precisely the Pashtun areas that are most loyal to the Taliban and where the elections will not be able effectively to be held. However, if elections are not held, then the puppet government of Afghanistan will continue to be one that has been thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the masses.

US imagines that because things appear to have quietened down in Iraq, it can simply remove troops from that country and redeploy them in Afghanistan. But the war in Afghanistan cannot be won. On the contrary, moving troops from Iraq will ease the pressure on the Iraqi resistance enabling it to win even more successes against the occupying forces. For America it is a double-edged sword. And this dilemma will haunt Obama as well. □□□