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The Nation

'Two, Three, Many Afghanistan'

By Michael T. Klare

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With little fanfare, the Defense Department has announced a revolution in military strategy--a transformation in global outlook and combat tactics whose only true precedent is the equally momentous turnaround engineered by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara during the Kennedy administration. Then, as now, an incoming administration inherited a strategy heavily weighted toward high-intensity warfare among well-equipped adversaries, mostly in Europe and Asia; now, as then, the response has been to redirect the Pentagon's attention toward low-intensity combat on the fringes of the developing world. The result back then was Vietnam; today it is Afghanistan and an unknown number of "future Afghanistsans."

When Kennedy assumed the presidency in 1961, the Defense Department was governed by a military "posture" that emphasized nuclear war and massive tank battles on the plains of Europe. Sensing that the main theater of competition between the superpowers had shifted to proxy warfare in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Kennedy ordered McNamara to undertake a massive enhancement of US capabilities for what were then called "brush-fire wars" in the Third World. The president also authorized a vast expansion of the Special Forces--then a small and obscure Army unit intended for partisan operations behind Soviet lines in Eastern Europe--and gave them responsibility for promoting the newly fashionable concept of counterinsurgency.

"Subversive insurgency is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins--war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration

instead of aggression," Kennedy said at West Point in 1962. "It requires in those situations where we must counter it...a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of training."

Kennedy's fierce patronage of counterinsurgency doctrine led to expanded US involvement in Southeast Asia and ultimately to the unmitigated disaster of Vietnam. In the wake of the war there, the US military largely abandoned its interest in counterinsurgency, fearing the specter of Che Guevara's 1967 call for "two, three, many Vietnams." Instead, it chose to focus on a renewed cold war in Europe and later, under the first President Bush, conventional combat against "rogue" states like Iran, Iraq and North Korea--basically recycling tactics developed for combat against Soviet forces. Although promising to modernize this posture after 9/11, the second President Bush merely grafted his "global war on terror" onto the rogue-state approach, choosing to invade Iraq rather than invent a new strategy aimed at radical Islamist insurgencies.

Now we have President Obama and his domineering Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, both of whom have criticized the Pentagon's emphasis on conventional combat at the expense of low-intensity warfare. Iraq, Obama has said, was the "wrong" war, a distraction from the more urgent task of defeating Al Qaeda and its network of allies, including the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. To rectify this strategic bungling, as he sees it, Obama has been redeploying combat resources from Iraq to Afghanistan. But this is just the beginning of his grand vision: Obama seeks to fashion a new military posture that shifts the emphasis from conventional combat to brush-fire wars and counterinsurgency.

"The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly, and it extends well beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan," Obama declared at West Point on December 1. "Unlike the great power conflicts and clear lines of division that defined the twentieth century, our effort will involve disorderly regions, failed states, diffuse enemies." To prevail in these contests, "we'll have to be nimble and precise in our use of military power. Where Al Qaeda and its allies attempt to establish a foothold--whether in Somalia or Yemen or elsewhere--they must be confronted by growing pressure and strong partnerships."

Clearly, this is a long-term strategy with far-reaching implications. Even if Obama brings some forces back from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011, as he has pledged, US troops are likely to be engaged there (some perhaps in a covert mode) and in a number of other hot spots--"two, three, many Afghanistans," to put Che's dictum into contemporary parlance.

This strategy, first enunciated in a series of speeches by Obama and Gates, has been given formal character in the Quadrennial Defense Review, the Pentagon's Congressionally mandated overhaul of strategy. Released on February 1, the QDR is expected to guide military planning over the next four years and to govern the Pentagon's budget priorities.

Like earlier Pentagon reviews, the 2010 QDR begins by reaffirming America's stature as a global power with global responsibilities--a burden no other country can shoulder. "The strength and influence of the United States are deeply intertwined with the fate of the broader international system," the document asserts. "The U.S. military must therefore be prepared to support broad

national goals of promoting stability in key regions, providing assistance to nations in need, and promoting the common good."

But while this globalist mission has remained unchanged for many decades, the nature of the threats confronted by American forces has changed dramatically. "The United States faces a complex and uncertain security landscape in which the pace of change continues to accelerate," the QDR indicates. "The rise of new powers, the growing influence of non-state actors, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and other destructive enabling technologies...pose profound challenges to international order."

