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Editorial: Obama and Pakistan

US President Barack Obama's new Afghan policy centres on three "core" elements. First, the troop surge adding 30,000 US troops to those already deployed there amidst the hope that Nato can be persuaded to contribute another 5-7,000. The latter may prove more difficult, since the first responses from Europe to Obama's speech at West Point indicate the same reluctance that has been on display for some time now. The exception, as always, is Britain, whose Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged another 500 British troops even before Obama spoke. The rest, led by Germany and France, want to wait for a consultation with their allies towards the end of January 2010 before taking a final decision. Second, Obama emphasises more civilian presence to help the reconstruction and recovery of war-battered Afghan society, offering some faint hope to its beleaguered people. This was one of the original elements of the Bonn and Tokyo conferences that pledged funds and reconstruction help that never really arrived in sufficient quantity to make a critical difference. Third, and perhaps most crucially, Obama underlined that success in Afghanistan was inextricably linked to a long term, sustained partnership with Pakistan.

Let us first examine some other factors that may hinder Obama's plan to first have a troop and civilian surge and then a withdrawal, at least of troops, starting from July 2010, barely 18 months hence. Afghanistan has no credible government or Western partner in Kabul at present, especially after the fraud-tainted presidential election of Karzai. Some analysts have argued that a timeline for withdrawal, whatever the reservations about the wisdom of that announcement, would focus minds in the Karzai regime on rooting out endemic corruption, clamping down on the drug trade from which the Taliban too draw financial sustenance, and providing some modicum of acceptable governance that may enthuse the Afghan people about their future. On the civilian surge side, the UN and NGO efforts so far have proved marginal or, in some cases, illusory. Nation-building by foreigners is inherently questionable, more so when dealing with traditionally fiercely independence-loving Afghans. Very few initiatives so far have seen the light of day since 2001 that point to the emergence of Afghan civilian partners of a credible variety.

As if these problems were not enough of a headache, there is a fundamental contradiction in the hopes being pinned on a partnership with Pakistan. The 'Pakistan' Obama may have in mind is hardly a monolithic entity. It is a society riven by divergent views and perceptions, with the widest gulf being between those who support the Taliban in varying degrees and those who oppose them. At the level of the state, the most powerful institutions see Pakistan's interests being best served by keeping their powder dry in terms of not withdrawing surreptitious support for the Taliban, especially since the security establishment has real fears of Indian ingress into Afghanistan (the being squeezed in a 'nutcracker' nightmare that informs our military strategists' thinking), resents the lack of adequate Pashtun representation in the government in Kabul, and sees the Taliban as the best, if not only, vehicle to achieve a 'friendly' government in Kabul. In contrast, the civilian elected government appears to vacillate between opposition to militancy of all shades and soft-peddalling, perhaps out of fear of annoying the powerful military.

The question then boils down to this: a partnership requires a partner. Who is that partner to be?

If it is to be the civilian government, that candidate is already under attack by our establishment, precisely because of its perceived lack of commitment to the security establishment's agenda. If, on the other hand, it is to be the military, what use all the recent rhetoric (including around the Kerry-Lugar Act) about "engaging" with the people rather than the military? Ideally, the 'partner' should be both the civilian and military protagonists. Is that doable?