

America's Hour of Truth

The Risk of Failure in Afghanistan and Iraq

An Essay by *Ullrich Fichtner*

Barack Obama is caught in a Catch-22 situation: If America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq fail, they will overshadow any of his domestic achievements. The end game in the leadership role of the United States in the world began long ago. Can the Afghanistan conference deliver a breakthrough?

I. There is a name that is now being mentioned frequently in the debate over America's wars, a name that does not bode well for US President Barack Obama: Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th president of the United States. Johnson, who, like Obama, was both a Democrat and an energetic reformer, ultimately failed because of an overseas war being fought by US troops. The Vietnam War prevented Johnson from being remembered as one of the most prominent US presidents in the history of the 20th century.

Johnson took on issues that no one before him had dared to touch -- not even his predecessor, John F. Kennedy. The set of domestic programs known collectively as the Great Society is associated with his name, and it was Johnson who courageously fought racial discrimination in the United States, declared war on poverty, welcomed non-European immigrants to the United States, reformed the education system from the ground up, promoted civil rights and, with his Medicare and Medicaid programs, laid the foundation for a new health care policy on which Obama can now build.

But these great achievements practically disappeared behind Johnson's miscalculations on Indochina. Beginning in 1966, when the US campaign in Vietnam was approaching its peak, the expression "credibility gap" became popular in the United States. Johnson's foreign policy spoiled the success of his domestic policies. He was a wartime president, a role Americans could not reconcile with his image of a conciliator at home.

Obama, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, will soon find himself in a very similar predicament. At that point, the entire current global order will most likely be up for debate.

How the President Deals with Armed Conflicts

II. Iraq was never Vietnam, and Afghanistan will never be. The problem with the overly hasty comparisons voiced by critics is that they gloss over the historic facts. At the height of the Vietnam War, there were 543,000 US soldiers on the ground, or well over twice as many as are now deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. More than 58,000 US soldiers had died in Vietnam by the time the war ended in 1975. Up to 1,000 GIs were dying every week in 1968, and the overall conflict claimed the lives of at least 3 million Vietnamese and well over half a million Cambodians and Laotians. Anyone familiar with these numbers will likely avoid making Vietnam comparisons today.

Nevertheless, there are similarities in the ways the respective American presidents have handled their armed conflicts politically. Like his predecessors Johnson and Richard Nixon, Obama promised that America's wars would soon come to an end. And, like Johnson and Nixon, Obama said that his goal was to return control of the countries now occupied by US troops to their governments as soon as possible.

Obama promised to withdraw all troops from Iraq by the end of 2011, and to start bringing home the troops from Afghanistan in July 2011. Nothing of the sort will happen. It will take until November for all of the 30,000 additional soldiers currently being deployed to Afghanistan, which will bring the US

contingent in the country to more than 100,000 troops, to have actually arrived in the country. If Obama made good on his promise to start withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in July 2011, these new troops would have only about nine months to turn things around in the Hindu Kush region. Judging by the current situation there, this would be a hopeless undertaking.

Winning the Battles, Losing the War

The dire state of the war effort in Afghanistan has been particularly evident in recent weeks. In Marjah, a small city in southern Afghanistan, thousands of British and American soldiers achieved a hard-fought and costly victory against the Taliban, but upon closer inspection, it was not a victory at all. Today, after the NATO forces' major offensive, Marjah is neither liberated nor pacified. NATO forces are in fact not in control of the city, because the enemy, broken up into pieces, is gradually returning to take over. The efforts of the US-led troops seem almost desperate, and they are emblematic of what has been happening in Afghanistan for almost nine years.

The Americans and their allies are winning all the battles, and they are losing the war. This week, the global public is now being prepared for a major, supposedly decisive offensive against Kandahar, the home of the Afghan Taliban. The corresponding rhetoric is reminiscent of the situation reports submitted by the failing generals in Vietnam. And it doesn't take an oracle to predict that a hailstorm of bad news will soon be coming from Kandahar, proving, once again, that this war -- whether it's called a battle against terrorism, counterinsurgency or a peacekeeping operation -- cannot be won.

The majority of the Afghan people, complete with their corrupt, incompetent government in Kabul, no longer seem to have an interest in the success of the Americans and their allies. In fact, today it seems that the Afghans would like nothing more than to see all of the foreigners disappear from their soil and go back to where they came from, even if it comes at the cost of a new Taliban government.

