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## **President Obama: look for a new Massoud**

*by Cora Sol Goldstein*

The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is floundering, and the American presence in Central Asia is in peril. After more than a thousand American casualties and billions of misspent dollars, the U.S. Army will be forced out of Afghanistan without having achieved any of its objectives: capturing Bin Laden, destroying Al Qaeda's operative and training capabilities, and transforming Afghanistan into a stable democracy governed from Kabul. This is tantamount to defeat. It is a mistake to equate, as it is often done, the American defeat in Vietnam with the looming American defeat in Afghanistan. Neither the National Liberation Front nor North Vietnam ever launched terrorist attacks against continental U.S., Europe, or other American allies. The Vietnamese who fought against the U.S. in Vietnam were not interested in projecting their ideology abroad. Theirs was a defensive struggle of national liberation and self-determination. The American defeat in Vietnam had political consequences both at home and abroad, but did not imperil American national security. On the other hand, an American defeat in Afghanistan will threaten American homeland security and configure a severe setback for American foreign policy. When the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, the country will once again become the ideal safe haven for training terrorists capable of launching attacks against the U.S. and its allies. If the U.S. leaves Afghanistan as it is, Pakistan, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban will be able to challenge American strategic presence in Central Asia and project their influence on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan unchecked. Pakistan will continue to wage its undeclared proxy-war against Kabul and Indian interests in Afghanistan, and will become the main power-broker in the region.

Critics of Obama's policy in Afghanistan claim that the U.S. needs to withdraw immediately and continue the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban using drones. This sounds attractive because it offers a way out of an increasingly unpopular war, and it promises a technological (and relatively pain-free) quick-fix. However, the proposal is flawed. To begin with, assassinated Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives are rapidly replaced. Second, after American troops leave Afghanistan, the country will be converted into a subterranean maze of refuges and arsenals that will be beyond the reach of drones. If this happens, the U.S. will be forced to escalate its air campaign, and this in turn will increase the severity of collateral damage. Third, strategic bombing, no matter how sophisticated, needs human intelligence to pinpoint targets. Lastly, a counter-insurgency war cannot be won by drones alone because every civilian casualty is a propaganda victory for the enemy, both in the battlefield and abroad. Collateral damage, irrespective of the actual number of victims and their putative "non-combatant" status, is a sure way to heighten critique of the U.S. Furthermore, if the U.S. uses drones in Afghanistan after withdrawing, the strikes will be qualified as illegal by the international community. The U.N. Human Rights Council has already condemned the American use of drones in Pakistan and Yemen because they are not war-zones. The issue is not the inadequacy of drones themselves, but their efficacy in achieving the military and political objectives of the war against Al Qaeda

and the Taliban. Drones alone will not be able to defeat a fundamentalist, multi-headed, jihadist movement bent on capturing Afghanistan and projecting its terrorist agenda beyond the Afghan frontiers.

Drones are part of the solution if and only if they are integrated into a campaign waged by anti-Taliban and anti-Pakistani Afghan guerrillas. Multiple Afghan armed factions waging relentless guerrilla warfare against the Taliban are likely to provide better results than gargantuan operations led by American and European soldiers with the dubious help of the new Afghan army and police. It is hard to believe that the American-trained Afghan armed forces, inefficient, corrupt, unreliable as they are, and extensively infiltrated by Taliban and Pakistani spies, will be able to supplant the American and NATO forces once these withdraw. The Obama administration and the U.S. Congress must reconcile themselves to the fact that the \$27 billion spent on the training of the Afghan security forces since 2002, has been a waste. Instead of continuing the pointless (and failing) “democratization jihad,” the American goal should be to empower local anti-Taliban militias that share with the Taliban many of the same cultural, religious, and social mores, and use comparable techniques of warfare. They know the Afghan territory and its people with the same depth as does the Taliban, and have extensive military experience in irregular warfare. Yet it is evident that without American support, the anti-Taliban groups will not succeed. American intelligence, American special ops, and American technological resources must be deployed as needed. In this way, the Afghanistan war will cease to be an asymmetric conflict and become a military and political struggle between the Taliban and rival Afghan groups. If there is a model to copy in the fight against Pakistan and the Taliban, it is that of Ahmed Shah Massoud’s Northern Alliance. The only way to fight the Taliban is through Taliban equivalents. A guerrilla movement can only be challenged and eventually defeated by another guerrilla movement equally knowledgeable of the territory and its people, and animated by a similar commitment to victory. Moreover, Al Qaeda and the Pakistani ISI will find it harder to exploit the collateral damage caused by American drones if the aerial bombing is helping an Afghan anti-Taliban guerrilla.

