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Denial and defeat in Afghanistan

Tarak Barkawi
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Many Afghans have protested against the killings of civilians by an unnamed US soldier in Kandahar province [EPA]

To listen to US and European officials, all is well with the Western project in Afghanistan.

Absent awareness of the irony, President Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron have announced that this project is in its "final phases".

"The trajectory we've set", said an advisor of President Obama's who specialises in strategic communications, "is one of transition and Afghan sovereignty". As the Afghans move into the lead, the US will be able to pull back.

It is as if the symphony of war was set to the rational beats of Western political calendars. For General John R Allen, the overall commander in Afghanistan, "The campaign is sound. It is solid."

Faced with news of 16 Afghans murdered by a rogue US sergeant and an upcoming NATO summit with politicians eager to pull out of an unpopular war, a European official blandly assured the media: "The most important thing now is the messaging."

Sound bites will not save the West's latest effort to modernise Afghanistan.

We are dealing here with peoples whose historical trajectory has dealt out repeated defeats to the world's greatest empires. You cannot make war successfully in such places as an afterthought to the crises of economy and democracy in the West.

The conflict in Afghanistan is at a decisive juncture, and the West is facing defeat on a scale not seen since Vietnam. Few want to face facts, and the result is a gap between rhetoric and reality of a kind that only wars gone badly wrong produce.

Lost in the rolling crisis that began with the Quran burning is an important upcoming date. At the end of this month, the Karzai regime will see through its threat to force out the private security companies who guard the contractors that carry out development projects across Afghanistan.

Humanitarian NGOs that operate without security will be unaffected. But the contractors who carry out projects funded by Western governments face the prospect of operating under the protection of a hastily raised "Afghan Public Protection Force".

Would you put your business and your life in the hands of such a force?

According to the *New York Times*, some companies are wrapping up their projects in Afghanistan and leaving; others allow their employees to illegally keep personal weapons; and all are scrambling to make new arrangements.

In the kind of corporate buffoonery that neoliberal privatisation creates, and which has damaged the Western war effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan, one US company is considering suing the US government. The contractors had been assured that they would have a secure environment in which to operate.

Another company is stationing guards with its employees who work in Afghan ministries. So unwelcome are Westerners assisting Afghans in developing their country that the advisors need bodyguards inside government offices. A better indicator of just how illegitimate for Afghans the continued Western presence is could hardly be imagined.

As one frightened US employee of an aid company commented, "We're easy pickings" for insurgents and angry Afghans.

And there are a lot of angry Afghans. Abdul Samad is one of them. He lost 11 relatives to the rogue sergeant in Panjwai. Along with those who have demonstrated against the Quran burnings, the Taliban, and the silent majority of Afghans, Mr. Samad has one demand: It is time for the Americans to leave, all of them.

Therein lays the reality that Western officials cannot face. The West is not welcome in Afghanistan and is only present by force of arms. Westerners prefer to believe that, a few bad apples aside, most "ordinary Afghans" support Western led development.

The basic idea of the "solid" and "sound" campaign is that Western combat forces will depart by 2014, leaving behind a large development assistance programme and a small counter-terrorism and advisory force, shielded by trained Afghan security forces.

Members of these forces have repeatedly turned on their Western advisors, slaughtering them unawares.

Can there be any more sure sign of the moral decay of the West? First it contracts out its dirty work in forlorn campaigns of white man's burden to its professional soldiers, then to its own hired guns, and onwards to Afghan recruits.

Shock is then expressed in all quarters of Western opinion when these Afghans turn on their invaders.

The fiction is that somehow the Karzai regime will be ready to "take the lead". But the regime is a creation of the Western presence, and is mostly an opportunity for corruption for well-connected Afghans. They are moving their money, much of it skimmed off Western development aid, out of the country at an increasing rate. The writing is on the wall and a comfortable exile funded by stolen Western tax dollars beckons.

What is left unexplained in the official story is just how it is that a small Western counter-terrorism force, civilian development contractors, and the pathetic faux-patriotic Karzai can long survive in a country that over 130,000 first line Western troops with their full panoply could not secure.

To be sure, as long as large numbers of Western troops are present, the insurgents cannot win. But neither can those troops decisively defeat the insurgency, nor can they win the allegiance of the Afghan population in the middle of a shooting war.

Inevitably, the troops will leave one way or another and the Karzai regime and the Western development enterprise will be swept away by angry Afghans of many different stripes.

The West's only realistic option is to regroup in a statelet based on the old Northern Alliance, from which it can launch counter-terror operations and continue to deny Afghanistan as a base

for terrorism. A problem here is that the Europeans, with their exhausted liberal publics, could never go along with such an exercise in realpolitik.

President Obama, too, probably lacks the ruthlessness, while his political advisors will tell him to cut and run from an unpopular war in an election year.

After all, exiting and forgetting has worked so far in Iraq.

Western opinion and financial crisis have decreed that the troops must come out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Yet the Western project there is doomed without those troops, and even their continued presence guarantees only a longer run for the tragic and bloody status quo.

These contradictions will come to a head before the next two years are out. Withdrawal of Western troops is likely to be followed by a collapse of the Karzai regime and civil war. While some committed humanitarian NGOs will always remain in the country no matter the circumstances, such chaos and disorder will see off the bulk of the Western development presence.

The upshot will be that the West has little to show for over ten years in Afghanistan but the corpses of Osama bin Laden and his fighters.