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The World after Great Power Withdrawals

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Abstract

Will the United States' pullback from Afghanistan, currently planned to be completed by the end of 2014, deeply affect the world? What would be its impact on the Muslim world, including the Muslim-majority countries of South Asia? These two questions are important for the making of public policy across the world because of the massive changes that are likely to occur once the United States has left the scene. Major large-power pullbacks have in the past led to the birth of new economic and political global orders. There is no reason why the same would not happen again this time.

Introduction: The Past Pullbacks

The British pullout from India in 1947 led to a wave of decolonisation in Asia and Africa and ushered in a new world order in which the influence of the old colonial powers was significantly reduced, creating space for the emergence of new quasi-imperial powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Some newly independent countries chose to align with Washington while

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some others preferred to get close to Moscow. Many became members of the non-aligned movement. There were massive changes when the Americans pulled out of Vietnam in 1973. There was considerable irony in what occurred once the United States left that particular scene. The war in Vietnam was fought to contain China and block its advance into the countries to its south and east. The strategy didn't work. Not only did the American withdrawal lead to the acceleration of China's rise, China also went on to become the dominant economic power in East Asia. In 1979, the Soviet Union went into Afghanistan to save its southern part from the influence of the rise of Islam in its immediate neighbourhood. It feared that the Islamic revolution in Iran could influence its southern republics that had Muslim majorities. After fighting a losing war for a decade it chose to leave Afghanistan ushering in a chain of events that finally led to its collapse. Not only did the southern states become independent countries, Moscow also lost influence over the nations of Eastern Europe. They pivoted towards the West. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that by leaving Afghanistan, the United States is likely to set the stage for another global convulsion; another reordering of the world economic and political orders.

The American Pullback from Afghanistan

The American decision to leave Afghanistan will have enormous consequences not only for that country's future but also for those in its neighbourhood. This subject is being studied intensively by three senior scholars at Singapore's Institute of South Asian Studies². As Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury writes in a recent ISAS paper, "Invading Afghanistan must surely be one of the most difficult undertakings in the annals of warfare. Holding on to it must be even more so. For thousands of years this arid patch of inhospitable territory has been the graveyard of foreign armies."³ The Soviet Union's objective was to have a friendly nation on the southern borders of its predominantly Muslim republics; and the United States has wanted to see Afghanistan as a relatively well-governed state that will not fall into the hands of forces hostile to Washington. The process of withdrawal has not been easy for the Americans. One example of its complexity is the "murky" duel between the Afghan and American forces that occurred on 30 September 2012 which left five combatants dead, two Americans and three Afghans, bringing "to 53 the number of coalition forces killed in the so-called insider attacks this year."⁴

² The focus is on Afghanistan after America.

³ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'Green on Blue': Clash of Colours in the Afghan Coalition, ISAS Insights, No. 188, 25 September, 2012.

⁴ Rod Nordland, "5 dead in murky attack involving U.S. and Afghan troops", The New York Times, 1 October, 2012, p. A4

America's Waning Influence in the Muslim World

As America pulls out of Afghanistan and pulls back from the Middle East, there is likely to be a serious realignment of political forces in the Muslim world. The groups that have always been suspicious of Washington's intentions in the area will gain the upper hand. This is already apparent. One example of this new thinking is the speech given at the United Nations General Assembly on 26 September 2012 by Egypt's President Mohammad Morsi. This address marked his debut as an international statesman. "The obscene [videos and cartoons] that were recently released as a part of an organised campaign against Islamic sanctities are unacceptable" he told the United Nations members. "We reject this. We cannot accept it. We will not allow anyone to do this by word or deed."⁵ Without referring to the speech in front of the same forum by US President Barack Obama, the Egyptian President took a stance entirely different from the one adopted by his American counterpart. "Egypt respects freedom of expression [but] not a freedom of expression that targets a specific religion or a specific culture."⁶

In his UN address President Obama attempted to balance the American political right's calls to protect "American exceptionalism" – the belief that America was founded as a nation-state to spread its values across the globe – with the need to be sensitive to the deeply held beliefs in the Muslim world. He called the video "crude and disgusting" and "an insult not only to Muslims but to America as well". That notwithstanding, he said, some of the response in the Muslim world could not be justified. "The strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression, it is more speech – the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect." The American President offered a vision for the Muslim world his country had not always followed in that area: "a belief that individuals should be free to determine their own destiny, and live with liberty, dignity, justice, and opportunity"⁷. In a widely hailed speech three years ago at Cairo's Al Azhar University, the premier centre of learning in the Muslim world, President Obama promised a "new beginning in relations between the United States and the world Islam. That beginning has receded into distance.

As the political landscape in the Muslim countries gets reshaped, it will produce a reaction in America, especially those on the right of the political spectrum. This became evident in the

⁵ A day after the Morsi speech, the man believed to be responsible for the production and distribution of the video was arrested and ordered held without bond. He was charged for an unrelated offence: See Brooks Barnes, "Man tied to anti-Islam video held on probation charge", *The New York Times*, 28 September 2012, p. A11. The government in Pakistan sought to use the man's arrest to dampen the anti-American sentiment in the country ahead of the demonstrations planned for Friday 28 September. The demonstrations a week earlier after the Friday prayers had led to the death of two dozen people mostly in the troubled city of Karachi.

