

Obama lays out Afghanistan war strategy

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The desperation at the heart of the Obama administration's plans for escalating the war in Afghanistan was laid bare in the president's interview with the New York Times last Friday.

Asked if the US-led forces were winning the war in Afghanistan, Obama bluntly stated "No". The answer was the only one that could have been given. The armed insurgency against the US and NATO occupation has vastly expanded over the past several years.

Large areas of the ethnic Pashtun-populated southern provinces of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan are effectively controlled by the Islamist Taliban movement or other anti-occupation forces such as the Hezb-e-Islami movement of warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The rate of occupation casualties has doubled this year compared with the same period in 2008, with 54 American and NATO dead so far. Attacks on the Afghan government security forces have tripled, according to the US Government Accountability Office. More than 50 Afghan police are being killed by insurgents per month. In many parts of southern Afghanistan, police do not leave their stations.

The resistance is being fuelled by the resentment and hostility of a poverty-stricken population that has already suffered more than seven years of repression and intimidation by US-led forces in Afghanistan and the US-backed Pakistani military over the border. Under conditions in which the Islamists are viewed as the only ones fighting against US attempts to dominate the region, they have continued to attract support.

Taliban-linked cells now appear to be active in all the major cities in Pakistan, raising the danger of a broader war. The US-NATO land supply route through that country is already unreliable, forcing Washington to seek alternatives through Russia and Uzbekistan. Concerns in US military circles over supply lines into Afghanistan have even led to suggestions that China and Iran be asked to assist. Significantly, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has invited Iran to take part in a summit on Afghanistan later this month.

The military reality in Afghanistan is that the occupation force has been unable to suppress an insurgency that has significant popular support. Even with the extra 17,000 US personnel being sent by Obama, there will still be less than 90,000 US and NATO troops and barely 80,000 Afghan government personnel. Given the size, geography and population of the country, military analysts estimate that a force of upward of 500,000 would be needed.

In the tribal region of Pakistan, operations involving over 100,000 Pakistani troops have failed to break the grip of Taliban, close down the safe havens used by Afghan insurgents or stem their cross-border movements.

Within this context, the strategy outlined by Obama hinges on the ability of the occupation forces to replicate what was called the “Awakening” in Iraq during late 2006 and 2007.

Coinciding with the “surge” of 30,000 additional troops that boosted US strength in Iraq to over 160,000, the US commander General David Petraeus was authorised to implement a policy of bribing insurgent leaders and their fighters to cease their attacks. The groups sought out were overwhelmingly made up of Sunni Arabs. Eventually, over 100,000 joined US-paid militias, especially in the suburbs of Baghdad and the western province of Anbar, and assisted the US military to crush a radical Islamist minority within the insurgency.

Obama told the Times: “If you talk to General Petraeus, I think he would argue that part of the success in Iraq involved reaching out to people that we would consider Islamic fundamentalists, but who were willing to work with us because they had been completely alienated by the tactics of Al Qaeda in Iraq.” In Afghanistan and Pakistan, he said, “there may be comparable opportunities”.

The prospect of an Afghan or Pakistani “Awakening,” however, ignores the main factor behind its development in Iraq. While in Anbar province there was conflict between traditional Sunni tribal leaders and Al Qaeda-aligned factions, the Sunni insurgents in Baghdad changed sides because they had been defeated in a vicious sectarian civil war against the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominated the US-backed government.

Thousands of Sunnis were fleeing the capital to escape daily indiscriminate killings. By ending their resistance, the Sunni insurgents were primarily seeking to win US military protection for their suburbs and communities from the Shiite death squads that operated with impunity within the Iraqi army and police forces.

Even now, the situation remains fragile. The US occupation has created a sectarian divide in Iraq, which primarily benefits the Shiite elite at the expense of the predominantly Sunni ruling stratum who dominated the regime of Saddam Hussein. In the long term, the bitterness and frustration among those who felt they had no choice but to sign up for the Awakening could trigger renewed fighting against US forces and the Shiite-dominated government.

In Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan, there is no obvious reason for the Taliban or Hezb-e-Islami to bow to the occupation or accept the US-backed government, as occurred in Iraq. While they have suffered large casualties at the hands of the far better equipped US and NATO forces, their strategic position is far stronger now than at any time.

Haroun Mir, a former advisor to anti-Taliban Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, commented to the British Guardian: “Reconciliation was a great idea in 2003 or 2004, when the government had the upper hand, but now things are all going the Taliban’s way. They are at the edge of Kabul and they have no incentive to join the government’s side.”

A particularly blunt characterisation of the situation in the key province of Helmand was made on March 6 by Sebastian Morley, a former major in the British special forces who resigned from the army in protest over the conduct of the war.

Morley told the Telegraph: “The operations that we are conducting are so worthless. We hold tiny areas of ground in Helmand and we are kidding ourselves if we think our influence goes beyond 500 metres of our security bases. It’s just crazy to think we hold that ground or

have any influence on what goes on beyond the bases. We go out on operations, have a punch-up with the Taliban and then go back to camp for tea. We are not holding the ground.

“The Taliban know where we are. They know full well when we have gone back into camp. I don’t think we have even scratched the surface as far as this conflict goes. The level of attrition and casualties is only set to rise. This is the equivalent to the start of the Vietnam conflict. There is much more to come.”

At this point, the political settlement suggested by Obama could only be realised by offering factions of the Taliban or Hezb-e-Islami control over majority Pashtun provinces or ministries in the Afghanistan government. This would mean, however, sidelining their Pashtun opponents who have collaborated with the occupation, in particular those around President Hamid Karzai.

Such a policy is clearly being considered. US recriminations against Karzai’s administration, over its corruption and incompetence, have grown steadily as the military situation has deteriorated. Karzai’s supporters are alleged to have amassed considerable fortunes by plundering state revenue and taking bribes and kickbacks from heroin traders. Most prominently, Karzai’s brother, Ahmed Ali Karzai, has been publicly accused by US agencies of overseeing drug trafficking in the southern province of Kandahar.

The Obama administration has made clear that its priority is to prevent US imperialism being driven out of Afghanistan. It has declared it has a “realistic” assessment of the government needed in Kabul—that is, it has abandoned the Bush propaganda that the US occupation is seeking to transform the country into a “flourishing democracy”.

Moves to weaken and remove Karzai are underway. His term of office ends on May 21. The country’s constitution states that presidential elections must be held 30 to 60 days before the end of the president’s term. However, the electoral commission, backed by the US and NATO powers, has called the poll for August 20, on the grounds that security for a credible poll in much of the country would not be ready before then.

Karzai has legitimately interpreted the decision as a hostile move. He faces demands to step aside for a “caretaker” government after May 21. His decree that the election be held according to the constitution was rejected by the electoral commission last week. He is now insisting that he remain president until the ballot but agitation is continuing for his term to end on schedule.

The most vocal opposition to Karzai is coming from the Northern Alliance—the ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Hazari warlords that fought alongside US forces in 2001. These are same people that the Obama administration would have to involve in any power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Supporters of the Northern Alliance also dominate the officer corps of the Afghanistan army.

Implicitly, Obama’s Afghanistan policy is based creating a new warlord regime to replace Karzai’s. Providing that factions of the Taliban and other Pashtun powerbrokers accept an ongoing US presence in the country, Obama would sponsor the parcelling out of spheres of influence between them and the Northern Alliance strongmen.

This sordid real politik highlights the reactionary and neo-colonial character of the occupation of Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of Afghans and hundreds of foreign troops

have lost their lives for no other purpose than securing a base of operations for US imperialism as it seeks to extend its domination over the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

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