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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Britain Resolves, U.S. Wavers

By ROGER COHEN

LONDON — In Afghanistan there's the United States, Britain and then the rest. Britain has lost 85 soldiers this year, more than all other European NATO allies combined. For both countries the annual death toll has been rising steadily since 2006, and with it the drumbeat of public opposition to the war. In all, more than 1,100 U.S. and British troops have died.

Special relationships are forged in blood; the U.S.-British bond is no exception. So, as President Obama hesitates, his decision on American troop levels ever “weeks away” as the weeks pass, the British view of the war offers as good an indication as any of what Obama will do. An hour-long conversation with David Miliband, the British foreign secretary, suggests reinforcements are on the way.

When I asked if the mission needed substantially more troops, Miliband said, “What I think that you can see from the prime minister’s strategy is that we believe in serious counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency is a counterterrorist strategy.”

He continued: “The Taliban has shown what it means to provide safe space for Al Qaeda.” Describing the fights against the Taliban and Al Qaeda as “distinctive but related missions,” Miliband said “the badlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan are the incubator of choice for international terrorism,” adding that, “Ceding ground happened in the '90s and then we all know what happened.”

That's a clear rebuttal of the ever-larger school, most often identified with Vice President Joe Biden, advancing the view that Al Qaeda is the real threat, the Taliban much less of one; and so the United States should not commit more military resources to a nation-building struggle in Afghanistan that's an expensive diversion from core U.S. strategic interests.

Wrong. Counterinsurgency in the “Af-Pak” theater is indeed a counterterrorist strategy. I see no workable distinction.

As Prime Minister Gordon Brown has noted, three-quarters of all terrorist plots uncovered in Britain in recent years had links to Islamic extremists in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The defense of the West begins in the Hindu Kush and Helmand. Would-be bombers must be kept off-balance. To believe otherwise is wishful thinking.

But of course the campaign has to be smart. Miliband identified several things that have to change, among them governance, outreach and military strategy.

Whatever Afghan government emerges has to be “credible,” where Hamid Karzai's administration has not been, and provide a new “offer to the Afghan people of security and economic development.”

Miliband also called for “serious outreach to the insurgency to divide it,” estimating that “70 to 80 percent of the foot soldiers are recruitable.” The choice they are being given now is “fight or flight” where it should be “fight, flight or flip” because “an enduring settlement must be a political settlement in which conservative Pashtun nationalism has a place.”

That’s critical. The Taliban are a Pashtun movement. Pashtunistan straddles the porous Afghan-Pakistani border. Afghanistan has always been ungovernable without a Pashtun buy-in. Pakistan’s strategic interest in that buy-in is non-negotiable. These are basic — but long ignored — building blocks of successful strategy.

Finally, Miliband argued for a different focus to military operations. “Occupying land for the sake of occupying land is not what counts,” he said. “It’s population. You need to make sure the major cities are secured and Kandahar is vital.”

These were the convictions behind Brown’s decision earlier this month to send 500 more British troops to Afghanistan, bringing the contingent to 9,500 — a decision the prime minister expected to be “consistent with what the Americans will decide.”

The reinforcement was about one quarter of what British generals had requested. In the U.S. case, Gen. Stanley McChrystal has asked for about 40,000 more troops. Doing the math on a “consistent” basis suggests a substantial American reinforcement short of McChrystal’s request will eventually be announced by the White House.

I asked Miliband if Obama’s protracted ponder worried the Brits. Miliband pondered in turn before saying, “No, I think it’s a measure of the seriousness with which he takes the decision.”

O.K., but I still worry. If counterinsurgency is counterterrorism, if this theater is the “incubator of choice,” if McChrystal is the most lucid product of America’s crash post-9/11 course in counterinsurgency, then Obama should step up.

Beyond Kabul I got these two nuggets from Miliband. Asked how worried he was about an Israeli military strike on Iran, he said: “I don’t provide a running commentary on other countries’ concerns or policies, but we are one hundred percent committed to a diplomatic resolution.”

Asked about a Mideast peace, he said, “It’s very stalled and that’s very dangerous.” He said Israeli settlements must stop, calling them “illegal” and “an obstacle to peace.” He said: “I profoundly believe that Israel’s security depends on a two-state solution and I think that a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders plus or minus agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as a shared capital, and a fair settlement of the refugee issue is the right basis for Israel’s future as well as the Palestinians’ future.”

I have not heard President Obama be quite as candid. It would help.

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