

The Afghanistan-Pakistan War: Obama's Vietnam?

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"Our interest in Afghanistan is to prevent it from becoming a haven for terrorists bent on attacking us. That does not require the scale of military operations that the incoming administration is contemplating. It does not require wholesale occupation. It does not require the endless funneling of human treasure and countless billions of taxpayer dollars to the Afghan government." Bob Herbert, *The New York Times*, January 6, 2009

"I don't want to just end the [Iraq] war, but I want to end the mind-set that got us into war in the first place." Presidential candidate Barack Obama, January 31, 2008

"If we are strong, our character will speak for itself. If we are weak, words will be of no help." John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)
35th U.S. President

"No nation ever profited from a long war." Sun Tzu, author of "The Art of War"

A solid majority of Americans (54 percent) now oppose President Obama's Afghanistan-Pakistan War. In fact, among Democrats, only twenty-six (26) percent support such a foreign war. In other words, by enlarging this conflict, President Obama is governing as if the opinion of a majority of Americans and of his own political base did not matter. In a democracy, a politician can do that for a while, but not for very long.

This undeclared war, just like LBJ's Vietnam War (1959-1975) and George W. Bush's Iraq War, is an adventure with no clear objective and no clear exit strategy, but with tremendous costs in lives and money. Nobody can tell if the U.S. and NATO are killing people in Afghanistan and in Pakistan because this is an operation to stop al-Qaeda terrorists from mounting future Sept. 11-type attacks, or because it is part of a larger plan to counter a Taliban insurgency and prevent this Pashtun Islamist party to regain power. But also, it has been said that it is a war waged to protect a pipeline crossing Afghanistan. Such a pipeline would move oil from the Caspian Basin to the coast of Pakistan through Afghanistan. Nevertheless, since this is not clearly explained, the war remains a blur for most people. The reason why such a war brings fewer open protests than the Vietnam War is essentially because it is waged with mercenaries.

That may be a reason why such open-ended wars fought with mercenaries can last for so long. For its part, Great Britain, a country used to colonial occupations, says through its incoming military Chief of Staff, General Sir David Richards, that it could stay in Afghanistan for 40 years. Even Germany seems to have regained its taste for military adventures, as its Defense Minister says it could occupy Afghanistan for ten years.

With this frame of mind, the world could be back in the nineteenth century, a century characterized by the anarchy of lawless armed conflicts, with militarized empires involved in prolonged wars, if not perpetual wars, with colonial and imperial military occupations. If the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 has simply ended the restraining its presence imposed on other empires from being lawless and imperialistic, then the world may be on a very dangerous course. It will be back to the future. All the democratic ideals of the second part of the twentieth century would be gone.

One has the feeling that such badly designed military adventures as the Afghanistan war, with no clear objectives in sight, are primarily launched and expanded to keep the military establishment busy and the military-industrial complex prosperous.

Mired in financial scandals and plunged into a deep economic recession, many Americans suffer from war exhaustion. There seems to be too many of these endless and costly wars, even though the professional warmongers relish them. For his part, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declares that the American public is “pretty tired” of the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan, and he believes that the situation has to be turned around in a year.

Indeed. Only a few months ago, a substantial majority of Americans thought they had kicked the Bush-Cheney neocon warmongering crowd out of power. Those who favor American-led wars of aggression had a choice in voting for Republican candidate John McCain. But, to no avail. The Obama-Biden soft-neocon crowd seems to be in the same camp as Bush and McCain. Nothing of substance has changed, or hardly.

At least in terms of foreign policy, the question can be asked if the Obama-Biden administration is anything more than a third term of the Bush-Cheney administration? The Obama-Biden administration did not arrive in power determined to take control of the government apparatus and to change its direction. In fact, the reverse seems to have happened: It was pre-empted and subdued by the entrenched governing nomenclatura. This reflects a lack of preparedness, dedication and vision.

As soon as it was sworn in, the Obama-Biden administration began planning to enlarge the Afghan conflict with more troops and more mercenaries, and, to make its intentions crystal-clear, kept in his post Bush’s Secretary of Defense (Robert Gates) while asking Congress for \$109 billion more funds to finance the adventure. Then President Obama fired Gen. David McKiernan, who had been in charge in Afghanistan, and replaced him with Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, a former Green Beret who lead the secretive Joint Special Operations Command, an outfit of commando teams that was involved in widespread murder and carnage in Iraq. And, what is strange, Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal proposed to President Obama the adoption of a Soviet Strategy of building bases and troop build-up for Afghanistan. With friends like this, Barack Obama needs no enemies.

As a matter of fact, Obama’s political enemies, beginning with Rupert Murdoch’s Wall Street Journal, but also other right-wing corporate media, are salivating at the thought. I wonder how many editorials the WSJ will write supporting candidate Obama in 2012!

But the die is cast: President Barack Obama now “owns” the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) war and he will have to live with the consequences. If the British and Soviet examples of foreign occupations in that part of the world are good indications of things to come, Commander-in-Chief Obama is going to be bogged down in this devastated mountainous

land for years to come, and this may very well cost him his presidency in 2012. For a while, the Republicans and some neocon Democrats are going to cheer him. But later on, most Americans are going to turn against him.

