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NATO and Afghanistan: Beginning of an Orderly or a Messy Process of Withdrawal?

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Abstract

The leaderships of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) countries were pushed by domestic considerations to lay out a programme for withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan at a more accelerated pace than they had originally envisaged. There were both political and financial reasons for America's rush to the door. The war was no longer regarded by the citizens as "necessary". This change in sentiment could not be ignored by the country's leadership especially when President Barack Obama faced stiff opposition in the run-up to the November 2012 presidential contest. America's European allies were even less enthusiastic about the war. They were too engrossed in solving their growing economic problems to focus much attention on a difficult and distant land. And the cost of continued engagement was way beyond what America and Europe could afford. President Obama told the press after the conclusion of the NATO summit in Chicago, held on 20-21 May 2012, "We can pull our troops back in a responsible way and we can start rebuilding America and start making some of the massive investments.... in America here at home."² But such a neat outcome does not seem to be on the cards even after the NATO summit in Chicago. This paper suggests that the "great pullout" is likely to be a messy affair and not as desired by the United States and its allies. Unlike the Soviet Union, the United States will remain engaged in one way or other in Afghanistan for years to come. Its pullout will not be as complete as was that of the Soviets.

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² Scott Wilson and Karen DeYoung, "NATO leaders agree on 'road map' to end Afghan war", *The Washington Post*, 22 May, 2012, p. A2.

Introduction

The [initiative for a] great NATO pullback from Afghanistan made political and economic sense but Pakistan's help was needed to bring it about in a less costly way. But NATO's relations with Pakistan had become complicated by a series of crises involving the United States in 2011. Islamabad had denied access to its territory following the deaths of 24 of its soldiers on 26 November 2011 as a result of an American attack on its post near the Afghan border. Islamabad wanted an apology from Washington for the attack, something the Obama administration was not prepared to tender. Having been repeatedly accused by his Republicans opponents for not protecting the US interests, an apology was politically not possible for President Obama. The Pakistanis also wanted the United States to cease its attacks by unmanned aircraft – the drones – on the Pakistani tribal areas near Afghanistan. These attacks were part of the US strategy to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for the terrorists who could carry out 9/11 type attacks. In spite of Pakistan's objections, attacks by drones continued. On 6 June 2012, Washington reported that the second-in-command of the Al Qaeda was killed two days earlier in an attack on a village in North Waziristan. In so far as Pakistan's role is concerned, it will be defined by its own strategic reasons. In this context it will not want to totally alienate the groups that had given the United States a great deal of problems during its Afghan adventure. How this pullout from Afghanistan plays out will have enormous implications not only for the region that includes Afghanistan and Pakistan but for long-term global security.

The Great Pullback

The NATO alliance agreed at its November 2010 summit in Lisbon, Portugal, that the Afghans would assume control of their security at the end of 2014, the exit deadline for the coalition. According to one assessment, "since then as public disapproval of the war has risen the coalition has become increasingly anxious to test Afghan force capabilities, US Defence Secretary Leon E. Panetta and others have indicated that the 'transition' outlined in Lisbon would be accelerated, and that all of Afghanistan will be under Afghan security by the end of 2013, while the coalition continues to provide assistance for another year until the withdrawal of NATO troops"³.

The effort to gain international acceptance of an unambiguous plan of troop withdrawal was accelerated by Barack Obama by convening two summits. A G-8 summit was held on 19 May 2012 at Camp David, the presidential retreat in the Maryland State's mountains, followed a day later by a two-day meeting in Chicago at which 61 heads of state and government were invited. The G-7 – not G-8 since Russia under its newly sworn-in President

³ David Nakamura, "Obama aims to gain consensus from NATO, G-8 summits", *The Washington Post*, 18 May, 2012, p. A14.

Vladimir Putin declined the American invitation – was focused on how the deteriorating situation in Europe was affecting the global economy. That said, the United States took the opportunity to press its allies in G-7 to commit financial resources of their own to complete the final phase of the Afghan enterprise. The invitation to Pakistan’s President Asif Ali Zardari was issued late and only after there was an indication from Islamabad that it was willing to open the supply route from the port of Karachi to landlocked Afghanistan. However, it transpired after Zardari arrived in Chicago that there was a price associated with Pakistan’s willingness to accommodate the American needs. As discussed later in this paper, the price Islamabad wanted to charge was not acceptable to Washington.