There is still time to change course. The U.S. government should not attempt to create a unified country led from Kabul. The decade-long American attempt to unify Afghanistan through social engineering (just like the Soviets tried to do) is preposterous. The U.S. does not need Karzai and his pseudo-army. American strategists should exploit the political potential of a divided Afghanistan, as Pakistani strategists already have. The Pashtun area of Afghanistan, which spans two thirds of the country and holds 42 percent of the Afghan population, is a vast tribal territory with very vague (or simply nonexistent) loyalties to Kabul. Therefore, Afghanistan must be divided into two zones, one Pashtun, under the control of Pakistan, and the other in the hands of American-backed anti-Taliban and anti-Pashtun guerrillas. The U.S. would not be artificially dividing Afghanistan, but rather using preexisting cleavage lines. Afghanistan is already an ethnic and political mosaic of communities that are often hostile and fearful of one another. The Afghan civil war, that began after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and lasted until the American invasion in 2001, had a death toll of 100,000, mostly civilians. No one could blame the U.S. for the disintegration of a country that is already de facto divided.

Of course, arming anti-Pashtun guerrillas is a risky strategy. If President Obama decides to redraw his Afghan strategy and fully back anti-Taliban warlords, he will be attacked on ethical grounds. Recently, the House Subcommittee for National Security has voiced its concern about the use of taxpayers dollars to finance warlords in Afghanistan. This critique is naive because

U.S. taxpayer dollars have uncritically supported the Pakistani ISI, the strongest warlord organization in Central Asia, for decades. The issue is not financing allies, but which potential allies to finance. The real risk posed by this strategy is that the anti-Taliban militias could eventually turn against the U.S. After all, Al Qaeda, the Afghan *Mujahidin*, and the U.S. were partners in the anti-Soviet crusade in Afghanistan. But the role of American diplomacy and American intelligence should be to avoid this evolution.

The history of the American occupation of Iraq and its aftermath should serve as a cautionary tale. In Iraq, American planners also failed to appreciate the potential benefits of dividing an already fragmented society. They were unable, or unwilling, to read the political situation on the ground with objectivity and accuracy. The Bush administration, fixated on the fantasy of an ethnically and politically integrated and democratic Iraq, did not realize that once Saddam Hussein was militarily defeated, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi security forces, and the Baath Party ceased to be the problem, but could have been part of the solution. The partition of Iraq and Baghdad into a Sunni/Kurdish zone and sector and a Shia zone and sector, would have allowed the U.S. to pacify and reconstruct the Sunni/Kurdish zone and sector, and outshine its competition. No Shia regime modeled on the Ayatollahs' Iran would have been able to compete with an American-driven development project in the Sunni/Kurdish zone and sector. Instead of partitioning Iraq, President Bush attempted to unify the country and thus made it possible for the pro-Iranian Shiites to gain access to power. The disastrous American occupation of Iraq led to the growth of Al Qaeda in the country, to the emergence of a powerful Sunni insurgency, and to the establishment of a government with dubious allegiance to the U.S. The Sunni Awakening movement, a late addition to the American strategy, achieved some success in the fight against Al Qaeda, but it was not able to conclusively defeat Al Qaeda or challenge Shia political control. As a result, Al Qaeda is still a threat in Iraq, and the U.S. is protecting a quasi-hostile Shia government.

Once again, the U.S. has bet on the wrong horse. First, President Bush installed Mr. Karzai in Kabul, and now President Obama is following his predecessor's lead and continues to back the corrupt, inefficient, and disloyal Afghan government. Obama too has been deluded by the mirage of a mythical Afghanistan, ethnically heterogeneous but united and peaceful. His military and political strategy in Afghanistan, in spite of his insistence otherwise, closely resembles the failed policy of the Bush administration. The widely publicized Marja offensive was a failure, and the much heralded drive to win the heart and minds of the people in Kandahar is likely to collapse as well. The piecemeal addition of troops and the renewed commitment to civil reconstruction in a context marked by an absolute lack of security, are simply useless. The Iraq experience shows that it is futile to attempt to construct or reconstruct a country and a civil society in an environment that can only be described as violent, hostile, and dangerous. The imminent military and political defeat of the U.S. in Afghanistan is ineluctable if the Obama administration does not take into account the reality on the ground and changes the nature of the war. While Washington hesitates to use anti-Taliban and anti-Pashtun guerrillas, Pakistan and the Taliban have de facto fragmented Afghanistan. Pakistan has already achieved its aspiration to create a unified political and military Pashtun zone spanning Pashtun Afghanistan and its own Tribal Areas. Moreover, Pakistan is taking the political initiative by negotiating directly with Karzai.

It is often said that foreign powers are condemned to fail in Afghanistan. This is an oversimplification – the ancient history of Afghanistan is the history of successive and successful

foreign occupations that radically changed the country and its prevailing ideologies. It is true that in modern times imperial powers have systematically lost their Afghan adventures. In all cases, the invading armies tried to deploy a reduced number of troops and attempted to keep their casualties low. They relied on their technological superiority in their efforts to impose a central government that could be controlled from afar. The U.S. is losing Afghanistan because it is adhering blindly to this model.

It is imperative to free American policy from the straitjacket of misconceptions that shapes U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.

