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## Toward a Kilcullen-Biden Plan? Bounding Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

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The initial assessment of the situation in Afghanistan sent by ISAF Commander General McChrystal to the Pentagon on August 30 (and leaked to the press three weeks later) is remarkable in two ways: a good way - and a bad way.

On the positive side, the report offers a wide-ranging and candid assessment of the three pillars on which any self-respecting counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign is said to rest: governance, development, and security. Its emphasis on a *crisis of confidence* in the Karzai government (at a time when the full extent of the electoral fraud had yet to be known) appears in retrospect particularly prescient. In addition, the report rightly emphasizes that the Taliban are not simply waging a “seasonal” kinetic *insurgency*, but are also committed to a year-round, campaign of *subversion* which has not gotten the attention it deserves in the West.<sup>1</sup>

On the negative side, the 66-page report is probably the only example in history of a military assessment that delivers all kinds of information except the most basic one: an estimate of the strength of the enemy. One will have to go to other official sources to discover that the Afghan Taliban actually numbers no more than 15,000, and that al Qaeda itself has at most 100 members in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, while the report argues that strategic communication should not be a one-way street, there is little evidence that it has taken into account the fact, as early as December 2007, 60 percent of the population was in favor of negotiation between the government and the Taliban (vs. 32 percent in favor of continued fighting), or that, as recently as December 2008, only 18 percent were in favor of more foreign troops (vs. 44 percent in favor of fewer troops).<sup>3</sup>

In the context of a COIN campaign, a military assessment is always a perilous exercise, and this *initial* assessment of the “Af” theater is, at any rate, only one element of a broader “AfPak” assessment anyway. Depending on the audience, the McChrystal report will be praised (by

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<sup>1</sup> General McChrystal, *Commander's Initial Assessment*, NATO-ISAF, August 30, 2009, available at [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews)

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, September 21, 2009. [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf); Lolita C. Baldor, “Obama adviser downplays threat of al Qaeda haven,” *Washington Times*, October 4, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> ABC News/BBC/ARD, *National Survey of Afghanistan*, February 9, 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/Story?id=6787686&page=1>

outsiders) for its didacticism, or criticized (by insiders) for erring at times on the side of dogmatism, espousing a maximalist view of counterinsurgency as “nation-building on steroids,” and imparting an excessive sense of urgency.

At the risk of stating the obvious - while a ragtag army of 15,000 insurgents can make the life of 30 million people difficult, it cannot by itself overrun 200,000 Western and Afghan troops in the short- or even medium-term. The Taliban may have the momentum on their side but, with no planes and no tanks, they simply can't “roadside bomb” their way to victory.

Taking a closer look, the McChrystal's report is all the more justified in that its recommended “jump” is in fact closer to an open-ended *escalation* than to a temporary *surge*, and that its implicit price tag guarantees that the Afghan war would end up costing (in treasure, if not in blood) as much as the Vietnam War.

Just do the math - with 63,000 troops on the ground, the cost for the U.S. of the Afghan War is already 6.7 billion dollars a month. With a hypothetical 40,000 troop increase, it would rise to *more than 10 billion a month*. For how long? Though it gives a time estimate for the possibility of failure (12 months), the report does not provide any timeline as to the possibility of actual success. Most counterinsurgency experts appear to be in agreement that it will take more than two years to know whether the plan has a chance of succeeding, and at least an additional three years for the plan to *actually* succeed. In short, the recommended *jump* is a 500 billion dollar gamble that would come on top of the Iraq trillion dollar war.

In these conditions, *any* responsible Administration - be it Democrat or Republican - would be justified in taking a closer look. That “endless money forms the sinews of war” (Cicero) is a timeless truth. The question is to what extent does the U.S. have endless money at this particular juncture?

Among the numerous analogies made between the wars in Afghanistan and Vietnam lately, the one that has yet to surface concerns the monetary dimension. The first casualty of the Vietnam War was not the Lyndon Johnson's Great Society project – it was the mighty dollar itself. Though the dollar had been the undisputed currency of the world ever since WWII, the Vietnam folly eventually forced Nixon to decouple the dollar from gold. From 1971 until roughly 2001, the dollar's new status did not seem to matter much, since the European Croesus could always be expected to bankroll the American Caesar.<sup>4</sup>

Not anymore. Today, Croesus no longer speaks German and French, but Mandarin and Arabic; and Croesus is increasingly vocal in its call to put an end to the status of the dollar as the world's

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<sup>4</sup> As Richard Rosecrance pointed out in 2003: “In the last thirty years, Europe has carried the primary financial burden, allowing the United States to maintain an essentially unbalanced economy while acting as the world's gendarme. Europe has not built up its military strength, but instead has done something much more important: it has created the financial conditions that have allowed the United States to act” (Richard Rosecrance, “Croesus and Caesar: The Essential Transatlantic Symbiosis,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2003. Contrary to what many argue, there is no such thing today as a China-America “financial balance of terror” as stable as the Soviet-U.S. nuclear balance of terror during the Cold War. There are *many* players interested in putting an end to the status of the dollar as the world's reserve currency, and the risks of miscalculations (and ensuing cascading effects) are limitless.

reserve currency. Ironically, the only people on earth who don't seem to realize the *incredible* advantage derived by America from the dollar's status are the American people themselves.

In last instance, America's military "command of the commons" rests on America's monetary command of the common currency.<sup>5</sup> The fact that, five years from now, the implementation of the McChrystal plan could actually lead to "victory" at the theater-strategic level is a distinct *possibility*. The fact that, five years from now as well, the dollar would no longer be the world's reserve currency is a *quasi-certainty*. The end of America as a *monetary* superpower would spell the end of America as a superpower *tout court* – the ultimate defeat at the national-strategic level.

Bottom line - on the one hand, the U.S. does not have 500 billion dollars to waste in an open-ended escalation in one of the many ungoverned sandboxes of the world. On the other hand, an incremental ("middle way") strategy would fail to create the psychological effect required in both the West and Afghanistan at this point.