Transferring the Task to Afghanistan

In planning for their withdrawal, the NATO leaders were guided by the experience gained in Iraq where a sizeable local force was built up with American help to take over the responsibility for maintaining law and order. A contingent of 670,000 made up of the military and police forces was raised, trained, and armed before the American withdrawal was completed. The Americans did not leave an entirely secure Iraq but the country was able to return to a degree of normalcy. It had also appeared on the international scene as a player: in end-May 2012 it hosted the second of a series of meetings to resolve the West’s dispute with Iran on the latter’s nuclear policy.

The initial plan for Afghanistan called for a force of 352,000 uniformed personnel. Several experts including Ronald E. Neumann who had served as the United States’ ambassador in Kabul from 2005 to 2007 termed the operation for creating such a force successful. “Underappreciated amid all the frustrations, losses and tragedies of the United States’ longest war is some good news: Afghanistan’s army and police are improving substantially”, he wrote in a newspaper article. “To be sure they still suffer from politicisation at senior levels, and they have a long way to go on the battlefield. But their progress has been real. Their numbers are growing; ethnic balance is reasonably good; and they are leading some 40 per cent of operations on the ground (albeit mostly simpler ones).”⁴ Other areas of progress were noted by other analysts. Some 260 of the country’s 403 districts covering 65 per cent of the population were by early summer 2012 secured primarily by Afghan troops. Night raids with Afghans now fully in the lead had taken out many skilled insurgents off the battlefield.

But the main problem for maintaining a force of this size was finance. Afghanistan on its own could not keep a force as large as Americans had initially aimed to develop. It would need a great deal of financial support for years to come. Accordingly, the force was to be scaled back to the suspiciously precise figure of 228,500 starting around 2015. The number was obtained by dividing the amount of financial resources that were likely to become available

⁴ Ronald E. Neumann and Michael O’Hanlon, “NATOS’s undue optimism”, *The Washington Post*, 18, May, 2012, p. A19.

by the estimated cost of maintaining an Afghan in uniform. According to Ambassador Neumann, this reduction in the planned size of the force “would save about \$2.5 billion a year bringing the expected cost of sustaining the army and police down from \$6.6 billion to \$4.1 annually. In fairness, having a specific target such as \$4.1 billion would help the United States elicit pledges from other allies for supporting the Afghan state in future years and would help the Afghans to concentrate on responsibilities they must shoulder”. Before the NATO meeting in Chicago, the United States indicated it would be willing to provide \$2.4 billion a year of the cost to maintain the reduced force. However, counterterrorism experts relying on the experience of other places and countries suggested “that in a country of 30 million, like Afghanistan, as many as 600,000 soldiers and police officers would be required.”⁵ There was apprehension in many policy circles that a force of the planned size would not keep the Taliban at bay once the NATO troops left the battle scene.

There were other problems faced by the United States and its allies as they did their planning to begin the pullout. One of them was the loyalty of the troops they had trained and would leave behind. A number of Afghan soldiers turned their American-supplied weapons back on the Americans on what the U.S. military called “green on blue” attacks. According to one account “already this year [May 2012], 22 coalition service members have been killed by men in Afghan uniform, compared with 35 for all of last year, according to coalition officials”.⁶ These attacks were threatening the training model adopted by the United States and its allies. One such incident occurred on 1 March 2012 at Sangesar camp in Zahre district in Kandahar province. It took the lives of two American servicemen while three Afghan soldiers were killed. A pattern of mistrust was emerging. “Just days before [the Sangesar incident], hundreds of American advisers had been pulled from Afghan government offices in Kabul after two American officers were killed by an Interior Ministry employee, worsening an already poisonous situation during the rioting that broke out after American military personnel burnt [copies of] Koran”⁷. If this trend continued there was fear that trained Afghan soldiers may harass the American troops as they began to leave their country.

It was also recognised that even if the Afghan forces were able to hold on to most of the country’s territory there were areas in the south and east that would be hard to bring out from under Taliban’s control. In these parts of the country ethnically based militias were reorganising themselves while the Taliban were gaining strength in the contested and strategically important provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. These provinces were the focus of attention of the American troops when thousands of additional soldiers were ordered into the country by President Obama in what was dubbed as the “surge”. The New York Times

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Matthew Rosenberg, “As trained Afghans turn enemy, A U.S.-led imperative is in peril”, *The New York Times*, 16 May, 2012, p. A1 and A10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

quoted from a recent Pentagon report “that enemy attacks in Kandahar rose 13 per cent in the more recent October-March time period versus the same period last year.”⁸

