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Stuck in Kabul, with Saigon blues again

By Pepe Escobar

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Some things never change. It was "only" eight years ago that the George W Bush administration unleashed its mini-shock and awe over Afghanistan to, in theory, smash the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Stuck inside of Kabul with the Saigon blues again, the "overseas contingency operations" of the Barack Obama administration continue to perpetrate a myth; never shall the words "Afghanistan" and "oil" be mentioned in the same sentence.

Instead, what is played to the jaded Washington galleries is the shabby spectacle of the dance of the generals - the serpent biting its own tail of the show of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, National Security Adviser retired General Jim Jones and General Stanley McChrystal, the top man in Afghanistan. Add to it extended, "analytical" corporate media reports of the "Has Obama lost his mojo?" kind; and the grandiose "Amanpour" at George Washington University collecting platitudes from the Pentagon supremo Robert Gates-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton combo.

McChrystal wants 40,000 extra troops and he wants them now. Jones basically told McChrystal to shut up. And non-general Gates saunters around practicing contortions.

An unnamed British government spokesman has been the only source to talk about that fateful Copenhagen meeting last week between a "furious" Obama and McChrystal; the spokesman said "they agreed that further 'Afghanization', including accelerated training of the Afghan army and police, needed to be at the center of NATO's [North Atlantic Treaty Organization's] counter-insurgency efforts".

Afghanize or else

The debate over what strategy should Obama go for in Afghanistan always revolves around counter-insurgency, as in "success in Iraq"; still another myth. Armchair warriors who would flee in horror from a night *al fresco* in the Hindu Kush pompously state NATO could successfully apply counter-insurgency while refusing to admit the Western-supported

election rigged by the President Hamid Karzai machine made the Iranian presidential election look as clean as a whistle.

Reams of "experts" argue the US should "Afghanize" its war - as in Vietnamize; does it ring a bell? When that talk comes from people such as David Kilcullen, a former adviser to General David "I'm positioning myself for 2012" Petraeus who passes for a geopolitical eminence in Washington, it says everything one needs to know about Washington. Some others fear the government in Kabul will fall to the Taliban - it won't, as Karzai is too wily, when push comes to shove, to play the Taliban against the warlords.

National Security Adviser Jones had to hit the talk show circuit to state that Kabul is not falling, that the Taliban are not "coming back", and that there are less than 100 al-Qaeda jihadis in Afghanistan. Which raises the question: what's the point of the whole war then? Why the super-human need for the extra, "magical", 40,000 troops McChrystal has requested?

All this is played up deep inside a staggering financial black hole. According to Jo Comerford, executive director of the National Priorities Project, the war in Afghanistan has cost US taxpayers no less than \$228 billion so far, with \$60.2 billion in 2009 alone. The war under Obama is costing \$5 billion a month; last year, under Bush, it was "only" \$3.5 billion a month". Comerford projects "we'll hit \$1 trillion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in March 2010". These \$228 billion, Comerford points out, "equal 800,000 four-year university scholarships for US students" (no wonder China is overtaking the US). Not to mention that \$228 billion would have turned Afghanistan into Singapore by now.

Have chaos, will travel

Steve Coll from the New America Foundation, writing in The New Yorker, argues that Obama should adopt a solution similar to that of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who - "boxed in by hardliners in his politburo and military" - orchestrated a gradual Soviet exit strategy from Afghanistan in the late 1980s.

It's wishful thinking to believe the generals will let Obama pull a Gorbachev. Even though the generals have no clue as how to fight a counter-insurgency in a rural, feudal society (their predecessors were humiliated in Vietnam); even though they have no clue how to conquer the "hearts and minds" of the Pashtun populations in the south and southeast away from the Taliban; and even though they ignore the deep mistrust Afghans in general feel in relation to Pakistanis (so much for the AfPak concept).

Many a general - but not McChrystal - would in fact love to infiltrate a bunch of special ops in Pakistan - a de facto invasion - and hit al-Qaeda's sanctuaries in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Now that's something they might convince Obama (and Islamabad) to authorize. But it gets worse. The Pentagon wants to drone out the Taliban not only in FATA but also in Quetta, Balochistan province's capital. Imagine the geopolitical fallout of the US bombing a major Pakistani city.

If Obama does not pull a Gorbachev, what are his options? Here's the state of play in the Dance of the Generals plus assorted functionaries. Mullen and McChrystal - as well as Secretary of State Clinton - want their 40,000 extra troops with a vengeance. Petraeus is as

usual over the wall. He'll surf whatever is politically most profitable. Gates may turn down McChrystal, who he in fact appointed a few months ago.

Jones, as well as Vice President Joseph Biden, the Obama crowd on Capitol Hill and White House officials as well as the majority of the US population for that matter, are dead set against an escalation.

Obama is caught in a lose-lose situation. The generals are saying that without the magical 40,000, Obama loses the war and the race in 2012 - but that's a fallacy.

The Obama-friendly crowd is saying that extra troops plus "Afghanization" will be equal to "Vietnamization", with the likely endgame of the last Black Hawk leaving the embassy in Kabul. Obama in this case also loses in 2012 - but not necessarily.

For McChrystal, a mere drone war plus special ops in Afghanistan will lead to "Chaos-istan". His leaked report to the Washington Post is ebullient on "securing the population", good governance, building the Afghan army and police and turning US/NATO soldiers into robocop replicas of Mother Teresa. For McChrystal, now it's all about hearts and minds - the Pentagon singing *We Are the World*.

As an exercise in obfuscation, the strategy is working wonders. Not a peep all across US corporate media about the real reasons the US, the Pentagon rather, needs to stay in Afghanistan forever; to protect the troubled Trans-Afghanistan pipeline if it ever gets built; and to encircle and spy on neighboring strategic competitors Russia and China.

Whatever the industrial-military complex will bend Obama to do, it will look a lot like (a very expensive) Chaos-istan anyway