



Written by on March 23, 2009

Holbrooke on U.S. Plans for Afghanistan

AFP reported that the series of talks are the last before what is termed a “big tent” international meeting on Afghanistan to be held in The Netherlands in a week. It is expected that by the time of that meeting, a new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan will have been unveiled. The BBC reported that the new strategic plan is now on President Barack Obama’s desk and will soon be made public.



The *Financial Times* quoted NATO spokesman James Appathurai, who summarized the purpose of the Brussels gathering: “It is to give the broad lines of the U.S. strategy review as it now stands. I don’t know that they’ve arrived at any final conclusions on which President Obama has signed off on, but their thinking is now very close to the conclusion of the process.”

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In a BBC interview in Brussels, Ambassador Holbrooke called reports that the United States would be scaling down its goals in Afghanistan “journalist gobbledygook,” and stressed that the opposite was about to occur: “Neglect is what happened in the past. That era is over.”

“I can guarantee you that this administration will do everything it can to succeed in one of the most difficult situations in the world,” emphasized Holbrooke. He stressed that there would be “more troops, more resources, more high-level attention.”

During his press interview, Holbrooke said that the “number one problem” in stabilizing Afghanistan was Taliban sanctuaries in western Pakistan, including tribal areas along the Afghan border and cities like Quetta: “Quetta appears to be the headquarters for the leaders of the Taliban and some of the worst people in the world,” which he said includes the leader of the Pakistani Taliban Baitullah Mehsud. During recent months, Taliban-controlled militants in northwest Pakistan have attacked truck terminals and convoys supplying the NATO operation in Afghanistan with increasing boldness.

During the Brussels meetings, Holbrooke told reporters from the *Christian Science Monitor* that the extent of Taliban infiltration in northwest Pakistan was his greatest surprise during his fact-finding mission to the region last month.

“A year ago, I visited Peshawar [near the Khyber Pass] and I was asked about starting an Asia Society office there,” Holbrooke said. “Last month, people were afraid to go outside after dark and walk their dogs. The change in the situation was stunning. Geopolitically Afghanistan hasn’t changed; Pakistan has.”

A Reuters news report of March 21 cited Holbrooke’s statement at the Brussels conference that



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President Obama plans a significant increase in the size of the Afghan police force. He said that an initial plan to help Afghanistan increase the number of its police from 78,000 to 82,000 was now considered inadequate. "Everyone we talked to without exception — Afghans, insurgency experts, the government, American military — agreed that was not sufficient," he said. "So we are looking in conjunction with our allies and friends in the Afghan government at a very significant increase."

"The police aren't very good right now. We know they are the weak link in the security chain," Holbrooke added. "We need to increase the number, increase the quality and increase the training." He said, however, that figures cited by the *New York Times* that NATO sought the creation of a combined force of about 400,000 Afghan troops and police officers were "speculative."

Holbrook also spoke about a plan in Washington to help Afghan opium farmers — whose crop helps fund the Taliban — turn to alternate crops. To achieve this goal, he said that President Obama will ask Congress for "very significantly expanded funding for agriculture sector job creation."

During an interview with CBS's *60 Minutes* on March 22, President Barack Obama said the new U.S. plan would contain an exit strategy and include greater emphasis on economic development. "What we can't do is think that just a military approach in Afghanistan is going to be able to solve our problems," he said. "So what we're looking for is a comprehensive strategy. And there's got to be an exit strategy.... There's got to be a sense that this is not perpetual drift."

"Making sure Al-Qaeda cannot attack the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests and our allies. That's the number one priority," Obama said. "In service of that priority there may be a whole host of things that we need to do," Obama added. "We may need to build up economic capacity in Afghanistan. We may need to improve our diplomatic efforts in Pakistan."

Another visitor to the Brussels meeting was Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who warned European policymakers at the forum that "minimalist" approaches would be ineffective. McCain urged American and European leaders to engage in "straight talk" with their citizens about a war where "the going will be extremely hard." The former presidential candidate told the *Christian Science Monitor* that "it will take a lot more than the 17,000 troops [now being sent] to take care of this job." He added: "a group ... on this side of the Atlantic, and on the other side, want to get rid of as many terrorists as we can," and leave. "We need a long-term commitment."

A March 21 *Financial Times* article reporting about the Brussels Forum carried a headline that seems almost amusing to those who understand the dynamics behind U.S. foreign policy: "McCain refuses to attack Obama's foreign policy." The article noted: "In an interview with the *Financial Times*, McCain, who retained his Senate seat when he became his party's nominee, repeatedly declined to criticize Mr. Obama's foreign policy stances, including the decision to explore the possibilities of talks with Iran."

One could attribute the naïveté implicit in the *Financial Times'* seeming surprise that Senator McCain has not criticized his former rival's foreign policy to the fact that the newspaper is London-based, but most U.S.-based newspapers would probably take a similar perspective. That we are not similarly surprised by McCain's acceptance of the Obama foreign policy stems from years of observing that U.S. foreign policy is made more at 58 East 68th Street in New York, than at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington.

For those who have just joined our sphere of thinking, the former address is the home of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an 88-year-old organization that has dominated U.S. foreign policy for generations. Since the 1940s, the strategically important post of secretary of state has been held



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virtually without interruption by CFR members — Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, Christian Herter, Dean Rusk, William P. Rogers (who joined the CFR after leaving office), Henry Kissinger, Cyrus Vance, Edmund Muskie, Alexander Haig, George Shultz, Lawrence Eagleburger, James Baker, Warren Christopher, Madeline Albright, and Condoleezza Rice. While present Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is not a member, Bill Clinton is.

Is John McCain opposed to the internationalist foreign policy orchestrated by the CFR? A policy that places the interests of bodies such as the UN and NATO over the interests of the United States? A “backgrounder” profile posted on the CFR website, [“Foreign Policy Brain Trusts: McCain Advisers,”](#) provides us with some clues: “McCain receives advice from several generations of Republican strategists and former top foreign policy officials such as Henry Kissinger and Richard Armitage, often grouped in the realist camp of foreign policy, as well as William Kristol and Robert Kagan, leading neoconservative voices.” Both Kissinger and Kagan are CFR members, and the article points to McCains’ partiality to what could be described as an “interventionist” foreign policy.

As for Richard Holbrooke, whose influence over foreign policy cannot be underestimated, he is nothing if not a CFR heavyweight. Holbrooke has a long history of State Department assignments, one of the best known being his brokering of a peace agreement among the warring factions in Bosnia that led to the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords — which coerced reluctant parties into an artificial settlement of the dispute. Following that deal, President Clinton announced the deployment of 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia to serve as an "Implementation Force" (IFOR) for the agreement.

A true internationalist and Wall Street insider, Holbrooke is a member of both the CFR (of which he is a member of the board of directors) and the Trilateral Commission. From 1985 until 1993, he served as managing director of Lehman Brothers, and in 1999, he was sworn-in as the 22nd U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. In 2001, Holbrooke left his UN post to become a counselor at the CFR and became chairman of its Terrorism Task Force.

One indication of the continuity of CFR influence from administration to administration, even when the political party designation changes, is that George W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has continued on in that role in the Obama administration.

In January 2004, Gates co-chaired a Council on Foreign Relations task force on U.S. relations towards Iran.

And the “change” part of Barack Obama’s foreign policy will be ... ?

Photo of Richard Holbrooke: AP Images



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