

Obama's Afghan Exit Plan Coming Unhinged

by Ramtanu Maitra

The much-ballyhooed Afghan exit strategy of President Barack Obama is coming unhinged, and there is speculation on how messy that could turn out to be. Obama and his coterie's lack of insight and endless arrogance has further eroded all hopes that the U.S./NATO troops will be able to leave Afghanistan in an orderly manner, leaving the country with even a modicum of order and stability.

Obama's "performance" at the NATO summit in Chicago on May 20 presents a clear picture of how muddled the situation is regarding the scheduled withdrawal of U.S. troops, and official acknowledgement that the U.S./NATO war in Afghanistan is over. At the summit, France's newly-elected President François Hollande, upholding his election pledge, announced that France will withdraw its forces by the end of 2012, about two years earlier than the original timetable. Along with Britain, Germany, and Italy, France is among the top five nations with troops in Afghanistan, with about 3,600 soldiers.

Less than a week later, on May 24, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Allen, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that 68,000 troops was a good starting number for 2013, as he was pressed by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) about reports that the Obama Administration is considering a earlier withdrawal. "My opinion is that we will need 'significant combat power' in 2013," Allen said. "Sixty-eight thousand is a good going-in number, but I owe the President some analysis on that." The current number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan is 90,000-plus, and if Obama plans, as he has promised, to withdraw 33,000 troops by this Summer to facilitate his reelection bid, Allen will be left at least 10,000 troops short. In other words, that number, 33,000, is seemingly not etched

in granite, and could be significantly less. Why is this happening at this late stage, after more than 10 years of U.S. and NATO engagement in Afghanistan?

The Shifting Sands of Objectives

The clear answer to that is the gross failure of leadership in Washington. It was evident at the very outset of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that Washington had no clue about what it was doing and why the action was needed. The invasion began with the mantra of dismantling al-Qaeda and capturing the "master-terrorist" Osama bin Laden. That objective changed later to a new objective of ushering in democracy in Afghanistan. Further down the road, with all previous objectives found to be unattainable and mere reverie, new objectives were set in place—the objectives of eradication of the Taliban and "straightening out" Pakistan. Now, Obama's objective, besides straightening out Pakistan, is to wriggle out of the combat situation in Afghanistan without a total withdrawal, and without accepting a strategic defeat.

Ikram Sehgal, a Pakistani defense and security analyst, in his article "The Afghanistan Endgame" in the News International of Pakistan on May 24, discussed the muddled U.S./NATO troop-withdrawal plan. He pointed out that the final transition phase, involving the handing over of responsibility for provinces and dis-



U.S. Army/Master Sgt. Kap Kim

President Obama has ignored the lessons of history in Afghanistan. Here, top Afghanistan commander Gen. John Allen testifies before members of the Senate Armed Service Committee, holding hearings in Kabul, Feb. 18.

tricts to Afghan authorities, will start from “mid-2013,” NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said.

A number of areas and towns have been handed over since the transition started a year ago. Incidents of Afghan soldiers turning on NATO troops are causing apprehension about increased Taliban infiltration of the police and army. NATO had initially planned to expand the Afghan Security Forces to over 350,000. At the Chicago summit, the number was re-set at roughly 230,000, by the time the war is declared over.

Papering Over History

If President Obama, or any of his coterie, had any accurate reading of history, they would know that war in Afghanistan really begins when the foreign occupiers leave the country. For ten years, Kabul, under foreign occupation, has had a single head of state, President Hamid Karzai, a Pushtun. In order to counter the Afghan insurgents, who were mostly Pushtuns, Karzai had to bring in non-Pushtun ethnic warlords, who did not trust him, and provided their support for a price. That was considered a necessary choice at the outset. But during the interim ten years, Washington did little to establish Karzai as a political force. In fact, it did the very opposite.

The Obama Administration, in particular, heaped abuse upon Karzai, the same way Pakistan has been abused in recent months by the same crowd in Washington. The purpose of this abuse is to cover up Washington’s lack of policy, its all ’round failures, and its resort to blaming others. All their arrogance and duplicitous policies vis-à-vis Kabul and Islamabad have haunted the U.S. and NATO throughout this long war. These insane policies have brought about death and injury to thousands of Americans, Europeans, and countless Afghans; the final toll comes at the time of exit.

The weakening of Karzai and the turning of Pakistan from a collaborator into a dangerous enemy stem from the policymakers’ abject failure to understand Afghan history. They are busy beating up both Karzai and Islamabad, while conveying to the American people that that the problems lie with Kabul and Islamabad.

On the other hand, the pages of history are open for all to see. Thomas Barfield, in his article “Afghans Look at 2014” in the April 2012 issue of *Current History: South Asia*, pointed out the following: “The aftermath of all foreign invasions of Afghanistan, not just the Soviet one, followed this pattern. Former insurgent leaders found that success on the battlefield or rallying opposition against foreigners could not be transmuted

into political authority once those forces departed. None of the insurgent leaders who drove the British from the country in the nineteenth century succeeded either in taking power for themselves or in playing a prominent role in the governments of the royal British-backed emirs who invariably came to rule Afghanistan at the expense of their less well-known rivals.”