An analyst looking at the problems the United States and its NATO allies were likely to face as they work out the logistics of the great pullback from Afghanistan recalled what happened in 1842 when the British decided to pull out of the country: “Few images better sum up what NATO wants to avoid as its troops exit Afghanistan than the exhausted Dr William Brydon, riding a half-dead pony into the garrison town of Jalalabad after Britain’s retreat from Kabul in 1842. His skull shattered, he was the only member of the British army to avoid death or capture. Since then other foreign armies have suffered similarly bitter departures from the region, most recently the Red army in 1989”⁹. There was nervousness about meeting such a fate although the circumstances then were very different. Then, the arrival of the British in the country invited universal Afghan hostility. That was also the case when the Soviet Union came marching in although there were elements in the Afghan society that looked with favour to Moscow’s attempt to change the highly conservative Afghan society. The American presence in Afghanistan had much greater support among the Afghans, in particular the ethnic groups in the country’s north. It was the Pushtun population that was largely opposed to the United States’ invasion and its attempt to create a new political order in the country. This made Pakistan’s cooperation an essential element of the pullout strategy since the majority of the world’s Pushtun population lived on its side of the border. There were other reasons for seeking Pakistan’s support in particular in the troop pullout phase of the operation.

The military planners working out of Washington were well aware of the logistical scale of the operation that will have to be put in place to move the American troops out of the country in which they had fought for more than 10 years. The planning for the pullout had begun a year earlier – in May 2011. In a prime time address, President Obama announced that 10,000 of the 100,000 US troops will be withdrawn by the end of 2011 and pledged to pull out 30,000 by the end of 2012. However, some of the heavy weights in his administration did not support this timetable. “A powerful quartet comprising Robert Gates and Hillary Clinton, the secretaries of defence and state respectively, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General David Petraeus, the US commander in Afghanistan, have been pushing for a continued strong presence there. [But] Vice-President Joe Biden has long been an advocate of smaller, counterterrorism – as opposed to counter-insurgency force in Afghanistan.”¹⁰ The fact that the support for the war declined in the United States helped Obama to firm up his commitment to leave Afghanistan. In the spring of 2011, 56 per cent of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center said the troops should be brought home as

⁸ *The New York Times*, editorial, “NATO and Afghanistan”, 19 May, 2012, p. A18.

⁹ Carola Hoyos, “Analysis: Bringing it all back home”, *Financial Times*, 17 May, 2012, p. 7.

¹⁰ Anna Fifield and Matthew Green, “US to reveal plan for troop-pullout”, *Financial Times*, May 22, 2011, p. 4.

soon as possible, while 39 percent favoured keeping troops in Afghanistan until the situation stabilised¹¹.

The Obama administration firmed up its plans for withdrawal a year later, in the spring of 2012. It planned to pull out 129,000 troops, the UK another 9,500. Some 70,000 vehicles would be involved in the process, most of which were armoured. About 120,000 container-trips would be needed to move this equipment. The cost of the equipment was estimated at US\$49 billion; another US\$15 billion would be needed to prepare what could be salvaged for further use. If the price Pakistan initially suggested for the use of its roads and territory was paid, it would amount to a total of US\$600 million additional cost for the United States. An alternate route was available to the Americans through the countries to the north of Afghanistan. However, the Northern Distribution Network was much more expensive and passed through difficult geographic and political terrain.

Change of Course by President Obama

It took President Obama about 30 months of deep reflection and careful watching of the unfolding of events in Afghanistan to conclude that his country had followed a flawed strategy to avoid the possibility of another 9/11 type of event. Initially he called the conflict in Afghanistan a “war of necessity” while that in Iraq was “war of choice”. He had campaigned in 2008 by pledging to end the second while increasing American commitment to the successful conclusion of the former. However, left unexplained was the objective that was to be pursued as Washington increased its involvement in Afghanistan. The reason why the goals were not clearly laid down as Obama campaigned for the high office and even after his inauguration in January 2009 was simple: he was not clear as to what America was set to achieve in that difficult land.

Even if the newly elected president had wanted a radical change in his approach to America’s dealings with the world and the way it was handling the war against terrorism, his room for manoeuvre was limited. As argued in a recent book by Jack Goldsmith, a conservative legal scholar who headed the Office of the Legal Council for a time under the administration of President George W. Bush, Obama was unable to shift the US foreign policy very far because by the time he took office it was already pitched at the centre of gravity of American political society¹². Obama was not the first American president to feel so constrained. “Although the Bush administration set out to expand the scope of executive action in the field of national security, it was ultimately forced back by a framework of checks and balances built into the American political system. The restrictions imposed on Bush administration and his officials were frustrating, but the policies that emerged enjoyed a degree of legitimacy that made it

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11*, New York, W.W.Norton, 2012. ,

hard for the new administration to abandon them.”¹³ President Obama operated under the same set of constraints. He had to bide his time before he could bring about a significant change in his country’s policies towards defeating international terrorism.

