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## A fog swirls in the Hindu Kush

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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The 19th century Prussian [military](#) theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his famous work, *On War*, "The great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently - like the effect of a fog or moonshine - gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance." Unsurprisingly, a Clausewitzian war such as the one in the Hindu Kush is often covered in thick fog.

Yet, there are times when the fog abruptly lifts or becomes transparent and non-material, and the atmosphere of uncertainty, hazard and blundering that characterizes the Afghan war eases a little and it becomes possible to grasp at air and arrest the declining lack of confidence.

One such moment presented itself on August 5, when the United States commander of the forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, was called to a meeting in Belgium with US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. There Gates and Mullen told the tough marine to go slow in submitting his report to US President [Barack Obama](#) in mid-August, as was expected earlier, and to wait until the outcome of the Afghan presidential elections on August 20 was known.

### AfPak's hidden agenda

The fog has since begun thinning. It is becoming obvious that the Pentagon is preparing the ground for expanding the Afghan mission well beyond Obama's early focus. Alongside is an attempt at promoting precisely the sort of nation-building plan being integrated into US military operations in Afghanistan that Obama seemed to decry in March.

What remains unclear is how much the incremental policy shift reflects the Obama administration's thinking and how much the Pentagon is forcing the pace. The president has been tacking to the right lately in the face of concerted pressure from the hawks in

Washington on other policy fronts such as Iran.

Equally, the Americans are in a quandary: if Hamid Karzai secures a renewed mandate on his own steam in the presidential election on August 20, the AfPak strategy cannot roll on. Nothing underscores this more dramatically than Karzai's decision last Thursday to conclude his four-year term as president with a final act of passing [legislation](#) permitting Shi'ite men to deny their wives food and sustenance if they refuse to obey their husbands' sexual demands; granting guardianship of children exclusively to their fathers and grandfathers; and requiring women to get permission from their husbands to work.

So far, the fog kept hidden from view the full contours of the AfPak strategy, which apparently focused on a "clear and concise and ... attainable goal which is to disrupt, dismantle and prevent al-Qaeda from being able to operate in its safe havens" - to quote US National Security Advisor General James Jones during his media briefing at the Foreign Media Center in Washington, DC, on March 29.

McChrystal reportedly wants to double the number of American civilians working in Afghanistan. The Washington Post reported that the US ambassador to Kabul has sent a cable to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seeking an additional \$2.5 billion in expenditure for 2010, which is about 60% more than the amount Obama has requested from the [Congress](#). This is despite the massive amounts of money already flowing into Afghanistan. Obama has already pledged substantial increases in US civilian personnel and development funds. The size of the US embassy in Kabul will increase to 976 personnel, up from 562 last year.

The signs point toward a calibrated escalation of the US's presence in Afghanistan. On Friday, at a press conference, Gates hinted at a big US troop buildup. When asked about speculation that McChrystal is preparing to make a case for troops, Gates said that at the meeting in Belgium he and Mullen told McChrystal that "we want him to ask for what he thinks he needs. And I think you have to allow your commanders that freedom".

Gates also underscored the criticality of the Afghan election results for US policy when he said that "close consultation" with the new Afghan [government](#) is an imperative to ensure that the Afghan people don't reject too big a US military footprint. He said that, as of now, while Afghans might be viewing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led coalition as their partner, "I just worry that we don't know what the size of the military presence might be that would begin to change that."

### **A parallel government**

Sure enough, Gates refused to predict how long the US troops would have to stay, saying there were too many uncertainties. Meanwhile, Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, is also doing his part by assembling a nation-building team for Afghanistan for the long haul.

This will comprise senior US diplomats, counterinsurgency liaisons from the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It will also include the United States Agency for International Development and agricultural experts and even well-

known academics and think tankers. Holbrooke commands an impressive parallel government.

Evidently, the "civilian side" led by Holbrooke will count on the success of the "military side" in killing and trapping the recalcitrant Taliban and smashing up the raging insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, who advises McChrystal, told The Times newspaper that the US should send another nine combat brigades comprising 45,000 troops, which would bring the total American presence to about 100,000.

