

Afghanistan: Obama's dangerous faux pas

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Tall, lanky, easy of manner and articulate, Barack Obama exuded hope and confidence across the globe when he entered the White House. The world was yearning for a paradigm shift and he held out the promise of change from the disastrous policies of aggression and unilateralism pursued by his predecessor, George W. Bush. So palpable was Obama's message that he was granted the Noble Peace Prize in anticipation of his future performance. However, two years later, the dream stands almost shattered. Obama's promise of change essentially called for a form of international disengagement in order to focus on domestic issues plaguing the United States.

Withdrawing from and ending US involvement in Afghanistan should have been a *sine qua non* for such a promise of change. Yet, the third review of Obama's AfPak (Afghanistan-Pakistan) strategy has failed to provide a clear solution for such withdrawal, and has rather put forward a plan that is both confusing and ambivalent. There remains the same old 'do more' demands on Pakistan, along with the repeated call for the reversal of the 'Taliban momentum'. Glimpses into Bob Woodward's Obama's Wars reveal a beleaguered US president unable to overcome the dominance of the military with political will and action.

This is evident if one analyses Obama's failure with regards to Afghanistan. With sixty-two percent of Americans wanting to end the war, and eighty-five percent of Afghans wanting an end to the occupation, Obama could easily have overturned the incompetent and ambitious generals, especially General David Petraeus, who is intoxicated by his partial success in Iraq and is said to be eyeing the office of the US presidency. His strategy to create local warlords to confront and contain the 'national resistance' – for that is what the Taliban movement has morphed into – is a recipe for an abiding misery for Afghanistan. For one thing, Afghans are not Iraqis; their history is testimony enough. For another, the conflict in Afghanistan has ideological underpinnings, and the Afghan nation has a tendency to gravitate towards 'faith'. This US strategy will only prolong the conflict and create room for 'faith-fighters' from all over the world to rally in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. The local proxies and remotely operated fire power will not be able to change the results.

The answer to the daunting problems that face the Obama Administration would be to beat a hasty retreat – even if it is a negotiated one. This would entail direct talks between the Taliban leadership and the US, instead of going about in circles and using proxies to engage diplomatically where military force has been unable to succeed. Sadly, this lesson has not been learnt from the two fruitless troop surges – with 21 000 additional troops being sent in during the first surge, and 40 000 during the second since Obama's entrance into the Oval Office. More troops produced more casualties for the allies, almost two dead and four wounded per day in 2010. In fact, the nine-year history of the Afghan war has shown that whenever NATO attempted to wrest the initiative from the Taliban, the latter grew in strength.

This is clear from the fact that the the Taliban has retained its strength despite numerous US military operations – such as Operation Anaconda in eastern Afghanistan in 2003 and Operations Khanjar and Mushtarak in the south. General Petraeus' claim that he had significant success in Kandahar is therefore spurious and misleading. In reality, the much flaunted operation Kandahar never took off. And the insidious plan of creating local militias is also doomed to fail. The Taliban are almost certain to penetrate and control these militias and, through them, acquire money to finance the resistance against the occupation and the puppet government. Already, the flourishing narcotics trade, of which the Taliban gets a handsome share, and the protection money doled out to Taliban commanders for safe passage of NATO's supply columns, is filling resistance coffers.

The American generals in Afghanistan are clearly disconnected from the current reality, and seem to have forgotten basic lessons of warfare. Take, for instance, the factors that govern the outcome of an armed conflict. A secure line of supply and reliable intelligence input are absolute prerequisites for success on the battle field. In the case of Afghanistan, both of these elements are highly unreliable for NATO forces. The long overland supply routes from the entrepot (Karachi) to the Afghan border are prone to ambush and are expensive to maintain. Some 200 NATO tankers and containers were torched in 2010 alone. The ten-day blockade of one of the two routes by the Pakistan military – following NATO helicopter attacks on a border check post which killed three Pakistani soldiers – brought NATO command to its knees. With growing anger in Pakistan because of the drone attacks, the spectre of the blockade will continue to haunt NATO operations.

To further compound the issue, the US policy of allowing India to destabilise Pakistan internally by fomenting unrest in Baluchistan by harbouring, training and arming Baluch separatists is patently self destructive. It is tantamount to cutting off the very branch on which they are precariously perched. US policy-makers seem oblivious to the fact that Pakistan's socio-political and financial woes could lead to a huge disaster as NATO troops could ultimately be stuck in Afghanistan's mouse trap in the event of turmoil in Pakistan. There is no adjacent Gulf of Tonkin (such as in Vietnam) where troops and equipment could rapidly be ferried to in case of an emergency.