Of course, the change President Obama was to articulate at Chicago on 20-21 May 2012, with the leaders of NATO and the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan and several Central Asian states present in his audience, was the result of three developments: the financial problems the United States and its European allies faced in the summer of 2012; the inability or the unwillingness of the leadership in Afghanistan to usher in a political and social order that would give comfort to those who would have wanted the American and the Europeans to pursue nation-building objectives in Afghanistan; and the steady deterioration of the economic, political and security situation in the nuclear armed Pakistan¹⁴.

Having agreed to the demand of his generals to add more American troops to those already fighting in Afghanistan, President Obama began to chart for himself and his country a course that would be different from the one Pentagon wanted him to follow. The generals wanted a straight forward victory – a complete defeat of the Taliban. Having succeeded in getting the new and inexperienced president to give them more troops, they did not want any constraint placed on them as to the time over which this additional force would be needed. Such an unconstrained commitment was increasingly difficult for President Obama as he began to wrestle with the economic and financial situation his country faced. According to David Sanger who chronicled in a recent book the change in the American course in Afghanistan, “if the generals’ counterinsurgency plan were left on autopilot it would cost US\$1 trillion a year over 10 years. And the more [President Obama] delved into what it would take to truly change Afghan society, the more he concluded that the task was so overwhelming that it would make little difference whether a large American and NATO force remained for 2 more years, 5 more years or 10 more years.”¹⁵

The way the Afghan political system was evolving reduced President Obama’s confidence in nation-building as a legitimate objective of the American involvement in Afghanistan. An increasingly erratic President Hamid Karzai who had won his second term as president in an election that was generally considered rigged, the Afghan leader’s support of local warlords known to be corrupt and little interested in creating a modern state in their country, and the failure of the NATO and American forces to clear and hold regions in Afghanistan in which the concept of the “government out of a box”—a government ready to work the moment an area was cleared by the military of insurgency – persuaded Obama and his civilian advisors

¹³ Anthony Dworkin, “Capping unbridled power of the presidency”, review of the book by Jack Goldsmith, Book World, *The Washington Post*, 20 May, 2012, p. B6.

¹⁴ The change in President Obama’s approach towards Afghanistan and Pakistan is chartered out in an important book written by David Sanger of The New York Times who had followed Afghanistan for his newspaper for several years. The book was published a couple of weeks after the NATO meeting in Chicago. See David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, New York, Crown, 2012.

¹⁵ David E. Sanger, “Charting Obama’s journey to a shift in Afghanistan” *The New York Times*, 20 May, 2012, pp. 1 and 9.

that a very limited goal was needed for the American involvement. This would be to ensure that Al Qaeda would not return to the country to do damage to the United States. It was the failure of the “clear and hold” operation in Marja, a town in Helmand province, which swung the Obama team away from pursuit of ambitious objectives. The operation proved that progress was possible but not on the kind of timeline that Obama thought was economically or politically affordable.

As the NATO leaders gathered for their important meeting in Chicago, they had hoped for an improving situation in Afghanistan. That was not on offer. On the eve of the meeting, a new and even more ruthless group of insurgents announced its presence. The group called itself the Mullah Daudullah Front, after a notorious Taliban commander who was killed in 2007. “People claiming to represent it have in recent days sent text messages and made telephone calls to numerous members of the Afghan Parliament, threatening suicide attacks if they vote to ratify the strategic partnership agreement between Afghanistan and the United States.”¹⁶ The group took responsibility for the assassination in early May of a former Taliban minister, Mullah Arsala Rahmani who was living in Kabul under government protection and was seen as the bridge to the mainstream Taliban for the off-and-on negotiations with the insurgents.

Finally, Pakistan’s political system was not developing in the way that would ensure that a democratically elected government in a country with the world’s fourth largest nuclear arsenal could be trusted to remain a friend of the West, in particular that of the United States. In the first days of his presidency, President Obama had asked Bruce O. Riedel, a former CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) officer with a deep knowledge of the region, to lead a rapid review of the situation. The Riedel team’s central insight was that Pakistan posed a far greater threat than Afghanistan. “If we were honest with ourselves, we could call this problem ‘Pak/Af, not Af/Pak,’” Mr. Riedel said shortly after turning his report. But the White House would not dare admit that publicly – even that rhetorical reversal would further alienate the Pakistanis¹⁷. Riedel went on to present his case in a book which, it was reported, was widely read by the Obama team¹⁸.

