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afgazad@gmail.com

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The secrets of Obama's surge

By Pepe Escobar
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Is United States President Barack Obama telling it like it is as far as his new strategy for the Afghanistan and Pakistan war theater - AfPak, in Pentagonspeak - is concerned? There are reasons to believe otherwise.

Obama's relentless media blitzkrieg stressed the new strategy is refocusing on al-Qaeda. Washington, we got a problem. Why deploy 17,000 troops against "the Taliban" in the poppy-growing province of Helmand, not in the east near the Pakistani tribal areas, where "al-Qaeda" is holed up, plus 4,000 advisers to train the Afghan Army, when Washington actually wants to fight no more than 200 or 300 al-Qaeda jihadis roaming in Afghanistan, plus another 400 maximum in the Pakistani tribal areas? And by the way they are not Afghans - they are overwhelmingly Arabs, with a few Uzbeks, Chechens and Uyghurs thrown in.

President Hamid Karzai, the puppet in Kabul which has left Washington beyond exasperated, loved Obama's plan to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Especially because it involves the improbable "hunt for the good Taliban" (always bribable by loads of US dollars) mixed with Special Ops inside Pakistan, and not Afghanistan.

Former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto's widower, President Asif Ali Zardari, the puppet in Islamabad, loved it too. But as the Pakistani daily Dawn revealed, his Foreign Office diplomats definitely did not.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan war has got to be 2009's prime theater of the absurd. It took the New York Times and the usual "American officials" something like 13 years to "discover" that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) - a [Central Intelligence Agency](#) twin - helps the Taliban. And this while the CIA, alongside their ISI pals, is compiling a mega hit list in the Pashtun tribal areas inside Pakistan. Maybe this is what US Central Command supremo General David "I'm always positioning myself for 2012" Petraeus means by a "trilateral" love affair, as he told CNN's State of the Union.

The Pentagon's preferred pal is doubtless Pakistani Army Chief General Ashfaq Kayani, who

happens to approve of what's not in Obama's presentation of the surge: the relentless drone war - with inevitable "collateral damage" - over what is for a fact Pashtunistan. As for the Pakistani masses, which have no say in all of this, they see the whole thing as a charade, and al-Qaeda as a threat to the US - not to Pakistan.

Obama is selling the surge basically as nation building, based on trust. A hard sell if there ever was one - as Washington cannot trust the ISI or the Pakistani government, while the Pakistani masses don't trust Washington.

Insistent rumors in Washington point to a troika - Holbrooke-Petraeus-Clinton - finally being able to convince Obama that the surge should be just the first step towards long-range nation building. Anyone with minimal familiarity with Afghanistan knows this is an impossible strategic target.

The Salvador option

And then Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy to AfPak, finally let it slip on CNN: the "people we are fighting in Afghanistan" are essentially ... Pashtuns. This was followed by a stark admission: "In the informational side ... we don't have a strong enough counter-informational program to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda."

So this amounts to the State Department admitting that the Pentagon/Petraeus "humint" (human intelligence) component of counter-insurgency in AfPak, hailed as a gift from the Messiah all across US corporate media, is essentially useless. This also means there's no way of winning local hearts and minds.

In the absence of "humint", what prevails is inevitably The Salvador option, performed by a Dick Cheney-supervised-style "executive assassination wing", as investigative icon Seymour Hersh first revealed in a talk at the University of Minnesota on March 10, "going into countries, not talking to the ambassador or to the CIA station chief, and finding people on a list and executing them and leaving". The "assassination wing" is in fact the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) - a shadowy, ultra-elite unit including [Navy Seals](#) and Delta Force commandos immune to Congressional investigations.

So if you have such a unit killing "al-Qaeda" jihadis at random from Iraq to Kenya, from Somalia to countries in South and Central America (these are not necessarily "al-Qaeda"; let's say they are inimical to "US interests"), why not let them loose in Afghanistan and the Pakistani tribal areas? Instead of a \$5 million bounty on his head, why not send a crack JSOC commando to South Waziristan and take out Pakistani Taliban superstar Baitullah Mehsud, who has just boasted his outfit will "soon launch an attack on Washington that will amaze everyone in the world?"

Well, maybe because US "humint" on South Waziristan is negligible - and even JSOC cannot infiltrate. JSOC by now should have been more than fully equipped to find Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Anyway, Vice-President Joseph Biden, to whom the unit would have to answer to, could at least come clean and state the "Salvador option" is not on the cards anymore. Or maybe it still is. The Obama administration is mum about it.

A priceless, self-described "hip pocket" manual prepared by [the US Army](#) Training and Doctrine Command - TRADOC, one more wonderful, Pentagon acronym to memorize - and available only to "US government personnel, government contractors and additional cleared

personnel for national security purposes and [homeland defense](#)" spells out what's (visibly) going on. On page 5, one learns this is a US war against, yes, Pashtuns, as Holbrooke said on CNN. The overwhelming majority of the "insurgent syndicate", they are funded by drug smuggling and US allies in the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Emirates, and are trained and assisted by, yes, the ISI, with some - in fact marginal - al-Qaeda assistance.

Al-Qaeda is a detail here. TRADOC does not seem to understand that al-Qaeda has a pan-Islamic agenda while the various groups bundled as "Taliban" are essentially in a war against foreign occupation and interference, with no dreams of establishing a Caliphate.

On page 7, TRADOC estimates the Taliban in Afghanistan to be around 30,000, half of them Pakistani, and supported by the ISI. That's correct. But they overestimate al-Qaeda to be 2,000; these "Arab-Afghans" plus some recently arrived "white moors" (European Arabs) are probably no more than 700.

