

U.S. AND THE WEST: LOSING GRIP ON DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Within a few weeks, the allied efforts in Afghanistan are faced with a number of serious drawbacks. The tone was set by a sober Pentagon assessment of the Afghan war, published at the end of April.^[1] Among others, it concluded that the population in key districts across most of the southern districts remained supportive or at least sympathetic towards the Taliban. Specifically, the 'government in a box, ready to roll in' as announced by General Stanley McChrystal failed to materialise - completely. As much had been predicted by the U.S. ambassador and former military commander Karl W. Eikenberry at the end of 2009.^[2] In the wake of this, the Taliban managed to re-infiltrate in cleared areas. This was bad news for the ongoing military offensive in and around the southern town of Marjah, in the middle of Taliban-held land in Helmand Province.^[3]

And it showed; a frustrated American military commander had to admit that it took longer than expected to secure Marjah. These were ominous signs for the upcoming offensive in and around Kandahar, too; its postponement was announced by General McChrystal on June 10. It was delayed till at least September, admittedly because it does not have the support of the Kandahar population.^[4] The Kandahar campaign had repeatedly been announced as being 'fundamental' to the entire American effort in Afghanistan.^[5] The expected outcome of that delayed battle should have given the US and Karzai the upper hand in the ensuing negotiations with the severely weakened Taliban.

An overly optimistic McChrystal and his staff for some time now have apparently been seeking to prevent the fall of the Sword of Damocles hung above their heads by President Obama on December 1, 2009, at West Point Academy. Being an essential part of new US strategy towards Afghanistan, Obama publicly stated that the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan was to begin in July, 2011.^[6] Since the beginning of 2010, McChrystal has repeatedly emphasized that the Afghan fight would extend long beyond July, 2011. Thus, the General sought to influence, if not reverse, the decision by his Supreme Commander to start drawing down forces in the middle of 2011.^[7]

In the aftermath of the so-called 'peace jirga' in Kabul, held on 2-4 June, president Karzai proceeded to annoy his Western 'friends'^[8], in spite of the fact that he is well aware of the necessity of their continued support.^[9] He chose to get rid of his head of the National Directorate of Security (Afghanistan's Intelligence Agency) since 2004, Amrullah Saleh, and his Interior Minister Hanif Atmar (controlling the police, among other tasks), both Tajiks, thus seeking to diminish the overriding influence of his long time allies of the former Northern Alliance.^[10] Their resignations laid bare the growing fissure within the Afghan political leadership, largely based on ethnic contradictions.

Formally, their departure was based on their failure to protect the peace jirga, which was disturbed by Taliban attacks. President Karzai, demonstrating once more that he does no longer trust his foreign allies, even went as far as to suggest that Americans were responsible for the attack on the peace jirga. As it turned out, Mr. Saleh had strongly opposed searched-for talks by president Karzai with the Taliban.^[11] Opposition leader Abdullah termed the approval of the resignations 'too hasty'; to him, these events indicated the real crisis of distrust in the present government.^[12]

In Western capitals reactions were cautious but clear; these two Afghan officials were described as 'top class', experienced, and efficient to work with. Since the American war effort in Afghanistan is termed to reach a critical phase, this move was described as 'not helpful' and "extremely disruptive" by some shocked officials from NATO and Western diplomats, underlining that a very good working

relationship with both men existed. Nevertheless, General McChrystal in a statement gave his full support to Karzai, respecting the president's authority to make a difficult political decision.^[13] The General could not do otherwise, but once again must have been grinding his teeth. In a mutual public show of respect and confidence Karzai and McChrystal on June 13 visited Kandahar. Karzai called on assembled community leaders to support the upcoming NATO-campaign against the Taliban birthplace and stronghold. McChrystal made all the obligatory remarks, stating that he was pleased to see that Karzai made such a 'strong, clear call for unity'.^[14]

