

How long are Americans going to stay in Afghanistan?

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The mid-term elections in the US don't seem to have taught the present Administration anything. For any unbiased observer, it is obvious that the Democratic defeat at the elections and the failure of what was generally perceived as a referendum on Barack Obama were basically due to the fact that President Obama had not kept up to his promises given during the 2008 presidential campaign.

One of the highest expectations at that time was that Obama would keep his word and withdraw the US troops from Iraq by August 2010. This year, with the deadline was approaching, Obama made his best to persuade that he was faithful to his promise. But not too many people in the US and in the outside world believed that a simple relabeling of troops into 'non combat units' amounted to the promised troops withdrawal.

Another promise made by Obama during the 2008 campaign was to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan by summer 2011. Until now personally Barack Obama did not seem to falter on the issue. But this week a high-level diplomatic and security conference was held in Australia with the participation of at least three top US officials in charge of foreign and military policies, namely State Secretary Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen.

The three did not really coordinate their speeches, but in all three of them the clearly read implication was such that the US troops will stay in Afghanistan for at least three more years beyond the previously set deadline.

The officials in the administration have tried to play down the significance of the statements, saying that they really did not signify any major difference in the administration stance on the issue.

"The old message was, we're looking to July 2011 to begin a transition," an unnamed White House official said. "Now we're telling people what happens beyond 2011, and I don't think that represents a shift."

But in fact, it does. And not only one shift, but rather a combination of them.

First, it demonstrates how easily the politicians can forget the promises they made while seeking office, once they are fully established in that office. The promise Obama gave in 2008 was not only addressed to Americans, but to the whole world community, and to the Afghan authorities in particular. The latter have already continuously demonstrated their irritation over the behavior of US-led NATO coalition in Afghanistan. The inability (or,

unwillingness) of the Administration to live up to its own pledges will only add to the irritation and a further loss of mutual trust.

Second, the decision to prolong the military presence in Afghanistan demonstrates that the US is by now so deeply involved in the whole campaign that it requires little to turn it into a second Vietnam. The consequences of the 1960-ies gamble were very serious, and the whole of American society had to live through decades before it got rid of the 'Vietnam syndrome'. Is the Obama administration really willing to create a new 'Afghan syndrome' remains to be seen.

Third, and probably most serious. The whole Afghan gamble from the very beginning demonstrated that the US is not eager to learn from others' mistakes. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has clearly demonstrated that no outside power is capable of dictating its will on the Afghan people. The British were the first to learn the lesson and then followed the Soviets. Basically, nothing has changed in Afghanistan, and the military and political failures the US is facing in Afghanistan, only confirm the thesis. Why the administration is so eager to endure the failed policies for another three or four year, is a question that remains unanswered.

To tell the truth, the Americans are not alone in their illusion that the Western military invasion has brought peace to Afghanistan, and that it serves for the benefit of Afghan people. The British, who should know better from their own experience, seem to have fallen in the same line.

As far back as June this year (that is, shortly after coming to power) Defence Secretary Nick Harvey stated that British troops would remain in Afghanistan 'until the job is done', implying that they may even stay there after the general elections in the UK scheduled for 2015.

Even leaving apart the issue of human losses that are inevitable and set to grow as long as the foreign troops are present in Afghanistan, the cabinet minister is expected to realize that the prolongation of the troops' presence in such volatile region as Afghanistan is disastrous for his party' political prospects.

And if the politicians - whether American or British - DO realize the fact, than the only plausible explanation is that they have by now given up on the prospects of their reelection for the next term.

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