That said, a *temporary* 40,000 *surge* remains a realistic option, but only so long as the White House strategy rests on two pillars "bounding" the counterinsurgency campaign - on the one hand, a convocation of a new *loya jirga* as advocated by counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen - on the other, a regional diplomatic settlement as advocated by Vice-President Joe Biden.

### **No Military Surge without a New Loya Jirga**

"Counterinsurgency is 80 percent political, 20 percent military." As simplistic as it might be, the standard formula still provides the best point of departure for assessing the Afghan situation since the August 20 elections.

When, on March 17, the Obama Administration agreed to a 17,000 troop surge, the goal was clearly to create a more secure environment for the upcoming August 20 elections. COIN expert David Kilcullen himself argued at the time that "it would be the height of folly to commit to a large-scale escalation now," and that the U.S. should simply use the extra 17,000 troops to stabilize the situation, but delay the big decision about escalation until after Afghanistan's presidential election in August.<sup>6</sup>

As it turned out, this limited *surge* ended up being a relative failure - on election day there were reportedly more than 400 Taliban attacks and, as a result, voter turnout was only 39 percent (compared to 70 percent in 2004).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Tony Corn, "Clausewitz in Wonderland," web special, *Policy Review*, September 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in David Ignatius, "Road Map for Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> According to some Western officials, voter turnout was actually as low as 1-5 percent in most parts of Kandahar and Helmand. Ahmed Rashid, "The Afghanistan Impasse," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 56, no 15, October 8, 2009.

More importantly, given the extent of the fraud, the August 20 election turned out to be an even bigger *political* failure which - though anticipated by some U.S. policy analysts<sup>8</sup> - clearly took by surprise an American political class focused on domestic issues.

If counterinsurgency is eighty percent political, twenty percent military, the logical point of departure of any discussion on Afghanistan ought to be the Galbraith report of October 4-19, rather than the McChrystal report of August 30. The report of the recently-fired number two of the UN Mission (UNAMA) deals mostly with political matters, and constitutes the most recent first-hand account available; the report of the ISAF Commander deals mostly with military matters, and was written long before the full-extent of the fraud had become public knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of his detailed testimony on the fraud and obfuscation that occurred before, during and after the August elections, Ambassador Peter Galbraith concludes unequivocally: "President Obama needs a legitimate Afghan partner to make any new strategy for the country work. However, the extensive fraud that took place on August 20 virtually guarantees that a government emerging from the tainted vote will not be credible with many Afghans."<sup>10</sup>

"Politics is perception." Irrespective of the final verdict of the electoral commissions and/or the rhetorical contortions of NATO leaders, the elections are by now perceived as illegitimate by the Afghan population at large. If the Obama Administration has so far kept a low profile on this all-important issue, it is presumably because it did not want to confront the UN mission to Afghanistan before the UN Security Council's decision to extend ISAF's mandate for another year (October 8).

Now that NATO's mandate has been extended and that the UN itself has (obliquely) acknowledged the magnitude of the electoral fraud, the worst mistake the U.S. and NATO allies could do would be to downplay the legitimacy problem, and to signal a willingness to continue to do business as usual with the "devil we know." By condoning in Afghanistan the kind of fraud

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<sup>8</sup> Writing the very eve of the election, CSIS Anthony Cordesman warned: "The election already is highly illegitimate and rigged, and will remain so regardless of the honesty of the voting process and the actual count. Karzai has spent months trying to exploit traditional ties and allegiances by buying bloc votes from ex-warlords, local leaders, and power brokers. The joke is that he has promised governorships to three times more such leaders than there are provinces. The reality is that Karzai's top running mates are the equivalent of warlords, and he had done everything possible to buy the election long before the vote will actually occur. As a result, the real question is how many Afghan voters will actually stay bought when they go to the polls." (Anthony Cordesman, "Legitimacy and the Afghan elections," [www.realclearworld.com](http://www.realclearworld.com), August 19, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Though the McChrystal report is as candid on the "crisis of confidence" in the host-nation government as diplomacy allows: "We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans - in both their government and in the international community that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents...Additional resources are required, but focusing on force or resource requirement entirely missed the point.. The weakness of state institutions, malign actions of power-brokers, widespread corruption and abuse of power by various officials, and ISAF's own errors, have given Afghan little reason to support their government. These problems have alienated large segments of the Afghan population. They do not trust GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] to provide their essential needs, such as security, justice, and basic services. A foreign army alone cannot beat an insurgency; the insurgency in Afghanistan requires an Afghan solution. This is their war and, in the end, ISAF's competency will prove less decisive than GIRoA's; eventual success requires capable Afghan governance capabilities and security forces."

<sup>10</sup> Peter W. Galbraith, "What I saw at the Afghan election," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2009, and "How the Afghan election was rigged," *Time*, October 19, 2009.

it condemned four months earlier in Iran, the West would not buttress Karzai's legitimacy - it would simply, irremediably, undermine its own legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan population.

Though hundreds of tribal leaders and officials from southern Afghanistan gathered in Kabul on September 2 to protest against the fraud, President Karzai, like the Bourbons of lore, appears to have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The fact that Karzai has gone as far as to blame the fraud *investigation* (rather than the fraud itself) for the increase in violence and the decrease of foreign investment (how do you say *chutzpah* in Pashto?) only shows that he has lost touch with reality and that a coalition government cannot be a sustainable proposition in the long-term.

