

**Obama's Fading Afghanistan Strategy**  
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**By David J. Karl**

*Anxieties abound across Asia about America's commitment*

The last few weeks have brought additional confirmation that domestic politics is driving US strategy in Afghanistan, raising in turn troubling questions about the direction and constancy of President Barack Obama's foreign policy.

First, as illustrated by last year's military intervention in the Libyan revolution, the Obama administration delights in drawing a sharp contrast between its predecessor's unilateralism and its own preference for multilateral consultation and coordination. But the surprise pronouncement by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta that US combat operations in Afghanistan will end by late 2013 – a year earlier than expected – has undermined this principle.

The new plan reportedly caught many off guard, including Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul, senior US military commanders in Afghanistan, and leaders in European capitals. NATO officials were busy in the last few days denying that any deployment decision has been finalized. But expect the Obama administration to use the NATO leadership summit in May to announce the plan's official enactment. By no coincidence, the summit will take place in Chicago, the president's home town and scene of his famous speech against "dumb wars" that helped launch his career in national politics.

Second, by telegraphing the ever-increasing limits to US staying power, Panetta's announcement undercuts the "fight and talk" strategy Washington says it is pursuing vis-à-vis the Taliban. Indeed, the Obama approach toward Afghanistan – most dramatically exemplified by the decision to surge US military forces while at the same time announcing a fixed deadline for their withdrawal – has been plagued by mixed messages. The decision to now drastically curtail the US role opens the door for another large-scale troop pullout in 2013, beyond the reductions already planned for this year.

The Obama administration is making meaningful concessions to the Taliban without even extracting corresponding ones in return. Needless to say, this is a curious way of trying to impress the Taliban and its Pakistani benefactors with the strength of US resolve. Ditto for the claim being trumpeted by the Obama re-election campaign that his ending of US involvement in Iraq is a template for Afghanistan. This rhetoric may have resonance among the Democratic Party's base, but its effect upon the Taliban's leadership is not salutary.

It also inspires little confidence among US allies and friends in the region. Few in Washington realize, for instance, how New Delhi's resistance to new oil sanctions against Tehran is linked to developments in Afghanistan. With the regional scramble for influence in a post-NATO Afghanistan now underway, India and Iran may even revive their cooperation during the 1990s that provided critical support to the non-Pashtun militias battling the Taliban regime. (Already reports are surfacing that the old Northern Alliance may be reconstituting itself.) The Americans will surely grumble about the cozying up with Iran, but the geopolitical logic of the Obama withdrawal leaves New

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little

choice.

A final worrisome issue is that among the concessions that the White House is prepared to make in the endgame negotiations that have just started is the transfer of senior Taliban commanders from Guantanamo Bay to Qatari house arrest. Washington justifies this move as an important "confidence building" measure that will establish its bona fides with the Taliban. But it is troubling that the Obama administration has not publicly linked this significant gesture to any comparable move by the Taliban, including the release of Bowe Bergdahl, the US soldier who has been held prisoner by the notorious Haqqani network for two and a half years.

The Obama administration defends the expeditious winding down of the wars launched in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as necessary prerequisites to the bolstering of US presence and prestige in Asia. But its moves in Afghanistan will not do much to impress allies and partners about the fortitude of its foreign policy.

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