

Obama's War

**By Maria L. Fornella*

On Tuesday night, speaking to an audience of Army cadets at West Point Academy in a much anticipated response to his general's request for additional troops, President Obama announced a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. It was a somber speech, delivered with his usual trademark of logic, rhetorical skill and assertiveness, but also with a certain emotion. At crucial moments in it, Obama looked straight into the camera, making direct eye-contact with the individual spectator, summoning his support in an effort he seems to be taking up somewhat reluctantly. He outlined a new strategy for the eight-year old war that will include immediate deployment of 30,000 new US troops to protect civilians, clear and defeat the insurgents and train Afghan forces in order to be able to begin the draw down in eighteen months. This new surge will be supplemented by additional NATO troops and Afghan national forces to meet the original 40,000 troops demanded by General McCrystal. After three months of deliberation, the President has decided to heed the advice of his generals and his Defense Secretary, and proceed with a military escalation of the conflict. In so doing, he rejected the logic of Vice President Biden who rhetorically asked earlier this year why the US spent 30 times as much in Afghanistan as it did in Pakistan, when it was well-known that Al Qaeda or what is left of it, is in the tribal regions of Pakistan. Lately he had argued against more troops (because the central government was an unreliable, weak and corrupt partner) and in favor of shifting the mission to killing or capturing main insurgency leaders, establishing more ties with local tribal leaders and giving more support to Pakistan. On Wednesday morning, however, Biden appeared in the morning news shows to defend the President's decision unequivocally.

The next morning, in hearings before the Senate's Armed Forces Committee, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton fleshed out the main objectives of the surge more fully: training Afghan forces, eliminating safe havens, stabilizing a region fundamental to American national security. She also emphasized the importance of the parallel "civilian surge" which the President had also mentioned in passing and whose job will be to develop the agricultural base away from opium and to further strengthen institutions at every level of Afghan society, so as "not to leave chaos behind" when troops are drawn down and responsibility is transferred to the Afghan government. Finally, she stressed the need to develop long-term relations with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed, Obama's three-pronged strategy includes not only military and civilian components for counter insurgency and institution-building, but also a strategic partnership with Pakistan, whose government can help contain the Taliban, destroy Al Qaeda and prevent it from gaining access to nuclear material.

Unfortunately, during his speech the President did not spend much time explaining the importance of that relationship. Another important omission was

the inclusion of other regional actors in the process of conflict resolution. But the truth is Obama was performing an extremely difficult balancing act, trying to simultaneously gain the support of disparate groups at home and abroad for a last-ditch effort to win an eight year old war in a context of war fatigue, massive debt and a weak economy. That also explains why in his speech he denied any intentions of nation-building (public opinion in the US is strongly against it mainly because of the cost and the long-term commitment it implies) and instead focused on transferring responsibility to the Afghans themselves for their own defense.

In articulating both an escalation and an exit strategy at the same time, the President opened himself to criticism from both the Right and the Left. While the Right was very supportive of the surge itself, it was quite critical of his timeline for withdrawal, which they say, will only embolden insurgents to wait the troops out. The Left of his party, led by Moveon.org, responded negatively to the increase of troops, which they regard as “deepening (US) involvement in a quagmire.” Meanwhile, and in spite of much commentary to the contrary, the White House insists that the President made this decision because he feels it is the right one, and that electoral considerations played no role in the process (although the withdrawal in the summer of 2011 conveniently coincides with the beginning of his presidential campaign for re-election!) Instead, pundits favorable to the President were quick to point out that a time frame was absolutely needed to provide a sense of urgency to the Afghan government itself so that it will clean up its act and take advantage of this “new window of opportunity” as Secretary Clinton put it. However, it is obvious to the same pundits that the pace and time of withdrawal will most likely be dictated by the conditions on the ground in the summer of 2011 and not by the pre-established timetable. Whether it is for political or strategic reasons, the fact is, the President has made speed, (that is, a quick deployment of new forces followed by quick withdrawal), the central tenet of his new strategy, and while providing for a civilian surge, he has underplayed the nation-building aspects of the mission for the obvious reason: that they undermine the credibility of a speedy exit strategy.

Whether or not this strategy works, his decision on Afghanistan has gained Obama some time free from the crushing criticism of the opposition whom he has silenced for the moment; he has pleased Independents (66% of whom trusted the generals over Obama in planning the war strategy; 48% were in favor of more troops, as opposed to only 30% of Democrats); and he can now turn to the two other major challenges facing his administration: public discontent with the economic situation and the battle for health care reform. The latter won a major victory two weeks ago when the Senate voted to bring the bill to the floor for discussion. Still, between the Thanksgiving break last week and the end-of-the-year holidays it is very unlikely this discussion will bear fruit within this calendar year, as was the President’s goal. And the more the bill gets delayed the more the public option gets diluted to the point that it will all but disappear from a final version. Since April the President’s plan has lost Independent support steadily (only 25% of Independents opposed it in April, now 50% are against it, while among Democrats it has wide support, with only 22% opposing the public option).

On the economic front, five times more Independents than Democrats hold Obama responsible for what has gone wrong. They blame him for salvaging the banks but not their jobs. In light of this, Obama has summoned a job creation “summit” to be held later this week in the White House. While most see it as a public relations tactic, with unemployment having surpassed 10% the public is demanding action, and job recovery is key to getting the Independent vote back. With his approval rate hovering at 50%, the President is in dire need of striking some points and delivering some victories before the end of the year. Amid a rising wave of populism that is both anti-Wall Street and anti-government, he needs to show that he can make government work.

After a seamless campaign and after months of relying on his own personal charisma and his gifted oratory to coax and persuade the public, the magic seems to be wearing off: he now needs to find other ways to reach the voters. Of course, performance will be the safest one: Independent voters want competence and results: they want him to show them that he can govern. This has proven elusive for many reasons beyond his control, but lately some mistakes were made that could have been prevented.

This is a young White House and in spite of their mastery of the new technologies to connect with young voters and their ability to establish their own narrative about the President, in the last few weeks Obama and his close advisers seem to have lost some of their attention to details insofar as his public image is concerned, for example the importance of certain visual and other non-verbal signals.

The trip to Asia provides myriad examples of this: the “unforced error” of bowing too deep to the Emperor of Japan, which was ridiculed by the media on all sides of the political spectrum; his tense press conference in China during which both he and Hu Jintao stiffly read prepared statements, after which neither took questions; the town-hall style meeting with students in Shanghai, in which he said “the Internet should be free and all should have access to it” but which was only shown by local TV and in a very slow live feed on the internet, and later all references to it were deleted from all websites. Even a picture of Obama alone by the Great Wall of China was interpreted as a bad visual that suggested isolation, and while this may be an over-interpretation, there is a reason why commentators made that association. Obama is having a very hard time keeping his coalition of independents, moderates and liberals together. The unraveling of his coalition is constraining every policy choice he makes, as he has to measure at every step not only the costs of each decision but also the opposition he is likely to face from within his own party. He thus feels limited in his choices and picks a middle of the road solution that does not fully satisfy his purposes and makes him a target from the two extremes of the political spectrum. In many cases, as in the Afghan war, *there are* no good choices but this is hard to confess to a public to whom he promised change and that is expecting him to deliver.

With his new Afghan decision President Obama may have swayed many hawkish independents to his side but the question is for how long. Soon Obama may find that while nation-building abroad may be difficult, nation-building at home is a task he cannot postpone any longer.

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