

What is a "Win" in Afghanistan?

Roman Sehling

Following on the strategic review commissioned by Obama, when he declared himself in favor of a troop-intensive counter insurgency (COIN), the President has begun to have doubts in the last few months about the merits of this approach. Back then, he decided on an increase in troops of 21,000 to over 68,000 US soldiers, to be in a position to guarantee voters' safety in the Afghanistan elections. This decision, however, was not a commitment regarding long-term goal-setting and strategy for Afghanistan, even though Obama promised then "to destroy, disband and defeat Al Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent a resurgence" – therefore describing the war as necessary. Leaving open the decision on a long-term strategy should have also been suggested in the subsequent task given to General Stanley McChrystal, which consisted of a comprehensive analysis of the different options to identify the best strategies. On December 1 Obama announced to the world that he plans to send a further 30,000 soldiers to Afghanistan in the next six months. In addition, the withdrawal of US troops should begin in July 2011. Until then, the plan is get the Afghan army and police force to the point where they can act on their own. Obama is using this compromise to put pressure on President Karzai to take responsibility for the country. On the other hand, he wants to appease the left wing of the Democratic Party, who are against the troop surge and whose vote Obama needs in November 2010 by the latest. By announcing a withdrawal date without naming an exact number of troops or a time frame, Obama has created enough leeway to be able to react flexibly to developments in Afghanistan. At the same time, the President has covered his back in the national political arena against his own party base. If his NATO partners can be persuaded not to withdraw their troops early but rather increase their contingent, Obama will have armed himself for the election battle as well as the war.

Support for the eight-year old war among the public and in the Democratic Party has fallen sharply in the last few months. Rising national debt, the continuing financial and economic crisis as well as various national political priorities have left President Obama facing a dilemma. He can either push through a troop surge with the closed Republican ranks (but bruise his own base at the same time) or gradually turn his back on Afghanistan and appease his Democratic base. However, this would strengthen the Republicans, especially if Afghanistan once again descends into chaos. Since the troop surge in spring, US losses in the summer and fall have reached monthly record highs, while the number of Taliban attacks between 2004 and 2009 has increased fourfold and led to 930 deaths and 4434 casualties for the Americans. Even if a few conservative commentators are calling for a withdrawal

because they see no credible partners in Afghanistan to justify the blood of American soldiers, the majority of conservative think-tankers favor increased engagement in Afghanistan. Max Boot from the *Council on Foreign Relations* refers to George W. Bush's decision to go ahead with the ultimately successful troop surge in Iraq – also in the face of increasing resistance from the US public. In addition to him, Jay Carafano from *the Heritage Foundation* is clearly in favor of the war and plays down the lack of support from Congress and the public.

In the last few months more and more Democratic voices and moderate think tanks such as the influential *Center for a New American Security* have been vocal in their support of a "middle way" in Afghanistan, which predicates that the ten biggest population centers receive increased protection. This should be possible with a troop surge of approximately 20,000 soldiers and would require little more than 40,000 additional personnel. Even Senator John Kerry spoke in favor of such a "slimmed down" COIN strategy. This would raise the level of security for troops in the cities and free up units to carry out CT operations in the rest of the country. Kerry emphasizes that the strategy has to go hand in hand with improved coordination of aid agencies. The US ambassador in Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, has been pushing for more assistance for the rebuilding and development of the country, and has called for \$2.5 billion for non-military tasks for Afghanistan from the 2010 budget – a figure roughly 60 percent over Obama's budget plans.

President Obama has now decided on the middle way. In addition to deploying 30,000 extra US troops in the next six months, the number of civilian personnel for development and agricultural assistance will be tripled. Furthermore, the Afghanistan army should be increased from 90,000 to 134,000 men by the end of 2010 and reach 240,000 soldiers in 2011. This is the foundation for the planned beginning of the American withdrawal from July 2011. In doing this, President Obama is keeping all his options open. It means, however, that he can expect strong criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. The Republicans will accuse Obama of not being decisive enough in his leadership of the war on terror and hold him responsible, should the situation in Afghanistan deteriorate, for not doing enough to support the troops.

The Democratic base must enter into increasingly frustrating compromises, as Obama has been able to implement only a few of their original political objectives. Obama is trying to sell to them his surge in Afghanistan with his parallel announcement of the withdrawal and by making clear that the USA is not interested in pursuing "nation building". The Taliban should not be defeated, but isolated. At the moment, the President no longer talks of victory. One can also conclude that by taking months to decide his Afghanistan strat-

egy Obama wants to signal to his support base that he did not find the decision as easy to make as his predecessor would have.

Obama also expects a huge contribution from his NATO partners. NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen has announced they can send at least 5000 more troops. Great Britain has already promised 600 additional troops, Poland recently promised a further 600, and Italian President Silvio Berlusconi made a surprise offer to send 1000 extra troops, despite having called in September for troops to be brought back home as quickly as possible after a suicide bomber took the lives of six Italian soldiers.

The US government is aware that they can count on this contingent of extra troops to be sent to Afghanistan to ensure the safety of the election. It has become clear, however, that even with a President Obama foreign engagement remains unpopular in Europe (and increasingly in the USA) – especially after the British defense minister openly criticized Obama at the end of November for his indecision, which was making it very difficult for the British government to convince its population that the troop surge was a good thing. Despite this, the Americans hope that Germany and France will, at least symbolically, increase their contingent. More important, however, is the need to persuade Canada and the Netherlands not to go ahead with their planned withdrawals.

According to a survey by the *Council on Foreign Relations* and the PEW Research Center, for the first time in 40 years the majority of the US population thinks the USA should take care of its own problems and let other countries look after themselves. President Obama is using the troop surge as evidence of his plan to exit the war. Even if he can avoid the mistakes his predecessor made, he will still be associated with the Afghanistan mission. If Afghanistan is not safe enough to permit the withdrawal of US armed forces, Obama will be gambling not only on the mid-term elections and his re-election but also his whole political capital.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 12/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.113-116