

The Afghan quagmire

By [Rahimullah Yusufzai](#)

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The death of eight American soldiers in a Taliban attack in Kamdesh District in Afghanistan's north-eastern Nuristan province on October 3 could expedite the planned withdrawal of US-led coalition forces.

This is already happening as there are reports that the beleaguered coalition troops have already pulled out from combat outposts such as Machadad Kot, Marghai and Rakha in Paktika and Khost provinces and from the strategic and dangerous, Taliban-infested Sato Kandao pass in Paktia.

In fact, the deaths could also bring urgency to the deliberations currently underway at the highest level of the Obama administration in Washington. President Barack Obama has been accused by his opponents of endangering the lives of American soldiers by delaying acceptance of the request by General Stanley McChrystal – the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan – for additional 30,000 to 40,000 troops to avoid defeat at the hands of the Taliban and other resistance groups.

The eight deaths, the heaviest US loss of life in a single battle since July 2008, when nine American soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack on an outpost in the same Nuristan province, could force Obama's hand and prompt him to sanction the dispatch of the required troops to Afghanistan. President Obama seems to be under tremendous pressure to accede to Gen McChrystal's request even though it is obvious that deployment of more troops in Afghanistan would neither cause Taliban defeat nor stabilise the war-ravaged country. Instead, Afghanistan would become a millstone for Obama and haunt him for the rest of his term.

The current US predicament reminds one of the Soviet dilemma in the 80s when the Red Army occupation troops in Afghanistan were pulled out of far-away military outposts to avoid further harm. When this policy was implemented, the Afghan countryside gradually fell into Mujahideen hands, the highways and roads linking cities became unsafe and the communist government of President Babrak Karmal and his successor President Dr Najibullah started weakening. This scenario could be repeated if the NATO forces were to pull back to better defended urban centres, thereby leaving most of the rural areas in southern and eastern Afghanistan in Taliban hands. This would also put to rest any remaining western hopes of winning the hearts and minds by interacting with the Afghan people and solving their problems to make their lives better than under the Taliban.

Few details of the daring assault by militants on the two outposts of the US Army and Afghan National Security Forces at Youmor in Kamdesh have emerged until now.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in a statement conceded that its

eight soldiers were killed in the attack along with two Afghan troops. Subsequent reports said seven Afghan soldiers were killed and many other captured by the Taliban.

As usual, conflicting figures were mentioned as the ISAF, Afghan government authorities and the Taliban made widely different claims regarding the number of casualties and the outcome of the fighting that continued for a day and night. The Taliban conceded the loss of four of their fighters only and injuries to another seven while a NATO spokesman claimed heavy enemy casualties in a fight-back by the US-led coalition forces. The Taliban also claimed that a number of foreign soldiers and 30 Afghan troops were killed and a huge quantity of weapons was seized. The Taliban said another 30 Afghan soldiers and policemen including the Kamdesh police chief, Shamsullah, were captured. They insisted the two outposts and the district headquarters were over-run by Taliban fighters while the NATO spokesman maintained that its forces were able to defend and retain control.

The NATO and ISAF spokesmen also tried to put a spin on the matter by saying the attackers came from a mosque and a village located on a hill opposite the military outposts. Such statements are meant to justify attacks on mosques and villages and there is every possibility that the mosque and village mentioned by the spokesmen would have been destroyed by now.

The Afghan authorities put their own spin on the incident by claiming that the fighters who took part in the attack included militants who had been driven out of Swat. They even suggested that 700 assorted fighters affiliated with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Haqqani Network groups took part in the attack. Now we all know that the Pakistani Taliban fighters from Swat have been mostly killed and captured and the ones who managed to escape took refuge in Waziristan, Dir and other places. Some are still hiding in remote mountainous areas in Swat, Buner and Shangla, a fact conceded by civil and military authorities.

The Taliban motive for launching such a big attack in Nuristan could be part of a strategy to un-nerve western forces and governments at a time of crucial decision-making about the fate of their Afghanistan mission.

Though one Afghan Taliban commander put it simply as a wish of their fighters to embrace martyrdom and inflict heavy losses on the enemy before the US forces pull back from remote and vulnerable military outposts to strongly-defended bases in big towns and cities, this cannot be the only explanation for the sudden Taliban rush to attack the enemy.

The fact that Nuristan has experienced more such assaults is also important. The Taliban attack in Wanat in Nuristan in July 2008 was followed by another massive assault on the Barg-i-Matal district in the same province. The district headquarter was captured and then reportedly retaken in a joint US-Afghan attack. Now there is this attack on Kamdesh, another stronghold of the Taliban and their allies in Nuristan.

It seems the Taliban want to capture a province to set up a permanent base, and Nuristan could be the ideal place if it were to fall in their hands.

The Taliban have been capturing districts in different parts of southern, eastern and central Afghanistan and then giving up control in the face of relentless NATO bombing. Capturing Nuristan could also prove fatal as it would be heavily bombed by the US and NATO aircrafts. It is also possible that the Taliban have expedited their attacks after realising that the foreign troops are about to evacuate most of Nuristan, in particular the vulnerable military

outposts near the border with Pakistan, and pull back to population centres in the neighbouring Kunar province.

The Taliban must also be familiar with history and would want to replicate it as it was in Nuristan and Kunar that the Soviet occupying forces and the Afghan Army suffered their initial defeats against the Afghan Mujahideen in the early 80s and began pulling back to Jalalabad.

It was in Asmar in Kunar, which at the time was a larger province area-wise and included present-day Nuristan, that hundreds of Afghan soldiers surrendered to the Mujahideen and changed sides to fight against the Kabul regime and the Soviet troops. Both Nuristan and Kunar subsequently fell to the Mujahideen, who then began threatening Jalalabad, capital of the adjoining Nangarhar province. When the defeated Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, a major Mujahideen assault on Jalalabad was launched but Afghan Army soldiers loyal to President Dr Najibullah were able to defend the city.

However, by 1992 the Afghan regime had become weak and Dr Najibullah agreed to the UN-brokered transition plan to step down. It is another matter that the Mujahideen commander Ahmad Shah Masood and elements within the Afghan government sabotaged the UN power-sharing plan. The rest as they say is history as then began a period of Mujahideen in-fighting, which paved the way for the Taliban to seize power.

It is thus clear that the latest Taliban attack in Nuristan and the heavy death toll of US soldiers could have implications beyond this under-developed province that doesn't have any paved roads, hospitals or colleges.

This could prompt the US government to send more troops to Afghanistan and ask its NATO allies to do so as well to cope with the Taliban threat. Already there are 103,000 foreign soldiers in Afghanistan and the addition of another 40,000 would take the total beyond the strength of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan at the peak of Moscow's ill-fated military campaign.

This would mean more fighting, though it is doubtful if the military stalemate in Afghanistan could be broken. And then, after a few months the Obama administration could be carrying out another policy review and wondering what to do next to extricate itself from the Afghan quagmire.

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Articles by: [Rahimullah Yusufzai](#)

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