

## AFGHANISTAN: A SHIFTING IN US STRATEGY?

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July is approaching fast and so is the decision on whether to start withdrawing some US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. The recent events help us understand how the policy makers in Washington are developing their future Afghan strategy. The killing of Osama Bin Laden is a remarkable foreign policy success that President Obama can use to boost his political consensus. However, from a strategic point of view changes will be limited: Al Qaida is no monolith, it is a brand with many franchises spread across the world and no single command structure. So the “global war on terrorism” is by no means over, to the contrary it is very much alive in places like Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. On the other hand, the killing of Bin Laden has highlighted more than before the weakness of Pakistan as a strategic partner in the fight against Al Qaida and the extremist groups that operate in Afghanistan from within its territory. These factors will probably result in a gradual shift in US strategy, from a man intensive quasi counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign to a counterterrorism approach that relies on fewer troops.

President Obama stated the US goal in Afghanistan in his 2011 State of the Union address: “By preventing the Taliban from reestablishing a stranglehold over the Afghan people, we will deny al Qaeda the safe haven that served as a launching pad for 9/11”<sup>1</sup>. To reach this goal Obama sent 33.000 US troops to fight the taliban insurgency in southeast Afghanistan. As highlighted by General Petraeus during his March Senate hearing, “the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country, and reversed in a number of important areas. However, while the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible”<sup>2</sup>. During his strategy review and subsequent troops surge, Obama made it clear to the military that his involvement would not be open ended and that he would begin a conditions based drawdown of troops in July 2011. Furthermore, at the 2010 Lisbon summit NATO countries committed their troops to Afghanistan until the end of 2014. By that date a gradual transition to Afghan security forces should be complete.

With this framework in mind let’s analyze the latest developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan to see in which direction US policy is going. On Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, a US Navy Seals team penetrated deep into Pakistani territory to a town north of Islamabad (Abbottabad) where a long intelligence siege suggested the presence of a high value target. As we all learned the target was Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaida and mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The operation was successfully carried out with apparently little or no Pakistani involvement. To many observers, news that he was in a fortified house in Abbottabad, some 60 km north of Islamabad, was a shock since Osama Bin Laden was thought to be hiding in the inaccessible remote tribal regions bordering

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<sup>1</sup>President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union address at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>

<sup>2</sup> General Petraeus’ hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee at: <http://armedservices.senate.gov/Transcripts/2011/03%20March/11-13%20-%203-15-11.pdf>

Afghanistan! The implications cast a shadow on the reliability of the Pakistani government and security forces and their pursuit of Al Qaida and Taliban fighters operating from their territory. It certainly highlights the uneasiness with which the Pakistani leadership has to deal with public opinion annoyed with US drone strikes and frequent violation of Pakistani sovereignty. The legacy left by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the *Jihad* that was weighed against them by the *Mujahidin* is still very much alive and some still see the foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan as an enemy to be fought. For NATO and the US in particular, this means highlighting once more the unreliability of a key partner whose support is indispensable for a successful end to the Afghan war. The US has no viable exit strategy from Afghanistan unless Pakistan cooperates.

Since 2009 the number of drone strikes in the tribal regions of Pakistan has increased dramatically. This has proven to be a formidable tool with which to conduct counterterrorist campaigns. They have offered very effective means of targeting key Taliban and Al Qaida figures that would otherwise be unreachable without a significant troop presence on the ground. While the drone campaign has a number of drawbacks, namely collateral damage, hostile public opinion (in Pakistan) and questions on the legality of such attacks, the positive fallouts outweigh the costs.

These factors all suggest that the gradual drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan due to start in July could be the first step to a shift in strategy: from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism. Such a strategy (first advocated by Vice President Biden during the 2009 strategy review) would certainly require fewer troops on the ground and more limited nation building goals in Afghanistan. It could however be sufficient to deny Al Qaida a safe haven in the region and guarantee long term US security concerns. US engagement in Afghanistan after 2014 will have to be defined within a wider strategic partnership. With the recent appointment of General Petraeus as CIA Director, President Obama is shifting his top COIN man to Langley, signaling his desire for a change in strategy. Finally, but most importantly, domestic politics play an important role in key strategy decisions. With support for the Afghan war down to 35%<sup>3</sup> the President has to show progress and start bringing troops home in order to strengthen his chances for the 2012 Presidential bid.

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<sup>3</sup>CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey released last December <http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/03/cnn-poll-u-s-opposition-to-afghanistan-war-remains-high/>