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European Languages

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Asia times online

Chinks exposed in Obama's Taliban plan

By Gareth Porter
3/17/2009

Advanced reports on the President Barack Obama administration's strategy to "peel off" a majority of insurgent commanders from the "hard core" of Taliban suggest that it will be presented as a political route to victory in Afghanistan that would not require United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops to win militarily.

But experts warn that the strategy is unlikely to work. And by appearing to provide a political route to victory, the strategy is luring the administration into a renewed commitment to war in Afghanistan and diverting it away from a deal with the Taliban leadership aimed at keeping al-Qaeda from having a presence there.

News reports this past week have raised the possibility of negotiations by Afghan, Saudi and Pakistani officials with the Taliban leadership that could result in an agreement not to allow an al-Qaeda presence on Afghan territory in return for US and NATO withdrawal and assurances that they will not intervene in the country as long as al-Qaeda is kept out.

The strategy of splitting off "reconcilable" insurgents may make commitment to an indefinite continuation of the US military effort more palatable to key US officials, including Obama himself, who know that the war cannot be won through military efforts.

The new administration strategy was reported last week after briefings of Congressional leaders by General David Petraeus, head of Central Command, and ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the State Department special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Petraeus has been a strong supporter of the strategy of trying to divide the Afghan insurgency by offering money and jobs to those willing to accept the government in Kabul. He has said that his strategy of outreach to what he has described as "reconcilables" among the insurgents in Iraq might be applicable in Afghanistan as well.

The premise of the plan being advanced by administration officials, at least for public consumption, was articulated by Vice President Joseph Biden in a speech in Brussels last week. Biden said only 100 to 1,000 Taliban or al-Qaeda members - representing about 5% of the Taliban insurgency - are "incorrigible", and that at least 70% were involved in the insurgency only because they are "getting paid".

Biden was reflecting the view of the insurgency held by senior military officials at the NATO regional

headquarters in Kandahar. Officials there see the insurgency in the south as made up largely of "young freelance fighters who are motivated more by money than religious zealotry", according to a report by Rajiv Chandrasekaran in the Washington Post on Sunday.

But that extraordinarily optimistic assumption is not shared by most experts on the insurgency in Afghanistan. A report by Carlotta Gall in the New York Times last Wednesday quotes "several Western diplomats and officials in Afghanistan, including those already in contact with the Taliban" as saying that attempts to split off individual commanders or groups from the Taliban leadership "would not work".

The reason, according to those officials, is that the plan would require those commanders to surrender and accept an Afghan government and a foreign military presence in which they have no trust.

Jonathan Landay of McClatchy newspapers reported from Kabul on Sunday that experts on the Taliban express "serious doubts" about the splitting strategy, because insurgent leaders believe they are winning and the Hamid Karzai government is growing weaker.

In contrast to the reported premise that most insurgents are motivated by material gain, most specialists on the insurgency emphasized the dominant role of Pashtun anger at foreign military operations in their locality killing members of their family or tribe.

An alternative strategy of seeking a deal with the Taliban aimed at separating them from al-Qaeda was first raised by Columbia University's Afghanistan specialist Barnett Rubin and Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid in an article in Foreign Affairs magazine last December. The article proposed that NATO offer to end military action in Afghanistan if the Taliban agrees "to prohibit the use of Afghan (or Pakistani) territory for international terrorism".

Rubin and Rashid have been hired by Holbrooke as adviser and short-term consultant, respectively, according to a report by national security correspondent Laura Rozen at Foreign Policy.

The option proposed by Rubin and Rashid has now been given new credibility by reports that Saudi Arabia is engaged in an effort to persuade the Taliban to separate itself clearly from al-Qaeda.

The London Times published a report by Christina Lamb on Sunday that Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi intelligence chief, visited Islamabad, Delhi and Kabul in January to talk to both Taliban and Afghan government officials.

Lamb also reported that Taliban Chief Mullah Omar had given his approval to peace talks with the Afghan government for the first time, citing a "mediator" with the Taliban, Algerian former mujahideen fighter in Afghanistan Abdullah Anas and an Afghan government official involved in the negotiations as the sources.

The Afghan government negotiator told Lamb that government officials "have been in contact both with Mullah Omar's direct representatives and commanders from the front line".

Asked for a comment on this development, Rubin, the Columbia University expert, told IPS in an e-mail that the Lamb story "is accurate".

A report published by Strategic Forecasting (Stratfor) last week by director of Middle East analysis Kamran Bokhari and Scott Stewart also noted the Saudi intelligence chief's trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan. In meetings with actual Taliban commanders in both countries, the Saudis have offered financial support if the Taliban agrees to divorce itself completely from al-Qaeda, according to the report.

Bokhari, a Pakistani specialist on Islamist groups, has had extensive contacts with high-ranking Pakistani and Saudi officials in the past.

The Saudi regime, once reluctant to crack down on al-Qaeda, has pursued a very successful political strategy against al-Qaeda within Saudi Arabia since 2003. Saudi Arabia has credibility with the

Taliban leadership because of shared religious beliefs and because it is one of the few foreign governments that continued to recognize the Taliban after 9/11.

The Taliban chief, Mullah Omar, had rejected US and Saudi pressures to expel Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. But the question of ties between the Taliban and al-Qaeda have been far less clear since the expulsion of both organizations from Afghanistan in late 2001.

Amin Tarzi, director of the Middle East Studies Program at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, wrote in an essay for the 2007 book *Taliban and the Crisis in Afghanistan* that there was "no evidence of concerted cooperation" between what he called the "neo-Taliban" and al-Qaeda in southern Afghanistan.

Some factions in the north and northeast, however, had "resurrected old ties with al-Qaeda" to obtain funds, recruits and technical support, according to Tarzi.

Tarzi cited a comment by Taliban spokesman Mohammad Hanif to an Italian newspaper in March 2006 that the movement had "no operational ties" to al-Qaeda, but that they had "tactical alliances based given circumstances and territorial situations".

As suggested in the Rubin-Rashid proposal, any deal with the Taliban will have to include a date for withdrawal of all US and NATO forces. In October 2007, The Guardian reported that senior Taliban commanders in Helmand province had sent a list of demands to the Karzai government through intermediaries that included control of 10 southern provinces, a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops and the release of all Taliban prisoners within six months.