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Antiwar.com

As Iraq Threatens to Come Apart, US Problems in Afghanistan Mount

By William Pfaff

April 6, 2010

Washington once again finds itself dangerously entangled with the hostile policies, nationalistic interests and supporters, and personal ambitions of a foreign figure whom it counted on to serve American interests.

This time it is in Afghanistan, the latest in what, alas, must be described as America's quasi-imperial foreign military adventures. This is a country to which the United States, at stupendous cost, and with stupendous effort, is transporting the greater part of the huge logistical and war-fighting apparatus it has deployed over the last seven years in Iraq. It occurs at just the moment when Iraq's situation – which none (save the surviving admirers of George W. Bush) dare call victory – is threatening to come apart.

Negotiations over the formation of a new government in Iraq have, for weeks now, been accompanied by bombings and suicide attacks, clearly political in nature, which imply the possibility of an eventual resumption of communal violence in that tragic country.

Shi'ite political figures have conferred in Iran (where they believe they are safe from American eavesdropping) on the formation of a new government, which inevitably will be Shi'ite-dominated.

Iraq under the Sunni tyrant Saddam Hussein, and his Ba'ath Party, was invaded by the United States (at Israel's urging!) because it was considered a major threat to American interests and security (and in Israel's case, allegedly to its very existence).

The thought that the invasion would eventually turn Iraq into a quasi-satellite of Shi'ite Iran seems the last thing anyone considered at the time. Nor is it clear today what is going to happen to the huge American military-base complexes, and the "enduring" U.S. troop commitments, grudgingly negotiated with the previous Maliki government in a status of forces agreement, supposedly so they could remain in a sovereign Iraq.

It all has happened before – in every significant military intervention of the United States since the Korean War (which never was won by the U.S.– or by South Korea's Syngman Rhee; it merely has been suspended for the past half-century).

It happened in Vietnam and Cambodia. The independent-minded leaders of those countries at the time of American intervention in Indochina in 1955 – the Catholic nationalist President Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam and the neutralist Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia – were both overturned by American-inspired military coups (and in Diem's case, killed).

Their successors were American-appointed generals told to fight the Communists. All were eventually defeated (and the United States as well).

It happened repeatedly in the Caribbean, where, before the rise of Fidel Castro, the U.S. put in place dictators friendly to American business interests, who then turned against Washington. The most recent was Gen. Manuel Noriega, a one-time CIA "asset." The United States had to go to war with Panama in 1989 to get Noriega out of Panama and into a Miami prison on fraud and drug-dealing charges.

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan last Thursday told his country's parliament that American and other Western governments, together with officials of the United Nations, were responsible for the widespread fraud that occurred in Afghanistan's presidential campaign and election last year, and indeed that they were continuing to undermine his government.

A UN-led Electoral Complaints Commission had disqualified nearly a million votes cast for President Karzai, thereby depriving him of an outright majority in last year's vote.

This attack by President Karzai on his former Western sponsors came four days after U.S. President Barack Obama personally visited Kabul to urge a crackdown by the Karzai government on the corruption supposedly provoking the Taliban rebellion in Afghanistan.

The Afghan uprising has by now led to insurrectionary episodes by Pakistani Taliban against the Pakistan army and government, and last weekend, an assault upon the U.S. consulate in the northern Pakistan city of Peshawar. The attack employed a truck bomb and rockets, and killed several Pakistani security officials.

President Karzai told his parliament that the U.S.-led NATO military coalition now in his country – being enlarged by land, sea, and air with every passing day – is close to finding itself looked upon in Afghanistan as an invasion force. That would lend even further support to the opinion held by many Afghans that the Taliban are fighting to save their country.

He earlier had said that the United States has designs on Afghanistan's sovereignty, planning permanent military bases there and the use of Afghan territory for a pipeline route that would avoid the ex-Soviet states while carrying Central Asian energy to ships in the Arabian Sea.

Such negotiations reportedly did take place before 2001, after the Soviet invasion ended and when the Taliban initially governed Afghanistan. The Taliban government was approached by the American Unocal company (now part of Chevron), and Karzai is plausibly reported as having been a consultant to Unocal. He says he was working in association with the U.S. government at that time to defeat the Taliban government.

The obvious if unwelcome conclusion of this is that American security is better found in an American foreign policy of military disengagement from the affairs of other societies, leaving them, and their own leaders, to search for their own solutions to their own problems. The American nation within its borders can safely be said invulnerable to military or terrorist defeat. That cannot be said of its forces, or its national honor, committed elsewhere.