

# Obama and Afghanistan

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"It is an infallible rule that a prince who is not wise himself cannot be well advised ... wise counsels, from whoever they come, must necessarily be due to the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince to the wise counsel received".

Niccolo Machiavelli's sage words aptly sum up the predicament of President Barack Obama on Afghanistan. Unlike his predecessor George W. Bush and his equally rash bunch of advisers, Obama is a sensible man. However, the haste he has shown in crafting a policy on Afghanistan does not reflect wisdom.

He ordered "a careful policy review ... as soon as I took office" he said on March 27 in a speech which, like all American pronouncements from on high, did not err on the side of brevity. His own understanding of that country and this region, as his campaign speeches revealed, was not profound. His advisers are none too blessed with the knowledge or understanding either. The highest in the intelligence services confessed to an "appalling" ignorance of the command structure of the Taliban whom his book *The Audacity of Hope* ignores. It has brief references only to Al Qaeda.

What is it that emboldened Obama to think that he would hit upon a cure for the ills in Kabul in record speed? The recipe prescribed in the speech does not reckon with the one fundamental that lies at the root of the problem — the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil. They went there to be rid of Al Qaeda. The Taliban were affected because they had extended hospitality to its chief Osama bin Laden. Second only to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, her colleague Karl F. Inderfurth was responsible for snubbing the Taliban's many overtures and for, thus, hardening their attitude. Disdain for diplomacy and indifference to other people's sentiments are the twin hallmarks of American diplomacy.

They were reflected in an article by Inderfurth and James Dobbins, a Bush official, published on the day Obama spoke. They were reflected in the president's speech as well. Inderfurth and Dobbins first

lay out the sketch of an impressive edifice of an international treaty which ensures peace in Afghanistan and in the region. The US and its allies will "withdraw all forces from Afghanistan once these other provisions (of the treaty) had been implemented".

That is a consummation devoutly to be wished for. But how will it be achieved? By the use of military force. "More western troops and economic assistance, more sophisticated military tactics and greater civilian capacity will be needed to turn the tide that is currently running against Nato...."

Obama's proposals are no different. Deployment of more US troops. "That's how we will prepare Afghans to take responsibility for their security, and how we will ultimately be able to bring our own troops home." Is this a realistic exit strategy?

The goal is defined thus: "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future." To this end "we must isolate Al Qaeda from the Pakistani people (sic)" — a strange formulation. Even

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*The Economist* came to realise by March 28 that "America's bombing raids inside Pakistan probably are counterproductive, and should stop". Economic aid to Pakistan will be coupled with demands for greater commitment to rooting out Al Qaeda and for denial of safe havens to it.

Afghanistan is also asked to meet certain tests. It must wipe out "the corruption that causes Afghans to lose faith in their own leaders". One wishes President Obama will also direct his energies to rooting out corruption in both houses of his US Congress — that pork system particularly — which causes the American people "to lose faith in their own people".

There is no effort to distinguish between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Their agendas differ, as they have always differed. The Kabul correspondent of *The Economist* reported "For most Taliban fighters, the ideology of global jihad is less important than other

things: Pakhtun nationalism; opposition to the western invasion; desire to defend conservative Muslim values deemed to be under attack; and a raft of local grievances, tribal frictions, inter-ethnic conflicts and competition for power and resources.

"Most analysts think that the irreconcilable ideological component of the Taliban remains in the minority. What is not so clear is the answer to the first question: how does one go about engaging with the Taliban? So far, the western aim has been to defeat them; little thought has been given to coming to terms with them. Taliban representatives were not invited to the Bonn conference of 2001, which was supposed to lay the foundations for an Afghan political settlement. (Many analysts have argued that that was a mistake). Since then, other Afghans have used their positions in power to marginalise many who might otherwise have been brought into the political process. The result has been that whole sections of the populace in the Pakhtun south feel alienated, a problem sometimes compounded by the clodhopping tactics of Nato-led forces."

In contrast, to Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, the real source of the problem lies in Pakistan. The Taliban, he told Nato ambassadors, were only the "outer rim" of a global jihadist movement. Familiarity with this region was not one of Holbrooke's qualifications. He is a man who would rather be wrong in speech than be right in silence.

Finally, Obama proposes "a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan" comprising all the stakeholders in the region from the Gulf nations to Central Asia; Iran Russia, India and China included. A group as large as this cannot serve as an efficient contact group. Its members do not see eye to eye. Some reject Obama's theses on the entire region.

The day Obama spoke, a special conference on Afghanistan met in Moscow. Convened by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with India and Pakistan participating, it threw its hat in the ring: "The SCO was one of the appropriate fora for a wide dialogue" on the issues related to Afghanistan. It proposed an "SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan". Obama has a lot to learn — and unlearn. ■

*The write is an author and a lawyer.*