Invited late to the Chicago meeting, Pakistan’s President Asif Ali Zardari would have like to have an agreement concluded with the United States for reopening the supply routes to Afghanistan through Pakistan. They were blocked after the deaths of 24 Pakistani soldiers following an attack by the United States, on 26 November 2011, on a post near the Afghan border and could not be reopened before the start of the summit in Chicago. Having reacted sharply to the incident, Pakistan found it difficult to restore relations with the United States.

¹⁶ Rod Nordland, “In Afghanistan, a new radical insurgent group begins a campaign of terror”, *The New York Times*, 20 May, 2012, p. 9.

¹⁷ David E. Sanger, “Charting Obama’s journey to a shift in Afghanistan” *The New York Times*, 20 May, 2012, pp. 1 and 9.

¹⁸ Bruce O. Riedel, *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

Islamabad's position was complicated by the fact that the Pakistani sentiment against the United States had turned extremely negative following a series of incidents throughout 2011. They started with the killing of two young men on a busy Lahore street by Raymond Davis, a CIA operative who was keeping a watch on the extremist organisations in and around the capital of Punjab. Davis was kept in prison for several weeks but his release was eventually secured after the United States put a great deal of pressure on Islamabad and arrangements were made for the payment of "blood money" allowed under Islamic law to the families of the men killed. The next major incident was the raid on Abbottabad on 11 May 11 2011 by the US Navy Seals that took the life of Osama bin Laden. The fact that the terrorist leader had lived for six years in a compound so close to the Pakistan Military Academy caused a great deal of embarrassment for the country's armed forces. Two conclusions could be drawn from this fact: that the Pakistani military was either complicit or incompetent. Neither interpretation was comfortable for the senior commanders. They sought to deflect the attention of the citizens by focusing their attention on another fact: that the United States had wilfully violated Pakistan's sovereignty. The November 2011 raid that killed more than two dozen soldiers was the last straw and a sharp reaction from Rawalpindi/Islamabad was the result. Pakistan blocked the movement of NATO convoys on its roads; told the United States to vacate the base at Shamsi in Baluchistan from where the CIA had operated drone flights; asked the CIA to pull out most of the agents that had operated in Pakistan; and demanded that all drone attacks should be stopped. The United States responded by suspending the flow of all aid to Pakistan. The American reaction created enormous difficulties for the authorities in Pakistan. The suspension of the \$11-billion programme Pakistan had negotiated with the International Monetary Fund in the closing days of 2008 had made the country extremely vulnerable. It was now even more dependent on official capital flows from Washington than was the case when the IMF was disbursing funds.

Caught in this difficult situation, the government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari decided to use the parliament to find a way out. A committee was appointed to suggest to the parliament the basis on which relations with the United States could be restored. After long deliberations in which the opposition used its leverage to force an approach stronger than the one President Zardari and his associates would have preferred to follow towards United States, the committee was able to present to the national legislature conditions on which the supply line to Afghanistan could be reopened. An apology by the United States President for the November 2011 killing of Pakistani soldiers, suspension of drone attacks and compensating Pakistan for the use of its road network for moving American equipment were the more important conditions proposed by the parliament.

The Chicago Summit: Seeking Security in an Age of Austerity

President Obama and his advisors choreographed the Chicago event by first convening a one-day summit of G8 (but actually G7 as it turned out) at which there was much discussion of

the way the rich nations should handle the economic crises they faced. That summit did not produce major results of significance for the winding down of the conflict in Afghanistan. There was tacit agreement among the assembled countries that they will pay some attention to economic growth as they worked to manage their large and increasingly heavy burden of debt but the need for austerity remained the main focus. The drive for austerity left little room for giving large amounts of assistance to Afghanistan.

The Americans began to put pressure on their allies to make financial contributions needed to keep in place at least a scaled-down fighting Afghan force once the NATO completed its pullout from the country. There was little enthusiasm among the allies for the American plans. Europe was passing through an exceptionally difficult economic period and did not have the appetite to continue to fund the Afghan effort. “The planned budget for post-2014 security spending is \$4.1 billion a year, with the Afghan government providing \$500 million. Even this was a significant amount for a country as poor as Afghanistan. It represented 3 percent of its GDP of \$17 billion. NATO allies were pressed to contribute \$1.27 billion a year, while the US was expected to foot the balance.”¹⁹ The UK indicated a contribution of \$110 million, Germany \$191 million, Australia \$99.5 million.

