

The Afghan Ant Hole: The New US-NATO Offensive will Run into Trouble

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NATO plans for Afghanistan this year are shaping up nicely: negotiate with the Taliban, but at the same time kill them in Kandahar and Kunduz.

A joint operation involving several thousand troops was launched in Kandahar last week, the second one this year after Operation Mushtarak in Helmand province. Kandahar has been the bailiwick of 2,500 contingent of Canadian troops who have suffered heavy losses in this mountainous home of the Taliban. It is ruled by a Canadian national, [Governor Tooryalai Wesa](#), a close friend of President Hamid Karzai's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, chairman of the Kandahar provincial council, infamous for his involvement in the drug trade.

Already, there are strong indications from [Marja](#), that the new offensive will run into trouble. The Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing there two weeks ago that killed 35. Though Marja now has one coalition soldier or policeman for every eight residents, after dark the city is like "the kingdom of the Taliban", said a tribal elder in Marja. "The government and international forces cannot defend anyone even one kilometre from their bases."

The new governor of Marja, Haji Abdul Zahir, like Wesa, a foreign national (German) parachuted in by the occupation forces, said the militants post "night letters" at mosques and on utility poles and hold meetings in randomly selected homes, demanding that residents turn over the names of collaborators. The Taliban "still have a lot of sympathy among the people." Zahir has no idea how many Taliban are still in Marja. "It's like an ant hole. When you look into an ant hole, who knows how many ants there are?"

Marja district MP Walid Jan Sabir scoffed at Zahir's denial that the Taliban were beheading collaborators. "He is not from the area and he is only staying in his office, so he doesn't know what is happening." He predicts the situation will deteriorate and return to "chaos" as "the Taliban and Marja residents all have beards and turbans so it's impossible to distinguish them."

Will these campaigns in Marja, Kandahar and Kunduz subdue the Taliban and bring them to the negotiating table, the newly professed strategy of the occupiers? It should not be forgotten that Karzai himself was a member of the Taliban government from 1995-98, before Unicol hired him as an insider to try to clinch an oil pipeline deal. His effortless transition to US protege suggests he was probably already on the US payroll, along with his less reputable colleague Osama bin Laden. Though Karzai sees negotiations as the only way out, comments by other ex-Taliban officials who have cast their lot with the occupiers, however reluctantly, are not encouraging.

The leading coopted Taliban, Abdul Salam Zaeef, holds no hope whatsoever. Zaeef was the Taliban's minister of transportation until he became ambassador to Pakistan. His post-911 news conferences, where he condemned the attacks, insisted Osama bin Laden was not responsible, and offered to send him to a third country for trial, are now the stuff of legend. Despite his diplomatic immunity, he was arrested, held at Bagram and Guantanamo, and, according to his hot-off-the-Columbia-University-press *My Life with the Taliban*, tortured.

He was released in 2005 and returned to Afghanistan, where he was installed in an upscale home around the corner from ex-Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil and lives more-or-less under house arrest. In 2007 he called for a unity government and negotiations with the Taliban, no doubt at the prompting of his beleaguered former comrade-in-arms Karzai. However, in a recent interview, he gave no hope for the reconciliation process, as the US is "a monster" that is "selfish, reckless and cruel", and the "reintegration process will further strengthen the Taliban."

Hakim Mujahed, a former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations, reconciled with Karzai several years ago, and is currently the head of a Taliban splinter group Jamiat-i-Khuddamul Furqan, which still has not been incorporated into the US-controlled Afghan political process. He told the US-funded Radio Free Afghanistan that reconciling with the Taliban through a traditional Loya Jirga will not work "as long as the foreign powers – the United States and Britain in particular – don't agree with this. The first important thing is to lift the sanctions on the leaders of the armed opposition. They are blacklisted and multimillion-dollar rewards are offered for them." He wants Saudi Arabia to mediate. Clearly with Zaeef in mind, he argues that if a Taliban were to attend a Loya Jirga, "he might get captured the next day and end up in Guantanamo Bay. Our president has no authority to even release somebody from Bagram."

Mulla Salam defected to the government three years ago in Helmand and was made district administrator of his native Musa Qala district as a reward. He sees the British occupation as a blatant act of revenge for their defeats in Afghanistan in the 19th century and regrets his decision, like Mujahed calling Karzai a powerless president. "We are still slaves. Foreign advisers are sitting in the offices." He complains that no Afghan minister can even visit Helmand without the permission of British military commanders. The British troops "haven't served our people and have yet to build schools or mosques in Musa Qala." Poor Salam's days are numbered as he has barely survived several assassination attempts. There will be no "reconciliation" for the likes of him.

