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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **US and Afghanistan: What Price Victory?**

By Amos Khan

### **Synopsis**

*As the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan continues into its ninth year, it is clear that the United States does not have the resources it needs to win before the July 2011 pullout. With pressing concerns at home and elsewhere in the world, Washington may have concluded that victory in Afghanistan is simply not worth it.*

### **Commentary**

THE AMERICAN-LED campaign in Afghanistan continues against an invigorated insurgency. Doubtless, 2010 is now the deadliest year since the beginning of the insurgency in 2001. As the United States prepares to continue the struggle in Afghanistan with new troops and now a new commander, American commanders and policymakers face an uphill battle. President Obama's pledge to quit the country by July next year seems increasingly unrealistic. Indeed, victory in Afghanistan is likely to require major additional commitments on America's part. Yet, with numerous other domestic and international concerns to consider, victory may demand a price higher than Washington can afford.

### **Hearts and Minds**

Victory in counter-insurgency relies on winning the support of the local population, thus depriving insurgents of support and gaining intelligence on their movements. This is not happening. Years of neglect by Washington in favour of operations in Iraq have eroded the initially high public support enjoyed by American troops in 2001. The light US military presence has allowed the Taliban to regroup and re-establish their power base among the rural population, while the limited reconstruction aid has mainly benefited the urban elite at the expense of rural areas.

A widening rift with Washington over allegations of corruption and incompetence, including the charge that President Hamid Karzai himself is manic-depressive, has undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government, concerns that the recent parliamentary elections will do little to assuage. In addition to outrage at collateral damage from air strikes, Afghans blame the Americans for inciting the escalating insurgent attacks. American commanders have an immense challenge ahead regaining the goodwill that was squandered over the past decade.

Despite the use of sophisticated military hardware by the US, 'boots on the ground' remain essential for victory in any counterinsurgency campaign. Conventional wisdom recommends a ratio of 20:1000 or twenty military or

security personnel for every thousand inhabitants of a country. This works out to well over 600,000 troops for the Afghan population of thirty million. With around 150,000 troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) alongside 170,000 Afghan security forces, commanders still lack manpower. There is no requirement that all these troops be foreign. Indeed, Afghan security forces are set to double by 2014.

However, the requirement is that the troops be effective, which is rather more difficult. Both the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police remain rife with corruption, inefficiency and questionable loyalties. The ANP has been neglected since 2001 and many of their senior officers are involved with local drug cartels. The army is in better shape, but events like the recent shooting of three Royal Gurkhas by an ANA recruit shows that both organisations remain at risk of infiltration by insurgents. Both organisations also lack recruits from the Pashtun ethnic regions, areas where the Taliban are strongest. With allied troop contingents like the Canadians and Dutch beginning their own pullouts and local forces still inadequate for the task, American leaders face an acute manpower shortage despite the recent troop surge.

### **End of the Road**

Victory in counter-insurgency struggles also requires time and patience. It takes an average of 14 years to defeat an insurgency. The US has been in Afghanistan for nine. Against a resurgent Taliban, the 2011 deadline may prove to be hopelessly optimistic. Indeed it has already drawn criticism from both senior American commanders and President Karzai. By announcing a definite end to major US involvement, the deadline actually encourages the insurgents while undermining the morale of the Afghan population, who fear civil war when the Americans leave.

One of the most important factors determining the success or failure of any insurgency is outside support. Historically, every successful Afghan insurgency has relied on sanctuary in the remote border areas of Pakistan and assistance from elements of its Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate. Washington has increased pressure on Pakistan to bring the battle to the Taliban on its territory. Yet, with a humanitarian crisis and increasing Taliban attacks on its hands, Pakistan itself looks in need of US assistance as well.

Washington has also attempted to bring Afghanistan's other neighbours on board to help lend legitimacy to the Karzai government. Yet even here the demands are daunting and the options unpalatable. Such neighbours include Iran, a major security concern in its own right; Uzbekistan, with a questionable human rights record; Russia, which has demanded concessions in Europe in exchange for cooperation; and China, which is wary of a permanent US presence in Central Asia.

### **What Price Victory?**

Given the enormity of the challenges ahead, it is perhaps unsurprising that many, like Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, are openly sceptical of President Obama's strategy. Some have begun to question whether victory is even necessary. Even at current levels of American commitment, Afghanistan demands time, attention and resources that may be better spent addressing other security concerns, such as rising tensions in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear ambitions, North Korean aggression, and Chinese maritime assertiveness.

Having been quoted as saying he is 'not doing' 10 years, long-term nation-building or a trillion dollars in Afghanistan, President Obama's exit strategy appears increasingly like an 'escape' strategy: one that will allow Washington to leave with a modicum of dignity and little else. Recent American efforts towards brokering a power-sharing deal with the Taliban may be an admission that for victory, Washington has to pay a very high price.

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