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TALIBAN PROPAGANDA: WINNING THE WAR OF WORDS?

July 25, 2008 Reuter's reported: "The Karzai government and its international supporters must become much better at countering sophisticated Taliban propaganda if they are to defeat an insurgency that is driving a dangerous wedge between them and the Afghan people.

The latest report from the International Crisis Group, examines the Taliban communication apparatus that is exploiting popular disillusionment with the government and the U.S. and other foreign troops. Using the full range of media, the Taliban is successfully tapping into strains of Afghan nationalism."..."

The Taliban has created a sophisticated communications apparatus that projects an increasingly confident movement. It tries to wear out its opponents. Influencing perceptions at home and abroad is a vital component of this strategy. The vast majority of the material is in Pashtu, and a shortage of language skills in the international community means much either passes unnoticed or is misunderstood. The Afghan and other governments engaged in Afghanistan have failed to communicate robustly and honestly with their populations in a way that would help build and sustain popular will for a long-term endeavour.

The Karzai government and its allies must make greater efforts, through word and deed, to address sources of alienation exploited in Taliban propaganda. By building institutions and offering the services that give the Afghan people a better life, the government can gain public support, thus denying the insurgents opportunities to exploit local grievances and thereby gain a modicum of legitimacy.

The international community must provide the necessary support and pressure for improved performance, while also examining its own actions. The governments of countries contributing international troops must improve communications with Afghans on the directions and activities of the international engagement, including doing more to avoid civilian casualties.

"The Taliban is not going to be defeated militarily", says Samina Ahmed, Crisis Group's South Asia Project Director."..."

(Reuters: The views of this report are the author's alone.)

NEW CUBAN NUKE CRISIS THREAT

July 24, 2008 SpaceWar.com reported: "Is Russia serious about deploying its nuclear bombers in Cuba to retaliate against U.S. ballistic missile defense deployments in Poland or Lithuania?"

The story broke Monday this week when the Russian newspaper Izvestia, citing what it described as "a high placed source" in the Russian government, said if the United States went ahead with its plans to deploy Ground-based Mid-course Interceptors in Poland or Lithuania, the Kremlin could retaliate by basing its Tupolev Tu-160 White Swan supersonic nuclear bombers -- NATO codename Blackjack -- in Cuba.



Cuba

The U.S. government took the threat seriously and lost no time in responding to it. On Tuesday, Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, head of USAF Transport Command who has been nominated to succeed Gen. T. Michael Moseley as chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, told his confirmation hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia would cross "a red line" if it made such a move.

"I certainly would offer best military advice that we should engage the Russians not to pursue that approach," he said. "And if they did, I think we should stand strong and indicate that that is something that crosses a threshold, crosses a red line for the United States of America."

It should be noted the Russian government has carefully sought to avoid making any open threat or incendiary comments about the potential threat and it has carefully avoided being drawn out on the issue. The Defense Ministry in Moscow issued a statement saying the Izvestia story was palpably false and that it was even written under a pseudonym and quoted a non-existent organization among its sources.

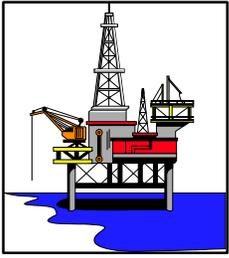
Nevertheless, the very possibility that Russia would deploy first-line strategic weapons systems capable of delivering nuclear weapons to the U.S. homeland from bases in Cuba, only 90 miles from the coast of Florida, would throw the entire strategic calculus of successive U.S. governments -- Republican and Democrat alike -- into complete disarray.

Such a possibility has never been seriously threatened in the 46 years since the world came closer than ever before or since in its history to all-out thermonuclear war in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Then U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev reached a deal whereby the successive U.S. administrations left communist Cuba alone and in return the Soviets refrained from basing any offensive nuclear weapons systems or offensive weapons capable of delivering nuclear warheads to the U.S. mainland on the island.

But all of a sudden this cornerstone agreement of Cold War and post-Cold War stability and security looks as if it might disappear overnight."..."

