

## **Making an Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategy Decision in a Flawed System**

President Obama is faced with an important decision outlining the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy. It would help if he had a vision for success. In his 2008 presidential campaign President Obama learned a hopeful vision was more compelling to voters than articulating the ills of the Bush administration. He needs to transfer this knowledge to the current Afghanistan-Pakistan debate. In March 2009, he stated the US wants

“to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That's the goal that must be achieved. That is a cause that could not be more just. And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: We will defeat you.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a goal, not a vision, and the stated goal does not by itself create a hopeful vision for the future. Once the goal is achieved, what kind of condition does he hope to create?

When we examine the health of a system we look for three characteristics.

**First**, a vision must be shared and understood by those in the system who strive to fulfill the vision.

One of the key reasons there is no coherent strategy in Afghanistan is the lack of vision. A compelling vision has hope – a crystal clear vision catapults you toward the future.

How would President Obama describe the ideal situation for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region?

Only after President Obama articulates a vision will our policy makers be able to draft the strategic roadmap to achieve the exit condition he outlines.

Stating goals and discussing strategy before outlining a clear vision is out of sequence and diminishes the possibility for success.

**Second**, the system must be able to communicate internally and externally. It is aware of changes within the system and aware of changes in the environment that could impact its probability to achieve its vision.

President Obama received data from only one part of the equation -- General McChrystal provided his assessment (unvarnished ground truth), but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not submit a similar report that provided the President with her analysis from a civil perspective. The process of collecting data reflects part of the problem in the administration's approach to determining the best strategy moving forward.

The military is only part of the picture. The military, given adequate resources, is capable of creating a condition (winning the conflict) for civilian agencies to meet the needs of the population. How successful have the civilian agencies been to date at building infrastructure and creating long-term economic growth in the region?

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<sup>1</sup> President Obama Speech, White House, March 2009

## **The Afghanistan-Pakistan decision requires thoughtful reflection on the following:**

- What are the conditions we require to exit the region?
- What are we willing to threaten if we don't get what we want? (For example, what do we expect from the Afghan government?) What are we prepared to do if the Afghan government doesn't deliver what it promises? Have we communicated our wants and our threats? (And are we certain the leadership understands them? Does the leadership believe our threats are credible?)
- How do we show our threats are credible?
- "How do we show our desired outcome to be more in the people's and opponent's interest than us carrying out our threat?"<sup>2</sup>

If President Obama clearly communicates what he wants and what he and his allies are willing to do if they don't get what they want, we have a greater chance of succeeding.

To date, our inability to articulate a vision and to *create* a compelling narrative to support that vision, much less *communicate* a compelling narrative has been appalling. We have not been able to communicate a compelling story to the people of Afghanistan, America or Pakistan. It is time to communicate a compelling story and deliver on the promises we make. An elder tribesman in Helmand Province stated, "Everyone makes promises to us – the Americans, our government, even the Taliban."<sup>3</sup>

If we are unable to communicate a powerful story and groups like al Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban are able to tell a more powerful narrative, we have lost. It doesn't matter how many troops we deploy or how much AID money we send to the region – we will lose.

In spite of the recent comments to the contrary --- "we are where we are" (by Secretary of Defense Gates and General Stanley McChrystal) – a review of how the Taliban (surrogates for AQ) successfully increased its stronghold in Afghanistan over the last eight years is worth noting. The Taliban require a safe haven (a sanctuary supported by locals) and carefully analyzing the local narrative the Taliban uses to persuade the Afghan people could be instructive.

Beyond examining what narratives appeal to the local population, it is important to be mindful of some decision traps that have decreased the quality of US decision-making in the past.