⁶ Quoted in Anne Gearan, "Morsi: Insults to prophet 'unacceptable'", *The Washington Post*, 27 September, 2012, p. A2.

⁷ President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly", 25 September, 2012, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25.

commentaries that followed the attack on the United States' consulate that caused the death of the highly respected American ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens. A good example of the reaction can be found in the columns of Charles Krauthammer, one of the known voices in this part of the political world in America. "Obama seems not even to understand what happened", he wrote in one of his columns. "He responded with a grovelling address to the U.N. General Assembly that contained no less than six denunciations of a crackpot video, while offering cringe-worthy platitudes about the need for governments to live up to the ideals of the United Nations"⁸.

The most significant reordering likely to occur will be in the Middle East and parts of South Asia. The contours of what is likely to emerge in the former have become visible; for the latter, however, there is much that remains undefined. In the Middle East, the West's relations with the mostly autocratic regimes of the area were articulated by what can be called the "grand bargain". This had essentially three elements: the West would support the regimes that governed even if they were non-democratic and corrupt as long as they allowed the free flow of oil and free use of area's water-ways for navigation and did not threaten the Jewish state of Israel. That bargain is no longer valid as a consequence of the Arab Spring of 2011 and the collapse of the long-enduring regimes in the Middle East. The new regimes will be much more assertive about what they perceive to be in their interest and in the interest of their citizens. This position was articulated at length by President Morsi in an interview with The New York Times before he set out for New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly. "If you want to judge the performance of the Egyptian people by the standards of German or Chinese or American culture then there is no room for judgment. When the Egyptians decide something, probably it is not appropriate for the U.S. When the Americans decide, this, of course is not appropriate for Egypt."⁹

Ensuing Conflict within the Muslim World

With Egypt and Turkey, two large Muslim countries, detaching from the United States and becoming less than Washington's client states, there are now many centres of power scattered around the globe. Each of these will extend its reach as far as those nearby will allow. Egypt will compete with Saudi Arabia to establish an inclusive political order in the Arab world. It will succeed for the reason that time and demography are on its side. The Arab Spring may have started in Tunisia but had its most significant impact in Egypt because of that country's size. A large and young population was able to demonstrate how the youth could use modern means of

⁸ Charles Krauthammer, "Go large, Mitt", The Washington Post, 28 September, 2012, p. A21.

⁹ David D. Kirkpatrick and Steven Erlanger, "Egyptian leader spells out terms for U.S.-Arab ties", The New York Times, 23 September 2012, pp. 1 and 6

communication to get rid of a political system that had lost its relevance. The old system provided only for the few in the establishment, not for the many in the street. The remaining autocrats in the Middle East may be able to resist, for a while, the dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring, but they cannot stop the flood from reaching their shores.

With the old order dispensed with, it is not certain that its place will be taken by moderate regimes that will be more tolerant of religious diversity. Once again Egypt will set the pattern which the other countries in the Arab world are likely to follow. While the moderate Muslim Brotherhood won the most seats in the Egyptian Parliament and saw one of its leaders become the country's first elected president, a more radical Islamic movement is challenging the outcome. In an essay titled "the rise of the Salafis", Bobby Ghosh describes the struggle for influence that is going on at this time in the Muslim world. "The demonstration of Salafi street power set off alarm bells in Muslim countries, nowhere more than in those liberated by the revolutions of 2011, where the fundamentalists seem determined to draw out all other voices in the political conversation...If the democratically elected governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen represent the flowering of the Arab Spring, the newly assertive Salafis are its weeds, flourishing in soil fertilized by free expression and poorly tended by weak governments. Many in the region and in Western capitals alike worry that if left unchecked, the Salafis will choke the life out of the new democracies by forcing their puritanical and intolerant brand of Islam on a timorous populace and craven leaders."¹⁰

The change in the non-Arab Muslim world is proceeding more smoothly. It is led by Turkey. Ankara has shown a way to accommodate Islam in the political system and how to keep the military where it should stay – in their barracks. Turkey is likely to become the model for countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh that too are seeking ways to deal with the issue of Islam in politics and the role of the military in the political order. With America's fading influence in this part of the world, adjustments to internal pressures will have to follow internal compulsions. For some time to come the countries in the region will be much more nationalistic than accommodating of large power interests.

Conclusion

United States is planning on leaving Afghanistan for political reasons. The cost of staying there is becoming too large to bear for a weakened and troubled economy. The Americans see no reason why they should spend so much to achieve a goal their leaders have not succeeded in defining with any clarity. Vietnam was different and even there the American intervention

¹⁰ Bobby Ghosh, "The rise of the Salafis" Time, 8 October, 2012, p. 48.

eventually lost domestic support. America went to Vietnam to stop the Communist train to keep on rolling in Asia. There is no such clear-cut objective in Afghanistan once Osama bin Laden was killed. If there is to be a clash with Islam and the Muslim world as postulated by Samuel P. Huntington, Afghanistan is not the place where it will occur. It will not even be in Pakistan the country in which the Americans have the lowest approval rating. It will be in the Middle East. For that clash the withdrawal from Afghanistan sends a message the American right does not want to hear: that the world now has many competing centres of power and America has lost its dominant position. How America reacts to its changed circumstances will have great significance for the way the new world order evolves.

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