

Fear and Loathing in Afghanistan?

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The passing tempest towards the end of June that led to the relief of US General Stanley McChrystal as commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan was both fascinating and disturbing. Much of the initial focus of the public debate focused on whether Gen. McChrystal should or should not be relieved because of the apparent distain of his command staff for their civilian leadership. The apparent split in opinion among media commentators on this question apparently existed even within the administration of President Barak Obama, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publicly admitted he advised the president that Gen. McChrystal should be kept in post lest removing him slow down or even halt the momentum of the new counterinsurgency strategy. The revelations in the Rolling Stone article, "The Runaway General", put President Obama in a "damned if he did and damned if he didn't" position; on the one hand the president ran the risk of appearing weak if he did not dismiss Gen. McChrystal, while on the other hand he ran the risk that the removal of the general could have an adverse impact on success in Afghanistan for which he would ultimately be blamed. The President, however, demonstrated considerable political deftness in accepting Gen. McChrystal's resignation and nominating Gen. David Petraeus, currently heading up Central Command, to replace him.

But, while the public fracas was fascinating to observe, the underlying implications were worrisome. What the apparent attitudes of Gen. McChrystal's staff made clear was the lack of "unity of purpose" between the American military leadership and civilian leadership. This lack of unity of purpose is, however, neither particularly new nor revelatory. It is no secret that US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry did not, and probably still does not, support the increase of US forces in Afghanistan or the

current counterinsurgency strategy devised by Gen McChrystal, or that Vice President Joe Biden very strongly preferred that the US and NATO pursue a counterterrorism strategy instead of a counterinsurgency strategy. Nor is it a secret that Ambassador Eikenberry had frosty relations with Gen. McChrystal and does not think that President Hamid Karzai is a viable partner for the US and NATO. Or that Richard Holbrooke, the US special ambassador for Afghanistan, is not on speaking terms with Karzai. One could, unfortunately, offer more examples of less than full harmony in the upper political and command echelons. Perhaps what really raises the eyebrow is that the apparent lack of unity of purpose at the top is seemingly evident further down the command chain. The 'surge' of US forces last year and then again this year has not been supported by the expected complementary 'surge' in civilian capabilities – though this particular problem is as much one of resources as it is with will or purpose. On the military side there has been a steady drip of public reports indicating that many junior US military leaders, engaged in the actual boots-on-the-ground tactical operations, question the rules of engagement designed to 'protect the population' at the expense, in their view, of the lives and limbs of the women and men who are doing the actual fighting.

Rectifying this apparent lack of unity of purpose across the many involved actors at seemingly all levels will be no easy matter. President Obama in announcing his acceptance of Gen McChrystal's resignation chastised the US senior civilian leaders for their apparent policy discord, but whether this public dressing down will have the desired effect or merely result in a papering over of differences is open to question. The president may have to, perhaps even should, replace some of the senior civilian players who are not completely onboard in support of the current official policy. Further, the president needs to address the problems inherent to US relations with President Karzai, as well as those hampering current relations with the Pakistan military and civilian leadership. Gen. Petraeus also faces major challenges as he assumes command. Certainly, any number of senior officers who were working with Gen. McChrystal will be quietly redeployed as Gen. Petraeus brings in his own staff, but the new commander further needs to convince the rank and file of the real utility of the current rules of engagement, and of the counterinsurgency strategy more generally, in spite of the personal costs. He too needs to develop a viable working relationship with President Karzai and his opposite numbers in Pakistan, never mind a better working relationship with Ambassador Eikenberry and America's many allies in Afghanistan. All in all,

seemingly what is required to ensure unity of purpose is a major reset of relations amongst and across the entire the range of involved actors, from the lowest to the loftiest.

This effort will be not easy, if it is even possible to achieve, and time is a precious commodity. Counterinsurgency is a long term effort, and is never easy. Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is proving to be particularly difficult and complex, and the effort appears not to be going well. Military operations in the Marjah region of Helmand Province earlier this year initially appeared successful, but the much touted 'government in a box' follow-on now appears to have been a largely empty container. Recent reports suggest that Afghans in the Marjah area are extremely wary about supporting the US forces still there, or to support the local and national governments, such as these even functionally exist in the province. These locals do not feel secure, for they are subject to continued covert and even overt acts of intimidation and violence from the insurgent forces that went to ground instead of fleeing (or being killed). The apparent slow down in the on-going operations in Kandahar and Kandahar Province, or 'process' as the US military now terms operations there, indicate that that all is not going as well as initially hoped or expected for this important phase of the strategy. Further, in the north there continues to be growing evidence that the Taliban are becoming entrenched in the Kunder region. More generally, the Taliban and/or associated opposition forces continue to wreak havoc with persistent attacks against local village and tribal leaders, NATO forces, Afghan government officials, and aid organizations. It is telling that Gen. McChrystal had been very careful through this past spring to state that US and NATO forces were succeeding in 'reversing the momentum', while Secretary of Defense Gates in the wake of Gen. McChrystal's relief felt obliged to state that he did not think that US and NATO forces were 'bogged' down in Afghanistan.

McChrystal's cautious observations and Gates' more recent reassurance reflect at best carefully guarded assessments of the progress in Afghanistan, and, after more than nine years of operations there, are not likely to be very reassuring to American and other NATO member publics. For a very salient issue is just how much longer our publics will tolerate the war in the Afghanistan. NATO's publics are more than just uneasy about their governments' commitments to Afghanistan given the growing human and economic costs. We should anticipate that these publics are likely to turn

even more against the war in Afghanistan through this summer. This June, the monthly death toll among NATO personnel reached 100 – the highest monthly toll in over nine years - and the casualty rate will, as Gen. Petraeus has warned, remain comparatively high through this summer. That the casualty rate would rise, particularly amongst American troops, is to be expected given that the counterinsurgency strategy involves ‘clearing’ many selected areas of insurgents, including areas where previously the insurgents had largely exercised unopposed sway. But this is a nuance that our publics likely do not appreciate or even care about. The long term counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan is going to run up very soon against rising public impatience and this collision will almost certainly trigger a consequent terminal caving of the political will amongst NATO’s democratic leadership to continue the fight.

President Obama, in announcing the second surge of US forces in December 2009, sought to straddle the divide between those who increasingly believe the US should pull out of Afghanistan and those who believe that America and its allies must make a firm commitment to stay the course. Both the president and the new commanding general sought in the wake of the Gen. McChrystal affair to clarify the US position. Gen. Petraeus in his Senate confirmation hearing noted that the policy was to draw down the numbers of the ‘surged’ forces in the summer of 2011, dependent on the conditions on the ground, while President Obama stated that everyone should be clear that this policy did not mean that America would be packing up and turning off the lights a year from now. No doubt both men are sincere that the US has no intention of pulling out 12 months hence. Yet, the American commitment to Afghanistan is strictly time-limited, and so is the commitment of its many allies there – the growing human and resource costs are a burden which is increasingly hard to bear and difficult to justify. NATO forces in Afghanistan, under the command of Gen. Petraeus, only have until next spring to show that the counterinsurgency strategy is making substantive, observable progress, and even with such progress will likely only have another year or so before America and its many diverse allies start to pull out. This two to three year time frame is far off. At issue when this soon-to-come point arrives is whether the objectives of the mission in Afghanistan have been reasonably attained, or whether, as ever more increasingly fear, the US and its allies will be withdrawing having failed to overcome the complexities and difficulties which are Afghanistan.