

## "Af-Pak: Obama's War"

Af-Pak is the new acronym the U.S. government has invented for Afghanistan-Pakistan. Its meaning is that there is a geopolitical concern of the United States in which the strategy that the United States wishes to pursue involves both countries simultaneously and they cannot be considered separately. The United States has emphasized this policy by appointing a single Special Representative to the two countries, Richard Holbrooke.

It was George W. Bush who sent U.S. troops into Afghanistan. And it was George W. Bush who initiated the policy of using U.S. drones to bomb sites in Pakistan. But, now that Barack Obama, after a "careful policy review," has embraced both policies, it has become Barack Obama's war. This comes as no enormous surprise since, during the presidential campaign, Obama indicated that he would do these things. Still, now he has done it.

This decision is likely to be seen in retrospect as Obama's single biggest decision concerning U.S. foreign policy, one that will be noticed by future historians as imprinting its stamp on his reputation. And it is likely to be seen as well as his single biggest mistake. For, as Vice-President Biden apparently warned in the inner policy debate on the issue, it is likely to be a quagmire from which it will be as easy to disengage as the Vietnam war.

There are therefore two questions. Why did he do it? And what are likely to be the consequences during his term of office?

Let us begin with his own explanation of why he did it. He said that "the situation is increasingly perilous," that "the future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbor, Pakistan," and that "for the American people, [Pakistan's] border region [with Afghanistan] has become the most dangerous place in the world."

And why is it so dangerous? Quite simply, it is because it is a safe haven for al-Qaeda to "train terrorists" and to "plot attacks" - not only against Afghanistan and the United States but everywhere in the world. The fight against al-Qaeda is no longer called the "war on terrorism" but is hard to see the difference. Obama claims that the Bush administration had lost its "focus" and that he has now installed a "comprehensive, new strategy." In short, Obama is going to do this better than Bush.

What then are the new elements? The United States will send more troops to Afghanistan - 17,000 combat troops and 4000 trainers of the Afghan forces. It will send more money. It proposes to give Pakistan \$1.5 billion a year for five years to "build schools and roads and hospitals." It proposes to send "agricultural specialists and educators, engineers and lawyers" to Afghanistan to "develop an economy that isn't dominated by illicit drugs." In short, Obama says that he believes that "a campaign against extremism will not succeed with bullets or bombs alone."

However, implicitly unlike Bush, this will not be a "blank check" to the two governments. "Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders." As for Afghanistan, the United States "will seek a new compact with the Afghan government that cracks down on corrupt behavior." The Afghan and Pakistani

governments are pleased to be getting the new resources. They haven't said that they will meet Obama's conditions. And Obama hasn't said what he will do if the two governments don't meet his conditions.

As for the way forward, Obama asserts that "there will be no peace without reconciliation with former enemies." Reconciliation? Well, not with the "uncompromising core of the Taliban," or with al-Qaeda, but with those Taliban "who've taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price." To do this, Obama wants assistance. He proposes to create a new Contact Group that will include not only "our NATO allies" but also "the Central Asian states, the Gulf nations and Iran, Russia, India and China."

The most striking aspect of this major commitment is how little enthusiasm it has evoked around the world. In the United States, it has been applauded by the remnants of the neo-cons and McCain. So far, other politicians and the press have been reserved. Iran, Russia, India, and China have not exactly jumped on the bandwagon. They are particularly cool about the idea of reconciliation with so-called moderate Taliban. And both the *Guardian* and *McClatchy* report that the Taliban themselves have reacted by creating unity within their hitherto divided ranks - presumably the opposite of what Obama is trying to achieve.

So, where will we probably be six months from now? There will be more U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and the U.S. commanders will probably say that the 21,000 Obama is sending are not enough. There will be further withdrawals of NATO troops from there - a repeat of the Iraq scenario. There will be further, perhaps more extensive, bombings in Pakistan, and consequently even more intensive anti-American sentiments throughout the country. The Pakistani government will not be moving against the Taliban for at least three reasons. The still very influential ISI component of the Pakistani army actually supports the Taliban. The rest of the army is conflicted and in any case probably too weak to do the job. The government will not really press them to do more because it will only thereby strengthen its main rival party which opposes such action and the result may be another army coup.

In short, the "clear and focused goal" that Obama proposes - "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future" - will probably be further than ever from accomplishment. The question is what can Obama do then? He can "stay the course" (shades of Rumsfeld in Iraq), constantly escalate the troop commitment, while changing the local political leadership (shades of Kennedy/Johnson and Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam), or he can turn tail and pull out (as the United States finally did in Vietnam). He is not going to be cheered for any of these choices.

I have the impression that Obama thinks that his speech left him some wiggle room. I think he will find out rather how few choices he will have that are palatable. I think therefore he made a big, probably irreparable, mistake.

by Immanuel Wallerstein