The Karzai problem is now bigger than the insurgency problem, and the insurgency problem itself remains bigger than the ISAF problem. As the ISAF Commander, General McChrystal, to be sure, could not but devote special attention to the performance of its troops ("ISAF is not adequately executing the basics of counterinsurgency warfare"), but ISAF is twenty percent of the equation at most. As David Kilcullen put it:

Counterinsurgency is only as good as the government it supports. NATO could do everything right - it isn't - but will still fail unless Afghans trust their government. Without essential reform, merely making the government more efficient or extending its reach will just make things worse. Only a legitimately elected Afghan president can enact reforms, so at the very least we need to see a genuine run-off election or an emergency national council, called a *loya jirga*, before winter. Once a legitimate president emerges we need to see immediate action from him on a publicly announced reform program, developed in consultation with Afghan society and enforced by international monitors. Reforms should include firing human rights abusers and drug traffickers, establishing an independent authority to investigate citizen complaints and requiring officials to live in the districts they are responsible for (fewer than half do).<sup>11</sup>

Of the two possible scenarios put forward by Kilcullen, the first one (a genuine run-off) does not appear to be a possibility in the short-term. As Galbraith pointed out - "by itself, a runoff is no antidote for Afghanistan's electoral challenges. The widespread problems that allowed for fraud in the first round of voting must be addressed," and these systemic problems cannot be solved before the winter season. Even if they could, voter turnout, given current security conditions, could be even lower than 39 percent - thus imparting little legitimacy to the ultimate winner.

In the short-term, then, the only realistic option is to make of necessity virtue and convoke a new *loya jirga* while installing an interim coalition government. As Council on Foreign Relations Fellow Daniel Markey has argued:

Washington's officials and pundits have a tendency to underestimate the importance of politics in Afghanistan, focusing instead on troop levels and budgetary expenditures as the primary measures of progress or failure. This is a mistake; a lasting victory in this

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<sup>11</sup> David Kilcullen, "Ten Steps to Victory in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 4, 2009. See also David Kilcullen, "Balanced Response: A National Security Strategy for Protracted Struggle Against Extremism," in Alice E. Hunt et al., *Beyond Bullets: Strategies for Countering Violent Extremism*, Center for a New American Century, June 2009.

war can only be won in partnership with Afghans, and victory over the Taliban will require a combination of state capacity and popular legitimacy. Since Afghan state *capacity* is likely to be in short supply for the foreseeable future, *legitimacy* will be all the more necessary to achieve success. It's now clear that the massively rigged presidential election will neither confer legitimacy on the victor, nor turn the unpopular incumbent out of office—a double failure.

.. Instead of tinkering at the margins, Washington and its international partners should seize this opportunity to press Kabul to organize a second constitutional convention, or *loya jirga*. Like the last convention in 2003, it would bring together elected and traditional leaders from throughout Afghanistan to ratify a new structure for democratic governance. A second *loya jirga* offers at least three potential benefits.

First, by reopening the door to nationwide participation in a meaningful political debate, a new constitutional convention might help to reenergize the Afghan public, shift the political momentum away from the Taliban, and offer an alternative to "more of the same" in Kabul. For Afghans who have become increasingly demoralized by the corrupt and ineffective practices of their government, a convention provides a forum for venting grievances that went unaddressed by the flawed presidential election process. And even if a convention is closed to Taliban representation *per se*, the meeting could still provide an opportunity for the reconciliation and political empowerment of Afghanistan's most conservative Pashtun tribes -- a necessary step for ending the insurgency.

...Second, a convention could address debilitating institutional problems enshrined in the current Afghan constitution. The present system is marked by dominant presidential authority, weak political parties, and limited democratic accountability at the provincial level. Few new democratic states have succeeded with such centralized governing structures, especially in countries wracked by civil conflict.

...Third, a convention might offer a fresh start for the United States and the rest of the international community involved in Afghanistan. A bold new political initiative in Kabul would complement Washington's new counterinsurgency strategy, new military leadership, and renewed commitment to the war effort. Recent European proposals to pull together another international conference on Afghanistan also suggest a desire to re-engage NATO allies and bolster confidence in the mission."<sup>12</sup>

If the West "owes" anything to the Afghan people, it is the opportunity to hold a "free and fair" *loya jirga* without Western coercion – in contrast to 2003.

The original sin of the West following the 2001 Bonn agreement was twofold. Having agreed to a convocation of a *loya jirga*, the West went against the desire of two-thirds of *loya jirga* members to have King Zahir Shah as interim head of state, and bullied the assembly to accept Hamid Karzai instead. To make matters worse, the West then compelled the Afghans to adopt a

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Markey, "Don't Waste the Afghan Election Crisis," *Foreignpolicy.com*, September 15, 2009. [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/15/dont\\_waste\\_the\\_afghan\\_election\\_crisis?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/15/dont_waste_the_afghan_election_crisis?page=0,0) (emphasis added)

*presidential* regime, though it was by then well-established that a *parliamentary* regime is more conducive to democracy.<sup>13</sup>

In the past twelve months, by trying to force on President Karzai a powerful “chief of staff” who would function as a de facto prime-minister, Washington has already (if obliquely) admitted that a presidential regime for Afghanistan is a flawed idea, and that a new constitution is needed.

A new loya jirga should be convoked with a mandate to draft a new constitution promoting both a parliamentary regime and the kind of Spanish-like, “variable- geometry” federalism that gives greater autonomy to the regions. The new constitution could be ratified on time before the scheduled 2010 parliamentary elections (If the “mayor of Kabul” objects to the plan, he should be kindly reminded who pays for his security detail).

Trying to implement a *nation*-building strategy resting on *one man* is the ultimate self-defeating proposition. Nobody is indispensable in Afghanistan today, least of all Karzai, under whose “leadership” Afghanistan has gone from 117th place in 2004 to 172nd place in 2009 in the Transparency International index.

Some COIN enthusiasts have been so politically naïve as to believe that “an illegitimate election in Afghanistan does not mean legitimate American military and political goals can’t be met”<sup>14</sup> - leading Tom Friedman to remark: “I am not sure Washington fully understands just how much the Taliban-led insurgency is increasingly an insurrection against the behavior of the Karzai government - not against the religion or civilization of its international partners. And too many Afghan people now blame us for installing and maintaining this government.”<sup>15</sup>

While the McChrystal report argues that “we have a key advantage - the majority of Afghans do not want a return of the Taliban,” this is a half-truth at best. As a well-publicized January 2009 poll revealed, only 18 percent of the Afghan population is in favor of more foreign troops, while 44 percent want a decrease in the level of troops. And the percentage of Afghans who say that attacks on ISAF troops are justified has risen from 13 percent in 2006 to 25 percent in 2008.<sup>16</sup>

In short, in and of itself, not only will the kind of “jump” advocated by the McChrystal report never solve the political problem at the top, but a military buildup may actually aggravate the political problem at the bottom. Eight years into the game, a military jump only makes sense if it is accompanied by a political jump start.