At the same time, it was widely reported that Karzai had lost confidence in his Western allies, no longer believing that the U.S. and its partners are able to defeat the Taliban.^[15] This growing conviction subsequently made Karzai search for both secret talks with the Taliban, as well as for increased Pakistani support.^[16] Unfortunately, a widely debated report released by a Western think tank squarely established the links between the Afghan Taliban (labelled 'Insurgents') and Pakistan's secret service, ISI.^[17] This will not help Karzai in soliciting larger support from his neighbouring country, since Pakistan is not popular among the Afghan population - as hardly any other country is, to be sure. In the midst of this, a new conservative liberal coalition government in Great Britain announced deep cuts to governmental budgets, including military operations in Afghanistan. The British force in Afghanistan, some 11.000 military strong and largely based in Helmand province, will not stay one day longer than absolutely necessary, in the words of Prime Minister David Cameron visiting Kabul.^[18] This announcement of U.S ally number one will only serve to enlarge Karzai's already serious doubts.

Then on Monday, June 21, a devastating report authored by members of the U.S. House of Representatives entitled 'Warlord, Inc. Extortion and Corruption Along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan' was published.^[19] Being the result of six months of investigations, it shows that the U.S. military is unintendedly funding a massive protection racket in Afghanistan, paying tens of millions of dollars to warlords, corrupt public officials and the Taliban, in order to ensure safe passage of its supply convoys throughout the country.^[20]

Although rumours and reports had been circulating for months^[21], and longer, about this practise, the amounts involved and the large scale on which this takes place are now proven to be staggering. Public support in the United States for the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan had been dwindling for some time; the findings of this report will undoubtedly further erode the perception of a winnable war.

On top of this General McChrystal, apparently fed up with the whole Obama and Afghanistan thing, spoke out from his heart in a pages long interview with 'Rolling Stone'.^[22] Ever since he is in command of the operation in Afghanistan (June, 2009), relations between the General and his entourage ('Team America') and the political leadership in Washington have been strained, especially with Vice President Joe Biden and Richard Holbrooke. His most favoured non-person seems to be Karl Eikenberry, U.S. ambassador in Kabul.

Insulting both the President, Supreme Commander, and the Vice President is not helpful in prolonging military careers. A furious Obama has called McChrystal back to the White House; reportedly, the General has already written his letter of resignation.^[23] Secretary of Defence and main political supporter of McChrystal Robert Gates stated that McChrystal had made 'a significant mistake and exercised poor judgment'.

Certainly General Stanley McChrystal is first and foremost a soldier, and anything but a politician, feeling entirely at ease in the field but definitely out of place in the world of politics and media. Still, after all his years in the service the man must have had some idea of what his damaging words would

do? If yes, he clearly wanted to be released from his post; if not, considering the serious damage done both in the West and Afghanistan, he had to be mercifully relieved from it, in spite of his apologies, and in spite of the niceties the Karzai brothers had to say about him.

By nominating General Petraeus to replace McChrystal, President Obama has for the second time fired a general leading the Afghan war (McKiernan was the sacked predecessor of McChrystal). Certainly, General Petraeus is far more at ease with his political bosses; also, he will not be lured into doing interviews like the one with McChrystal in Rolling Stone Magazine.

But most importantly, President Obama's Afghanistan strategy, as devised and implemented primarily by General McChrystal, clearly has not resulted in the major situational improvements needed on the ground in Afghanistan. Altering the current bloody stalemate in favour of the feverishly pursued reintegration of the Taliban movement by the Karzai-administration and its Western allies remains as remote a prospect as ever. Obviously, U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is in dire need of another thorough revision.

Appointing General Petraeus to do the job will not establish that; being one of the architects of the currently executed COIN-strategy, it will be continued largely unmodified. As President Obama stated, the Afghan policy of his administration, arrived at only after several months of laborious talks and study in the fall of 2009, will not change.^[24] And that is bad news for American soldiers and Afghan civilians alike.

Olivier Immig, Amsterdam, 24 June 2010

^[1] Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, issued April 26, 2010. It includes an analysis of developments in Afghanistan from October 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010.

