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The winner takes all in Afghanistan

By M K Bhadrakumar
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The Nobel Peace Prize has a tradition. In the entire period from 1901 to 2009, it has never been awarded twice to any of its 97 individual recipients.

United States President Barack Obama is thus unlikely to win a second Nobel. Yet, in an historical perspective, Afghanistan promises to become the first country in which Islamists will have been ushered into power on the wave of America's newfound smart power.

That too may only be the beginning. "Of course Afghanistan is not an island. There is no solution just within its borders," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said at a [security conference](#) in Munich last weekend.

NATO [eyes](#) Central Asia

The international [community](#) has been led to believe that the India-Pakistan faultline is the pivotal concern in the US's diplomatic strategy in [Afghanistan](#). However, it is a mere subplot. The US's principal protagonist is China, while India and Pakistan - and increasingly Russia - are more like jesters in forming the confusion and the humor in an Elizabethan drama.

The main plot is about the expansion of NATO into [Central Asia](#). At Munich, Rasmussen spoke of the "need to turn NATO into a forum of [consultation](#) on worldwide security issues ... NATO is a framework which has already proven to be uniquely able to combine security consultation, military planning and actual operations ... Afghanistan is a vivid example that in [the 21st century](#), security can't be a relay race, with one individual handing the baton to the next runner ... That is why ... the Alliance should become the hub of a network of security partnerships ...

Already today, the Alliance has a vast network of security partnerships, as far afield as northern Africa, the Gulf, Central Asia and the Pacific."

The Central Asian region is increasingly projected in the Western media as a "ticking bomb waiting to go off". The argument runs like this: social and ethnic tensions are smoldering and the economic crisis is deepening, whereas the autocratic and repressive regimes are incapable of addressing the tensions; Islamists are, therefore, stepping into the political vacuum and Central Asia is becoming increasingly susceptible to al-Qaeda.

The argument is gaining ground. Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid said recently, "[Militants] are preparing the ground for a long, sustained military campaign in Central Asia. There is now a real threat because the Islamist surge is combined with an economic and political crisis ... The reason is that they have, first of all, done enough fighting for other people. They now want to fight for their own country. The real threat now is the fact that they are trying to infiltrate back into Central Asia .. They are trying to infiltrate weapons, ammunition and men back into Central Asia."

Islamists as agents of geopolitics

There is an ominous overtone to Western reports. Al-Qaeda was used after all as justification for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.

This is where the US's idea of reconciliation with the Taliban merits scrutiny. The idea is indeed eminently sensible at a time when Muslim anger is rising, there is growing disillusionment about Obama, and when the US is dangerously close to confronting Iran and a need arises to "split" Muslim opinion.

At the same time, the Taliban's reconciliation also makes realpolitik. [The Afghan](#) war costs a lot of money, it costs Western lives and it cannot be won. The Taliban's reconciliation is arguably the only option available to keep open-ended NATO's military presence in Central Asia without having to fight a futile war.

The ascendancy of malleable Islamist forces also has its uses for the US's containment strategy towards China (and Russia). Islamists lend themselves as a foreign policy instrument. The rise of Islamism in Afghanistan cannot but radicalize hot spots such as the North Caucasus, Kashmir and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China.

China has the maximum to lose if a Taliban regime re-emerges. That explains the length to which Beijing went at the London conference on Afghanistan on January 28 and at the Istanbul regional conference immediately preceding it to assert that Afghanistan is far too critical an issue for regional security and stability to be left to Washington.

China repudiates US's strategy

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi spelt out in great deal during his speeches at London and Istanbul that Beijing intends to play an active role to safeguard its interests.

Yang outlined the kind of Afghanistan that China wishes to see emerge out of the abyss. First and foremost, it has to be a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that "eradicates the threat of terrorism". Two, it should be an Afghanistan that accepts the "existence of diverse ethnic groups, religions and political affiliations and rises above their differences to achieve comprehensive and enduring national reconciliation".

The accent on pluralism is a virtual rejection of the fundamentalist ideology of Wahhabism practiced by the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. Three, Afghanistan should "enjoy inviolable sovereign independence, territorial integrity and national dignity. Its future and destiny should be determined and its state affairs run by its own people."

In essence, China expects a total and unconditional vacation of foreign occupation. Four, Yang highlighted repeatedly the centrality of regional powers in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Afghanistan "should be a part of the regional cooperation mechanisms ... Countries of the region have special associations with Afghanistan."

He added, "There are now quite a number of mechanisms and initiatives regarding Afghanistan. Countries in the region should increase [communication](#) to ensure that the relevant mechanisms are viable, practical and efficient and can play a positive role ... We should avoid overlapping of various mechanisms ... we should be open and inclusive and promote sound interaction with other partners ... It is imperative to respect the leading role of the United Nations in coordinating international efforts and demonstrate openness and transparency."

Yang then added a punchline: "Countries from outside the region should vigorously support the efforts of countries in the region and fully appreciate their difficulties in order to foster sound interactions between the two." In effect, he challenged the US's monopoly of conflict-resolution.

Yang demanded that the Obama administration should get off the back of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He asked Washington to "respect the leading role of Afghanistan in economic reconstruction and let the Afghan [government](#) and people sit in the driver's seat. China supports channeling more assistance through the Afghan government and making more [investment](#) ... on the basis of equal consultations with the Afghan government."

Equally, "[The] international community should fully respect the unique history, culture and religion as well as the current development stage of Afghanistan, take into consideration the realities and difficulties of the Afghan government and respect the wishes of the Afghan people. In short, we should let Afghanistan choose on its own a governance model most suited to its own national circumstances."

Obama deserves another Nobel

Chinese commentaries have since robustly questioned the efficacy of the Obama administration's plan to "reintegrate" the Taliban, saying it is a deeply flawed idea and raises concerns that Karzai may be ultimately forced into making "certain political concessions" to the insurgents in terms of a power-sharing arrangement and constitutional reform.

They lamented that the entire exercise aimed at "a graceful exit strategy" for the US and its allies and "appears to have been carefully stage-managed to allow the US and NATO troops to start scripting a withdrawal. But perceived in a certain light, it could be counter-productive."

The Chinese commentaries underlined that the plan to split the Taliban by buying off its cadres and reintegrating those who had no links with al-Qaeda wouldn't work. "The United States has always tried to spend its way into a solution, a tactic that could backfire with the more extreme element of the Taliban ... the prospect conjures images of a bottomless money pit."

China is far from alone among the regional powers to harbor deep misgivings about the US's plan to reconcile the Taliban. Almost word-by-word, Moscow or Delhi will be pleased by what Yang said.

Yet, if Yang's Russian and Indian counterparts chose to keep their counsel at the London conference, Obama could claim credit for it as a superb practitioner of smart power and grand bargains - worthy of a Nobel - even if his plan to pacify Taliban leader Mullah Omar gets nowhere.