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<sup>13</sup> The chronic instability associated with traditional parliamentarism has long been solved with the adoption of the so-called “constructive vote of no confidence” that exists in modern parliamentary regimes from German to Spain. On these issues, see Juan Linz, “The Virtues of Parliamentarism,” *Journal of Democracy*, Fall 1990, and “The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy*, Winter 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Fontaine and John Nagl, “Counterintuitive counterinsurgency,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Not good enough,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> ABC News/BBC/ARD, *National Survey of Afghanistan*, February 9, 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/Story?id=6787686&page=1>.

## Legitimacy-Building before Capacity-Building

“Counterinsurgency is eighty percent political, twenty percent military.” The primacy of the political dimension also means that, when it comes to the military, the *institutional* dimension (i.e. civil-military relations) ought to take precedence over the *operational* dimension (effectiveness).

The McChrystal report argues that “the Afghan National Army (ANA) must accelerate growth to the present target strength of 134,000 by Fall 2010, with the institutional flexibility to continue that growth to a new target ceiling of 240,000. The target strength of the Afghan National Police (ANP) must be raised to 160,000.” At first sight, this looks like a no-nonsense proposition, if only because keeping a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan for a year costs \$250,000, while an Afghan soldier costs only \$12,000.

But focusing on stepping up efforts to “train, mentor and empower” Afghan security forces (the centerpiece of the plan) will never amount to anything, and can even be reckless, if, as a result of the fraudulent August election, Afghan security forces in general, and the officer corps in particular, have divided loyalties vis-a-vis their civilian masters. Institutionalizing loyalty is a particularly acute problem in Afghanistan (“you can rent an Afghan but you cannot buy one”) that has two distinct dimensions.

*First, the ethnic “balance of power” within the military.* Civil-military-relations in multi-ethnic societies are known to be a complex matter. In the case of Afghanistan, it so happens that Tajiks are disproportionately represented in the officer corps and that there is a distinct possibility that they will simply not put up with the result of elections. As Galbraith pointed out: “Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's main challenger, is half Pashtun and half Tajik but is politically identified with the Tajiks, who dominate the north and are Afghanistan's second largest ethnic group. If the Tajiks believe that fraud denied their candidate the chance to compete in a second round, they may respond by simply not recognizing the authority of the central government. The north already has de facto autonomy; these elections could add an ethnic fault line to a conflict between the Taliban and the government that to date has largely been a civil war among Pashtuns.”

A focus on mid-term threats (Taliban) has led Western observers so far to overlook the possibility of shorter-term threats, in the form of either a polarization of Afghan civil society along ethnic lines, or a coup by Tajik elements within the Afghan military, or insubordination of Pashtun recruits against their Tajik officers. To this writer's knowledge, there is no detailed study of the ethnic make-up of the military institution, and of the inter-ethnic friction at the operational level whenever, say, an Uzbek battalion happens to be deployed in a Pashtun region.

Far from being simply a domestic issue, the ethnic composition of the armed forces has geopolitical ramifications as well. As former Indian ambassador M K Bhadrakumar (who served in both Pakistan and Afghanistan) has argued: “At present, Tajiks constitute over three-quarters of the Afghan army's officer corps. But Tajiks have been entirely out of the pale of Pakistani influence - even during the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Tajik nationalism challenges Pakistani aspirations to control Afghanistan. Summing up these dilemmas facing the Pakistani military,

former Pakistani foreign secretary Najmuddin Sheikh recently pointed out, "Obama's Afghan policy [of rapidly building up the ANA] would in fact be the realization of Pakistan's worst security fears."<sup>17</sup>

*Second, the question of professionalism and leadership.* If there is one thing that any neutral observer cannot help but be puzzled about, it is the contrast between the self-taught Taliban insurgents, who are proving to be both resilient and quick studies in the “graduate level of war,” and the Western-trained Afghan military, who are fickle and seem to take forever to learn the basics of the trade. Why it is that the “accidental guerrilla” is so professional, and the professional military so amateurish?

The answer, it would appear, is probably a combination of three factors: the politico-religious motivations of the Taliban are stronger than the political-economic motivations of the ANA; the salaries offered by the Afghan army are not high enough to attract the best and the brightest in Afghan society; U.S. trainers themselves (many of them contractors) do a poor job at training the natives.

In fairness, U.S. trainers in Afghanistan face a tougher challenge than their counterparts in Iraq. Iraq is one of the most literate countries in the Muslim world; yet, as Colonel Reese’s famous memo pointed out, the Iraqi military culture has proven hard to change.<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan, by contrast, is one of the least literate Muslim country (nine recruits out of ten are illiterate), and is composed of 18 different communities marked by ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. Given this context, focusing on capacity- and capability- building alone may yield much smaller results than expected.

Marine Corps University professor Mark Moyar has argued that the most critical variable in COIN is neither destroying insurgents nor winning the population but the quality of leadership:

Success in counterinsurgency depends primarily on the relative strengths of the counterinsurgent and insurgent *leaders*, not on the choice of methods from either the enemy-centric or population-centric playbooks... The past is littered with the carcasses of security force expansion programs that failed because they did not appreciate the centrality of leadership. Among those failures we can count the early development of the Afghan National Police and the Auxiliary Police program of 2007–2008. In case after case, planners assumed that creating security forces required merely recruiting, training, and equipping young men. While the organizers were able to complete those three tasks in a matter of months, they learned the hard way that competent leaders take

