

RELEASE IN PART
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From: sbwhoep [redacted]
Sent: Thursday, October 8, 2009 10:14 AM
To: H
Subject: H: Afghan. Sid

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Hillary: FYI: I found this one of the most sensible and informed brief articles on Afghanistan. Patrick Cockburn, of the London Independent, is one of the best informed on-the-ground journalists. He was almost always correct on Iraq. Sid

Patrick Cockburn: To say this war must be won in a year is nonsense

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/patrick-cockburn-to-say-this-war-must-be-won-in-a-year-is-nonsense-1799296.html>

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Eight years ago I was standing on a hill 50 miles north of Kabul watching the flashes in the night sky as the US air strikes started again at the Taliban front line. There were a few ineffective puffs of fire from Taliban anti-aircraft guns which could do nothing against the bombs and missiles raining down on them.

It was a strange war to cover, not least because so little real fighting took place. The reputation of the Afghan fighting man is partly based on agilely joining the winning side at the right moment. In the meantime they don't fight too hard for anybody and try to avoid getting killed.

The US and British press mostly reported the war of 2001 as a real military conflict and rather missed the point that the Taliban had just gone home. I remember visiting the former headquarters of a Taliban armoured brigade in the city of Ghazni south west of Kabul. The tanks and armoured vehicles had all been smashed to pieces by American bombs, but when I asked local people how many men the Taliban had lost, I was told "none at all. They could see what was going to happen so they just ran away."

Just as the US military victory of 2001 was overstated, so eight years later is the sense of military crisis which is being busily stoked by Gen Stanley A McChrystal, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan. In Washington military officials are quoted as saying that the war will be won or lost in the next twelve months.

This is nonsense. The Taliban have been able to advance so rapidly in the last three years because they have Pakistani backing and because of the spectacular political and military weakness of President Hamid Karzai's government. But the Taliban draw all their strength from the Pashtun community, which makes up 42 per cent of the Afghan population. They will have great difficulty advancing into areas occupied by the other 58 per cent of the population where there is a Tajik, Hazara or Uzbek majority.

Squads of six or eight Taliban on motorcycles might be harassing the roads around Kabul, but there is no need to treat them as if they were North Vietnamese divisions at the gates of Saigon in 1975. The strength of the Taliban is that not that they can take and hold territory, but that they can inflict quite small military losses on the US which are politically unacceptable back home. They can do this through roadside bombs, something the US army speaks as if it were a new device, though it was being used against the British army in Ireland in 1921. If the Americans and British try to hold territory supposedly cleared of Taliban with penny packets of troops then these are vulnerable to being suddenly targeted by the other side.

It is to prevent this happening that Gen McChrystal has asked for an extra 40,000 soldiers. But Afghans tell me that more foreign troops will simply mean more violence and dead Afghans as more of the country becomes a battlefield. It is absurd to imagine that the world's most heavily equipped military force is not going to use its weapons when it comes under attack. Polls also show that Taliban support is at its height in just those areas where Afghan civilians have been killed by American shells and bombs.

So what should Obama do? First of all he has time. He is not going to win or lose the war in the next year. Like it or not he is stuck with Mr Karzai and he should get used to the idea. It is reasonable to suggest helping to produce a larger Afghan army and police force but this cannot be done overnight. Most military recruits are there for the money and are too malnourished even to wear American flack jackets. Speeding up security training for Afghan police meant over the summer that terrified men, often on heroin, were being sent to man dangerous and isolated police posts with just three weeks training. Many of them did not come back.

One way Obama could strengthen the Afghan army and police is to make sure their men are paid properly. In Kabul many facilities are being guarded by policemen earning \$70 a month, which is not enough to live on unless supplemented with bribes. This contrasts with \$250,000 a year paid to foreign consultants who lurk inside heavily defended compounds. Paying the Iraqi army properly really did make a difference in Baghdad and might do the same in Afghanistan where 40 per cent of men are unemployed. A difference is that Iraqi oil revenues last year were \$62 billion while the Afghan government is dependent on foreign aid.

The US and its allies will have to pay. It is carefully thought out measures like this that Obama should be considering and not the panicky dispatch of US Special Forces or tens of thousand of more troops.