

ISAS Insights

No. 261–19 September 2014

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Obama's 'War on Terror': A South Asian View

Shahid Javed Burki¹

For a politician who built his 2008 presidential campaign on a no-war platform, it is a painful decision to reverse a course he has diligently sought to pursue. On 10 September 2014, a day before the 13th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, American President Barack Obama committed himself to another war. This was done in a televised address to his nation. He made a sober assessment of the situation created not only for his country but for the entire international community by the new threat from an Islamic extremist movement that had morphed several times since the United States invaded Iraq under the direction of President George W Bush.

President Bush had launched two wars during his first term but left both unfinished as he handed the reins of power to his successor, Barack Obama. Bush had sent American troops into Afghanistan in October 2001 to punish the Taliban regime that then governed from Kabul for having provided support and sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and his terrorist

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@gmail.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

organisation, Al Qaeda. It was bin Laden's organisation that planned and launched the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 that claimed almost three thousand lives. Less than two years later Bush sent American troops to Iraq to achieve an objective that remains unclear to this day. Both wars in many ways contributed to the rise of Islamic extremism. Its latest manifestation is something called the 'Islamic State', also known as the 'Islamic Caliphate'. The latter term signifies the movement's ambitions that embrace the Muslim lands beyond Iraq and Syria, the two countries where the 'Islamic State' is currently lodged.

Bush's two wars have left an impression on world history that will remain for decades to come. Thousands of American lives were lost and tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans were killed. These wars and their aftermath, by various counts, have caused more than a couple of trillion US dollars. By pulling out his country's troops from Iraq and by beginning the process of withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Obama had hoped to bring to an end this particular episode in American history. But that has not happened since the chain of events relating to these two wars has resulted in the spread of conflict to other places including Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali and Nigeria. The original Al Qaeda created franchises in many places in Asia and Africa. In July 2014 its nominal head Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that a new chapter had now been founded in South Asia that would focus on the sub-continent's large Muslim populations. According to Saeed Naqvi writing for *India Today*, "desperate Muslim youth may at that stage be in search for a rallying force, but I find it difficult to believe that Zawahiri kind of Islam will have burgeoning clientele in India. The danger will arise when muscular forces like the ISIS, with their mastery of the new media technology begin to reach out to pockets of agitated Muslims on social networks. That would be dangerous because the turmoil in West Asia is a regular part of the Arab and Western media diet. They have some understanding of issues arising from their different perspectives. On foreign affairs Indian audiences have no sources of information other than that is doled out to them by outsiders".²

Some of the "morning after" commentary following President Obama's address missed the real import of the message he was giving. We can read five meanings into it, all of considerable significance for the countries of South Asia. The sub-continent after all has one of the largest concentrations of Muslim populations in the world. Even more important, the

² Saeed Naqvi, "Can Ayman Zawahiri have the desired effect on India?", *India Today*, 8 September, 2014.

region has 83 million of the 200 million people who belong to the Shia sect of Islam. It is this group that is the particular target of the 'Islamic State' as it has shaped up in Iraq and Syria.

Among the more thoughtful comments in the American press following the delivery of the speech was by E J Dionne Jr., the columnist who contributes regularly to *The Washington Post*. "Over the last decade, Americans' views on foreign policy have swung sharply [from] support for intervention to profound mistrust of any military engagement overseas. Over the same period, political debates on foreign affairs have been bitter and polarized, defined by the question of whether the invasion of Iraq was a proper use of the nation's power or a catastrophic mistake. This contest for public opinion has taken place in the shadow of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. For understandable reasons, the United States was thrown off-balance by the horrific events of 13 years ago, and we have never fully recovered".³ Another gruesome event – the beheading of two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, with videos of their execution displayed on social media sites – is another course-changing event for the leadership groups and citizens of the United States.

There are five elements in the strategy laid out in President Obama's short address on 10 September 2014 that need to be noticed, in particular by those who are watching the unfolding of these events from the South Asian angle. The first refers to the promise that America will not put troops on the ground in this latest declaration of war. Using ground troops has always led to long-wars for which the American public has no longer any appetite. Operating from the air, the America will like other nations to set their troops on the ground. America's big disappointment was that Pakistan refused to send its ground troops to eliminate the safe-havens from which several terrorist groups were giving a hard time to the Americans fighting in Afghanistan. Effectively, Islamabad left the fight against terrorism on its own territory to the American drones which were used extensively for three years. It was only after it dawned on the Pakistani establishment that the extremist presence in the country's tribal areas had become an existential threat to the Pakistani state itself that the Pakistan Army launched an operation called Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan. Moreover, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan may take two years beyond the declared target of end-December 2014.

