

Petraeus Is Winding Back Afghanistan's Clock

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When US General David Petraeus assumed command of General Stanley McChrystal's post as chief of all foreign troops in Afghanistan, the White House rolled out a predominate theme to keep public approval from flat-lining: "change in personnel but not strategy," in the words of President Barack Obama. He couldn't afford to rework his surge so late in the game. Changing strategies now would delay his July 2011 transfer deadline, a possibility that could kill the support he has left.

Obama [declared last Tuesday](#), "We have the right strategy. We are going to break the Taliban's momentum. We are going to build Afghan capacity, so Afghans can take responsibility for their future. We are going to deepen regional cooperation, including with Pakistan."

Petraeus was Obama's only chance at selling an uninterrupted transition, and few in Washington questioned his ascendancy. US officials praised his military credentials and political skills, the media fawned over America's premier counterinsurgent ("coindinista"), and Congress would unanimously approve of his selection. Petraeus departed for Afghanistan immediately, having waited years to get his hands on the war. But he also entailed a significant degree of risk.

Petraeus too is having difficulty keeping Afghanistan on schedule, putting him on a collision course with the White House. And Obama has no one left to tap in case of emergency.

Though Petraeus had closely monitored Afghanistan during his two year tenure at United States Central Command (CENTCOM), it was not unreasonable to conduct a war review upon hitting the ground. And yet, as architect of US counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, the targets of his review also seem a little strange. McChrystal's strict rules of engagement quickly came into question even though Petraeus had led the charge to reduce civilian casualties.

Then two days ago [The Wall Street Journal reported](#), "Gen. David Petraeus plans to ramp up the U.S. military's troop-intensive strategy in Afghanistan, according to some senior military officials, who have concluded that setbacks in the war effort this year weren't the result of the strategy, but of flaws in how it has been implemented."

So the strategy in Marjah for example - hyping it as a Taliban stronghold, hastily cobbling together Afghan forces, an empty box of a government, and overselling the time-line - wasn't flawed. Just the implementation of that strategy - a strategy Petraeus is now revising.

As the smoke clears around the fiery aftermath of McChrystal's termination, it's become evident that Petraeus and his loyal officials are turning McChrystal into a scapegoat for

Afghanistan's wider ills. Though, "people close to Gen. Petraeus said Special Operations missions won't be pared back under his revised strategy," they simultaneously argue, "Gen. McChrystal put too much attention on hunting down Taliban leaders," and not enough time into COIN.

Petraeus's strategy, not its implementation, begins to make less and less sense. The Wall Street Journal adds, "Under Gen. Petraeus, the coming offensive in the southern city of Kandahar will remain the primary effort for international forces, military officials said. But he is also expected to highlight other operations that are showing success, particularly the campaign against the Haqqani terror network in eastern Afghanistan."

It seems particularly odd for Petraeus to fault McChrystal's excessive Special-Ops knowing that McChrystal had previously served as chief of US Special Forces, then promote counter-terrorism against the Haqqani network. So does hinting at loosening US rules of engagement to go after Taliban commanders while still upset with McChrystal's excessive focus on counter-terrorism, a reversal that would only alienate Afghans further.

As architect of Afghanistan's strategy, it's possible that McChrystal didn't follow Petraeus' blueprint. Except the blueprint itself appears faulty, and Petraeus has resorted to covering his own stalled plans by blaming the builder. The West have the watches but the Taliban have the time, so the saying goes. Since Petraeus is almost certain to miss Obama's July 2011 transfer deadline, he's winding back the clock by dumping his failing strategy on McChrystal to mask a new strategy.

Kandahar is soon to become news in America for the wrong reasons. Remember though that McChrystal hadn't eyed southern Afghanistan for years, hyping up Kandahar as the "cornerstone" of US strategy and "tipping point" of "breaking the Taliban's momentum." That would be Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Michael Mullen, and Petraeus. They picked McChrystal to get their job done. Kandahar's operation eventually shrunk after a majority of the locals rejected the Pentagon's large-scale campaign.