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<sup>17</sup> M K Bhadrakumar, “Strange Storm Brews in South Asia,” *Asia Times* online, December 2, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Colonel Reese’s leaked memo provides a cautionary tale for Afghanistan itself: “Our combat operations are currently the victim of circular logic. We conduct operations to kill or capture violent extremists of all types to protect the Iraqi people and support the GOI. The violent extremists attack us because we are still here conducting military operations. Furthermore, their attacks on us are no longer an organized campaign to defeat our will to stay; the attacks which kill and maim US combat troops are signals or messages sent by various groups as part of the political struggle for power in Iraq. The exception to this is AQI which continues its globalist terror campaign. Our operations are in support of an Iraqi government that no longer relishes our help while at the same time our operations generate the extremist opposition to us as various groups jockey for power in post-occupation Iraq.” Timothy R. Reese, “It’s time for the U.S. to declare victory and go home,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2009.

much longer to produce. Poorly led troops broke under fire. They often deserted or switched to the insurgent side, bringing their assault rifles with them. They used their authority and power to extract bribes from the population and commit acts of rape and pillage.... In Afghanistan today, the United States first must do its utmost to fix the severe leadership problems in the existing security forces...”<sup>19</sup>

Moyar concludes that better leadership can be achieved through an increase of U.S. trainers. Others are less optimistic. Upon learning that General William Caldwell had been appointed to head the NATO Training Mission, military analyst Ralph Peters recently remarked: “I know Caldwell can *train* the Afghans. I'm just not sure anyone can *motivate* them. We're sending the best we've got, a man who's led a division in combat and even battled the media to a standstill in Baghdad. But how do we get the Afghans to send *their* best?”<sup>20</sup>

Rather than toy with the idea of bribing tribal and/or Taliban elements in “not fighting,” why not go all the way and try to recruit the best and brightest for the NCO corps? A “bribe the tribes” scheme is a reckless gamble in a nation of inveterate fence-sitters. Instead of paying them for not fighting (what happens when we stop paying?), why not give a select few a highly-paid, regular commission in the military? That could make the difference between increasing reintegration and increasing corruption. In and of itself, speeding up recruitment and training considerably increases the risk of greater infiltration by the worst elements. A better, rather than bigger, military is what Afghanistan needs.

At any rate: be it ethnically or economically-based, legitimacy- and loyalty-building ought to take precedence over capacity- and capability- building. This is clearly an under-appreciated challenge in most discussions on the Afghan military today.<sup>21</sup>

### **Population Protection or Strategic Disaggregation?**

Since ISAF has the lead role in Security (and only a supporting role in Governance and Development), it was bound to happen that “population protection” would acquire, in the text of the ISAF report itself, a centrality it does not necessarily have in the overall scheme of things.

For an audience of civilian policy-makers who do not always understand the difference, the report is right in emphasizing that, *compared to* both conventional warfare and counterterrorism, which are “enemy-centric,” counterinsurgency is “population-centric.” But there is nothing to gain by hardening a *doctrine* into a *dogma*, and claiming that Afghanistan calls for the kind of classical COIN campaign in which success is achieved “not by seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces,” but by “gaining the support of the people.” By definition, the “clear, hold, build” operational strategy implies seizing *some* terrain and confronting *some* enemy (incidentally, in classical counterinsurgency, “clear, hold, build” was called “clear and hold” *tout court*).

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Moyar, “COIN needs Afghan leaders,” *DoDBuzz*, October 13, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Peters, “America’s Last Chance,” *New York Post*, October 13, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Obai Younossi, et al., *The Long March: Building an Afghan National Army*, RAND, 2009.

More importantly, it is a mistake to argue that Afghanistan calls for a “classical” COIN campaign. As David Kilcullen has amply demonstrated in his *Accidental Guerrilla*, today’s insurgencies in the Muslim world are *transnational*, and the challenge is to analytically and effectively discriminate between *local* insurgents and *global* jihadists.<sup>22</sup>

As important as it may be, “population protection” as such is only the defensive component of the campaign. The offensive component remains “strategic disaggregation of the enemy” through a variety of kinetic and non-kinetic means ranging from diplomatic negotiation, political reconciliation, financial cooptation, to economic reintegration, social reinsertion, military disruption, and targeted assassination.

While the 2003 ISAF mandate mentioned enemy neutralization first and population protection last, the McChrystal report essentially reverses the hierarchy of priorities and offer a maximalist conception of COIN in which “population protection” occupies center-stage, “training, mentoring and empowering” security forces comes second, and enemy neutralization appears to be a distant third. Symptomatic of this reversal of priorities is the following statement:

There are five principal actors in the conflict: the Afghan population, the GIROA, ISAF, the insurgency, the external players). It is important to begin with an understanding of each of these actors, *starting with the most important: the people...* The complex social landscape of Afghanistan is in many ways much more difficult to understand than Afghanistan’s enemies. Insurgent groups have been the focus of U.S. and allied intelligence for many years; however, ISAF has not sufficiently studied Afghanistan’s peoples, whose needs, identities and grievances vary from province to province and from valley to valley. This complex environment is challenging to understand, particularly for foreigners. For this strategy to succeed, ISAF leaders must redouble efforts to understand the social and political dynamics of all regions of the country and take action that meet the needs of the people, *and insist that GIROA officials do the same* (emphasis added).

*Hold on.* This is no longer counterinsurgency, but armed social engineering on an unprecedented scale. True enough, if you can manage to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland, there is a good chance that the insurgency might just wither away all by itself. At any rate, it would take decades before ISAF leaders (who don’t even speak Pashto or Dari) get such a granular understanding of a country the size of France as to be in a position to tell the host-nation government that “NATO knows best.”

The main danger in elevating “population protection” above everything else is to marginalize the importance of the question of the enemy’s “capabilities and intentions.” The McChrystal report does not always avoid this trap:

- The report fails to provide any quantitative estimate of the strength of the insurgents. If the enemy’s strength was close to 100,000, a robust COIN (“COIN Plus”) approach would certainly be in order. But we know from other official sources that the number is

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<sup>22</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

in fact closer to 10,000. In this case, a “COIN Lite” (or “CT Plus”) approach appears to be a more sensible course of action.

