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Targeted Killing Is New U.S. Focus in Afghanistan

By [HELENE COOPER](#) and [MARK LANDLER](#)

WASHINGTON — When [President Obama](#) announced his new war plan for Afghanistan last year, the centerpiece of the strategy — and a big part of the rationale for sending 30,000 additional troops — was to safeguard the Afghan people, provide them with a competent government and win their allegiance.

Eight months later, that counterinsurgency strategy has shown little success, as demonstrated by the flagging military and civilian operations in Marja and Kandahar and the spread of [Taliban](#) influence in other areas of the country.

Instead, what has turned out to work well is an approach American officials have talked much less about: counterterrorism, military-speak for the targeted killings of insurgents from [Al Qaeda](#) and the Taliban.

Faced with that reality, and the pressure of a self-imposed deadline to begin withdrawing troops by July 2011, the Obama administration is starting to count more heavily on the strategy of hunting down insurgents. The shift could change the nature of the war and potentially, in the view of some officials, hasten a political settlement with the Taliban.

Based on the American military experience in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, it is not clear that killing enemy fighters is sufficient by itself to cripple an insurgency. Still, commando raids over the last five months have taken more than 130 significant insurgents out of action, while interrogations of captured fighters have led to a fuller picture of the enemy, according to administration officials and diplomats.

American intelligence reporting has recently revealed growing examples of Taliban fighters who are fearful of moving into higher-level command positions because of these lethal operations, according to a senior American military officer who follows Afghanistan closely.

Judging that they have gained some leverage over the Taliban, American officials are now

debating when to try to bring them to the negotiating table to end the fighting. Rattling the Taliban, officials said, may open the door to reconciling with them more quickly, even if the officials caution that the outreach is still deeply uncertain.

American military officials and President [Hamid Karzai](#) of Afghanistan have begun a robust discussion about “to what degree these people are going to be allowed to have a seat at the table,” one military official said. “The only real solution to Afghanistan has got to be political.”

The evolving thinking comes at a time when the lack of apparent progress in the nearly nine-year war is making it harder for Mr. Obama to hold his own party together on the issue. And it raises questions about whether the administration is seeking a rationale for reducing troop levels as scheduled starting next summer even if the counterinsurgency strategy does not show significant progress by then.

A senior White House official said the administration hoped that its targeted killings, along with high-level contacts between Mr. Karzai and Gen. [Ashfaq Parvez Kayani](#), Pakistan’s army chief and a former head of its intelligence service — which is believed to have close links to the Taliban — would combine to pressure Taliban leaders to come to the negotiating table.

A long-awaited campaign to convert lower-level and midlevel Taliban fighters has finally begun in earnest, with Mr. Karzai signing a decree authorizing the reintegration program. With \$200 million from Japan and other allies, and an additional \$100 million in Pentagon money, American military officers will soon be handing out money to lure people away from the insurgency.

“We’re not ready to make the qualitative judgment that the cumulative effects of what we are doing are enough to change their calculus yet,” the White House official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly. But, reflecting the administration’s hope that the killings are making a difference, he added, “If I were the Taliban, I’d be worried.”

Mr. Obama’s timetable calls for an assessment in December of how his strategy is faring. The administration has not yet begun a formal review of the policy. But while several officials said Mr. Obama remained committed to the strategy he set out at the end of last year, they conceded that the counterinsurgency part of it had lagged while the counterterrorism part had been more successful.

That divergence could lead to a replay of last year’s policy debate, in which Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) pushed for a focus on capturing and killing terrorist leaders, while the Pentagon, including the current commander in Afghanistan, Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), pushed

for a broader strategy that also included a strong focus on securing Afghan population centers with more troops.

Still, in an interview Thursday with “Today” on NBC, Mr. Biden appeared to reiterate his earlier stance.

“We are in Afghanistan for one express purpose: Al Qaeda,” he said. “Al Qaeda exists in those mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are not there to nation-build. We’re not out there deciding we’re going to turn this into a Jeffersonian democracy and build that country.”

The administration’s shift in thinking is gradual but has been perceptible in the public remarks of various officials. The incoming commander of the military’s Central Command, Gen. **James N. Mattis**, was asked last week by Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, whether the administration’s July 2011 date for starting to withdraw American troops implied a shift in emphasis from counterinsurgency to a strategy concentrating on killing terrorists.

“I think that is the approach, Senator,” he replied.

The emerging American model can best be described as “counterterrorism, with some counterinsurgency strategy that forces the hands of insurgent leaders,” said a diplomat with knowledge of the planning. It melds elements of both strategies in a policy that continues to evolve, as conditions change.

Some of the feelers to the Taliban are being put out by the Karzai government and some by the Pakistanis. Some, eventually, will be handled by General Petraeus and other military officials. Contacts are being kept under wraps, several officials said, because any evidence that insurgent leaders are talking to American or Afghan officials could be used against them by rival insurgents.

Another factor that has spurred talk of reconciliation is a classified military report, called “State of the Taliban,” prepared by Task Force 373, a Special Operations team composed of the army’s Delta Force and Navy Seals, which has captured insurgents and taken them to Bagram Air Base for interrogation.

While the report does not offer a silver bullet for how to deal with the Taliban, one official said that for the first time, it gives Americans and their allies “a rich vein of understanding of why the Taliban was fighting and what it would take them to stop.” The report depicts the Taliban as spearheading a fractured insurgency, but one in which conservative Pashtun nationalism and respect for Afghan culture are both at play, this official said.

Despite deep American concerns about Pakistan’s trustworthiness as an ally, Pakistan has also

emerged in recent months as a potential agent for reconciliation. Mr. Karzai has held at least two meetings with General Kayani of Pakistan. American officials say they believe that their talks have not yet delved into the details of negotiations with insurgent leaders, but Pakistan is eager to play a role in talks with the Haqqani network, a major insurgent group based in the country that has close ties to its intelligence service.

The links between Mr. Karzai and General Kayani, officials said, helped seal a recent trade deal between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which required concessions on the part of the Pakistani military.

“The best hope for resolving Afghanistan lies in Pakistan, and we have made some progress there,” said Senator [John Kerry](#), the Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and a frequent visitor to the region.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.