Furthermore, the search for an alternative route through Central Asia and Russia is also unlikely to come to fruition since:

1. it's very long and exorbitantly expensive (more than ten times the present cost), and
2. Russians have a long memory, and want to see the US humiliated in Afghanistan, as well extracting unacceptable strategic concessions. The alternative supply line would remain a pipe dream. The burden of maintaining visualised troop levels till the end of and beyond would break the economic back of the flagging US economy as well as create uneasiness among the NATO allies.

US Intelligence failures in Afghanistan have been monumental. Over-reliance on the Afghan State Intelligence (FAS) for field intelligence, as well as the unrealistic dependence on Pakistan's ISI have led to numerous intelligence fiascos. Afghan Intelligence is also relatively amateurish and more a source of disinformation than genuine intelligence. ISI's support was bound to be tentative and reluctant, given the circumstances under which it was press-ganged into service following 9/11. Despite spending billions of dollars on intelligence-gathering, the sixteen intelligence agencies of the US did little more than chase shadows of Al-Qaeda. Ostensibly, only twenty valuable targets of Al-Qaeda have been eliminated thus far by drone strikes in Pakistan's FATA region. Yet more than 2 200 innocent Pakistani civilians have been killed in these attacks. Such barbarity has had little effect on the war itself, least of all on the Afghan battlefield. On the contrary, the front-line of Pakistan has been ravaged by numerous revenge attacks by suicide bombers. As a corollary, Pakistan is no longer willing to embark on a potentially disastrous operation in North Waziristan.

NATO's entire intelligence apparatus is rusty, incompetent and corrupt. [Evidence for this?] Only the impostor Mulla Akhtar Mansoor's case is enough to put them to shame. Private security contractors are enjoying the bonanza of the free flow of money like never before. Lucrative contracts have been awarded to retired CIA and FBI officers on the basis of 'old boys club' relationships. The privatization of intelligence gathering, as illustrated by the case of David Furlong, is a novel way to squander money for negative

returns. On the other hand, the adversaries are engaged in an ideological conflict with a high degree of motivation, and therefore cannot be countered by greedy, tired and morally depraved legions of intelligence mercenaries.

Historically there are three decisive determinants of victory or defeat in the combat zone. These are: time, space and relative strength. An evaluation of each of these in the context of Afghanistan is an illuminating exercise. Although probably an urban legend, there is much truth in the statement often attributed to the Taliban: 'The Americans have the watch but we have the time.' A rudimentary insight into Afghan traits would indicate that Afghans rarely become exhausted in a war of attrition. As for space, the Afghan resistance controls eighty-five percent of Afghanistan's territory, and holds sway over government functionaries in areas where the government lacks direct authority. And on the scales of relative strength, guerilla fighters have always enjoyed an advantage due to their freedom of movement and ability to surprise. The guerilla, after all, does not have to win, but has only to deny victory to the adversary. Furthermore, the war in Afghanistan is not a numbers' game in the conventional sense. But even if it was, it cannot credibly be claimed that the resistance is short of human resources. And with the scent of victory now in the air, who would not rally behind the victors.

Only with relation to fire-power do the allies have an absolute supremacy. However, if fire-power alone could win wars, General William Westmoreland – who commanded American military operations in Vietnam between 1964 and 1968 – would not have had to cut and run out of Vietnam as he did.

Obama's feet-dragging withdrawal strategy defies all military logic. The time-tested doctrine of achieving a 'clean break' to avoid a 'running battle' would be a wise course to follow. Fanciful formulations such as the proposal to divide Afghanistan or to establish 'stay behind fortresses' to maintain a life-line for a moribund puppet regime in pursuit of illusive objectives would only prolong the agonising Afghan imbroglio. Worse still, such options would destabilise Pakistan, the only 'relief zone' available to NATO for an honourable withdrawal. Pakistan would likely be driven into a revolution or a civil war, which could ignite an inferno that would consume the entire South Asian region.

In conclusion, President Obama must trust and follow the instinct which he amply displayed in his Cairo speech on 4 June 2009, where he said: 'Make no mistake: we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan. We seek no military bases there. It is agonizing for America to lose our young men and women. It is costly and politically difficult to continue this conflict. We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can.' It was a legitimate and realistic objective, and the US can retain its dignity if the occupation were to end sooner rather than later. Sadly, President Obama seems to have changed his position since Cairo. He needs to stand up to his generals as they will never except their failure and will continue to invest in the error. This is an established psychology of military commanders vividly analysed by Norman F. Dixon in his book *On The Psychology of Military Incompetence*. If Obama fails to measure up even in the fourth review of AfPak strategy due in April 2011, his folly would be recorded in history as a monumental blunder.

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