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Failing in Afghanistan successfully

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While we have been fixated on successive Arab breakthroughs and victories against tyranny and extremism, Washington is failing miserably but discreetly in Afghanistan.

The American media's one-obsession-at-a-time coverage of global affairs might have put the spotlight on President Obama's slow and poor reaction to the breathtaking developments starting in Tunisia and Egypt. But they spared him embarrassing questions about continued escalation and deaths in Afghanistan.

In spite of its international coalition, multiple strategies, hundreds of billions of dollars, and a surge of tens of thousands of troops, the US is unable to conclude its longest war yet or at least reverse its trend.

Recent "reports" from the war front have been of two kinds. Some official or analytical in nature and heavily circulated in Washington portray a war going terribly well. On the other hand, hard news from the ground tell a story of US fatigue, backtracking and tactical withdrawals or redeployments which do not bode well for defeating the Taliban or forcing them to the negotiations' table.

For example, while the US military's decision to withdraw from the Pech valley was justified on tactical need to redeploy troops for the task of "protecting the population", keen observers saw it as a humiliating retreat from what the Pentagon previously called a very strategic position and sacrificed some hundred soldiers defending it.

Likewise, strategic analysts close to the administration speak triumphantly of US surge and hi-tech firepower inflicting terrible cost on the Taliban, killing many insurgents and driving many more from their sanctuaries.

But news from the war front show the Taliban unrelenting, mounting counterattacks and escalating the war especially in areas where the US has "surged" its troops. And while the majority of the 400 Afghan districts are "calmer", they remain mostly out of Kabul's control.

What success?

Those with relatively long memories recall the then defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld's claims that most of Afghanistan was secure in early 2003 and that American forces had changed their strategy from major combat operations to stabilisation and reconstruction project.

But the Taliban continued to carry daily attacks on government buildings, US positions and international organisations. Two years later, the US was to suffer the worst and deadliest year since the war began.

Today's war pundits are in the same state of denial. For all practical purpose, Washington has given up on its counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy devised under McChrystal and Petraeus.

Instead, it is pursuing a heavy handed and terribly destructive crackdown that includes special operations, assassinations, mass demolitions, air and night raids etc that have led to anything but winning the country, let alone its hearts and minds.

The killing of nine Afghan children last week - all under the age of 12 - by US attack helicopters has once again put the spotlight on the US military's new aggressive methods.

The results are so devastating for the conduct of the war and to Washington's clients, that President Karzai not only distanced himself from the US methods, but also publicly rejected Washington's apology for the killings.

Nor is the recruitment and training of the Afghan forces going well. Indeed, many seem to give up on the idea that Afghan security forces could take matters into their hands if the US withdraws in the foreseeable future.

Worse, US strategic co-operation with Pakistan - the central pillar of Obama's PakAf strategy - has cooled after the arrest of a CIA contractor for the killing of two Pakistanis even though he presumably enjoys diplomatic immunity.

Reportedly, it has also led to a "breakdown" in co-ordination between the two countries intelligence agencies, the CIA and the ISI.

But the incident is merely a symptom of a bigger problem between the two countries. A reluctant partner, the Pakistani establishment and its military are unhappy with US strategy which they reckon could destabilise their country and strengthen Afghanistan and India at their expense.

That has not deterred Washington from offering ideas and money to repair the damage. However, it has become clear that unlike in recent years, future improvement in their bilateral relations will most probably come as a result of the US edging closer to Pakistan's position, not the opposite.

All of which makes one wonder why certain Washington circles are rushing to advance the "success story".

Running out of options

The Afghan government's incapability to take on the tasks of governing or securing the country beyond the capital, and the incapacity of the Obama administration to break the Taliban's momentum does not bode well for an early conclusion of the war.

To their credit some of Obama's war and surge supporters realise that there is no military solution for Afghanistan. Clearly, their claims of battlefield successes help justify the rush to talk to the Taliban.

But it is not yet clear whether the presumably ongoing exploratory secret negotiations with the Taliban are serious at all, or will lead to comprehensive negotiations and eventually a lasting deal. The last "Taliban commander" Washington dialogued with in the fall turned out to be an impostor - a shopkeeper from Quetta!

If the Taliban does eventually accept to sit down with Obama or Karzai envoys, the US needs to explain why it fought for 10 years only to help the group back to power.

Secretary of state Hillary Clinton has begun the humiliating backtracking last month: "Now, I know that reconciling with an adversary that can be as brutal as the Taliban sounds distasteful, even unimaginable. And diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace."

Facing up to the reality

The mere fact that the world's mightiest superpower cannot win over the poorly armed Taliban after a long decade of fighting, means it has already failed strategically, regardless of the final outcome.

The escalation of violence and wasting billions more cannot change that. It is history. The quicker the Obama administration recognises its misfortunes, minimises its losses and convenes a regional conference over the future of Afghanistan under UN auspices, the easier it will be to evacuate without humiliation.

Whether the US eventually loses the war and declares victory; negotiates a settlement and withdraw its troops, remains to be seen. What is incontestable is that when you fight the war for too long, you also become weak.

All of which explains the rather blunt comments made in a speech at the end of February, by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates when he said "... any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it."

Amen.