There was also a profound political change taking place in the European continent as several liberal parties were able to successfully challenge rule by the conservatives. The greatest change had occurred in France where in mid-May 2012, following the presidential election held a few weeks earlier, Francois Hollande replaced the conservative Nicolas Sarkozy. The new president met his American counterpart, Barack Obama, for 20 minutes on 18 May, two days before the meeting in Chicago. Before arriving in the United States for the meeting of G8 at Camp David and the NATO’s Chicago conclave the new French president had announced his intention to accelerate the timetable for the withdrawal of his country’s troops from Afghanistan. This was to be done before the end of 2012 when 3,400 French troops would be pulled out. In his comments after the brief meeting with President Obama, Hollande said he was committed to providing assistance to Afghan security but not for the fighting. “I reminded President Obama that I made a promise to the French people to the effect that our combat troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2012. That being said, we will continue to support Afghanistan in a different way. We’ll seek a different format. And that will be done with good understanding with our allies”²⁰.

The summit began with remarks by NATO Secretary General Andres Rasmussen saying that the focus of the gathering would be on “security in an age of austerity”. In his opening statement President Obama emphasised the need for collaborative effort on the part of all nations to solve the world’s more pressing problems. That had been the theme of his

¹⁹ Geoff Dyer and Kiran Stacey, “US presses allies on Afghan funding pledges” *Financial Times*, 18 May, 2012, p. 4.

²⁰ Quoted in David Nakamura, “Obama, Hollande disagree on Afghan efforts”, *The Washington Post*, 19 May, 2012, p. A10.

presidency, distinguishing it from that of his predecessor George W. Bush. He called for all member countries to invest in the “defence capabilities and new technologies that meet our collective needs”. NATO can “work together and pool our resources,” he said, allowing each of our nations to accomplish what none of us can achieve alone”²¹. This was in sharp contrast to his predecessor who paid scant attention to the opinions of other countries – even those the Americans counted as its allies and friends. Bush ordered American troops into Iraq without much support from his European allies. The only exception was Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Britain, who began to be called “America’s poodle” by the liberal segment of the British press.

The Chicago summit did not begin well for Pakistan. The United States rejected the proposal from Pakistan to charge \$5,000 per container moving through its territory carrying non-lethal supplies for Afghanistan. Asked if the Pakistani proposal was anywhere near what Washington would be prepared to pay, a senior US official responded: “Not when seven or eight months ago we were paying a fraction of the figure.”²² The NATO delegation, not happy with the Pakistani position, cancelled the meeting that had been scheduled between President Zardari and Andres Rasmussen. The meeting had been initially set for 20 May, a day before the start of the two-day summit. The White House also indicated that President Obama’s schedule did not allow a one-on-one meeting with the Pakistani president. Instead, Zardari spent a significant amount of time meeting Hillary Clinton on Saturday (20 May 2012). As one news analysis put it, “it was a measure of just how bad things have gotten between the United States and Pakistan that, by contrast, Mr Obama’s relationship with Mr Karzai – which has been rocky ever since Mr Obama came to office [and] vowed to end what he viewed as former President George W. Bush’s coddling of the mercurial leader – looked calm and stable on Sunday. The two men, fresh off Mr Obama’s unannounced trip to Kabul this month to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Mr Karzai that set departure of American troops in 2014, presented a united front before reporters after a one-hour meeting on the outskirts of the NATO summit. It was a sharp contrast with the past when Mr Karzai berated American troops, threatening to join the Taliban and chastised the American-led NATO mission.”²³

The Chicago summit delivered what was expected of it: a withdrawal plan with the promise that the NATO countries will remain engaged to strengthen Afghanistan’s ability to manage its security. There was a sober assessment of what was achieved. “We leave Chicago with a clear road map” President Obama told a news conference held after the meeting had concluded. “This alliance is committed to bringing the war in Afghanistan to a responsible end.” Each nation will determine its own pace of withdrawal, coordinated with coalition

²¹ The Rasmussen and Obama quotes are from Karen DeYoung and Scott Wilson, “NATO focuses on war’s closure”, *The Washington Post*, 21 May, 2012, pp. A1 and A4.

²² AFP dispatch carried by Dawn under the heading of “US rejects Pakistan fess for supply routes”, www.dawn.2012/05/2012/us-rejects-high-pakistan, accessed on 20 May, 2012.

