

## Obama's dilemma: Triangulation or strangulation?

Written by Eric Walberg

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The new president is discovering that America's road to Kabul goes through Moscow, says Eric Walberg

12/2/9 -- As United States President Barack Obama prepares to transfer troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and other jihadists are also "transferring" there, according to Afghan Defence Minister General Abdel-Rahim Wardak, giving the country the dubious distinction of remaining the centre of the "war on terror". Throwing down the gauntlet to Obama, the Taliban successfully closed the Khyber Pass yet again last week by blowing up a bridge, torching 10 supply trucks for good measure.

The Pakistan army responded by bombing an insurgent base, killing 52 suspected militants. The Taliban have killed nearly two dozen suspected US spies in recent months, all of them in the border region where American drone aircraft have carried out a series of missile strikes.

Newly installed officials describe the situation on the ground in Afghanistan as far more precarious than they had anticipated, with US government departments poorly organised to implement the plan he presented last week to his National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Special envoy to Afghanistan-Pakistan Richard Holbrooke said it is "an extraordinarily dysfunctional situation in which the very objectives have to be reviewed." Obama reacted by delaying the deployment of any further troops until defence chiefs presented a coherent "endgame", though he can hardly afford to wait 60 days for the results of his "Afpak" policy review. After only a few weeks in office, Obama has painted himself into a corner on this, the stoney cornerstone of his foreign policy.

Despite talk of change and both his and Vice-President Joe Biden's professed distaste and distrust for Afghan President Hamid Karzai, it appears that Obama is committed to continuing Bush's ill-conceived policy of bombing both Afghanistan and Pakistan, supporting a puppet regime and expecting the starving shell-shocked natives to be thankful. One innovation from the "dying" days of the Bush regime that thankfully looks like it was still-born was proposed by General Bantz John Craddock, the Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, Commander of the US European Command and head of the International Security Assistance Force, the "peace-keeping force" operating in Afghanistan. He advocated giving troops a licence to kill all suspected poppy farmers, in effect ordering the mass execution of tens of thousands of civilians.

This Pol Pot strategy of genocide led to a mutiny by NATO officers and it looks like Craddock will be forced to resign, but it is surely a sign of the times. In December 2008 US military doctrine was modified to permit the bombing of drug labs if intelligence suggested that no more

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than 10 civilians would be killed. Last month, Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated, "If we have evidence that the drug labs and drug lords are supporting the Taliban, then they're fair game." Will he also be forced to resign? Or will genocide become the official US policy in Afghanistan?

The latest problem for Obama is the loss of the US airbase in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz President Kumanbek Bakiyev announced the decision in a Moscow press conference after talks with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. He was attending the Collective Security Treaty Organisation meeting which set up a regional rapid reaction force to include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. He explained the cancellation as due to the US mission in the "war on terror" being over, and besides, the US wasn't paying enough and had whisked a US soldier accused of murder out of the country without so much as a howdy-do. On the closure of the precious US base, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said this was a sovereign decision of Kyrgyz authorities, albeit sweetened by Russia's \$2 billion loan and \$150 million gift to Kyrgyzstan, once the darling of the US neoliberals and scene of the US-sponsored "tulip" revolution, but now another bankrupt failed state.

Ending the US military presence in Kyrgyzstan puts the last piece into place in the Russian control of supply routes to Afghanistan through its "near abroad". This is a serious blow to Obama's plan to up the ante in Afghanistan. The Khyber Pass is no longer reliable and the only other access for supplies -- apart from Iran -- is now through Russia. Not unaware of this dilemma, the Kremlin has bent over backwards to show Washington it is ready to accommodate US transport needs. Lavrov said: "We expect the US side to send a request on the quantity and the nature of the supplies. We will give a relevant permission as soon as this happens."

But for the US to benefit from Russian goodwill, it will have to abandon its missile plans for Eastern Europe and tear up its invitations to Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. Will the US risk abandoning its vital supply links to 60,000 troops in Afghanistan just to put its toys in eastern Europe and invite its "friends" Ukraine and Georgia into its private club? After the gay 90s, when Russian policy was made in Washington, is US policy now being made in Moscow? A delicious irony.