- The report offers a rather sketchy qualitative estimate of the relation the three regional Taliban *networks* among themselves, as well as of their respective relations to al Qaeda. The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbudin (HiG) are simply said to “coordinate action loosely, often achieving significant unity of purpose and even some *unity of effort*, but they do not share a formal command-and-control structure. They also do not have a single overarching strategy or campaign plan.” In addition, HQN is said to have a closer relation with al Qaeda than QST and HiG.<sup>23</sup> But the fact that the links appear to be mostly tactical rather than strategic should logically lead to a more granular estimate of the insurgents’ capabilities and intentions.
- The report has little to say about the motivation of the insurgents as *individuals* (as opposed to *networks*). In Iraq, it was said that five percent of the insurgents were “true believers,” 25 percent were politically disenfranchised, 70 percent were economically motivated. Since each insurgency is unique, one has to assume that the ratio in Afghanistan is somewhat different, but if you don’t have even a ballpark estimate, there is no way to implement the “political reconciliation” element of a disaggregation strategy.

It bears repeating - framing the Afghan debate in terms of an *operational* alternative (CT vs. COIN) is counterproductive in that it marginalizes the real challenge, i.e. *strategic* disaggregation, which will *have* to combine some CT and COIN elements.

In some military quarters today, there is a tendency to trade a Clausewitzian theology for a COIN theology.<sup>24</sup> The real challenge is to trade theology of any kind for better anthropology. Interestingly, General McChrystal himself has shown an understanding of the maddening complexities of tribal politics worthy of a professional “development anthropologist”.<sup>25</sup> But McChrystal is poorly served by doctrinaire supporters who muddied the water by framing the debate in terms of an either/or (CT vs. COIN) alternative.

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<sup>23</sup> Other analysts have argued that all Taliban networks maintain close links with al Qaeda. Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Al Qaeda is the tip of the jihadist spear,” *Long War Journal*, October 8, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> For a laser-guided critique of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine on the “pol-mil” front, see Stephen Biddle, “The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, no2, June 2008.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance McChrystal’s remarks on the micro-politics of well-building in his October 1, 2009 speech at the IISS in London: “In Afghanistan, things are rarely as they seem, and the outcomes of actions we take, however well intended, are often different from what we expect...For example, digging a well sounds quite simple. How could you do anything wrong by digging a well to give people clean water? Where you build that well, who controls that water, and what water it taps into all have tremendous implications and create great passion. If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village. If you tap into underground water, you give power to the owner of that well that they did not have before, because the traditional irrigation system was community-owned. If you dig a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village. Therefore, with a completely altruistic aim of building a well, you can create divisiveness or give the impression that you, from the outside, do not understand what is going on or that you have sided with one element or another, yet all you tried to do is provide water.”

While COIN has enjoyed a much-needed renaissance in recent years, a widening gap is appearing today between the Minimalists, for whom COIN is doable, but should be avoided whenever possible, and the Maximalists, who see COIN as a silver bullet for “changing entire societies.” To use an old Weberian trope, and at the risk of simplifying: while the Minimalists are driven by an “ethic of responsibility,” the Maximalists are driven by an “ethic of conviction.”

If the Maximalists appear to have the upper hand, it is not due to greater intellectual cogency, but to broader political constituency. The theorists of COIN as “nation-building on steroids” can count on the support of, on the one hand, the humanitarian-industrial complex, on the other, former hawks mugged by reality who now see in COIN a kinder, gentler alternative to the scabrous “bomb-early-and-often” school of exporting democracy. The most vocal supporters of General McChrystal tend to belong to the Maximalist camp, and end up being the General’s own worst enemies.

It is disingenuous to argue that only “boots on the ground” in Afghanistan can provide the kind of tactical intelligence needed for even a CT “decapitation” campaign. Whose boots, what grounds and whose heads are we talking about? Since both the al Qaeda and Taliban leaderships happen to be in Pakistan, the kind of tactical intelligence needed in that case is more likely to come from the ongoing CIA surge in Pakistan (seven hundred officers and counting) than from ISAF, whose intelligence-gathering activities are likely to be limited to Afghan-based, rank-and-file insurgents. Nobody, at any rate, is arguing for a purely “offshore” CT strategy.

As to the claim that a return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan would automatically lead to a return of al Qaeda, this is largely a moot point. Given the choice, wouldn’t you rather see al Qaeda in the Afghan sandbox than in nuclear-armed Pakistan? At any rate, as CT expert Paul Pillar argued, the real issue is “whether preventing such a haven [in Afghanistan] would reduce the terrorist threat to the United States enough from what it otherwise would be to offset the required expenditure of blood and treasure and the barriers to success in Afghanistan, including an ineffective regime and sagging support from the population.”<sup>26</sup>

It is equally disingenuous to argue that, the CT approach having clearly “failed” since 2001, the only alternative is a maximalist COIN approach. The name of the game was “disrupt, dismantle and destroy al Qaeda:” in that respect, the counterterrorist campaign has in fact been a clear success, as counterterrorist expert Bruce Hoffman readily points out.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that there are inherent limits to what a CT decapitation strategy can achieve should not lead anyone to conclude that it has “failed” or, a fortiori, that a “fully-resourced” COIN approach would deliver more - if only because there not a chance to see a fully resourced “civilian surge” in the timeframe indicated by the report.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul R. Pillar, “Who is Afraid of a Terrorist Haven?,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> “The al-Qaeda of 2009, it should be noted, is a mere shadow of its pre-9/11 self. It does not have the freedom of movement, massive personnel numbers, robust network of training camps and operational bases, functioning international infrastructure, and considerable largesse that it possessed nine years ago when it was located in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.” Bruce Hoffman, “How to Win Afghanistan,” *The National Interest* online, October 8, 2009.