**“The democratization of Afghanistan is possible.”**

*Not really.* Democratization by force is not the same as radical regime change. It implies a thorough ideological and political transformation that can only be achieved if the enemy is militarily annihilated and politically defeated, and unable and unwilling to resist. Therefore, if an American government were interested in introducing liberal democracy in Afghanistan, it would have to fight and win a total war. Only then would a military occupation aimed at democratization by force à la Germany and Japan have a chance of success.

**“There is a nation in Afghanistan and it’s been there for a long time.”**

*Hardly.* Afghanistan is a fragmented conglomerate of tribal and ethnic groups harboring deep resentments against each other, and split by regional and local conflicts. If anything, Afghanistan is two countries, Pashtunistan (which straddles over the Durand line and includes parts of Pakistan) and the rest. Any American policy tailored around the idea of a united Afghanistan governed from Kabul is condemned to fail.

**“We are fighting a stateless enemy in Afghanistan.”**

*Not true.* Pakistan functions as the base and sanctuary of Taliban and al Qaeda. It is a failed state with expansionist ambitions where political decisions are heavily influenced, and often dictated, by the armed forces and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). The ISI trains, pays, protects, and manipulates the Taliban, and shelters, tolerates, and condones al Qaeda. Therefore, unless the Pakistan problem is solved, the war in Afghanistan will be lost.

**“It is crucial to avoid collateral damage.”**

*Is it?* If American national security is really at stake, collateral damage should be an irrelevant strategic consideration. 19,894 French civilians were killed by the Allies during the invasion of Normandy, yet the world would be rather different without D-Day.

**“We must win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.”**

*Before that, we must win the war.* It is impossible to construct and reconstruct in a context devoid of security, and it is impossible to win the heart and minds of an enemy population during war and before defeat. The U.S. was able to win the heart and minds of the population of its zone and sector only after the unconditional surrender of Germany. Military defeat and physical destruction had made the German population amenable to change, and the American military government was able to gain a quasi-absolute monopoly of violence, information, and propaganda in the American zone. This allowed the American military government to carry out a denazification and reeducation campaign, introduce monetary reform, and guide the construction of democratic institutions and practices.

**“We can get the Taliban to drop their weapons through diplomacy.”**

*How?* It is preposterous to think that Taliban fighters can be won over by the NATO forces. The Taliban are winning, and therefore have no real incentive to accept American conditions and Kabul’s leadership. American military and civilian strategists seem unaware of the depth of the ideological commitment of the Taliban commanders and many of their fighters. The only way to make the Taliban drop their weapons is by drying the pond in Pakistan while conducting a fierce anti-Taliban guerrilla war in Afghanistan.

**“Investing in education, not military surges, will bring peace to Afghanistan.”**

*This is absurd.* The U.S. is not in Afghanistan to “improve” the Afghan school system, and we should not be involved in a farcical democratization à la Iraq. Humanitarian organizations may be interested in discussing Afghan education with tribal elders in order to preserve the safety of new schools, but we should not follow this example. If “respectful consultation” with tribal elders guarantees the security of a school, the inference is that the Taliban are authorizing the school and its curriculum. Al Qaeda and the Taliban would certainly profit if the U.S. government and humanitarian organizations invested in educating their future recruits because they use contemporary weaponry and incorporate modern information and communication technology. Any policy, governmental or non-governmental, aiming at increasing education in a Taliban-ruled society, means increasing the power of the enemy.

**“American national security is not at stake in Afghanistan.”**

*This is simply wrong.* How many Americans must be killed by al Qaeda using operatives trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to consider the Afghanistan war a national security priority? There were 3000 casualties in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. This is approximately the number of American soldiers killed in action in France from June 6 to June 20, 1944. Is this not reason enough to consider the outcome of the Afghanistan war relevant to American homeland security? Moreover, if the U.S. leaves Afghanistan without defeating the Pakistani/Taliban/al Qaeda challenge, American foreign policy in Central Asia would suffer a considerable setback. Pakistan, the Taliban, and al Qaeda would be able to project their influence on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan unchecked, and Pakistan would become the main power-broker in the region.

No foreign power can win an asymmetric war by relying exclusively on its state of the art technology. If Afghanistan is in fact an area of strategic importance for the security of the U.S., then President Obama must radically change his present military philosophy. He must not withdraw from Afghanistan, but reengage. The use of nuclear weapons is not yet justified. The national and international political context makes it impossible for the U.S. to fight a total war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, since this would require military conscription and the full mobilization of the home front, and would imply very high Afghan and American casualties. The only chance of success is to accept and encourage the division of Afghanistan, and to partner with anti-Pakistani and anti-Taliban militias.

*Cora Sol Goldstein is an Associate Professor of Political Science at California State University, Long Beach. Goldstein received her Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago in 2002. Her book, Capturing the German Eye: American Visual Propaganda in Occupied Germany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) discusses the U.S. experience in postwar Germany. Her recent publications include “2003 Iraq, 1945 Germany, and 1940 France: Success and Failure in Military Occupations,” Military Review, July 2010 and “A Strategic Failure: American Information Control Policy in Occupied Iraq,” Military Review, March-April 2008.*

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