The Prospect of Civil War Is Never Far Away

III. Iraq was different from the start. Saddam Hussein may have been a brutal dictator, but in its own way, his regime brought modernization to the country from which Iraqi society still benefits today. Saddam used religion when it suited his purposes, but ultimately he was a secular leader who admired engineers, was enthusiastic about science and whose concept of the social role of women can be considered enlightened by Middle Eastern standards.

For this reason, the American war in Iraq was much easier to wage, even though it gave rise to a long series of devastating news stories, particularly in 2006 and 2007. Iraqi society -- in sharp contrast to Afghan society -- is largely urban, average levels of education are significantly higher, and the country's entire infrastructure can be considered modern compared with Afghanistan's. This is why the country was always immune to all attempts at "Talibanization."

Despite all ethnic and religious differences, despite the Kurdish problem and despite the dispute over revenues from oil exports, it was always possible in Iraq to find rational interlocutors everywhere with sufficient influence to negotiate somewhat sustainable political solutions. The Iraqis have elected a parliament three times since the American invasion in the spring of 2003, and each election has been relatively democratic. When Obama came into office, the country, under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, was on the right path, albeit a rocky one lined with many hazards, but a path nonetheless -- and no number of attacks could prevent the Iraqi people from debating the future of their country primarily with words rather than weapons. In recent weeks, however, this conclusion has begun to lose its validity.

The Return of Authoritarian Leadership

Now that Obama is sticking to his plan to withdraw all troops from Iraq by the end of 2011, the sectarians and terrorists in the country see their chance once again. Most of all, Iraq's leaders are suddenly remembering their old, bad habits. The authoritarian style of leadership, softened for several years by the desire not to jeopardize the country's national unity, is making a comeback.

Prime Minister Maliki -- whose party won fewer seats in parliament in the March election than that of his biggest challenger, Ayad Allawi -- clung to his office with disquieting stubbornness and, for months, prevented a government from taking shape. Many compromises that were achieved with painstaking effort over the years, partly as a result of the threatening presence of US troops, of which there are still 90,000 in Iraq today, are suddenly becoming less binding. All of this can be viewed as a consequence of the imprudent foreign policy of Obama, who often behaves like an idealist with little understanding of reality.

For the time being, the prospect of civil war will never be too far removed from daily life in today's Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, if Obama hopes to prevent all the gains made in Iraq from evaporating overnight, he will ultimately have to revise his troop withdrawal decision, which will undoubtedly result in a loss of authority for the president. Like Germany after World War II, Iraq will need the stabilizing presence of American troops until further notice, and the US government will eventually realize that it could be helpful to maintain a certain threatening presence against Iraq's neighbor, Iran.

A Consistently Dismal Outlook for Afghanistan

IV. How is the situation in Baghdad and Kabul in 2010? This question is almost more difficult to answer for Iraq than for Afghanistan, because the outlook for Afghanistan is so consistently dismal. The international coalition's territorial gains there have always proved to be short-lived, and large parts of the country are under the de facto control of various splinter groups, clans and warlords, all of which are amalgamated in the debate and labeled as Taliban. In fact, Afghan society, and this is also true of its enemies, is an amazingly complex web of cultural, ethnic, religious, geographic and tribal loyalties that foreigners can hardly hope to ever untangle in a reasonably satisfying way.

Afghan society is also influenced by Pakistan, Iran, Russia and even China. To understand it, one has to understand Uzbek influences, Tajik connections and Russian old-boy networks. One has to be familiar with the paths of all threads woven in 30 years of war, all the tales of loyalty and betrayal, the legends of the mujahedeen. Someone who doesn't know who happens to be whose son-in-law, or which tribal leader is currently bribing which police chief, will always be faced with an unsolvable mystery.

America On Verge of Shifting Focus to Pakistan

A society like this cannot be shaped into a state, at least not according to American criteria and methods. The current US ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, has been at odds with the administration in Kabul on many issues for some time. US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke is already seen as a declared enemy of President Hamid Karzai, whose incompetence, after eight years, is now widely viewed as a proven fact. It is clear that American diplomacy is on the verge of abandoning Afghanistan and instead concentrating its efforts on neighboring Pakistan, which, as a nuclear power and the real haven of Taliban terrorists, has been attracting more attention than Afghanistan for some time.