Second, there will be greater reliance on airpower to achieve the stated objectives. The US will use bombers and fighters more sparingly since they inflict heavy collateral damage that

³ E.J. Dionne Jr., "The new politics of foreign policy", *The Washington Post*, 11 September, 2014, p. A19.

creates enormous resentment among those who get hurt. It is these people who then become willing recruits for causes such as those espoused by the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria'. Instead, there will be much greater reliance on drones, a weapon that got its full operational test in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

But the drones are successful only when they are operated on the basis of sound intelligence. This can only be provided by the locals, and that means working with the governments operating in the area. This is the third part of the Obama strategy. This is a new kind of war being waged in the countries where the governments are basically friendly towards the United States. This, by and large, was the case when the use of drones was at its peak. However, a friendly government which backs the US efforts must be fully representative of all – or nearly all – segments of the population. To use the new jargon from political science, it must be “inclusive”. That certainly was not the case in Iraq where the administration of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was avowedly pro-Shia. This political orientation threw many Sunnis into the extended ISIS arms. It was only after a new government took office in Baghdad that President Obama felt some comfort that his condition of political inclusiveness might be met and that the alienation of the Sunni population from the Shia-dominated central government might be reduced.

The fourth element is the pursuit of aggressive multilateralism but not of the type practised by President George W Bush. President Obama is working on putting together groups of countries that will include some major Muslim states. US Secretary of State John Kerry has visited various Middle Eastern capitals now to drum up support for the new American war. His efforts have yielded some results. Ten Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia announced during the American diplomat's visit that they would join Washington in a strategy to first debase and then destroy ISIS. Turkey also indicated its support for the effort. According to one assessment, the “[US] administration believes that it needs clear support of Sunni regimes in the region to prevent ISIS from framing the conflict as a clash between Islam and the west”.⁴ It was for this reason that in his speech President Obama said the US could not take the place of Arab nations in securing their region. The cooperation of the Saudis is of critical importance since they espouse the form of Islam that is closest to the one advocated by the ISIS. With the co-option of the Muslim states by the US, the world's Muslim

⁴ Geoff Dyer and Richard McGregor, “Arab states back Obama against ISIS”, *Financial Times*, 12 September, 2014, p 1.

populations will not see Obama's war in the terms spelled out by Samuel Huntington in his enormously influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

The fifth element of the strategy is the clear message from the United States that ultimately the responsibility for dealing with the scourge of extremism rests with the countries that have become or are likely to become its victims. In justifying his war that will be fought by the American military mostly from the air, President Obama drew a parallel between his approach in the areas that have succumbed to the ISIS and his approach towards Yemen and Somalia. That was a wrong comparison since these two are weak states that don't have the capacity to deal with dissatisfaction that has led to the spread of extremism. Iraq and Syria have the potential of becoming strong states once again. What is also wrong is to suggest, as Vice-President Joe Biden put it a couple of days before President Obama spoke, that the US would follow the ISIS "to the gates of hell". If America has learned a lesson from its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan it is that the push towards the gates of hell can be made only by the political systems that are in place in the countries that are likely to succumb to the pressures of extremism. As Emile Simpson, a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, who had done a tour of duty in Afghanistan as an infantry officer, wrote: "The lessons of the past decade suggest that a clearly bounded extension of US military action means taking responsibility at most for the initial phase, not the permanent defeat of ISIS, in which the west should only play a supporting role. The alternative is to commit to a long fight, removing the pressure on regional states to act. Anyone advocating that would have to believe that the western publics are prepared to bear the cost. They are not".⁵

For South Asia, the war against the ISIS is not a distant war. There are elements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan who would be prepared to adopt the ISIS ideology and its techniques if it is able to consolidate its hold over the areas in which it has established itself. India too has to worry since it has a large Muslim population with a significant Shia population, one of the targets of Sunni extremism.

.

⁵ Emile Simpson, "Fight Isis but do not chase them to the gates of hell", *Financial Times*, 12 September 2014, p. 11.