

Scrounging for Answers in Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

As expected, the declassified strategic review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan released by President Barack Obama on December 16 for public consumption is extremely cautious and bland. One can only hope that the classified version has more meat on the bone, if the United States is to deal with the highly complex, rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

The five-page report cites some progress in relation to al-Qaeda, Pakistan and Afghanistan but states that “the challenge remains to make our gains durable and sustainable.” It says the U.S. military surge this year has halted Taliban inroads in the south of the country, while the United States continues to successfully kill Pakistan-based operatives of al-Qaeda, which has been degraded to its lowest level since 2001. However, it warns that gains against the Taliban remain “reversible.”

The review also says that the strategy “is setting the conditions” to withdraw a small number of U.S. troops in July 2011, but it does not specify how many of the hundred thousand American soldiers in the country would actually leave or from which locations. The enormous confusion created by Obama in his West Point speech in December 2009, when Afghans and regional powers assumed that the Americans would start leaving Afghanistan by 2011, has been avoided in the review by talking up the new date of 2014 when a full transition to Afghan forces will be completed—something that was agreed upon at the recent NATO summit in Lisbon. Moreover, the review states unequivocally that the United States will remain committed to Afghanistan and the region well beyond that date.

The review resists any public criticism of Pakistan for continuing to host Taliban and al-Qaeda sanctuaries or President Hamid Karzai, whose government has been prone to incompetence and corruption. However, two classified intelligence reports given to the president just before Thanksgiving in November, called National Intelligence Estimates (NIE), cited Pakistan’s hosting of sanctuaries as a serious obstacle to U.S. objectives. The NIEs were first reported on by the Associated Press.

Tensions with Pakistan have been ongoing. In the week preceeding the review, separate visits to Islamabad by U.S. commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen and senior CIA officials made it plain to the Pakistan government that Washington was getting impatient with the lack of Pakistani military action in the tribal areas where al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders are partly based.

U.S. press reports said that the NIE on Afghanistan questioned the effectiveness, until now, of the U.S. military surge in southern Afghanistan and the ability of the Karzai government to carry through a full transition. However, the review states that there have been major advances in the drive against the Taliban.

The assessment is short on details and still leaves unanswered how by 2014 the United States will be able to so improve the situation in Afghanistan that the transition to Afghan authority can take place and allow Western forces to leave. It also leaves unanswered as to what strategy America will pursue toward Pakistan in the months ahead if Pakistan is unwilling or unable to pursue al-Qaeda and the Taliban on its soil. The singular lack of a strategy for Pakistan and instead ad hoc tactical moves by both the Bush and the Obama administrations continue to impact U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

There is no mention of the policies of reintegration of Taliban foot soldiers being pursued by the Afghan government with U.S. support and funding, and not a whisper about talks with the Taliban—something that President Karzai, several European members of NATO with troops in Afghanistan and regional countries such as

Pakistan are desperately keen to pursue. The Taliban have sent repeated signals that they want to talk to the Americans rather than Karzai. The Karzai government has held on-again, off-again talks about talks with some Taliban elements since 2008, but they have not yet moved into the sphere of negotiations.

It was tragic that the Richard Holbrooke, the point man on Afghanistan and Pakistan for the U.S. government, died so suddenly just a few days before the review was released. Holbrooke believed strongly in a political settlement even though he was constrained in public to say so due to opposition from within the administration, the U.S. military and what is now a U.S. Congress dominated by Republicans.

The U.S. military continues to believe in its military surge and wants it extended into next year so that the Taliban can be decisively degraded and fragmented, which, the military believes, would then force them to the conference table. Holbrooke and his team may well have been able to lead the United States toward a political settlement in Afghanistan that would have allowed a faster withdrawal of U.S. forces and greater stability in Afghanistan and the region. It is still unclear who will replace Holbrooke.

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*Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and writer, is the author most recently of **Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia** (Penguin, 2009). His book **Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia** (Yale, 2010) has been updated and republished on the tenth anniversary of its original release.*