

The US is staying on in Afghanistan

Shaukat Qadir

So, now we finally have the long awaited clarification. Robert Gates, US Secretary for Defence has clarified that the US President's announcement of a withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2011 will merely be a token withdrawal. He has not committed himself to the period that US military forces will remain in Afghanistan; but if a permanent peace in the region is the object, most analysts in this region are fairly certain the US will not stay the course. Let us attempt to examine the implications of this decision to understand why the majority opinion is that the US will not stay the course.

That the US is losing the Afghan war is a fact now acknowledged by most knowledgeable journalists and analysts. In fact, Admiral Mike Mullen also admitted as much to the Congressional Committee last year. Although there are many reasons for this, two stand out: the Afghan government's corruption and indifference to its citizens; and the conduct of US troops.

A forty six year old, educated, middle class resident of Jalalabad, let us call him Shams-ur-Rahman, who owns a middle sized general store and has an agricultural land holding. Two of his sons are studying in Kabul University and he hopes to send his daughter to Pakistan for further studies, a typical middle-of-the-road citizen of any country. He had this comment to make on assurance of anonymity: "when the Taliban entered Afghanistan in 1994, we supported them, though with some misgivings, because they promised us justice. From 1996 onwards they began to change and we had to accept them or die. When the US attacked the Taliban we heaved a sigh of relief. Now we find that the US puppet government is busy making money to fill their own pockets, while the American troops kill (Afghans) for no reason whatsoever. The Taliban at least had some reason for their cruelty; these fellows (Americans) have none; they just kill whoever they like. If they don't kill they hand over their prisoners to Saleh (the recently sacked chief of Afghan Intelligence). We are left with no option but to support the Taliban. They are defeating the Americans, who will go very soon. What else can we do? They are now our only hope".

Shams' father was killed last year by 'accident' by a NATO patrol while returning home, around nightfall. His father was rather vocally critical of US military operations and the Karzai government; and Shams' comments were made well before recent the WikiLeaks' report. It might take WikiLeaks to convince the less knowledgeable about the conduct of US forces in Afghanistan, but the local grapevine keeps the people well informed, far before these disclosures reach the rest of the world.

Such views are expressed by most Afghans but I picked on Shams; the typical middle class make-no-waves individual. If his mildly worded views are as expressed, it is not difficult to imagine his fiery father expressing his views far more forcefully and embellishing them with choice four-letter expletives!

But now we also have that shocking and damning report from WikiLeaks. Wide-scale killing of civilians by US and NATO forces; torture of prisoners handed over to the Non-Pashtun/Northern Alliance dominated Afghan secret police; death squads; endemic corruption and theft, not only among Afghan forces, but also in the US and NATO forces; double-crossing all and sundry; and most significantly, the extent of the demoralization of western occupation forces facing ever fiercer Taliban resistance.

How can the US hold out any realistic hope of victory or even of sufficient improvement in the security situation for them to pretend to pull out from a position of strength? If this war was about winning the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan people, it has already been lost. If it was about a military victory; only the Americans could think of claiming one! The much touted Marja Operation was a fiasco. The Kandahar operation was postponed from June to July this year; after the change of command in ISAF and with the onset of the monsoons, it is unlikely to commence till September/October, if it does. And if it does, it is unlikely to improve upon the performance in Marja.

WikiLeaks has also reported its views on the ISI's links with the Taliban. The views expressed there are not very different from the report published by the London School of Economics; on which I have commented in an earlier article, and do not think it necessary to repeat my words. However, the frequent harping on this issue may have other, more insidious implications.

History provides us two examples of the mighty US being defeated by guerrilla warriors in an insignificant foreign country; Korea and Vietnam. Even though while pulling out from Vietnam, Richard Nixon, then President of the US, bombed Cambodia to near destruction, so as to claim some kind of victory; there was a convenient scapegoat for the failure of the world's super power to achieve a complete victory over the ragtag forces in Korea and Vietnam: China.

When the US forces are forced to pull out of Afghanistan, under similar circumstances, take one guess as to who will be the scapegoat?

So, watch out Pakistan, you are in bed with a Praying Mantis; there is, however, a serious error with this analogy, which some American with a sense of humour might wish to debate: the Praying Mantis is female and, there could be a serious issue with who is actually doing what to whom?!