The United States also faces a danger not unlike that envisioned by Kennedy in 1961: the emergence of radical insurgencies in the corrupt and decaying nations of the developing world. "The changing international system will continue to put pressure on the modern state system, likely increasing the frequency and severity of the challenges associated with chronically fragile states," the QDR notes. "These states are often catalysts for the growth of radicalism and extremism."

In this environment, America's traditional advantages in conventional conflict--what the QDR calls "large-scale force-on-force warfare"--can no longer guarantee success. Instead, the US military must be prepared to prevail in any number of conceivable combat scenarios and employ the same sort of novel warfighting tactics as those used by America's rivals and adversaries. Our principal objective, the QDR affirms, is "ensuring that US forces are flexible and adaptable so that they can confront the full range of challenges that could emerge from a complex and dynamic security environment."

Within this mandate, no priority is given greater weight than the task of preparing for an unending series of counterinsurgency campaigns in remote corners of the developing world. "The wars we are fighting today and assessments of the future security environment together demand that the United States retain and enhance a whole-of-government capability to succeed in large-scale counterinsurgency (COIN), stability, and counterterrorism (CT) operations in environments ranging from densely populated urban areas and mega-cities, to remote mountains, deserts, jungles, and littoral regions," the QDR explains.

The language used here is instructive--both in the degree to which it reveals current Pentagon thinking and the ways it echoes Kennedy's outlook. "Stability operations, large-scale counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism operations are not niche challenges or the responsibility of a single Military Department, but rather require a portfolio of capabilities as well as sufficient capacity from across America's Armed Forces," the QDR states. "Nor are these type of operations a transitory or anomalous phenomenon in the security landscape. On the contrary, we must expect that for the indefinite future, violent extremist groups, with or without state sponsorship, will continue to foment instability and challenge U.S. and allied interests." As a result, "U.S. forces will need to maintain a high level of competency in this mission area *for decades to come.*" (Emphasis added.)

As the QDR makes plain, this will require substantial retooling of military capabilities. In place of "large-scale force-on-force warfare," the Pentagon must be configured to fight many small-

scale conflicts in dissimilar locations on several continents at once. This requires that forces be equipped for counterinsurgency-type operations: helicopters, small arms, body armor, night-vision devices, mine-resistant vehicles, aerial gunships, surveillance drones and the like. Some of this material has already been provided to forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the entire military will have to be re-equipped.

Also required will be increased military aid and training (provided by growing cadres of Special Forces) for the military and police forces of embattled governments in fraying Third World states.

"Terrorist groups seek to evade security forces by exploiting ungoverned and under-governed areas as safe havens from which to recruit, indoctrinate, and train fighters," the QDR notes. "Where appropriate, U.S. forces will work with the military forces of partner nations to strengthen their capacity for internal security.... For reasons of political legitimacy as well as sheer economic necessity, there is no substitute for professional, motivated local security forces protecting populations threatened by insurgents and terrorists in their midst."

Except for a slight modernization of terminology, these are exactly the words used by Kennedy to justify the deployment of thousands of counterinsurgency "advisers" in Vietnam, plus hundreds more in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The danger is that America's "partner nations" are not capable of deploying "professional, motivated" forces, so US soldiers will be compelled to shoulder an ever-increasing share of the burden. As proved true in Vietnam--and as is being repeated today in Afghanistan--this will likely be the case when the local army and police are viewed by the majority of the population as tools of a corrupt and unresponsive government.

What should be cause for alarm is that despite the worrisome picture in Afghanistan, the Pentagon is determined to export this model to other areas, many for the first time, including Africa. "The need to assist fragile, post-conflict states, such as Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan, and failed states such as Somalia, and transnational problems, including extremism, piracy, illegal fishing, and narcotics trafficking, pose significant challenges," the document notes. "America's efforts will hinge on partnering with African states, other international allies and partners, and regional and sub-regional security organizations to conduct capacity-building and peacekeeping operations, prevent terrorism, and address humanitarian crises."

The United States is already assisting the Ugandan government in its seemingly futile efforts to eradicate the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal guerrilla group with no discernible ideology, as well as the Somali government in its (equally futile) campaign to rid Mogadishu of Al Shabab, a militant Islamic group linked to Al Qaeda. It is likely that advisory teams from the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, based at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, are engaged in similar operations in North Africa and the Sahel. (The CJTF-HOA is the combat arm of the US Africa Command, a multiservice headquarters organization established by Bush in 2008 and given expanded responsibilities since then by Obama.)