ARCTIC MAY HOLD 90 BILLION BARRELS OF OIL, U.S. SAYS



July 23, 2008 Bloomberg.com reported: "The Arctic may hold 90 billion barrels of oil, more than all the known reserves of Nigeria, Kazakhstan and Mexico combined, and enough to supply U.S. demand for 12 years, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

One-third of the undiscovered oil is in Alaskan territory, the agency found in a study released today. By contrast, a geologic formation beneath the North Pole claimed by Russian scientists last year probably holds just 1.2 percent of the Arctic's crude, the U.S. report showed.

Energy producers such as Royal Dutch Shell Plc and Chevron Corp. have accelerated exploration of the northernmost regions for untapped reserves amid record prices and receding access to deposits in more hospitable climates. Russia's move to scrap a United Nations convention and carve out an exclusive Arctic zone sparked protests from Canada, the U.S., Norway and Denmark.

"Most of the Arctic, especially offshore, is essentially unexplored with respect to petroleum," Donald Gautier, the project chief for the assessment, said in the report. "The extensive Arctic continental shelves may constitute the geographically largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on Earth."

Russia dispatched a nuclear-powered icebreaker to the Arctic Ocean last year to map a subsea link between Siberia and the North Pole as part of a bid to refute a UN convention limiting resource claims beyond 200 miles (321 kilometers) offshore. Canada said earlier this month that it plans to counter the Russian overture with "a very strong claim" to Arctic exploration rights."..."

MILITARY STRIKE NOT AN OPTION ON IRAN, EU MINISTERS SAY

July 23, 2008 The EU Observer reported: "European Union foreign ministers on Tuesday...called for further diplomacy in dealing with concerns over Iran's nuclear programme and ruled out a military strike as an option. UK foreign secretary David Miliband said following the meeting: "We are 100 percent focussed on a diplomatic resolution to the Iranian issue."

The EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, said there was "no other route" apart from diplomacy. "The position of the European Union is clear," said Mr Solana according to the AP. "We want to find a diplomatic solution to this, in particular to clarify to the fullest the nature of their nuclear programme." Mr Solana outlined for the ministers the results of a meeting on Saturday between Iran and diplomats from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, and Russia, where Tehran was encouraged to halt its uranium enrichment in return for a package of economic and political carrots."..."

The six nations and the EU have given Iran a fortnight to reply to the latest offer. If the response is unsatisfactory, further sanctions could be considered."..."

HU: CHINA SEES RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AS DIPLOMATIC PRIORITY

July 21, 2008 Xinhua reported: "President Hu Jintao said on Monday that the relationship with Russia has been China's diplomatic priority. He made the comment while meeting with Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov. "We will work with Russia to deepen strategic coordination and upgrade the partnership to new heights," said Hu.

Describing current Sino-Russian relations as stable and healthy, Hu mentioned his two meetings with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and comprehensive cooperation and consultation in international affairs.

Hu particularly expressed thanks for the support of Russia on the Taiwan, Tibetan and Olympics issues, as well as its assistance after the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan Province. "All these demonstrate the friendship between the two states and peoples," Hu said, calling the two countries good neighbors, friends and partners."..."

IRAN SETS UP 31 MARTIAL DISTRICTS, PREPARES 320,000 GRAVES FOR WAR DEAD

June 30, 2008 Debkafile reported: "Iran has divided the country up into 31 military sectors as part of its stepped up preparations for war, ... Iranian sources report. Sunday, June 29, Brig. Gen. Mir-Faisal Baqerzadeh, head of the Iranian Army's Foundation for the Remembrance of the Holy Defense and MIAs, said the 320,000 graves were to be dug for enemy forces in case of an attack on Iranian territory.

"We don't wish the families of enemy soldiers to experience what Americans had to go through in the aftermath of the Vietnam War," said Baqerzadeh. Our sources report that it was obvious to the average Iranian that the graves, concentrated in the border regions, were intended for prospective domestic victims of US and Israeli bombardments.

The plan to divide the country into 31 military districts was approved at a top-level consultation at the office of Supreme Ruler Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last week.

Each sector will have its own command center headed by a Revolutionary Guards officer-in command, which in a war contingency will assume control of the district government and keep supplies of food, water, medicines running as well as emergency services for evacuations.

A military force attached to each command will be responsible for maintaining order and responding to problems...This arrangement guarantees the government regime in Tehran effective control of every part of the country in any war contingency."