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Obama's Tragic Afghan "Strategy" - Joseph Gerson

Obama's Afghan "Strategy" – Another American Tragedy Joseph Gerson

Shortly after President Obama's Afghanistan War escalation speech, I was contacted by the Voice of America's Russian Language Service. They wanted to interview me. These are the questions they asked: What do you think about Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan? Were you surprised by it? Do you think it would be possible to carry out all Obama's objectives by 2011? Would Afghanistan, you think, cease to being a failed state?

Weighted down by a sense of the tragic implications of the speech, I answered as follows:

How could we be surprised? During the 2008 election campaign candidate Obama repeatedly and unknowingly said that the Afghanistan war is a "good war." Back then that was the politically expedient thing to do, and many of his supporters who were rightfully outraged by the damage wrought by Bush and Cheney simply ignored what he was saying.

Now he's stuck with that commitment, whether he believes in it or not. Politically, given the power of the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex, as well as widespread cultural assumptions of U.S. dominance, he has not been in a good position to reverse course, as Vice President Biden reportedly urged. It should, however, be noted that President Obama ruled out General McCrystal's 80,000+ troop increase option from the beginning. Obama has sought a middle way between powerfully contending forces - including the U.S. peace movement. It won't work

Obama's so-called "strategy" means years of tragedy and lost opportunities for generations of Afghans, U.S. Americans, and people of many other countries. It is Bush-lite with enormous negative consequences to follow. Think about the jobs that won't be created here in the U.S., the money lost to investment in health care, our children's educations, and building the 21st century infrastructure needed for the U.S. to complete economically with rising and less belligerent powers.

President Obama's strategy, as Russians should know from prior experience, can't possibly succeed.

While the President denied comparisons to Vietnam, his approach mirrors that of Vietnam era Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Presidents Johnson and Nixon: "coercive diplomacy." The mistaken "logic" underlining the contradictions of massively increasing the number of U.S. warriors sent to Afghanistan with the vague commitment to begin some withdrawals in late 2011 is to increase his bargaining leverage with the Taliban. Obama wants to augment U.S. power and influence in Afghanistan before the U.S. approves Karzai negotiations with the Taliban or publicly begins them on its own.

In fact, back channel U.S. discussions with the Taliban are widely reported in Europe, and the United States' British and German allies have encouraged Karzai to enter into

a process initiated by the Saudis.

Unfortunately, like LBJ and Nixon, Obama's approach won't work. With its extraordinary corruption, its reliance on repressive and misogynist warlords, and the deaths and suffering of civilians caused by U.S.-NATO attacks, Afghan hearts and minds will not rally to the Karzai government or to U.S. occupation forces. Similar to the failures of "Vietnamization" in the early 1970s, the idea that the U.S. will be able to triple the size of the Afghan military, isolate it from corrupting warlord and Karzai government influences, and provide it with élan and modern warfighting capabilities in just two years is a deadly pipe dream. So too is his plan to vastly increase the size of and professionalize the Afghan police.

Note too that President Obama's pledge to begin reductions of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in late 2011 was very vague. At best, we will likely see a minimal reduction of forces in the months leading up to the 2012 presidential and congressional elections. There remains, however, the possibility of further increases in U.S. forces as the war continues to go south.

The most obvious flaw in Obama's so-called strategy is the impossibility of the U.S. transforming Afghanistan's corrupt and failing government into a modern functioning state. Here too the similarities with Vietnam, where the U.S. imposed and supported a series of corrupt dictators, is striking. The question that President Obama failed to answer was what happens when Karzai, the warlords on whom his power depends, and his corrupt allies refuse to cooperate with the U.S. plan. If a U.S. victory in Afghanistan is so "vital to U.S. interests", would the U.S. simply withdraw its troops and leave in defeat when Karzai and company continue to make matters worse?

This leads us to a situation analogous to that described in the Pentagon Papers in which 85% of the reason for continuing the war, and even escalating it, will be "perception," to defend the image of the U.S. as a military superpower that must not be challenged.

Like the U.S. in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, this is a strategy that will bleed the foundations of prosperity within the U.S. and is global reputations and influence.

Societies are not changed in two years or even in a single generation. The way forward is for the U.S. to press for all party negotiations within Afghanistan to create a new Afghan social contract. This would need to be reinforced by an international conference and actions on the part of all major states involved in the war to help build and support that social contract. This, of course, also means dealing with the source of Indian-Pakistani tensions, and the geostrategic ambitions of the major powers who have insisted on playing, and losing, the "Great Game."

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