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US, China and playful AfPak frogs

By M K Bhadrakumar
3/28/2013

Writing in the Los Angeles Times a year ago, predicting with extraordinary prescience how exasperating the American efforts to negotiate an Afghan settlement would turn out to be when the crunch time comes, Peter Tomsen who was president Ronald Reagan's special envoy to the Mujahideen in the 1980s and is undoubtedly a richly experienced regional expert - he was inexplicably marginalized, though, by the late Richard Holbrooke - compared such efforts to the woes of a bazaar merchant in the Hindu Kush trying to balance the weight of frogs on opposite trays of a produce scale.

Tomsen wrote, "The merchant can load frogs on one tray. But as he begins to load the second tray, some of the frogs on the first one will inevitably jump off. And as he reloads them, frogs on the second tray will leap to the ground. Eventually, even the most determined merchant will give up."

Tomsen's prognosis might well be turning out to be the miserable fate of the United States today in Afghanistan as time is running out and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's troop withdrawal has begun in earnest, while on the parallel track the peace talks with the Taliban are yet to begin with any seriousness.

In fact, the situation is even more complicated today than what Tomsen could have expected in the late 1980s when he struggled with the moody Mujahideen groups based in Peshawar under Pakistani military's supervision. For one thing, the merchant's basket today contains many more

frogs than during the "Afghan jihad" and it also contains now a Big Frog, which can easily devour the small frogs in the basket if and when it chooses - at least, some of them.

The past 72 hours must have been a chastening experience for US Secretary of State John Kerry. After an unpublicized dinner meeting with the Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kiani at Amman on Sunday, where they apparently hit it off with some soldier-to-soldier talk and agreed on the need to quickly commence the peace talks with the Taliban at the Qatari capital of Doha, Kerry flew into Kabul the next morning on an unscheduled visit reasonably certain that he had cut a deal with the Big Frog the previous night.

Kerry's next mission was to get Afghan President Hamid Karzai on board. Now, that is a trickier frog since Karzai's ties with the US had lately taken a nosedive, with the Afghan leader even alleging "collusion" between the Americans and the Taliban.

If anyone within the US administration today has a fighting chance of mollifying Karzai, it is Kerry. Karzai, in turn, knows the secret of Kerry's diplomatic success in Kabul; simply put, Kerry dislikes unpleasantness and by and large he concedes Karzai's demands even if he didn't mean to at the outset.

In October 2009, Kerry was dispatched by President Barack Obama to persuade Karzai to back down and allow a fair and free presidential election to be held so that a genuine winner could emerge with a legitimate mandate, but instead he ended up being persuaded that the Afghan president rightfully deserved a second term and would be inclined to heed the US' advice circa 2014.

The merchant got nowhere

Kerry's latest visit on Monday, which was also the first since he took office as state secretary, was no exception. In sum, Karzai's wish list has been fulfilled again. Bagram prison has been handed over to the Afghan government along with the hundreds of Afghan prisoners except for a small number of insurgents whom the US military has blacklisted as highly dangerous militants.

The US Special Forces shall also withdraw from Wardak. Besides, Kerry made up his mind to accept Karzai's plea that the Afghan presidential election in April next year should be "Afghan-led" (meaning he will supervise it without any US interference), and he believed Karzai's assurance that the election will be held with "transparency".

Most important, the US has accepted Karzai's demand that the Afghan government will lead the talks with the Taliban in Doha. Kerry and Karzai agreed that the latter would travel to Doha shortly to meet the Emir of Qatar and open an office for the Taliban in the Qatari city.

Without doubt, the body language at the joint press conference between Kerry and Karzai following their talks in Kabul on Monday was terrific.

Evidently, Kerry was delighted with the trophy he thought he was carrying back to the Oval Office to Obama in return for all these "concessions", namely, that Karzai would help wrap up a

status of forces agreement that provides for diplomatic immunity for the US troops to be stationed in the military bases in Afghanistan beyond end-2014.

Without doubt, Kerry reiterated the US commitment to safeguard the stability of Afghanistan. From Kerry's assertive remarks, it appears that Obama may even decide to keep a substantial troop presence in Afghanistan to deter the Taliban from making any attempt at an outright takeover in Kabul once the NATO forces departed in end-2014.

After all, as an unnamed US official put it to the media, the US also has strategic interests other than the Taliban also to think about.

Suffice to say, as Kerry took off from Kabul on Monday evening, things looked real good. Kerry seemed to have sorted out virtually all the sticking points and the prospects for the status of forces agreement appeared bright. Finally, the Afghan peace talks also seemed to be getting under way in a near future in Doha.