## What “Civilian Surge?”

COIN is a three-legged stool, and while ISAF has the lead on Security, it only has a supporting function in Governance and Development. At the risk of simplifying, most recommendations contained in the report fall into one of the following categories:

- On the one hand, recommendations that an ISAF commander has the power to implement (even without a surge), but whose effects will be mostly felt at the tactical-operational level - changing ISAF culture, better detainee operations, closer partnering with local forces, etc.
- On the other hand, recommendations that an ISAF commander is in no position to implement (even after a surge), though they would have a definite impact at the strategic level - they range from better Afghan governance at the national and sub-national levels, to greater “unity of effort” on the part of the myriad of IGOs and NGOs, better integrated military-civilian effort in the context of the U.S. whole-of-government approach, etc.

*Host-Nation Government?* ISAF has limited leverage on elected officials. To be sure, ISAF can “out-bribe” any competitor, but it cannot put an end to corruption itself. And while bribing your way can lead to tactical successes in the short-term, it often aggravates the strategic equation in the long term.

*International Community?* In the two critical years following international intervention, aid per capita in Bosnia was \$679, while Afghanistan only got \$57. Today, there is little that ISAF can do about the fact that military spending since 2001 amounts to \$100 million a day on average while international aid amount only to \$7 million a day. Nor can ISAF do much about the fact that only ten percent of the assistance actually reaches the average Afghan.<sup>28</sup>

*Whole-of-Government?* As Kilcullen pointed out, there is a major military-civilian mismatch within the U.S. Government: while there are 1.68 million uniformed military, there are only 6,000 diplomats and 2,000 AID officers. In terms of personnel, the military-civilian ratio is 210:1; in terms of budget, it is closer to 350:1. The McChrystal report is unquestionably right to argue that “ISAF cannot succeed without a corresponding cadre of civilian experts,” but creating an interagency Civilian Response Corps with the required skill sets will take at least a decade.

Contrary to a widespread myth within the U.S. military, the problem is not that U.S. diplomats are unwilling to volunteer in great number to be part of Provincial Reconstruction Teams. They do volunteer *en masse* - but for one thing, the State Department is so understaffed that volunteers do not reach “critical mass;” for another, diplomats rarely have the skill sets required to make a difference on the ground (a typical agricultural attaché is no agronomist, but a policy analyst trained to assess the consequences of EU milk quotas on Midwest farming).

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<sup>28</sup> *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, ACBAR, March 2008.

*Bottom line* - Even if the U.S. Government had the financial resources for the kind of “military jump” advocated by the report, it still would not have the human resources required for the “civilian surge.”

### **Reminder: “The Enemy Has a Vote”**

The McChrystal report also contains recommendation of the “third kind,” i.e. recommendations that are in the power of the ISAF commander to implement (with or without surge), but which may yield much less results than expected if only because, as the old saying goes, “the enemy has a vote.”

On the face of it, redeploying troops from sparsely populated border areas to population centers is a no-brainer. Yet, it is not as simple as it first appears.

Some ways of “holding terrain” in sparsely populated areas actually offer greater “population protection” than one would initially think. As David Kilcullen splendidly demonstrated, U.S. troops are never more effective on *all* fronts (governance, development, security) than when they are out there in the middle of nowhere doing “road-building.” If you redeploy these troops in the cities in order to “protect population,” who will do the road-building in the countryside? What will be the equivalent, in an urban context, of “road-building” in terms of yielding optimal governance, development, and security dividends?

In addition, what will prevent the Taliban from sending suicide bombers in crowded market places, thus killing 100 civilians at a time and scoring major victories (amplified by media that are *city-based*) by demonstrating that, once again, ISAF over-promises and under-delivers? After eight years of occupation, who do you think the local population will blame for the bombings? As General McChrystal himself acknowledged in his London speech: “On the one hand, you might say that the Afghan people would recoil against the Taliban who left that IED. To a degree, they do, but we must also understand that they recoil against us because they might think that, if we were not there, neither would be the IED.”

Should ISAF troops be redeployed, the Taliban may decide to take the war to the cities without waiting for 40,000 more troops to arrive. Or they may decide to capitalize on the U.S. rush to increase security forces to increase their own infiltration of the ANA and ANP. Or, since more U.S. troops also mean more contractors supporting the troops, greater U.S. dependence on convoys, and greater opportunities for the Taliban for either extortion or disruption, they may decide to focus their efforts on supply lines in the coming months – a sort of Ho Chi Minh trail in reverse. Then again, they may simply decide to lie low and play for time until a U.S. drawdown. As the local saying goes: “Americans have the watches, but the Taliban have the time.”

COIN Maximalists tend to be so haunted by Vietnam and the idea of fighting “A Better War” (Lewis Sorley) that they overlook the cautionary tale provided by a more recent campaign in armed nation-building: Bosnia. A small country of four million people in the heart of Europe, Bosnia once was the poster child of nation-building:

By the end of 1996, 17 different foreign governments, 18 UN agencies, 27 intergovernmental organizations, and about 200 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) - not to mention tens of thousands of troops from across the globe - were involved in reconstruction efforts. On a per capita basis, the reconstruction of Bosnia - with less than four million citizens - made the post-World War II rebuilding of Germany and Japan look modest... From 1996 to 2007, \$14 billion in foreign assistance flooded into Bosnia amounting to approximately \$300 per person per year in a country of less than four million people. (By comparison, since 2002, international donors have pledged only about \$65 for each resident of Afghanistan per year.)<sup>29</sup>

Fourteen years later, Bosnia is an economic basket case and a political tinderbox ready to explode again, thus creating the possibility of new “safe havens” for al Qaeda. Unsurprisingly, Europeans are more inclined to focus on Bosnia than on Afghanistan, and have shown little interest in the kind of “unbounded” counterinsurgency promoted by the COIN Maximalists.<sup>30</sup>

When, on September 12, 2001, the Europeans invoked Article 5 for the first time in NATO’s history, they did not sign up for Operation Infinite Mission Creep. Today, America’s key allies (UK, France, and Germany) are exploring ways to regain the diplomatic initiative at the regional level in order to gradually disengage militarily. Turning a Great Game into a Grand Bargain is exceedingly difficult, though not impossible. At any rate, it is not clear that it is in America’s interest to remain passive on the diplomatic front and let key allies wander off the Afghan reservation.<sup>31</sup>

### **No Military Surge without a Diplomatic Settlement**

It is too often forgotten that, in the twentieth century at least, Afghanistan has been the “playground of neighbors” more often than a “graveyard of empires.” The rivalry between Pakistan and India existed long before U.S. troops arrived, and will continue to exist long after U.S. troops have departed. In recent months, the rivalry has, if anything intensified, with elements of the Pakistani security services supporting the Taliban, and India supporting Karzai.

