

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg

Afghanistan After America: Possible Post-Drawdown Scenarios

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹
Shahid Javed Burki²

Mullah Omar's face was much unlike that of Helen of Troy. Yet it too was one that caused the launch of a thousand ships – airships to be more precise. Like the besieged city in Homer's 'Illiad', Afghanistan of the present was swarmed by invaders, not by the Greeks, but as some see them, by their modern counterparts – the Americans and their allies. As in the Trojan War, 10 years down the line the War Council met, as it must have also in Mycenae of ancient Greece. This time the venue was Chicago in the United States, home of the modern-day mighty Agamemnon, President Barack Obama. In Chicago, as it had happened in the epic tale, the invaders finally decided to call it a day. They agreed to depart after a decade of unwinnable and unrewarding warring. This time, too, a Trojan horse would be required to be left behind. But a problem had arisen. On that mythical occasion the jubilant but unwary Trojans had dragged the huge wooden horse inside their city walls, not heeding the warnings of that perceptive priest of Poseidon, Laocoon, who had beseeched them, in vain, not to: 'I fear the Greeks', he had

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He was the Foreign Adviser (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh from 2007 to 2009. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

² Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ISAS, and he can be contacted at sjburki@yahoo.com. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

bemoaned, ‘even though they come bearing gifts’! The Trojan counterparts of today, the Afghans, drawing, not perhaps from the lessons of the ancient Classics but from many practical experiences, had become suspicious of the potential contemporary horse.

However, unlike in the case of Trojans, the Afghans will discover not just one group (or nationality) of riders inside the ‘horse’ but several, in conflict with not just the Afghans but also among themselves. The Pakistanis would have liked to be the only ones on their own, like the Greeks, but they would have to contend with others who would have climbed onto the bandwagon, like the Iranians, the Indians, the Chinese and the Russians. The problem would be further exacerbated by the ‘horse’, or rather the riders inside, now having a mind of their own, and refusing to play the current version of the classic part!

This became evident in what transpired in Chicago at the gathering of the US and its allies in May 2012. Gentle snubs are acceptable modes of diplomatic communication. These have been in vogue since Solomon failed to offer Sheba a seat immediately upon her arrival in his court (the torrid love affair was a later development). But one delivering the snubs must be cautious that these are not perceived as slights, or worse still, insults to the one to whom they are delivered. Such disequilibrium is bound to upset the apple-cart! This is what may have happened at the NATO summit in Obama’s hometown. In his inaugural remarks Obama thanked the Central Asian leaders, including the Russians (somewhat ironically given the historical context of earlier collaboration in happier times between the US and Pakistan against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan!) for assistance in reaching supplies to ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan. Alas, he made no mention of Pakistan, whose President, Asif Ali Zardari, was present. The fact that the omission was not an unintended error was made clear by Obama’s denial to Zardari of a one-on-one meeting, like the one granted Afghanistan’s Karzai.

The last straw on the camel’s (or if the earlier metaphor is to continue, the horse’s) back was to exclude the Pakistani President from a group photograph on the occasion. Obama was obviously miffed at Pakistan’s intransigence in not opening up the NATO supply routes through its territory, closed since the killing of 24 Pakistani troops by the Americans in November at Salala near the Pak-Afghan border (Actually Pakistan asked for a thirty-fold increase in fees per container, which the Americans, not unreasonably, judged too excessive, though the asking price may have been a function not of value but of rage, or perhaps of need. With the US not paying Pakistan’s bills, its so-called ‘frenemy’, Islamabad, was beginning to slowly go bankrupt!). Coming from a culture that puts great store by rules of hospitality, in accordance with which a guest is to be treated at a level he himself assesses to be deserving, President Zardari took these ‘unkind cuts’ to heart. Surely there was no dearth of red carpets (Afghan, Pakistani or otherwise) in Chicago, but only the lack of intention on Obama’s part to lay one on for this visitor!