Again McChrystal is blamed for planning, "a summer conquest of the Taliban in Kandahar to reinvigorate the battle against the Taliban." Petraeus "inherited" a plan, "criticized for placing too much emphasis on targeted assassinations of key insurgent leaders and not enough on winning over local residents." Petraeus, conversely, "believes that the operation must be a broad-ranging counter-insurgency campaign, involving more troops working with local militias."

Though he only recently secured President Hamid Karzai's approval to expand local militias, a military buildup never served as a wise alternative. Why settle for a massive operation because the initial buildup didn't generate sufficient local support? The concept makes no sense except as a threat, and even then a poor one. After much uncertainty and backsliding, Kandahar's operation has finally ground to a halt.

[The Telegraph discovered](#) that Petraeus has finally, "decided a full-scale military encirclement and invasion – as American troops had done in Iraq's Fallujah – was not an appropriate model to tackle the Taliban in the southern capital... The operation has been repeatedly delayed by concerns that it would not adequately restore the confidence of city residents in the security forces."

This revelation comes on the heels of another report [from Afghanistan's NGO Security Office](#), released two days before Kabul's conference, warning that a military buildup is alienating Kandahar residents. [Petraeus recently attacked](#) the Taliban for civilian casualties, but his argument is somewhat negated by the fact that many Afghans view a US buildup as the reason for escalating violence.

"We do not support the [counter-insurgency] perspective that this constitutes 'things getting worse before they get better', but rather see it as being consistent with the five-year trend of things just getting worse," the report said.

Worse still, the report skeptically concluded that Kandahar's operation was "very unlikely to be the 'breaking point' of the Taliban" so frequently anticipated by US officials. Instead, "it seems more likely to go the way of Operation Moshtarak, in Helmand, with lots of public ballyhoo around the actions of the IMF while the Afghan 'partners' discreetly pursue their own, often countervailing, agendas."

It may seem well and good that Petraeus is listening to the locals, but not when he's trying to save face by selling near disaster as wisdom. Richard Holbrooke, US envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, dropped all illusions of "no change in strategy," nonchalantly remarking that US strategy in southern Afghanistan "is undergoing sweeping changes." Apparently everything is McChrystal's fault, as if Petraeus had nothing to do with Kandahar's planning.

"We have Gen. David Petraeus looking at the plan, scrubbing it down, looking at it again," says Holbrooke confidently, 12 months from a ticking time bomb.

These events set up a terribly divided review in December and render July 2011 virtually obsolete. Marjah already exposed how fictitious US timelines can be and Kandahar is surpassing it. The initial hope was to secure Kandahar by August. Now the operation, still in its infancy, is undergoing complete revision in August and a slower counterinsurgency will only lengthen the need to maintain current US troop levels.

White House officials such as Vice President Joe Biden, Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, and senior adviser David Axelrod initially opposed a long and costly surge, fearing it would drain his domestic support, while Karl Eikenberry, US ambassador to Afghanistan, also feared a surge would be too little, too late. They've simply concluded that Obama's surge won't stabilize the country within the allotted time, that Afghanistan's costs are outweighing its end.

The Wall Street Journal reports that these same actors continue to, "advocate a pared-down approach that requires fewer troops and greater emphasis on drone attacks on insurgent leaders. These officials would like to see an accelerated withdrawal of U.S. troops." Though the strategy of withdrawing forces while still launching drone attacks is futile, White House dissent will likely foster more infighting and create ripples in the lineup.

All of this instability makes sticking to July 2011 that much harder. Petraeus assumed command no sooner than he had downplayed the deadline to Congress, and now Kandahar's main operation may not start until fall. US officials will try to keep the deadline on schedule as long as possible, but it may have already been pushed back in private.

The Wall Street Journal cites Petraeus's many sources when revealing that he won't pressure Obama publicly to delay "his promise to begin drawing down troops in July 2011."

This despite [the fact that he already has](#). Officials also, “expect him to privately push for troops to be removed slowly, along a timetable that keeps a large force in Afghanistan.”

Faced with the longer-than-anticipated struggle to break the Taliban’s momentum, there seems to be no hope of bringing the war to a conclusion. Obama and Petraeus both appear undecided on what to do in Afghanistan, and an explanation isn’t forthcoming.

But left unchecked by the White House and Petraeus will continue putting as much time on the clock as he can get away with.

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