It is against such a complex background that the US wishes to tighten its control over the power structure in Kabul. Karzai's re-election bid poses a major headache for Washington. Holbrooke is heading for Kabul. En route, the great fixer warned that the Afghan elections "may have a muddled result. There'll be disputes ... The process will take a while ... some level of disagreement about the results is still likely." Holbrooke's mission to Kabul is of utmost importance for the future of the AfPak strategy.

The sustained propaganda, quite often vicious and personal, would have us believe Karzai lacks the capacity for good governance, fawns cronyism and is soft on venality; that he pampers corrupt relatives and brutish warlords; and, of course, as Obama once famously put it, that Karzai doesn't even stir out of his "bunker" in the presidential palace. All of this, much of it or at least some of it may be true. But the fog kept out of sight the schism between Karzai and his erstwhile mentors in Washington.

### **Karzai undergoes 'Afghanization'**

It was towards the end of 2007 that Karzai began demanding that he should have a say in the US deployment and the scale of military operations by the foreign troops. He talked about an Iraqi-style Status of Force Agreement. Essentially, he wanted the occupation forces to abide by Afghan laws. He then raised it at the United Nations, under whose mandate, after all, the NATO forces operate in Afghanistan.

Two, Karzai began demanding that the international community should work through his government in undertaking the various activities of Afghan reconstruction, whereas the US is averse to using the Afghan government and prefers to directly disburse aid. It was a Catch-22 situation. The US insisted that Karzai's government lacked the wherewithal to administer foreign aid. But then, a beginning needed to be made at some point. The fact of the matter is that strong vested interests have developed.

The Afghan war involves big-time money and somewhere along the line in the 2002-2003 period a gravy train began running through the Hindu Kush. All wars breed corruption, but the US has spawned a culture of corruption in Afghanistan that will be hard to exorcise. Since 2001, the US has spent \$38 billion on reconstruction in Afghanistan, but the common people think they have been had, disillusion has set in and Karzai takes the flak for the great swindle that Afghan reconstruction became.

Yet another fault line developed when he began insisting that the government must play the

lead role in political reconciliation. Karzai claims the prerogative to lead any reconciliation process with Taliban. In his election rallies, he demands an intra-Afghan peace process through a *loya jirga* (tribal council) to reconcile the Taliban, which would pave the way for the vacation of occupation by the NATO.

But Karzai's approach undercuts the US agenda of monopolizing the conflict resolution in Afghanistan, which is crucial for the pursuit of the US's key regional policies with regard to NATO's open-ended stay in the region, its evolution as a global organization and indeed the role of Islamism in the remaking of Central Asia, a strategic region that forms the "soft underbelly" of Russia and China.

It is very obvious that as time passed, Karzai underwent an "Afghanization". Last week's "barbaric" above-mentioned marriage law is an assertive move by Karzai that makes a mockery of the "nation-building" that the AfPak strategy proclaims. He knew the Western world would be furious. It was only on August 3 that Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in his very first press conference after taking over as the new NATO secretary general, said, "The moral argument [for the Afghan war] is also powerful: anyone who believes in basic human rights, including women's rights, should support this mission". In early April, Obama and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown joined a Western chorus of condemnation of any such Afghan legislation.

The point is, the US has a problem in appreciating that Karzai is in his element with the wheeling and dealing that provides the alchemy of political consensus in the Afghan way of life. Rather than having him operate like a CEO through his English-speaking cabinet officials (whom Afghans contemptuously call "dog washers"), the US should let him meander instead of nit-picking and finding his assertiveness to be unhelpful - as Henry II (1133-1189), England's "imperialistic king", would have found his surrogate Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket.

At the end of the day, Karzai is a Popalzai aristocrat steeped in the accumulated lore of Pashtunwali. Anyone familiar with the folklore of the Hindu Kush could have foretold that Karzai's transformation followed a trajectory that was as predictable as daybreak - though the fog kept it from view.