Attempting to make valid predictions about military campaigns is a tricky undertaking. The upcoming troop surge in Afghanistan, like the one that was employed in Iraq in 2007, could change the game. Many welcomed the appointment of four-star General David Petraeus to the post of commander in Afghanistan as a hopeful sign. However, Petraeus's experiences in Iraq, where his smart decisions helped turn things around in 2008, could prove to be an impediment in Afghanistan. Even Petraeus repeatedly says that Iraq is not Afghanistan, and yet Petraeus is still Petraeus, so it is to be feared that he will attempt to apply the same methods that proved effective in Iraq to Afghanistan.

It isn't hard to predict that they won't work there. The turnaround in Iraq materialized largely because the Sunni sheikhs changed sides and formed alliances with the Americans, first in Anbar Province and then throughout the country, and not because more American soldiers were deployed to Iraq. Similar potential allies do not exist in Afghanistan, unless one subscribes to the audacious idea that Petraeus and the United States would one day negotiate directly and openly with the Taliban.

Karzai wants to do this and has in fact been doing it secretly for some time. From the standpoint of the Kabul government, the United States, with its harsh anti-Taliban strategy, is fast becoming an obstacle on the road to internal peace. Karzai has been working against the Americans for some time, as he recently demonstrated with his shrill dismissal of his interior minister, Hanif Atmar, seen in the West as one of the few competent member of his cabinet in Kabul. And even if sounds like a wild dream today, in the end, when everything is at stake for Karzai and his clan, he could even set himself up as the leader of the anti-Western resistance in the country, dealing the deadlocked International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission a final, absurd blow.

The problems in Iraq are relatively small compared with those in Afghanistan, or at least it seemed that way until recently. Even though the recurring reports of devastating terrorist attacks in the country have shaken the world, the security situation has noticeably improved, partly as a result of the successful development of a national army and police force.

The southern part of Baghdad, which only three years ago was a dead war zone in which militias, snipers and US soldiers fought each other in eerie house-to-house combat, looks like a normal civilian neighborhood today. Everyday life has returned to places with notorious names -- Falluja, Ramadi, Najaf -- complete with markets, street festivals and children walking around in school uniforms. But now a dangerous crisis is beginning to develop in the country.

The refusal of Prime Minister Maliki to admit that he lost the election has led to a political stalemate, or perhaps even a power vacuum. Ethnic militias are targeting members of other ethnic groups again, but this time they are not controlled by foreign forces, as was long the case, or by terrorist networks or Iranian intelligence. Instead, a new, internal conflict seems to be developing in Iraq. Its causes are homegrown, and much of the blame can be attributed to incompetent policymaking.

An Ongoing Dispute over Oil Wealth

It is important to note that the Iraqis have been wrangling over a national oil law for years. Despite all negotiations, and despite all pressure from abroad and at home, the Iraqis still haven't managed to find a fair method of distributing their mineral wealth, which could be a key to peace in the country.

The inability to achieve this major breakthrough goes hand-in-hand with countless other inadequacies of those in power who, for example, have proven to be incapable of accomplishing the task of providing Iraq with electricity and water, as well as satisfying many other basic needs. The people are getting tired of the complicated political games in Baghdad and are beginning to turn away from leaders who are clearly more interested in their own well-being than that of the country.

It is an alarming sign that these reports are now coming from friends of Iraq who know the country well, like former US Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who warns that some of the more recent achievements in Iraq could be undone again. It seems as if the hope that all Iraqis could live together in peace is fading away again, just at the historic moment at which the United States has decided to completely withdraw its troops. Nothing good can come of this.

In Afghanistan, Options Are Extreme and Contradictory

V. Seen in the cold light of day, Obama doesn't have a lot of options in Iraq. If, as commander-in-chief of the US Armed Forces, he did in fact pull out all troops, a failure of the Iraqi experiment would be more than likely, a view that the US government will share sooner or later. Only with a stabilizing, armed US presence to support them can the moderate forces in Baghdad proceed with their project, and it would be a historic mistake to deprive them of that opportunity.

The situation is different in Afghanistan. The options there are extreme and contradictory, and the consequences of choosing any option are very difficult to assess. The option preferred by most Europeans consists of the rapid withdrawal of all troops and could be described as an "after-us-comes-the-flood" strategy. Obama, too, is coming under growing pressure to put a swift end to

the hopeless military operation in Afghanistan and to consign the clearly unwilling Afghans to their fate.

Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Australia and many other countries are either withdrawing their troops or are questioning their commitment to the effort, the ISAF coalition is crumbling, and Obama faces the choice of continuing the operation as an increasingly costly American and British war or ending it without victory. Both options are not exactly tempting, which is why it is both conceivable and desirable to make one last major effort, which could end in a more constructive solution.

'Great Game' Factors Play a Role Today

Before he was forced to resign under dishonorable circumstances, former ISAF Commander Stanley McChrystal said that the point is not to end the war quickly, but properly -- a banal but true statement. If the war is to be followed by other actions, they would have to go beyond the military involvement of more and more US combat troops. In Afghanistan, all the factors that shaped the historic 19th-century "Great Game" between the British Empire and the Russians still play a role today. The conflict can be resolved here and there, but not within Afghanistan's borders.

If Obama is indeed the Messianic world leader he was heralded as everywhere after his election, he should succeed in forcing all parties to come together once again at a major Afghanistan conference, which would include powers like Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran, but also the Taliban in some form and a few Afghan warlords. Given the messy situation, it would take nothing less than such a conference to achieve workable ways out of what will otherwise be a guaranteed disaster.

If this sort of a last diplomatic effort fails to materialize, and if the current, seemingly purposeless meandering conflict simply continues, Afghanistan's future will be easy to predict. America's allies will abandon ship, gradually at first and then more and more quickly, and even the United Nations will eventually withdraw, if only to protect its employees. The country will sink into a chaos that will end with a resurrection of the Taliban as its savior. History will have come full circle, all sacrifices and efforts will have been in vain, and Afghanistan will be back where it was in 2001.

An Endgame Around the Role of the US in the World

VI. More is being negotiated in Iraq and Afghanistan than merely the stabilization of both countries and their societies. The conflicts revolve around entire regions, political spheres of influence and a sort of an end game around the role of the United States in the world. It is quite possible that historians will one day look back at the beginning of the 21st century as the period when the United States lost its status as a superpower, on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, to China, which currently wields a "soft power" worldwide that many believe already exceeds that of the United States. It is also quite possible that Barack Obama will go down in history as the president who finally ushered in the decline of US dominance.

But in these months and years, which are also heavily burdened by a historic global economic crisis, the United States, and its role in the world, isn't the only thing at stake. The wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan may be primarily American wars, but in their wake, three major players in global politics are experiencing their hours of truth. The UN, NATO and the European Union run the risk of finding themselves among the collateral damage of the current wars, particularly the one in Afghanistan.

The European Union's Absence

In Afghanistan, all three have demonstrated that, as crisis intervention forces, they are little more than expensive total failures. The UN may have launched successful vaccination and education programs in Afghanistan and improved health care here and there, which is certainly not to be overlooked, but it has failed completely as a self-proclaimed master of nation-building. During the course of the ISAF operation, NATO proved to be a quarreling bunch of individual armies, each acting on its own, capable of neither winning a war nor establishing peace. The Europeans were, after all,

absent as a European Union, and the individual European countries that did send troops as part of ISAF almost fought more energetically to defend their own interests -- just as they do in Brussels -- than against the enemies of a new Afghanistan.

These conclusions lead to a sobering realization: In Afghanistan, the hope that reasonable multilateral solutions exist for the world's central problems is currently waning. In any event, the prospect that today's agencies of the international community will fail at their self-imposed touchstone, Afghanistan, cannot remain without consequences for the fabric of the world.

A positive consequence could be that the parties involved will analyze their joint failure and find their way to substantial reforms that could involve restructuring NATO, the UN and the EU, but no one believes this will happen. Negative consequences are more likely. The members of the international coalition did not find common ground in Afghanistan, but in fact became more estranged from one another. Rifts are opening up, largely between the United States and Europe, but also, on a smaller scale, between many European countries. Germany, in particular, became isolated and even exposed to international derision because of its complicated special role in the military mission.

If the Afghanistan mission were to end as shabbily as it seems that it could at the moment -- in that the members of ISAF simply slink away, one after another, without leaving the country and the region with any prospects -- it would be a total loss in terms of global politics. This is why the relevant world leaders must now find a way to cooperate, not in their usual, routine fashion, but with all seriousness and in full knowledge of the dramatic situation, with the intent of beginning work on a reasonable, sustainable solution.

A major Afghanistan conference, one that puts an end to the catastrophic status quo and truly brings all players, including the dubious ones, to the negotiating table, is the order of the day.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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