The Pakistani retaliation was swift. There was sharp rebuke of Obama's policies by Bilawal, Zardari's son, the Pakistanis lowering the level at which criticism was delivered by a whole generation, thereby perhaps making a subtle point as well. Bilawal urged that Obama 'show courage', hinting that the American President was short of it, by apologizing for the Salala incident, indicating that there is no 'open sesame' mantra in the near future for NATO with regard to the gates of entry into Afghanistan. Also, almost immediately, a physician largely seen as being responsible for the lead in locating Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad that led to his killing by the Americans. Dr Shakeel Afridi, was sentenced to 33 years in prison by a tribal 'jirga court', often a contradiction in terms, for 'treason' (though Abbottabad, where his offence was purported to have been committed is a 'settled district, in which the regular judiciary should have jurisdiction). Obviously America's hero, by the same count, was Pakistan's traitor! Doubtless a puzzled Afridi, a tribal medical practitioner, may be paying a heavy penalty for his understandable inability to comprehend the complexities of US-Pakistan relations, often bafflingly obtuse even to the sharpest observer of international politics. The tit-for-tat reaction to Afridi's conviction on the part of the US was also somewhat unconventional. The US Senate Appropriations Committee said it would cut aid to Pakistan by US\$ 33million, explaining the amount, should anyone query the computation, as US\$ 1 million for each year of Afridi's detention! (One cannot help but be reminded on this score of the title of Henry Kissinger's book: 'Does America need a Foreign Policy?' when Congress appears to be of the view that such a tit-for-tat on every occasion is all that is needed!) In a farcical twist to the melodrama, Pakistan announced Afridi was tried not for complicity with the US but with the extremist Lashkar-e-Taiba! Of Pakistan, said Senator Patrick Leahy: "It's 'Alice in wonderland' at best", though the term could perhaps be more appropriate to describe the essence of US-Pakistan relations.

Meanwhile, following a judicial fiasco in Pakistan, the Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani was forced to leave office, preferring to fall on his own sword in June 2012 rather than comply with the Supreme Court's orders to open correspondence with the Swiss authorities on Zardari's alleged assets parked in that country. He was replaced by Raja Pervez Ashraf who faces an uncertain future for several reasons one of which cost Gilani his position. As is now the evolving tradition among the senior echelons of the Pakistani political society, personal gain is often seen to replace social betterment. While Ashraf was the Minister-in-charge of water and power, he had approved exorbitant amounts of payment, allegedly for personal gains, to rent ship-based power generating plants from Turkey. An Asian Bank investigation had found the rent paid egregious. This earned the Prime Minister the cognomen of 'Rental Raja'. Though unrelated to this political development, and more to do with Pakistan's economic difficulties, there was a slight easing of US-Pakistan relations when Pakistani authorities – for 'authorities' read the 'military' – agreed to reopen the transit routes to Afghanistan for NATO. This was in return for assurances of reimbursement of US\$ 1.2 billion previously unpaid amounts owed to the Pakistan Army for costs incurred in earlier anti-terrorist operations. Though this was not 'new money' but

only amounts already due, it was a balance of payment support that Pakistan required badly (despite the claim by Bilawal Bhutto in a US TV interview that “Pakistan did not measure soldiers’ blood in aid”). The understanding was the result of painstaking negotiations conducted by Pakistan’s new envoy to Washington, Sherry Rahman, who was eager to henceforth “use time and space (to quote her) to build on convergences” in bilateral relations. Unfortunately the convergences were getting increasingly difficult to locate, and the episode was yet another evidence that the Pakistan-US relations had now become purely ‘transactional’ than ‘strategic’. The recent signs of some improvement such as the signing of the MOU regarding the above payment, or the visit to the US by the new Chief of Pakistani military intelligence Lt General Zahir ul Islam, does not point to substantive ‘bettering of ties’ but only strengthens the thesis of ‘transactional relationship’.

It appears that come what may, US and its NATO partners are determined to depart Afghanistan by 2014, leaving behind small numbers of so-called ‘residual presence’ that will unfortunately become greatly vulnerable. They are willing to pay enormous amounts to be able to leave. In Chicago in May 2012, NATO assured Afghan military US\$ 4.1 billion in aid. In July 2012 in Tokyo donors pledged civilian sectors an amount of US\$ 16 billion, with the US, Japan, Germany and the UK in the lead. (In World Bank calculation, 95 per cent of Afghan GDP will comprise foreign resources, an unsustainable situation by any standard). The assistance is to be spread over four years. This is a long time in Afghan politics and no one can be sure as to who will rule the roost in Kabul in 2018, with the Taliban waiting and biding their time. These are not the only sums NATO will be paying. Now that Pakistan has obtained promises of US\$1.2 billion (the final figure is closer to US\$ 1.1 billion, for which a Memorandum of Understanding has already been signed) for opening up the southern supply routes. Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will ratchet up their demand for rent for the use of the northern supply lines, critical for NATO withdrawal. NATO is saddled with Hobson’s choice, for there is no option but to leave. Their people want them to. This war has lasted twice the time-span of World War II or the Vietnam War. It also cost the US and allies 3083 dead and counting (with many more with injuries and trauma, not to speak of Afghan casualties), and US\$ 546 billion.