As a sign of which way the wind is blowing, Harvard professor Karl Kaiser confidently dismisses any further plans to expand NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine in a recent New York Times editorial, arguing that the former's reckless war against Russia shows how easily NATO could be dragged into a senseless war, and that the latter is too divided a nation on the issue. If NATO were forced to undertake a conventional war in Europe which existing members

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don't want, it would be shown up as a paper tiger, leading to its own collapse. Hmm. Perhaps letting the Georgian joker into this exclusive club is not such a bad idea after all.

As an afterthought, Kaiser adds that it would further harm already bad relations with Russia and suggests the Obama administration push for a new understanding with Russia, including strategic arms control, a nonproliferation policy, a new "security architecture", and reviving the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. All of these issues will require serious compromise by the US, which would be wonderful, but how far and how fast can Obama go without raising the ire of US hawks? The answer depends very much on how successful Obama is in faraway Afghanistan in the next 12 months. Which depends on the Russians. Obama is painted into yet another corner, this time a Russian-Afghan one.

The standard line in Western media is to warn against "Russian expansionism", as if it has no right to demand that its borders are safe and nearby countries don't aim nuclear missiles at it. At last week's Munich Security Conference (MSC), US Vice-President Joe Biden vowed to resist the notion of a Russian sphere of influence (read: he accepts it grudgingly, and don't tell anyone), promising that the new government under President Barack Obama would continue to press NATO to seek "deeper cooperation" with like-minded countries (read: Ukraine and Georgia will not get invitations to join NATO). He also said the Obama administration would continue to pursue the missile defense system, "in consultation with our NATO allies and Russia," provided the technology works and is not too expensive (read: "Maybe we will, maybe we won't. I dare you to put your missiles in Kaliningrad").

"So how can Obama reconcile the two goals of strengthening the American presence in Afghanistan while curbing Russian expansionism?" asks Stratfor chief George Friedman in another NYT op-ed. His answer (I'm not making this up) is to "rely less on troops, and more on covert operations like the CIA." Covert operators travel lightly, as we know from James Bond movies, and can spot Bin Laden terrorist training camps, beam the coordinates to Scotty and -- wham! Mission accomplished. Friedman, taking a leaf from Rumsfeld's scribbles, argues this would require far fewer forces and remove the irksome supply-routes problem. He does make the valid point that Obama's conventional route of putting more troops on the ground is doomed, but more bombing, spying and other covert activities is hardly a credible option.

The only real alternative to the present military quagmire is negotiations with the Taliban, which will probably be the new policy, trying to replicate the "success" in Iraq with the Sunni Awakening Councils. The idea is to offer the Taliban a share of power if they give up, allowing the US to concentrate on wiping out their friends in "terrorist camps" along the Pakistan border. This is derided by hardliners as appeasement. In any case, it is unlikely the Taliban will

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suddenly agree to get along with the detested Karzai and the heathen invaders. Such "coalitions" never last long without one side being destroyed. The comparison with Iraq is apples and oranges. And ungovernable tribal lands on the Pakistani border will remain just that.

Plans to attack Iran look laughable in this context. There are already rumours that Iran is beginning to look more favourably on the Taliban, which means US plans in Afghanistan will depend on Iran as well as Russia. On Iran, Biden told the MSC: "We will draw upon all the elements of our power -- military and diplomatic, intelligence and law enforcement, economic and cultural." Ali Larijani, the speaker of Iran's parliament, noted Biden's softer tone and called the MSC Obama's decision to send George Mitchell as his envoy to the Middle East a "positive signal". Iran is now waiting for a positive signal in its direction. Obama is painted into this corner, too. This time an Iranian-Afghan one.

Despite all the sympathy Obama has received from around the world, it is hard to translate any of it into support for US policies, either on the part of allies or foes. Nothing much has changed, except that existing problems have worsened, both on the military and economic fronts. Even the prospect of serious negotiations with the Taliban, Iran and Russia raise few hopes. The US would have to back down unilaterally on so many thorny issues that few expect this to happen.

This all looks spookily like the situation in 1961 when president John F Kennedy came to power. The conviction of many is that after initially proposing an escalation of the Vietnam war, the intelligent Kennedy soon realised the pointlessness of it and was about to reverse his position and quickly withdraw -- until his assassination.

Many Americans are calling Afghanistan an unwinnable war and even Obama is now calling for an exit strategy before more troops are sent, much like Democrats were doing in the 1960s. The only way out of his dilemma with the Russians, Iranians and Afghans is to reverse his foolhardy pledge and end the war immediately. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/934/in1.htm>