Let's place things in perspective here. Just as in Vietnam, the U.S. is intervening in a civil war involving Pashtuns (40% of the Afghan population), Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazara Shiites, among over ten minority groups sharing a traditional and often repressive and barbaric Islamic culture, in a country called Afghanistan. And it is waging guerrilla warfare in Afghan villages and towns in order to support a corrupt and illegitimate Islamist government.

The foreign soldiers are trying to "flush out the Taliban from villages" just as they were trying to flush out the Vietcong from villages. Since such wars cause many civilian deaths, sooner or later, the entire population will turn against the foreign military invaders and they are likely to be kicked out. That was the story in Vietnam and there is little doubt that this will be the story in Afghanistan-Pakistan. Sending more troops to this Asiatic region will only make matters worse. The advantage for the military establishment, besides generals getting a few stars on the shoulder, is that a prolonged conflict will keep the money flowing in their coffers and in those of their suppliers.

But wait. Now Obama is enlarging the Afghan conflict, not only by waging a drone war against tribesmen in Pakistan, but he also wants to turn the Afghanistan war into a war against Afghan drug lords. The logic here, I gather, is to multiply your enemies: the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Pakistan tribesmen, Afghan drug lords, etc. The more you have, the more likely the conflict will endure.

When you forget that the initial objective in Afghanistan, after the 9/11 attacks, was a narrow one, i.e. to prevent that country from becoming again a haven for terrorists, it is easy to widen a conflict ad nauseam. As a matter of fact, this was tried before in Afghanistan. The Soviets tried it for nine years, from December 1979 to February 1989, and despite sending in hundreds of thousand troops, they did not succeed. It was the Soviet Union's Vietnam War, to paraphrase Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's Security advisor.

Similarly, Obama's war in Afghanistan-Pakistan would require hundreds of thousands of troops on the ground. Like the Soviet Union, the U.S. is building large military bases in Afghanistan and its commanders think there are never enough troops. Presently, the U.S. has some 60,000 troops in Afghanistan. Next year, it is easy to predict it will have more than 100,000 troops in that remote country, if the current policy is followed.

And under what legal basis? It is stretching quite a bit the terms of the U.N. Security Council's resolution 1368 of September 12, 2001, to justify an open-ended war in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. That resolution was adopted under Article 51 of the U.N. Charter that affirms the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense. Since the 9/11 terrorists had trained in Afghanistan under Taliban control, such training camps had to be dismantled, either by the Afghan government or by external forces. Since the Taliban government refused to comply, the U.S. was in its right to intervene. Thus the overthrow of the Taliban government and the destruction of al-Qaeda training camps in that country. This was done in the fall of 2001.

On December 20, 2001, the U.N. Security Council (Resolution 1386) authorized the creation of a NATO-led military international force to assist the newly established Afghan Transitional

Authority in creating a secure environment in and around the capital Kabul and to support the reconstruction of Afghanistan. That's the legal reason why there are foreign soldiers in Afghanistan. They operate under the umbrella of the so-called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), whose mission has been expanded, year after year, to cover most of Afghanistan (see U.N. Security Council Resolution 1510).

Later, the U.N. Security Council also authorized a mission of assistance in Afghanistan. In March 2002, the U.N. Security Council organized an Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) with the adoption of Resolution 1401. UNAMA's primary mandate is "to manage all humanitarian, relief, recovery and reconstruction activities." That mandate has been renewed in March of each year, the last time on March 23, 2009, extending it until March 23, 2010.

But now we are in 2009, eight years after 2001. Is there really a legal basis for the U.S. to drop bombs over villages in Pakistan and to occupy Afghanistan indefinitely with foreign troops? There is some play with words here. For example, the European countries participating in the NATO-U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan talk about a "police mission" to justify the presence of their soldiers in Afghanistan. In fact, this so-called police mission has turned into a permanent military occupation of Afghanistan and into a guerilla war against local militants and insurgents, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Let's keep in mind that many of the so-called "militants" or "insurgents" in Afghanistan, the Mujahideen and to a certain extent the Taliban, used to be called "Freedom fighters" by President Ronald Reagan (see the Reagan Doctrine) when they were fighting the Soviet invaders, with the help of the American C.I.A., Saudi Arabia and the Pakistani secret police (ISI). This shows how such "freedom fighters" conveniently change names when they switch camp! They have gone from being called "heroic" to being called "insurgents". Such is the propaganda of war. —An historical fact remains: The unintended consequence of the Reagan Doctrine is the current Afghanistan-Pakistan war, and it may have played an important role in preparing the ground for the 9/11 catastrophe.

Nevertheless, let us say that this is stretching the U.N. Charter to the limit to say that it now permits the permanent military occupation of a sovereign country by foreign troops. It is true that the U.N. Charter, under Chapter VII (Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression), can authorize collective action against a country for good reasons. But the intent of such a military intervention is to be short-term and not to be turned into a permanent colonial occupation.

In conclusion, let us say that since the Obama administration is clearly enlarging the Afghan conflict and has authorized drone bombings in Pakistan, it would seem that the U.N. Security Council should be called to authorize or condemn such an enlargement of the conflict. It should also indicate that it favors a compromise solution to the conflict.

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