

Obama & Afpak: exit from Afghanistan, entry into Pakistan?

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Some commentators have taken advantage of the recent deterioration of the situation in Pakistan to criticise the new US strategy for Afpak (Afghanistan and Pakistan) as a continuation of the Bush administration policy. Yet a more profound analysis of the strategy would reveal that President Barack Obama and his team have taken significant steps in the right direction. The US President has smoothed the way towards a military “exit strategy” for the international community in Afghanistan; in addition, the central role of Pakistan in any regional stability strategy is implicitly recognised by including Afghanistan’s neighbour to the east as part of the same theatre of operations; and finally, the “entry” Obama proposes in Pakistan is economic, rather than military.

Obama’s team (which includes people who know the region well, such as Vice President Joe Biden and the new special envoy for Afpak, Richard Holbrooke) has developed a strategy in line with the moderate and multilateral philosophy which is quickly becoming the hallmark of President Obama’s foreign policy. Still, beyond the inclusion of a regional approach, the media has struggled to reformulate the new strategy into a simple headline, a new strategy whose main objectives in the medium term are perhaps more implicit than explicit.

Afghanistan: Towards a military “exit strategy”

In terms of troops, the United States is sending a relatively small number of soldiers. Taking into account that 4,000 of these are to be sent exclusively for the purposes of training the Afghan armed forces, and that the recently relieved General McKiernan had requested 30,000, the 17,000 additional troops committed should be understood as a modest reinforcement for the crucial August elections, as well as to fight the insurgency, with the aim of being able later on to negotiate an honourable withdrawal from what Americans describe as a “position of power”.

The announcement of the beginning of a military withdrawal at the present juncture would have been a shot in the arm to the Taliban insurgency and Al Qaeda. Obama has limited himself for now to a modest troop deployment rather than the much bigger “surge” which some voices were calling for. Only in coming years will it be revealed to what extent the political debate between analysts as to the possible benefits of an increased military presence - or whether more troops are ultimately counter-productive in the face of a sceptical local population - has penetrated the White House.

The component of the new strategy that has been most strengthened is the training of Afghanistan's armed forces. By sending 4.000 additional troops exclusively to train the Afghan army, and by setting up a trust fund to ensure its sustainability, Obama would seem to be preparing for a possible withdrawal. At the least, this is a clear request for the international community to contribute towards the capacity of the Afghans to defend their national sovereignty and combat the terrorist threat themselves; or to put it another way, it a means to enable the bulk of the international forces to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.

Almost no mention is made in the new administration's rhetoric about "building a democratic state", or about human rights for that matter. In his speech to the country, Obama made it clear that the mission's objective is to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Afpak". Whilst talk of "defeating" an enemy like Al Qaeda is always a dubious matter, there can be little doubt that more modest objectives mean a gradual troop withdrawal will be possible earlier, giving way to a more balanced strategy for Afghanistan. Taking into account the opposition in Afghanistan and public opinion of the countries taking part in the international mission (a 2011 exit date has been set in Canada as a matter of political expedience), this seems like a sensible and politically opportune change of course.

Stimulating negotiations

Likewise, the announcement of the new strategy also included a subtle but significant call by President Obama for "the reconciliation process to begin in every Afghan province". After a year in which the debate on whether to talk to the Taliban or not surfaced in the public arena, Obama has given official and unequivocal backing to a negotiation process with elements of the Taliban, something the Karzai government has already initiated at the national level, while Saudi Arabia and other third party countries with influence have done the same at the regional level.

There has been a tendency here to fall into the all-too-easy mistake of trying to draw parallels with Iraq, or the agreements Pakistan is reaching with the Pakistani Taliban. The objective in Afghanistan, it should be stressed, is to cut off the Afghan Taliban from the Al Qaeda international jihadist network sustaining it just over the Pakistani border, not to neutralise one of the ethnic groups involved in the conflict, as was the case in Iraq. Nor is there any agreement being contemplated in Afghanistan which goes against the principles of the Afghan constitution, ruling out the application of Sharia law as a quid pro quo for a ceasefire, such as the agreement that the Pakistani government struck in the Swat valley.

Putting these important differences to one side, the support for negotiations finally acknowledges that consolidation of a peaceful Afghan state must include an attempt to neutralise the Afghan Taliban who are 'reconcilable'. This can therefore be seen as another step along the road towards the "exit strategy". Not only because it would steadily diminish the strength and legitimacy of the insurgency in Afghanistan, but also because of the important role that the United Nations (UN) is being called on to play in this process. Disdained until now, the UN's role is expected to be strengthened by Obama's creation of a "contact group" with relevant regional actors; the UN is the only organisation which has the legitimacy and acquaintance with the political terrain needed to secure international support for a national reconciliation process led from Kabul.