Then there is Abdul Ghani Baradar – second in command only to Taliban leader Mohammed Omar – whose recent capture in Karachi was hailed by the US as a sign that Pakistan was getting serious at last. His arrest appears to have backfired big time. Not only has Pakistan refused to extradite him, but Karzai is apparently furious over the capture, as he was supposedly negotiating with Baradar to split the Taliban and coopt moderates.

Former UN special representative to Afghanistan Kai Eide, who stepped down this month (in disgust?), asserted last week that the arrest was a huge mistake, stopping a secret ongoing channel of communications with the UN, and revealed that he had been holding talks with senior Taliban figures for the past year in Dubai and other locations. He suggested Pakistan was deliberately trying to undermine the negotiations, as it ultimately wants to control the political landscape in Afghanistan, however rocky and dangerous for its own stability. "I don't believe these people were arrested by coincidence. The [Pakistanis] must have known

who they were, what kind of role they were playing,” adding it would now take a long time before there was enough confidence between both sides to really move forward.

“I see no evidence to support that theory,” immediately harrumphed US envoy to AfPak Richard Holbrooke, insisting that the US had no involvement in any of Eide’s talks, and knew of them only in a “general way”. In line with the Washington line, he heaped praise on Pakistan for the capture. At the same time, he welcomed “reconciliation of all Afghans”, whatever that could possibly mean. Of course, Pakistan protests its innocence, understandably preferring the American version of events. It just happens to have presented Washington with a multi-billion dollar bill for its selfless battle in the “war on terror”. Publically at least, Karzai is all smiles, calling (ominously?) Pakistan a “twin” during a visit to Islamabad last week.

A bizarre theory about the capture promoted by McChrystal is that Baradar, deemed more pragmatic than other top Taliban leaders, was “detained” to split him from fellow insurgents. McChrystal said recently that it was plausible that Baradar’s arrest followed an internal purge among Taliban leaders, that Omar himself, angry about Baradar’s negotiations with Karzai or the UN or whoever, squealed on him and tipped off Pakistani intelligence officials. But both McChrystal and Holbrooke are so out-of-touch with reality that we can probably safely assume that the opposite of what they say about anything.

During his trip to Afghanistan last week, Defence Secretary Robert Gates – the guy who in fact calls the shots – made the real US policy clear. He said it was premature to expect senior members of the Taliban to reconcile with the government, that until the insurgents believe they can’t win the war, they won’t come to the table. Said Heritage Institute researcher Lisa Curtis ghoulishly, “The military surge should be given time to bear fruit.”

The purpose of undermining the feeble attempts by Karzai or Pakistan or the UN or Bob’s-your-uncle to undermine the resistance is hard to fathom, considering that negotiations are now part of US policy. At the pompous London conference on Afghanistan in January, US advisers even came up with the very American idea of simply bribing them with a cool [half billion greenbacks](#), a strategy that Russian officials (tongue-in-cheek?) also have urged on the Americans.

A key US protege in the Pakistan military with close contacts with the Taliban in Pakistan, Colonel Imam, said the idea of paying members of the Taliban to change sides would not work and only bogus figures would come forward. “It is shameful for a superpower to bribe.” He seconds Zaeef’s conclusion that negotiations, like Lisa’s strategy of mass murder, are fruitless. The Taliban cannot be defeated and they will not be weakened by the recent capture of even senior commanders such as Baradar.

“The movement is so devolved that commanders on the ground make most of their own decisions and can raise money and arrange for weapons supplies themselves. The Taliban cannot be forced out, you cannot subjugate them,” he said. “But they can tire the Americans.” Obama is “doing what you should never do in military strategy, reinforcing the error. They will have more convoys, more planes, more supply convoys, and the insurgents will have a bigger target. The insurgents are very happy.” Of all the thousands of men he trained, he said, religious students like Mullah Omar were the most “formidable” opponents because of their commitment.

Hamid Gul, a former director of the Pakistani intelligence service, says the insurgents want

three things from the US before talks could begin – a clearer timetable on the withdrawal of troops, an end to labelling them terrorists, and the release of all Taliban militants imprisoned in Pakistan and Afghanistan. What could be more obvious?

So Mr Obama, even if you ignore your own loyal opposition in Congress, where a motion to withdraw immediately garnered both Democratic and Republican support 10 March, even if you ignore the thousands of loyal Americans who marched on the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq 20 March, calling for the same, please listen to these voices of reason.

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