The Pentagon is also supporting counterinsurgency operations in Colombia, the Philippines and Yemen, among other countries. Typically, these operations entail deploying training and advisory teams, providing arms and intelligence information, and employing (often covert) specialized combat units. According to the QDR, "U.S. forces are working in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Colombia, and elsewhere to provide training, equipment, and advice to their host-country counterparts on how to better seek out and dismantle terrorist and insurgent networks while providing security to populations that have been intimidated by violent elements in their midst." Again, one must ask, Just how deeply is the United States involved? Where is this leading? What happens when the "host-country counterparts" prove unequal to the task?

The worry that this will lead to an endless series of Vietnam- or Afghanistan-like counterinsurgencies is further heightened by the QDR's call for increased reliance on social scientists to better comprehend the perplexing social and cultural realities of these faraway places. Under its Minerva Initiative, the Defense Department is seeking "the intellectual capital necessary to meet the challenges of operating in a changing and complex environment." For those whose memory stretches back far enough, this will recall the infamous Project Camelot, a Vietnam-era Army effort to secure academic assistance in assessing public attitudes in Third World countries for counterinsurgency purposes.

The greatest risk in all this, of course, is that the military will become bogged down in a constellation of grueling, low-level wars. This is the prospect of "imperial over-stretch" spoken of by Yale historian Paul Kennedy in his 1987 classic, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. It is also, says Fareed Zakaria in *The Post-American World*, the scenario we must avoid if the United States is to escape the fate of the British Empire and other failed imperiums. "Britain's strategic blunder was to spend decades--time and money, energy and attention--on vain attempts to stabilize peripheral places on the map," Zakaria wrote in 2008. "The United States could easily fall into a similar imperial trap."

The Pentagon's renewed commitment to counterinsurgency and low-intensity warfare will also require a substantial investment in new hardware at a time when the country faces a record deficit, further eroding its long-term vitality. To obtain the added funds he deems necessary, Gates has asked for an \$18 billion increase in the Pentagon's base budget for the 2011 fiscal year, raising total spending to \$549 billion (which does not include combat costs in Iraq and Afghanistan). To gain additional financing for these projects, he has been willing to sacrifice some big-ticket items intended for major conventional wars, such as the F-22 jet fighter (discontinued in 2009).

Gates calls this shift in emphasis "rebalancing," and it is said to be the guiding principle of the new Pentagon budget. "Rebalancing our forces in support of these strategic priorities means that US forces must be flexible and adaptable to confront the full range of plausible challenges," Under Secretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy, one of the QDR's principal authors, told a Pentagon press briefing on February 1. "To underwrite this flexibility...we need more and better enabling capabilities...like intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, rotary-wing aircraft, language skills and so forth."

The danger here is that Congress--prodded by powerful interests in the military-industrial complex--will approve the specialized counterinsurgency equipment sought by Gates and Flournoy, as well as an array of costly, super-sophisticated weapons designed to fight a full-scale war with some future, Soviet-like "peer" competitor. Under these circumstances, the Pentagon budget will continue to grow.

The Obama-Gates strategy thus entails a double peril. On the one hand, it risks involvement in an endless series of wars, wearing down the military and turning more and more non-Westerners against the United States--exactly the outcome envisioned by Che in his famous 1967 dictum. On the other hand, the "rebalancing" sought by Gates could lead to higher spending on low-intensity hardware while failing to curb investment in high-end weaponry, thereby producing ever-increasing military budgets, a growing national deficit and persistent economic paralysis. In the worst case, both outcomes will occur, dooming the United States to retreat, humiliation and penury.

There is no reason to doubt that Obama and Gates believe they are acting in the nation's--and the world's--best interest by advocating a strategy of global counterinsurgency. Such a strategy could conceivably prevent Al Qaeda from gaining a temporary foothold in some "ungovernable area" on the fringe of the Islamic world. But it will not eliminate the conditions that give rise to Islamist extremism, nor will it ensure lasting peace. The Pentagon's new strategy can only lead, in the end, to a world of increased anti-Americanism and violence.