The shift in the mission's objectives, the commitment to train the Afghan armed forces, the support for negotiations with the Taliban, the strengthening of the UN and the regional approach: taken together, these amount to an implicit yet clear change of course towards an Afghan "exit strategy".

The urgent need to strengthen the Pakistani State

At the same time, the situation in Pakistan grows more worrying by the day. There can be no doubt any longer: it is the Pak in Afpak which should be the main focus of attention. While it may be the case that troop deployment in Afghanistan and its domestic reception are the more pressing concerns for NATO member state leaders, the terrorist threat which most jeopardises international security will continue to emerge from Pakistan. Terrorism posing a threat to global security is exported these days from Pakistan, not Afghanistan. The recently published UK policy paper for Afpak notes that three out of four terrorist plots investigated in the United Kingdom has links to Pakistan.

So there are good reasons for concern. In terms of the Afghan situation, the peace agreements being reached between Islamabad and the Taliban in the border areas are the calm before the storm, as the insurgents prepare their summer offensive for the Afghan presidential elections in August. As General David Petraeus put it, "things are going to get worse before they get better".

The endemic vulnerability of the Pakistan civilian government, weakened by a thoroughly divided political class on the one hand, and military and intelligence services (ISI) which have supported the Afghan Taliban for decades (like the CIA and Saudi Arabia once did) on the other, is extremely disturbing. The Pakistani Taliban have come of age in this context as the ISI's very own kind of Frankenstein, an institution which some observers have gone so far as to define as a "parallel state".

Today, the Pakistani Taliban are more than capable of standing on their own two feet, as has been witnessed in the never-ending advance of terrorist attacks, from the semi-autonomous tribal badlands bordering Afghanistan, to the cities of Lahore and Islamabad. Violence perpetrated in the name of Islam threatens the state and divides its people. Some analysts are now even talking about a situation akin to that of pre-revolutionary Iran. Bunar – only 100 kilometres away from Islamabad - is the latest district to succumb to Taliban control, sparking the current brutal crackdown by the Pakistani military.

The United States and the international community at large must decide how to respond to the nightmare Pakistan, a nuclear power with 170 million inhabitants, is becoming. On the military side of things, the US seems to have drawn a line at the frequent and selective airstrikes on Al Qaeda leaders from its pilotless drone fighter aircraft. Team Obama is well aware these attacks already cause enough popular anti-American feeling as things stand. More significantly, the ties which exist at the public level on both sides of the border run counter to the "military option" in both Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Afghan civilian casualties cause a sense of outrage in Pakistan as well, and the sooner the international forces leave Afghanistan, the easier it will be to win the trust of Pakistanis.

Obama's team has consequently opted to strengthen the civilian government through economic aid. Somewhere in Washington the idea seems to have sunk in that the long term objective should be no less than full integration of the destitute and semi-autonomous tribal areas (where unemployment is as high as 45 per cent) into the Pakistan state.

In a crucial moment for the country, both the United States and Europe must show the Pakistani people that the commitment to the region is a serious and long term matter. At the recent Pakistani donors' conference, the international community (mainly the United States, the EU and Saudi Arabia) pledged 3.8 billion euros in aid. At the bilateral level, Obama is waiting for congressional approval for a plan which would benefit Pakistan to the tune of 1.5 billion

dollars a year. In the course of the last month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Defence Secretary Robert Gates have requested emergency aid of around 900 million dollars in order to strengthen the Pakistan army in the face of the Taliban, and to provide a response to the economic and refugee crisis which the country is facing. But these are just stop-gap measures. Pakistan is unfinished business, and for Europe especially there is work to be done. It beggars belief that states such as Nicaragua or Bangladesh can receive more funds from the European Commission than Pakistan which, as The Economist puts it, is "the most dangerous place in the world".

It now remains to be seen whether the Pakistan civilian government will be able to ensure the funds are targeted at development projects and the fight against Al Qaeda, and does not end up contributing to the historic conflict with India in Kashmir, which was the fate of more than 12 billion dollars sent by the Bush Administration to Pakistan during General Musharaf's rule. It is reasonable to hope that with the new Obama administration (whose economic aid comes with certain conditions), and a Pakistani public opinion more opposed to the Taliban than ever, the same thing doesn't happen all over again. But it will be no easy matter. The fragile civilian government finds itself between a rock and a hard place, trying to keep a lid on an instinctively anti-American popular feeling, while struggling to rein in at the "parallel state" the ISI amounts to at the same time.

Although Obama has laid the groundwork for a military "exit strategy" in Afghanistan, there is an increasingly urgent need to think about an essentially economic "stability strategy" for Pakistan.

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