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European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Asia Times Online

## US shocked and awed by the Taliban

By Pepe Escobar

8/9/2011

Talk about a double whammy. It was not enough for Standard & Poor's to downgrade the United States' credit rating; with impeccable timing, and apparently a single shot, the Taliban in Afghanistan simultaneously downgraded the empire's colossal war machine.

As much as the US power elite refuse to accept that the US financial crisis was caused by years of George W Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and mega-corporations; massive bailouts of banks and insurance companies; and astronomic military spending on the Pentagon's declinations of The Long War, the power elite will also refuse to acknowledge that the "new" war strategy in Afghanistan is also a failure.

### Chinook down

The sound of that Chinook CH-47 transport helicopter shot down by a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) in Wardak province, southwest of Kabul, on Friday, killing 38 people - including 19 US Navy SEALs and seven Afghan commandos - was the full digital sound of the empire being shocked and awed into disbelief, no matter Pentagon efforts to practically order the media "not to read too much" into the crash.

Wardak - along with neighboring Logar - is now prime Talibanistan real estate. They are entrenched, know the terrain in detail and even have time to prepare complex operations. On top of it, the Taliban are "making progress" (Pentagon jargon) not only in their public relations skills

and in adapting new weapons to the battlefield, but also in the mechanics of delivering a major psychological blow to the Western occupying forces.

The SEALs are part of a humongous, 10,000-strong Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) task force, based in Afghanistan, which has been involved in as many as 70 raids a day in AfPak, capturing - according to Pentagon spin - 2,900 "insurgents" and killing more than 800 from April to July. JSOC's global reach has been deconstructed in a piece by Nick Turse (see [A secret war in 120 countries](#) Asia Times Online, August 5).

The SEALs killed in Wardak were part of the same unit, Team 6, involved in the Abbottabad raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in early May. But instead of flying the army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment's state-of-the-art stealth helicopters, the SEALs in Wardak were part of a rescue operation, riding a pedestrian National Guard Chinook.

As they were lifting off, they fell into a Taliban trap and were hit by a modified RPG - what the surgical Danger Room blog at the Wired website identified as an improvised rocket-assisted mortar (IRAM), sporting a bigger warhead than a shoulder-fired RPG.

According to Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, that was indeed "a weapon that is similar to an RPG ... and we are trying to get more of this weapon".

So assuming the IRAM - which has emigrated from the Iraqi battlefields - is now a player in Afghanistan as well, one might call it a warped return of the Stinger remix; during the 1980s Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union, a major game-changer was for the US to drop hundreds of lethal Stingers into the hands of the mujahideen, wreaking havoc among the choppers of the mighty Red Army.

A close comparison between the Abbottabad and Wardak operations may raise a forest of eyebrows - apart from puncturing the myth of Navy SEALs as invincible, larger-than-life hunter-killers. In Abbottabad, as version after version of the raid was being fed to the media, it was finally established that a stealth helicopter simply "crashed". No one knows if this was a pilot error or the helicopter was shot at.

The fact is the "crash" left an intact tail section of the stealth helicopter inside the compound - that tail section that left the Pentagon freaking out it would be "sold" to the Chinese by the Pakistanis. It's quite a stretch to believe this crash generated no casualties - according to the Pentagon/White House spin.

And because the Bin Laden raid narrative was redacted over and over again, febrile minds are already linking these casualties to the Wardak death toll - implying the SEALs who actually died in the Abbottabad crash have now died "again" in Wardak. It doesn't help that the initial versions of the Wardak hit (later corrected or redacted) identified the SEALs as the same ones who took part in the "kill Osama" raid.

## Pass the joystick

After the Wardak hit, new Pentagon chief Leon Panetta came up with the usual "stay the course" in Afghanistan speech while corporate media regurgitated that "all foreign combat troops are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014" - when everyone knows the Pentagon will never roll over, die and accept that kind of exit.

What Wardak will do is to bolster the Pentagon's case that the government in Kabul is mightily unprepared to maintain security across the country - no matter the fact that the majority of Afghans want foreigners out, for good. While the White House/Pentagon are singing their remixed version of The Clash's *Should I Stay or Should I Go*, all the Taliban have to do is wait and see, in silence (they hate pop music). They know that Kabul taking over national security will only bolster their strategic position.

It's astonishing (or maybe not) that the Washington power elite simply does not register how the empire was mercilessly downgraded by the Taliban over this past month. The Taliban killed President Hamid Karzai's half-brother, drug lord and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asset Ahmad Wali. They killed people at his funeral. They killed Karzai's head of tribal relations and a member of parliament. And they killed the mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Hamidi.

Not a long time ago - the autumn of 2010 - the talk was of the US/North Atlantic Treaty Organization going to take over Kandahar in a major counter-insurgency drive and win the war against the Taliban for good.

Today the claim has been laid to rest by facts on the ground. Yet its conceptual artist - in typical Washington fashion - has been kicked upstairs. In Iraq, General David Petraeus pulled an illusionist trick, convincing everyone in Washington that his 2007 surge/counterinsurgency drive was a success.

In Afghanistan, Petraeus was hit by a Hindu Kush rock on his head. Anyway, he's been promoted to CIA chief, so others will take the blame. And while more Chinooks will go down in Afghanistan, he can at least have fun with the joystick, playfully concentrating on droning the Pakistani tribal areas to death.