²³ Helen Cooper and Matthew Rosenberg, “Pakistan dispute casts a shadow on NATO meeting”, *The New York Times*, 21 May, 2012, pp. A1 and A6.

planners. However, there was no clear indication as to how the Afghan government will finance the large force that was required to keep peace in the country by securing a number of contested areas in which the Taliban remained active. Obama said that the strategy formally endorsed at Chicago would “achieve a stable Afghanistan that won’t be perfect.” The withdrawal would be messy, the American president conceded. “I don’t think there is going to be an optimal point where we can say, ‘this is all done, this is perfect, this is just the way we wanted it, and now we can wrap up all our equipment and go home. This is a process, and it’s sometimes a messy process, just as it was in Iraq.”²⁴

The robustness of the enemy, the Taliban, was not the only reason why the process of withdrawal was likely to be less clean than what the Americans and their NATO allies had hoped for. Real challenges remained in dealing with Pakistan. Islamabad was hoping to solve its severe financial problem by heavily taxing the trucks and containers that will bring out the equipment the United States did not wish to leave behind. The amount Pakistan wanted for the use of its communication system was regarded as extravagant by Washington. Also, the Pakistanis were not prepared to commit that they will bring under their control the Haqqani-group that had been operating out of its territory and had brought considerable grief to Kabul and the Americans operating in Afghanistan. President Obama showed his unhappiness with Pakistan by not meeting President Zardari. He “pointedly exchanged only a few words with the country’s president, Asif Ali Zardari, during the two-day summit meeting – ‘very brief, as we were walking into the summit,’ he said. The two men also stood and spoke briefly with the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, before all three joined the other leaders for a group photograph.” That said, the American president was willing to grant that Pakistan had to be part of the solution to the Afghan problem. “We believe that Pakistan has to be part of the solution in Afghanistan”, he said at the news conference. “Neither country is going to have the kind of security, stability, and prosperity that it needs unless they can resolve some of these outstanding issues”.²⁵

Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan’s failure to accommodate the United States’ interests further worsened relations between the two countries. Tensions flared as a Pakistani court imposed a 33-year sentence on a doctor, Shakil Afridi, who assisted the CIA in the hunt for Osama bin Laden. “The doctor had conducted a vaccination programme in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad to determine whether, on the basis of DNA taken from his relatives, bin Laden was living there. The court convicted him of treason”²⁶. Three days after the conclusion of the Chicago summit

²⁴ Scott Wilson and Karen DeYoung, “NATO leaders agree on ‘road map’ to end Afghan war”, *The Washington Post*, 22 May, 2012, p. A2.

²⁵ Helene Cooper and Matthew Rosenberg, “NATO agrees on Afghan security transition in 2013”, *The New York Times*, 22 May, 2012, p. A6.

²⁶ Haq Nawaz Khan and Richard Leiby, “U.S. drone kills 10 suspected militants”, *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2012, p. A8.

the United States resumed drone attacks aimed at the militants operating out of Pakistan's tribal belt. Ten insurgents, reportedly from some Central Asian nations, were killed in back to back attacks. Keeping the pressure on Pakistan, a US Senate committee reduced to \$50 million an \$800 million administration request for a fund that reimburses Pakistan for its military efforts against terrorists. Pakistan says it has \$3 billion in unpaid counterterrorism expenses while the United States puts the figure closer to \$1 billion. The Senate committee took out another \$33 million, one million for each of the year Dr. Afridi was meant to serve in prison for his help to CIA.

How well have the Pakistanis played their cards in protecting their interests as the great pullout begins? Not very well is one answer provided by David Ignatius, a syndicated columnist, who knows well Pakistan and the Muslim world. "As America begins to pull back its troops from Afghanistan, one consequence gets little notice but is likely to have a lasting impact: Pakistan is losing the best chance in its history to gain political control over all of its territory – including the warlike tribal areas along the frontier," wrote Ignatius in a newspaper column.²⁷ According to this line of thinking, Pakistan should have made use of the opportunity presented by the presence of a large American force north of the country's troubled tribal areas to pacify them and bring them under the government's control. The Americans would have been very willing to partner with the Pakistanis in achieving these objectives. But this argument was based on two assumptions, neither of which was correct. That a large force would succeed in Pakistan's tribal areas while it had mostly failed in securing the Afghan provinces such as Kandahar, Helmand and Khost on the other side of the border was an assumption hard to accept. It also implied that Pakistan would be willing to tolerate the attacks on its cities and civilians that the Pakistani Taliban had shown the ability and expertise to launch once they came under pressure of the Pakistani security forces. This notwithstanding, pressure from the West mounted as the countries deeply involved in the Afghan conflict assembled in Chicago. "President Asif Ali Zardari will also be there", wrote The New York Times in an editorial on the eve of the meeting. "President Zardari is close to persuading his government to reopen supply lines. Mr Obama has as yet to figure out how to get Pakistan's military to cut ties to the extremists. Until that happens, even a competent Afghan force will have a hard time maintaining stability. The cost for Pakistan's fragile democracy could be even higher."²⁸

The treatment meted out to President Zardari by senior US officials did not go unnoticed in Pakistan. According to an assessment by The New York Times, "for Mr Zardari, the visit to Chicago was a political disaster at home exposing the increasingly embattled president to blistering criticism...Imran Khan, a former cricket star who has become one of the most popular opposition leaders, declared that the visit a disgrace to the country, and accused the United States and NATO of ignoring the demands of Parliament and its own sacrifices in the fight against terrorists. 'This is not our war,' Mr Khan said of Afghanistan, 'so let's get out of

²⁷ David Ignatius, "Pakistan's blown chance", *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2012w, p. A15.