^[2] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'Still a long way to go for U.S. operation in Marja, Afghanistan', The Washington Post, June 10, 2010

^[3] Remarkably, a force of 15.000 NATO and Afghan soldiers appears to be unable to overcome the resistance of a few hundred Taliban fighters. Rahimullah Yusufzai, 'The looming twin offensive', The News International, June 1, 2010

^[4] Gareth Porter, 'McChrystal faces 'Iraq' moment', Asia Times Online, June 14, 2010

^[5] Don Snow, 'Onward to Kandahar', Atlantic Council, may 25, 2010

^[6] Obama's Afghan Policy Speech at West Point, The Washington Post, December 1, 2009

^[7] 'Iran training Taliban, says McChrystal', Daily Times, May 31, 2010

^[8] Karzai did so at the beginning of April, 2010, as well, when he accused both the United Nations and the International Community of fraudulent interference with the presidential election. Karzai even threatened to join the Taliban if the US continued to pressurize him on ending corruption. The White House seriously considered cancelling Karzai's upcoming visit. 'White House to consider cancelling Karzai visit', The News International, April 8, 2010; Don Snow 'Watching Karzai, Seeing Diem', Atlantic Council, April 8, 2010; Heather Maher, 'Karzai in the lion's den', Asia Times Online, May 11, 2010

[9] In his opening speech to the peace jirga, he told the 1600 delegates present, specifically those with narrow bonds with the Taliban movement: "Make peace with me and their will be no need for foreigners here. As long as you are not talking to us, not making peace with us, we will not let the foreigners leave". Quoted in Aunohita Mojumdar, 'Afghans talk, Taliban shoot', Asia Times Online, June 2, 2010. Tellingly, the jirga did not demand the withdrawal of foreign troops; that would have meant handing victory to the Taliban.

[10] Both vice presidents of Karzai, Tajik leader Mohammed Fahim and Hazara leader Karim Khalili, had issued a strong warning to Karzai; the president could well be killed if the Taliban managed to get a foothold in the national government. 'Karzai to seek Obama's approval for peace deals', The Frontier Post, May 4, 2010

[11] Jonathan Burch and Hamid Shalizi, 'Afghan ex-intel chief opposed Karzai peace plan', Yahoo! News, June 8, 2010

[12] 'Approval of Key Afghan Official's Resignation Too Hasty: Abdullah', written by Quqnoos, 10 June, 2010

[13] Alissa J. Rubin, 'Afghan Leader Forces Out Top 2 Security Officials', The New York Times, June 6, 2010

[14] 'Karzai appeals for Kandahar support', Al Jazeera, June 13, 2010

[15] Alissa J. Rubin, 'Karzai's Isolation Worries Afghans and the West', The New York Times, June 7, 2010

[16] Dexter Filkins, 'Karzai Is said to Doubt West Can Defeat Taliban', The New York Times, June 11, 2010

[17] Matt Waldmann, 'The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents', Crisis State Research Centre (LSE Development Studies Institute), London, June, 2010.

[18] 'This year "vital" for Afghanistan: British PM', Xinhua News Agency, June 10, 2010

[19] 'Warlord, Inc. Extortion and Corruption Along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan', Report of the majority Staff, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs and Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, June, 2010.

[20] Karen DeYoung, 'U.S. indirectly paying Afghan warlords as part of security contract', The Washington Post, June 22, 2010.

[21] Dexter Filkins, 'Convoy Guards in Afghanistan Face an Inquiry', The New York Times, June 6, 2010. Mr. Filkins must have been well aware of the ongoing investigation and its results.

[22] Michael Hastings, 'The Runaway General', Rolling Stone, Nr. 1108-1109, June 22, 2010.

[23] Helene Cooper, Thom Shanker, Dexter Filkins, 'McChrystal's fate in Limbo as he Prepares to meet Obama', The New York Times, June 23, 2010

[24] Helene Cooper and David E. Sanger, 'Obama Says Afghan Policy Won't Change After Dismissal', The New York Times, June 23, 2010