One has to remain supremely optimistic to believe that the Taliban will continue to remain on the sidelines once NATO withdraws. In fact to date, the Taliban unsurprisingly has been assertive in regions the US and NATO have vacated in pursuance of their 2014 withdrawal plan. For instance – in the Wardak province in the east. A few months ago, the US evacuated from the Combat Outpost Conlon, leaving Afghan government troops in control. Within weeks the State’s patrolling activities were severely hobbled by the insurgents. A rueful commander of the government forces, Lt Col Kohdamany remarked: “The enemy has got stronger since the Americans left, and their morale is up”. There is no reason to believe this situation would not be replicated elsewhere. Recently when two New Zealand soldiers were killed in Taliban attacks,

that country's Labour Party leader David Shearer (who has had experience of work in Afghanistan) said: "Unfortunately Afghanistan is generally a very violent place, and there is always the threat of danger, and that is what's happened today". This was a clear admission that a decade's bloodletting initiated by the invasion has changed little, a lesson, some would have said, an obvious one, learnt at great and continuing cost.

It is true, though, a Taliban take-over may not be a shoo-in. This, for two main reasons. One, the Karzai forces are stronger and better trained and equipped than before. And two, no major regional protagonist wants the Taliban back – the Pakistanis, the Indians, the Iranians, the Chinese, the Russians or any of the Central Asians. But neither reason is an insurmountable impediment. If the Taliban has succeeded in forcing the world's most powerful militaries to withdraw, Karzai's Army, or that of his successor, is unlikely to be able to stand in its way. As to the second, no neighbour will risk a military confrontation with the Afghan Taliban, for the consequences of such a misadventure would be clear. Afghans would be best left in the driver's seat of their own destiny. An intellectual non-acceptance of an eventual Taliban control would put us in a state of illogical denial. As we know full well, it cannot be thwarted by force. There is a painting that hangs in the Tate Gallery in London called 'The Remnants of an Army'; it is one, by an English artist called Elizabeth Butler, of the sole British survivor of the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1842, William Brydon, and his horse staggering out of their traumatic battle experience. This was part of the famous (or infamous) 'Great Game', the competition in Afghanistan among the 'Great Powers' of the day (in the 19th century). There was a lesson in it, to which thereafter the British, the Russians and the NATO had not accorded sufficient heed. For this they all paid a heavy price. We should now be that much wiser.

If the Americans, metaphorically, are to be 'the remnant of an army' struggling out of Afghanistan on something akin to Brydon's horse, and if a bunch of free predatory riders are in the Trojan horse being pulled into the country by unsuspecting Afghans, what would Afghanistan after America look like? This is the question we posed in the title of this paper.

Our answers are based not just on reinterpretation of ancient Greek classic in the contemporary context of Afghanistan. They are based on an analysis of how the current dynamics in international political and economic affairs will affect Afghanistan and its neighbours. We believe: The United States and its NATO allies will keep increasing their distance from Kabul, eventually treating it as just another in a long list of capitals in small countries around the world where they had left their boot-print. Afghanistan's neighbours will begin to aggressively pursue their own perceived strategic interests in that unfortunate country. The pursuit is likely to be individualistic rather than collaborative. There may be attempts to bring into play relevant international groupings like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), but its continuing failure to influence any international situations, not just Palestine, but also Libya and Syria, does

not provide cause for confidence in any such initiative. Some of this may result in proxy-wars which the new, large and well-equipped Afghan Army will attempt to bring under its control. Thus engaged, the Afghan National Army will most likely take control of the government and do away with the democratic institutions so painstakingly put in place by the West. The Taliban will, re-energised and emboldened, heighten its resistance and strengthen its onslaughts. So, in this inhospitable terrain, the graveyard of many a foreign ambition, and yet a magnet for external attention, the modern variant of the 'Great Game' will go on. And on!

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