However, no sooner than Kerry boarded the aircraft, the frogs started jumping out of the tray one after another, just as Tomsen had feared they would. By Tomsen's frogs-on-scales analogy, Big Frog most certainly got into action.

A joint report was presented to the Pakistan Supreme Court on Tuesday in Islamabad by the premier intelligence agencies Inter Services Intelligence [ISI] and the Military Intelligence, which alleged that the Afghan government could be instigating "increased terrorist incidents" in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Curiously, the report was not a classified document despite its sensitive contents and was widely reported in the Pakistani media. At a minimum, it served the purpose of poking fun at Karzai.

Very soon it was mayhem. Thus, the Taliban butted in and pointblank ruled out the possibility of holding negotiations with Karzai during his upcoming visit to Qatar. To rub salt into Karzai's wound, it has been revealed that around 25 Taliban representatives are already living in Doha but they have no plans whatsoever to meet him when he travels to Qatar.

As their spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid put it, Karzai government is useless and "has no powers and cannot take decisions independently".

Meanwhile, Kabul has alleged heavy shelling by the Pakistani military from across the border in the eastern province of Kunar through Monday and Tuesday. In protest, Kabul announced on Wednesday it was canceling a planned visit by an 11-member team of Afghan military officials to the Pakistani army staff college at Quetta.

Soon, frogs were all over the place. The top Afghan foreign ministry official, Deputy Foreign Minister Jawed Ludin, who is a key figure at the policymaking level, called in Reuters for an interview in Kabul on Wednesday where he launched a furious attack on Pakistan.

Ludin roundly condemned the Pakistani doublespeak. He virtually said that the Big Frog is

creating havoc by manipulating the small frogs at its will and ensuring that the merchant never gets anywhere.

Ludin disclosed that Pakistan is systematically undercutting Karzai and is playing off the various non-Taliban groups against each other and vis-a-vis the Taliban, thereby ensuring that the peace talks got nowhere and Afghanistan remained unstable so that it could capitalize on it once the NATO troops pulled out by end-2014.

To quote from the Reuters report, Ludin said, "What they [Pakistan] would like is again a fragmentation of the Afghan state and going back to the drawing board so that they can have another 10 years, at least another decade, of weak, compromised Afghan state."

The Malacca dilemma

So, what does merchant Kerry do now? The only option seems to be to forget Syria for the moment and to start all over again by having another dinner engagement with Kiani - say, a candle light dinner by the Nile. But Kerry should then follow it up with a quick dash to the airport straight from the dinner table through the Cairo traffic to make it to Kabul - and Doha - in time. But how can he possibly rush to two cities at the same time?

He possibly can't. But then, if he cannot, that is sufficient lead-time for the Big Frog to instigate the small frogs to start jumping the tray. And Secretary of State Kerry may have to start all over again.

By now it should be obvious to Washington that the Pakistani military is simply not interested in the reconciliation of the Taliban. After investing so much in blood, toil, tears and sweat in the Taliban, the Pakistani military consider the "strategic assets" to be rightfully and exclusively theirs and intend to keep it that way for a very, very long time.

Besides, as to what the Pakistani military wanted as quid pro quo from Washington, they eventually got none of it. And, plausibly, they don't expect anything much from the Obama administration now - and in fact, they don't need much anymore, either.

Last month, China concluded an agreement to set up more nuclear plants in Pakistan and supply reprocessing technology sidestepping the Nuclear Suppliers Group altogether, which in turn obviates the need for Pakistan to extract a deal from the US akin to what the Indians had been given in 2008.

As for energy security, again, the US made many pledges but did precious little to render practical help, and now Pakistan is going ahead with the Iran gas pipeline project with a US\$500 million Chinese loan.

Above all, Pakistan has handed over to China the management of the port of Gwadar, which is a windfall for Beijing to work its way around its own "Malacca Dilemma". But then, Gwadar is not simply a communication link. It also symbolizes Pakistan's strategic rejection of the US's New Silk Road Initiative aimed at undercutting Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia.

All in all, therefore, the US today needs Pakistan more than the other way around as it transports the war equipment out of Afghanistan through the Pakistani transit routes. Conceivably, the US would also need to use these routes for supplying the American military bases in the Hindu Kush if they ever get established. The Big Frog, of course, will ensure that the bases do not get established with such delectable ease as Kerry imagines. China can count on the Big Frog, too, in this noble endeavor.