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The Empire's graveyard

By Brahma Chellaney

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With the stage set for secret talks in Qatar between the United States and the Taleban, US President Barack Obama's strategy for a phased exit from war-ravaged Afghanistan is now being couched in nice-sounding terms that hide more than they reveal.

In seeking a Faustian bargain with the Taleban, Obama risks repeating US policy mistakes that now haunt regional and international security.

Since coming to office, Obama has pursued an Afghan strategy that can be summed up in three words: surge, bribe, and run. The military mission has now entered the "run" part, or what euphemistically is being called the "transition to 2014."

The central objective is to cut a deal with the Taleban so that the US and its NATO partners exit the "graveyard of empires" without losing face. This approach – aimed more at withdrawing forces as soon as possible than at ensuring enduring peace and regional stability – is being dressed up as "reconciliation," with Qatar, Germany, and the United Kingdom getting lead roles in facilitating a settlement.

Yet what stands out is how little the US has learned from the past. In critical respects, it is beginning to repeat its own mistakes, whether by creating or funding new local militias in Afghanistan, or by striving to come to terms with the Taleban. As with the covert war that the

US waged in the 1980's in Afghanistan against Soviet military intervention, so, too, have short-term interests driven US policy in the current overt war.

To be sure, any leader must work to extricate his country from a protracted war, so Obama is right to seek an end to this one. But he was not right in laying out his cards in public and emboldening the enemy.

Within weeks of assuming office, Obama publicly declared his intention to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan, before he even asked his team to work out a strategy. A troop surge that lasted up to 2010 was designed not to rout the Taleban militarily, but to strike a political deal with the enemy from a position of strength. Yet, even before the surge began, its purpose was undercut by the exit plan, followed by a publicly announced troop drawdown, stretching from 2011 to 2014.

A withdrawing power that first announces a phased exit and then pursues deal-making with the enemy undermines its regional leverage. It speaks for itself that the sharp deterioration in US ties with the Pakistani military has occurred since the drawdown timetable was unveiled. The phased exit encouraged Pakistani generals to play hardball. Worse, there is still no clear US strategy on how to ensure that the endgame does not undermine Western interests or further destabilise the region.

The US envoy to the region, Marc Grossman, has already held a series of secret meetings with the Taleban. Qatar has been chosen as the seat of fresh US-Taleban negotiations in order to keep the still-sceptical Afghan government at arm's length (despite the pretense of "Afghan-led" talks), and to insulate the Taleban negotiators from Pakistani and Saudi pressure.

Now, US policy, with its frantic search for a deal with the Taleban, is about to complete another orbit. Indeed, the Qatar-based negotiations highlight why the US political leadership has deliberately refrained from decapitating the Taleban. The US military has had ample opportunities (and still has) to eliminate the Taleban's Rahbari Shura, or leadership council, often called the Quetta Shura because it relocated to that Pakistani city.

Yet, tellingly, the US has not carried out a single drone, air, or ground strike in or around Quetta. All of the US strikes have occurred farther north, in Pakistan's tribal Waziristan region, although the leadership of the Afghan Taleban and of its allied groups, like the Haqqani network and the Hekmatyar band, is not holed up there.

Like the US occupation of Iraq, the NATO war in Afghanistan will leave behind an ethnically fractured country. Just as Iraq today is, for all intents and purposes, ethnically partitioned, it will be difficult to establish a post-2014 government in Kabul whose writ runs across Afghanistan. And, just as the 1973 US-North Vietnam agreements were negotiated after the South Vietnamese regime was shut out of the talks, the US today is shutting out the Afghan government, even as it compels President Hamid Karzai to lend support and appears ready to meet a Taleban demand to transfer five incarcerated Taleban leaders from Guantanamo Bay.

These negotiations, in which the US is seeking the creation of ceasefire zones to facilitate its forces' withdrawal, can only undercut the legitimacy of the Karzai government and bring the

Quetta Shura back to center stage. But Afghanistan is not Vietnam. An end to NATO combat operations will not mean the end of the war, because the enemy will target Western interests wherever they may be.