On page 10, TRADOC finally admits that Karzai in Kabul is supported by a myriad of "warlord militias" profiting from crime, narco-trafficking and smuggling. The key element here is not "terrorism" - but regional wars for control over ultra-profitable poppy/heroin manufacturing and smuggling routes.

Then there's this stark admission, by former Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Salam, currently [governor](#) of a town in poppy-infested Helmand province. He told Reuters that the Taliban are not the real enemy. If Kabul was not so corrupt, and capable of providing security to the rest of the country, most Pashtuns would not even be Taliban. No wonder the Obama administration has stacks of reasons to get rid of Karzai.

An opening in The Hague

Asia knows this whole thing is upside down. The crucial Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), grouping China, Russia and the Central Asian "stans", all concerned neighbors of Afghanistan, met in Moscow last Friday to discuss it, ahead of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting in The Hague this Tuesday privileged by the US.

This is how Asia sees it - and that's an absolutely taboo issue for Obama to touch upon every time he faces American public opinion: Asians simply don't want [US military](#) bases in Central Asia. No wonder Iran, which is currently an observer, and soon to become a full member, officially said the SCO is the right forum to solve the Afghan tragedy, not NATO. A minimum of 40% of Afghans are either Shi'ites or they speak Dari, a Persian language.

Well, at least Holbrooke admits "the door is open" for Iran to have a say on Afghanistan, but always with conditions attached ("plus our NATO allies"). If Holbrooke is clever, he should immediately buy dinner for legendary mujahid Ishmail Khan, the Lion of Herat, in Western Afghanistan. Khan, a complex mix of feudal warlord and economic developer, told al-Jazeera English "friendship between Iran and America" is essential to solve the Afghan riddle. What Washington has to admit is that Iran has been deeply involved for years in visible, post-Taliban reconstruction in Afghanistan - from roads and railroads to restoration of mosques, financing of libraries and *madrassas* and the provision of electricity. The Iranian Consulate in Herat, for instance, houses no less than 40 diplomats. Khan - the key Iranian liaison in Herat - was so successful in spite of Kabul that Karzai, under US pressure, stripped him off his enormous powers as local governor and gave him an innocuous ministry in Kabul.

At the UN-sponsored, US-backed international conference on Afghanistan this Tuesday in The Hague, Mohammad Mehdi Akhundzadeh - one of Iran's deputy foreign ministers - officially broke the ice, offering to help the rebuilding and stabilization of Afghanistan, something that Iran is already doing anyway.

Akhundzadeh was specifically referring to projects fighting drug trafficking - which badly affects Iranian society. But he was also very clear on how Iran views NATO: "The presence of foreign forces has not improved things in the country and it seems that an increase in the number of foreign forces will prove ineffective, too."

But, significantly, he tipped his hat to Obama's decision to send those 4,000 trainers for the Afghan Army, when he stressed "Afghanization should lead the government-building process". As for US Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#), she described corruption in the Kabul government, ie Karzai and his gang, as a "cancer" as threatening to Afghanistan as the Taliban. One more sign from Washington that Karzai's days may be numbered.

Follow the money

Did Obama's "strategic reviewers" read this Carnegie Endowment report (http://carnegieendowment.org/files/afghan_war-strategy.pdf)? Apparently not. It states flatly "the mere presence of foreign soldiers fighting a war in Afghanistan is probably the single most important factor in the resurgence of the Taliban".

So the question Americans must ask themselves is this: Would you buy a used car - sorry - war from people like Mullen, Petraeus, McKiernan? Well, former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who's seen them all since John F Kennedy, wouldn't. For him, "they resemble all too closely the gutless general officers who never looked down at what was really happening in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff of the time have been called, not without reason, 'a sewer of deceit'."

So what if the AfPak quagmire had nothing to do with "terrorists" but with these facts:

1. A Cold War mentality in action still prevailing at the Pentagon. That explains a Vietnam-style surge - expanding the war to Cambodia then, expanding it to Pakistan now. As University of Michigan's Juan Cole has pointed out, the rationale is the same old fallacious domino theory (communism will take over Southeast Asia, terrorism will take over Central/South Asia). The Taliban are simply not able to take over and control the whole of Afghanistan (they didn't from 1996 to 2001). Al-Qaeda simply can't have bases in Afghanistan: they would be bombed to smithereens by the 80,000-strong Afghan Army plus Bagram-based US air strikes.
2. The US Empire of Bases still in overdrive, and in New Great Game mode - which implies very close [surveillance](#) over Russia and China via bases such as Bagram, and the drive to block Russia from establishing a commercial route to the Middle East via Pakistan.
3. The fear of a spectacular NATO failure. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, absolutely despised by progressives in Brussels and assorted European capitals, is pressuring everyone for more troops to avoid what he calls the "Americanization" of the war. No one is impressed - especially because Scheffer himself was forced to admit troops will have to stay on the ground "for the foreseeable future".

4. Last but not least, the energy wars. And that involves that occult, almost supernatural entity, the \$7.6 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which would carry gas from eastern Turkmenistan through Afghanistan east of Herat and down Taliban-controlled Nimruz and Helmand provinces, down Balochistan in Pakistan and then to the Pakistani port of Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. No investor in his right mind will invest in a pipeline in a war zone, thus Afghanistan must be "stabilized" at all costs.

So is AfPak the Pentagon's AIG - we gotta bail them out, can't let them fail? Is it a Predator drone war disguised as nation building? Will it become Obama's Vietnam? Whatever it is, it's not about "terrorists". Not really. Follow the money. Follow the energy. Follow the map.