As Henry Kissinger pointed out recently, India and Pakistan are actually only two of the many regional stakeholders:

The special aspect of Afghanistan is that it has powerful neighbors or near neighbors - Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Iran. *Each is threatened in one way or another and, in*

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<sup>29</sup> Patrice C. McMahon and Jon Western, “The Death of Dayton – How to Stop Bosnia from Falling Apart,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2009).

<sup>30</sup> As a former DOD deputy assistant secretary pointed out: “If “counterinsurgency” is merely a more palatable stand-in for “nation-building,” that politically freighted but strategically more illuminating term, then our terminology may be obscuring the true extent of our predicament. The U.S. military can be notoriously resistant to change, so the rapid ascent of counterinsurgency thinking is an impressive triumph of intellectual entrepreneurship in a normally parochial institution. But while counterinsurgency theory and doctrine are vital and have a role to play, their applicability is bounded. Too often in Washington the discovery of a hammer makes everything look like a nail. The question is not whether counterinsurgency works, but where, when and to what ends it is wise to commit U.S. power and resources.” Celeste Ward, “Countering the Military’s Latest Fad,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008.

*many respects, more than we are by the emergence of a base for international terrorism: Pakistan by Al Qaeda; India by general jihadism and specific terror groups; China by fundamentalist Shiite jihadists in Xinjiang; Russia by unrest in the Muslim south; even Iran by the fundamentalist Sunni Taliban. Each has substantial capacities for defending its interests. Each has chosen, so far, to stand more or less aloof.*

The summit of neighboring (or near-neighboring) countries proposed by the Secretary of State could, together with NATO allies (...), seek an international commitment to an enforced non-terrorist Afghanistan, much as countries were neutralized by international agreement when Europe dominated world affairs. This is a complex undertaking. *But a common effort could at least remove shortsighted temptations to benefit from the embarrassment of rivals.* It would take advantage of the positive aspect that, unlike Vietnam or Iraq, the guerrillas do not enjoy significant support. It may finally be the route to an effective national government. *If cooperation cannot be achieved, the United States may have no choice but to reconsider its options and to gear its role in Afghanistan to goals directly relevant to threats to American security. In that eventuality, it will do so not as an abdication but as a strategic judgment.*<sup>32</sup>

In their zeal to push for a “pure” Counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan, many Maximalists have failed to realize that, in the so-called Biden plan, the preference for a “Counterterrorism Plus” approach is subordinated to a diplomatic regionalization of the Afghan question.<sup>33</sup> As Biden argues, the real center of gravity is Pakistan, yet instead of thinking in terms of “PakAf,” we continue to think in terms of “Afpak,” and to spend \$ 65 billion a year in a sandbox like Afghanistan while spending only \$2 billion in nuclear armed Pakistan where the bulk of Al Qaeda leadership is located.

The advantage of a Biden-like regionalization is that it provides cover for gradual devolution in the event of the failure of Plan A. By contrast, an open-ended COIN escalation would be synonymous with greater U.S. “ownership” and, as Tom Friedman has argued, “baby-sitting” 30 million Afghans is one thing, “adopting” them is quite another. If Washington is in the mood for a costly adoption, then America would be better inspired to adopt a “Mexifornia,” which is currently going south.

The U.S. should not wait too long before launching a regional diplomatic offensive over Afghanistan, if only because if America does not do it now (when it is still in a strong position), its main creditor China will do it later, and the West could lose face in the process.<sup>34</sup> Having spent 500 billion dollars in vain, the last thing we need five years from now are front-page headlines reading “The Mighty SCO Comes to the Rescue of a Bankrupt NATO.”

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Kissinger, “Deployments and Diplomacy,” *Newsweek*, October 3, 2009 (emphasis added).

<sup>33</sup> Holly Bailey and Evans Thomas, “An inconvenient truth-teller,” *Newsweek*, October 19, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> On China and Afghanistan, see former Ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar, “China breaks its silence on Afghanistan,” *Asia Times* online, February 25, 2009, and “China maps an end to the Afghan war,” *Asia Times* online, October 2, 2009.

## **Toward a Kilcullen-Biden Plan?**

At this particular juncture, the U.S. simply cannot afford a 500 billion dollar open-ended escalation. Nor can it opt for an incremental (“middle road”) strategy which would fail to create the psychological effects required in both the West and Afghanistan.

A temporary 40,000 surge is doable, but only if the core of the Obama strategy is a “Kilcullen-Biden” plan combining convocation of a loya jirga domestically with a regionalization of the Afghan question diplomatically. Let’s go massive for a limited time, and “clear, hold, and build” as much as we can. If it does not work, a regional negotiation provides ample cover for a drawdown.

COIN diehards will argue that in the absence an explicit long-term commitment, large segments of the Afghan population will continue to do fencing-sitting. Guess what: if the West is “the West” rather than just another Bananastan, it is because, from the British in 1688 to the Americans in 1776, and from the French in 1789 to the Romanians in 1989, Westerners decided that to “live free or die” was a more honorable option than forever “fencing-sitting.” At the end of the day, if 30 million Afghans want to be known as a nation of fence-sitters unwilling to stand up to 15,000 insurgents, it is their problem first, that of their immediate neighbors second, and only third that of the West itself.

COIN Maximalists and Minimalist can at least agree on one thing: whatever the option chosen, McChrystal is the man for the job. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the ISAF Commander has a grasp of tribal politics worthy of a professional anthropologist. On the other hand, reading between the lines of the report, it is not hard to see that General McChrystal has the kind of quiet determination that led a General Foch, on the eve of the Marne offensive, to defiantly report:

Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. I shall attack.

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