In other words, the fate of President Karzai, who was kept weak by a spiteful Obama Administration, is pretty much determined in advance, no matter what the promoters of Obama’s Afghan exit policy tell us. Barfield opened the history pages to inform us that Dost Mohammad (1843-63) and Abdur Rahman (1880-1903), purged popular former insurgent leaders the instant they became troublesome. For instance, in 1842, Shuja, who was put on the Afghan throne by the British and kept there for three years, was assassinated as soon as the British planned to withdraw in 1842, ending the First Anglo-Afghan War. Dost Mohammad, who was languishing in a prison in British India, came to take over and stayed in power for 20 years.

The same pattern followed the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1879. The British picked Mohammad Yaqub, a son of a deceased emir. Under pressure from the Afghan people, Yaqub abdicated in 1880 and Abdur Rahman took power, and held it for 23 years.

A similar development was in the process with the Afghan Taliban as well. The Afghan Taliban were brought to power by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia at a time when Afghanistan was torn apart by civil war. The Taliban never had a popular support base, but the uncertainties caused by the civil war led many Afghans to accept them as rulers. However, the Taliban had no real legitimacy and were propped up by foreign powers. Within five years, the Taliban had lost all credibility. In 2001, when the Americans came to dislodge the Taliban with the help of the Northern Alliance, it was virtually a cakewalk. Other than the militia, and some Pakistani soldiers dressed as Taliban militants, no Afghans came out to help the Taliban.

It is likely that a similar fate awaits President Karzai as well. Remaining a foreign occupier’s puppet to stay on the throne is almost a guarantee in Afghanistan to get dethroned once the foreign occupiers put away their guns.

Regional Solution Barred by Obama Administration

But the situation did not have to come to this state, had the Obama Administration wanted things to be dif-



DoD/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Clayton Weis, U.S. Navy

A workable U.S. exit from Afghanistan would require a regional solution to the conflict, but the Obama Administration has rejected that option. Shown: a U.S. special forces member fires a mortar during a fight in Kunar Province, March 7.

ferent. The appropriate Afghan exit policy would have been a regional solution to the ten-year-old conflict. But, that would have required strong leadership from four nations—the U.S., China, Russia, and India. While it is still not clear what kind of resolution of the Afghan conflict China, India, or Russia would consider at this point, it is likely that there is a realization that U.S. efforts have little chance to succeed. What is known at this point is that the Afghan situation is very worrisome to Russia, China, and Iran, in particular.

The possibility of Washington beginning a process leading to a regional solution to Afghanistan appeared fleetingly. But the British-Saudi-influenced Obama Administration quashed it quickly, using Iran as the “bogeyman.” U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s June 23, 2011 prepared testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings stated that the Core Group, of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States, had met twice and would convene again the following week. “At the same time, we are engaging the region

around a common vision of an independent, stable Afghanistan, and a region free of al-Qaeda. And this effort is paying off. India, Russia, and even Iran, are now on board.” In response to questions from Committee members, Clinton was forthright about the importance of bringing Iran to the table, discussing the approach to put an end to the Afghan conflict.

Not only did the Obama Administration ignore Secretary Clinton’s initiative, it began to make moves that eventually isolated Pakistan. A series of events, which culminated with the killing of at least 24 Pakistani soldiers along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border by U.S./NATO helicopter gunships, Obama’s arrogant refusal to apologize to Islamabad for the killings, and Islamabad’s retaliation—closing the NATO supply line that snakes through Pakistan to bring in almost 75% of the goods used by the 130,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan—effectively broke the tenuous trust that existed between the two.

Although it is likely that the ongoing arm-twisting by Washington will force Pakistan to open the supply lines, that will not mend their relations. The daily drone attacks inside Pakistan’s tribal areas to “kill off” the anti-American Pakistani Taliban is a policy which has created a visible level of anti-Americanism within Pakistan. Should the supply line be reopened, there will be emotional ramifications in Pakistan among a population that is no longer patient with the arbitrary and unilateral policies of the United States.

However, this strategic blunder committed by the White House has gone virtually unnoticed in the United States. It is evident that in order to exit from Afghanistan with its baggage, guns, and tanks, an access through Pakistan is a necessity. It is also evident that after what happened in the recent past, Islamabad is no longer willing to play second fiddle in the U.S./NATO’s foolish Afghan war, but it is of great importance to the U.S. and NATO that Pakistan does not become an obstacle during the messy exit process. This was pointed out by none other than President Karzai, who told the NATO heads of state in Chicago: “We believe Afghanistan and Pakistan have strong mutual security interests to work together to defeat terrorists intent on killing our people, undermining the sovereignty of our countries, and destabilizing our region. . . . Over the past few years, we have closely engaged Pakistan to assist us with the peace process, and I am hopeful that the weeks and months ahead will witness more tangible measures in this regard.”