²⁸ *The New York Times* editorial, "NATO and Afghanistan", 19 May, p. A18.

it.”²⁹ In a detailed personal account of his career and the reasons for entering politics, published in 2012, Imran Khan had argued at some length against Pakistan’s policy towards the United States. “The current strategy can only increase radicalisation – a dangerous prospect given that Pakistan is a country with a fast growing population, a youth bulge and high rates of unemployment”, he wrote. “Now there will be a generation born of anger, an army of young men who lost relatives to US drone attacks or Pakistani military operations. And that radicalisation will not just be limited to the poor and dispossessed. Even for the youth of the rich elite, Pakistan’s abdication of responsibility for its own sovereignty is a searing humiliation”.³⁰

There is no doubt that the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan would become a very complicated operation if relations between the two countries continue on their present trend. Both sides will need to give and take. For Pakistan options are limited given the speed with which the process of democratisation is proceeding. Policymakers in Washington have not fully recognised that the development of the democratic systems in much of the Muslim world has reduced the degrees of freedom for their counterparts in the countries that were experiencing rapid political change. General Ziaul Haq’s Pakistan and Pakistan of General Pervez Musharraf could easily switch sides in foreign affairs³¹. This was done when Pakistan chose to side with America in the latter’s effort to expel the Soviet Union from Pakistan. It took one phone call to Musharraf from Washington after 9/11 for Pakistan to sever relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and begin to aid the Americans³². A democratically elected government – especially the one faced with elections a few months hence – must be responsive to public sentiment. That, as Imran Khan observed in the passage quoted above, is not supportive of the United States. That support will further wither away if Washington continues to demand more from Pakistan than it is prepared to give in return. There is palpable sentiment against Pakistan in Washington, in particular in the US Congress.

Conclusion

The much anticipated NATO summit held in Chicago to which President Barack Obama, the host, had invited a number of non-NATO nations directly involved in the Afghan conflict did not produce the needed results. The American president wanted two commitments to be made by his country’s allies: a firm financial commitment by them to Afghanistan in the post-pullout period, and an undertaking by Pakistan that it would facilitate the NATO pullback. He received neither. There were only vague promises by the NATO allies of financial support that would make it possible for the Afghans to maintain a military and police force in their

²⁹ Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, “Frustrations grow as U.S. and Pakistan fail to mend relations”, *The New York Times*, May 28, 2012, p. A8.

³⁰ Imran Khan, *Pakistan: A Personal History*, London, Bantam Press, 2012, p. 309.

³¹ This theme is developed more fully by the author, in “mmm” *Business Standard*, June 4, 2012.

³² How this actually happened is described by General Musharraf in some detail in his autobiography. See Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, New York, Free Press, 2006, pp. 199-207.

country that would ensure reasonable security to the citizens of the long-troubled country. He also wanted Pakistan to work closely with the NATO nations as they pulled their troops out of Afghanistan. Islamabad's cooperation was needed to protect the flanks of the retreating forces against assaults by the well-armed groups of insurgents that operated out of the sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas. The Pakistanis, concerned about their economic and security situation, sent their president to Chicago but did not make any tangible promises of assistance. After Chicago, there was no assurance that the American involvement in the longest-ever war in its history would wind down according to a well-laid out plan. The withdrawal is likely to be messy and may result in producing some unforeseen consequences.

While this analysis has looked at the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan mostly from the prism of Washington-Islamabad relations, this part of the campaign will not end with the American pullout. Several other countries in the region around Afghanistan have legitimate interests in the country's future. China, India, Iran and Russia in particular have strategic interests that go beyond maintaining some order in this difficult country. An Afghanistan with a strong presence of Islamic forces – a repeat of the Taliban era in some form or other – will be of concern to all these countries and their concerns will have to be factored into whatever the international community decides about its future involvement in this hard place. Even after the Americans have completed their pullout from Afghanistan, the country will loom large, as a brightly lit spot of concern, on the international radar screen.

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