

The diplomatic surge: Can Obama

By Joe Klein

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ADMIRAL Mike Mullen is an odd one. He eschews the crisp, classic aura of command; he comes across as a no-drama, common-sense-dispensing country doctor from downstate Illinois (actually, he's the son of prominent show-biz publicists from Los Angeles). But as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mullen is still the highest-ranking US military officer, and so it was a bit disconcerting to see him taking flak from a group of Afghan farmers and international agricultural experts in Kabul the first week in April. "The military is giving away free wheat seed to Afghan farmers, and that's undermining our efforts," said an expert whose USAID-supported programme gave farmers vouchers to buy seeds, which was helping build a secondary market of seed- and farm-supply businesses.

Instead of taking umbrage, Mullen took notes. In fact, he seemed close to excited as ideas flew around the table. It was not the normal fare for an admiral, but agriculture — specifically, how to get Afghan farmers to plant something other than opium poppies — is a central issue in this very complicated war. Mullen was thrilled to hear positive news about the relative merits of wheat and pomegranates, and the success of US Army National Guard farmer-soldier teams, which were helping to plant and protect in remote Afghan districts. "There are possibilities here we couldn't imagine a year ago," the admiral said at the end of the meeting. "So please keep thinking about how we can do this. Let your minds run free."

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Pentagon dominance of the Bush years. It was a demonstration of the Obama emphasis on diplomacy and economic development, a strategy that tracks with the military's new counterinsurgency tactics — "We've developed the best counterinsurgency capability in the world," Mullen said several times — that focus on protecting the public and building civil order. And so, in addition to the usual round of private meetings with government officials, Holbrooke convened a breathtaking parade of farmers, Afghan tribal leaders, women legislators, rule-of-law advocates, journalists, the local diplomatic corps, religious leaders; and then a similar roundelay in Pakistan. Mullen seemed amazed and somewhat nonplussed by Holbrooke,

who is the David Petraeus of diplomats, a constant source of energy and creativity — and occasionally controversy, since he is not, shall we say, a country-doctor sort of guy.

Most of the meetings were brutally candid, and often risky for the Afghan and Pakistani participants — we journalists were asked not to reveal their names for their own safety. Obviously, these were the most pro-American Afghans, willing to come to the US embassy for a meeting, but they included former Taliban and, in one case, a former prisoner at Guantánamo. "We told our people that there was a difference between the Americans and the Russians," said one tribal leader, part of a fierce-eyed, intensely

ama's team tame the Taliban?

dignified group of Pashtuns. "But you are now stepping in the steps of the Russians, bombing and invading houses. We defeated the Russians with your weapons ... But now the money you are paying the Pakistanis is being used against us and also you," he said, referring to the general belief, shared by Afghan tribes and the US military, that the Taliban is being supported by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI).

The difficulty of the war was apparent in a meeting several of us had with Hanif Atmar, the Afghan Minister of the Interior, who had a dramatic map of his country on display, coloured according to threat levels — a broad slash of red (highest level) running across the southern half, bordering Pakistan. Indeed, two-thirds of Helmand province, the prime poppy-growing area, was coloured black, which meant it is in Taliban control. Helmand and its neighbour, Kandahar province, is where most of the 17,000 additional US troops are headed. They will arrive just as the poppy crop has been harvested, the moment when many rural Afghans trade their ploughs for rifles and "fighting season" commences, a term that Admiral Mullen doesn't like — there were Taliban attacks through the winter — but which will be all too apparent from the expected surge in US casualties this summer.

Atmar described a series of new efforts to curb police corruption — although he was much less forthcoming about the Karzai government's buck-raking — and some of the programmes, especially those that paired local police with NATO mentoring teams, seemed quite promising. Indeed, right now Afghanistan is bristling with new ideas, and the slightest sliver of hope. It is, of course, easy to be deluded by a handful of pro-Western Afghans who hazard a visit to the US embassy, but there is a quality of pride and independence to these people — a consequence of their never having been successfully colonised, I'd bet — that makes a good-faith effort to help them toward stability seem almost plausible ... if it weren't for the presence of the world's most dangerous extremists, who are running the Afghan insurgency from just across the border in Pakistan.

If Afghanistan seems a bit better than expected, Pakistan appears much worse. There are ter-

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rorist attacks — some quite spectacular — almost every day, but the fragile democratic government of Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, seems unwilling to admit the extent of the problem. "The terrorist threat is a cancer eating my country," Zardari told the small group of journalists accompanying the Mullen-Holbrooke mission, as he sat in his office, flanked by dramatic photos of his wife. It was a good line, but unsupported by anything resembling a strategy to combat the disease. When we asked about the role of his intelligence service in feeding the cancer, he responded, "The germ was created by the CIA." True enough, but somewhat dated. "Your government called them the moral equivalent of George Washington," he said, referring to the mujahedin who defeated the Soviets. True again — and US complicity in the creation of Al Qaeda shouldn't be forgotten — but the game changed after the Russians were kicked out of Afghanistan and the terrorists focused their attention on both the US and Pakistan, where they now reside. Zardari insisted

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Zardari's helplessness reflected one reality — the Pakistani Army holds the real power in the country — but it also fed the parallel reality of an infantile political class, constantly squabbling, incapable of acting effectively even in a dire crisis. Holbrooke and Mullen saw it firsthand when a shouting match broke out before dinner at the US embassy between a prominent Zardari aide and a leading member of the lawyers' group that had successfully forced the reinstatement of Pakistan's Chief Justice. "They're both moderate, secular leaders," one of those present commented later. "They should be focused on the desperate threat facing their nation instead of fighting each other."

Indeed, the meetings that Holbrooke and Mullen had with Pakistani civic leaders were far less hopeful than the meetings in Afghanistan. The local journalists seemed more intent on defending the Pakistani Army and intelligence services ("Why are you always beating up on the ISI?") than on the threat that terrorists posed to their country. The war was an American war, an American problem — even though the terrorists had allegedly tried to blow up the entire Pakistani Cabinet in a bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on Sept. 20.

But the most telling meeting was with young adults, many of them students, from the northwest Tribal Areas. A young man said he had known one of those killed in a Predator drone strike. "You killed 10 members of his family," he said. Another said the refugees created by the Predator strikes had destabilised his village. "Are many of them Taliban?" Holbrooke asked.

"We are all Taliban," the young man replied. It seemed a statement of solidarity, not affiliation, but as a way of revealing how mixed loyalties and deep resentments make Pakistan so difficult to handle, it was shocking all the same. COURTESY TIME