## **What leads us to faulty conclusions when making decisions?**

- No clear vision of success;
- Neglect to include the enemy's intentions as part of the analysis;
- Neglect to include the enemy's reactions to our actions --- the enemy is part of the system;

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<sup>2</sup> General Sir Rupert Smith, *Utility of Force*, page 385

<sup>3</sup> "In Helmand, a Model for Success?" by Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Washington Post*, October 22, 2009, Page 1

- Ignore what has worked to date;
- Neglect to put mechanisms in place to adjust course and reorient the strategic roadmap;
- Assume if the military is successful the civilian agencies will also be successful;
- Assume the decision is binary; and
- Neglect to ask our allies for input and forget to shore up support for the decision (even though we may have the resources to execute the decision without ally assistance).

Remember that all players in this region are involved in human confrontations. President Obama's strategy decision and the strategy decisions in European capitals will not be made in a vacuum. While President Obama's decision to increase troop levels or change to a counterterrorism strategy is influenced by his domestic confrontations (contentious healthcare legislation, for example), so too are similar decisions for troop levels influenced by domestic confrontations in our allies' capitals. Like Russian nesting Matroushka dolls there are human confrontations within human confrontations in this tapestry of decision-making with complex connections and relationships that span years.

**The Third**, and final characteristic in a system that thrives – there is a way for the system to reinvent itself. Innovation is fostered. There is a way for the system to change course. The system is able to alter direction when information externally or internally alerts it to changes that require adjustments.

Our system does not receive high marks on any of these three characteristics when it comes to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The institutions we have are ill suited to address the long-term needs of this region, and the American political will has little patience to endure.

Thus, President Obama is making a crucial decision (with long-term domestic and international implications) in a flawed system.

### **Initial questions to consider as President Obama weighs the options before him?**

- What is our vision for the future of the region?
- Does this narrative resonate with the people of the region?
- What is the least amount of resources required to achieve our national security objective?
- To what extent is the US willing to support the current Afghan government? What are the boundaries of US support?
- How does a legitimate central government rule effectively when 60% of the economy is operating on the black market?
- If the Pakistanis deployed 30,000 troops to South Waziristan, a Taliban and Al Qaeda controlled area (2550 square miles) to wipe out the insurgents, how can we believe Afghanistan (251737 square miles) will be tamed by 40,000 additional troops?
- If the military is successful in creating a condition for civilian agencies to perform, then what?
- In a recent article by the *Financial Times*, Matthew Green noted that with all the discussion about troop levels a key aid question is not being addressed:

“The pressing question of whether the US can improve the effectiveness of its aid to Afghanistan, where USAID has spent some \$9B on road, power and service schemes since 2001”<sup>4</sup>

- If the US government is unable to rebuild one of its own cities (New Orleans) in four years (a test of our institution’s ability to respond), how credible is the suggestion that the US government can successfully build the needed infrastructure for an entire nation 6930 miles away?

## **Moving Forward**

As President Obama considers his options for the utility of force in Afghanistan it would be wise to reflect on the words of General Sir Rupert Smith (former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, NATO):

“War amongst the people is a paradigm of confrontations and conflicts.... It is fought against enemies firmly embedded in the people, who do not present a strategic target. Our institutions, civilian and military, have yet to adapt to this new reality --- each within itself an intertwined world that leads to any decision on military action...without properly considering the enemy against which they seek to operate, or the consequences of the actions. Even if force is used to stop violence, it will not deliver the strategic decision sought by those who decide to apply it...in war amongst the people no act of force will ever be decisive: winning the trial of strength will not deliver the will of the people, and at the base that is the only true aim of any use of force in modern conflicts.”<sup>5</sup>

President Obama is making a decision within an institutional framework that has not adapted to war amongst the people. The tools at his disposal were not designed to address this kind of war. He is making a decision in a flawed system with a flawed process. Under these unfortunate circumstances the chances of achieving a high quality decision that will lead us to a successful exit from the region in a timely fashion are slim.

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<sup>4</sup> *Financial Times*, October 14, 2009, “US Rethinks Afghan Aid Strategy” by Matthew Green

<sup>5</sup> *Utility of Force*, General Sir Rupert Smith, page 331