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## US perches in an Afghan eagle's nest

By Zahid U Kramet  
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LAHORE, Pakistan - Now that the coals have been well and truly raked, the fires that burn in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan will not easily be extinguished by democratic dispensation. Nor are they really expected to. The election of August 20 is factually a red herring, as the United States and its allies have every intention of overseeing affairs personally in Afghanistan until stability is restored.

Afghanistan's elections, in any case, have been a fiasco, with President Hamid Karzai's victory remaining open to question, not just by his rival Dr Abdullah Abdullah, but pertinently by Afghan tribal leaders and the warlords who are the ultimate arbiters in the territory. This is the hard reality taken into consideration by Foreign Policy's Denial Markey in his article "Don't waste Afghan poll crisis".

With administrative, military and political structures still a long way from taking root in [Afghanistan](#), the Talibanized tribesmen who inhabit these territories will continue to resist "foreign occupation" under the banner of sharia law. And, without a shadow of any doubt, the fundamentalist hand of al-Qaeda will steer the sundry warships. The US does not look to be going anywhere until this problem is resolved.

There is, at the same time, an elemental difference between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The latter battle to preserve antiquated tribal [arrangements](#), which include trafficking in narcotics, gun-running and smuggling in the absence of other means of gainful employment; the former seek to run an anti-globalization campaign looking to win the minds - and [energy resources](#) - of the Muslim world.

The seeds of their message fall on fertile ground in most, if not all, of the impoverished Muslims nations, especially with the US with the Western coalition seen to be gaining little ground either in Iraq or Afghanistan. At the same time, the displacement of the Palestinians by the expansionist policies of Israel is a festering sore.

Meanwhile, the country that has suffered the most from the terrorist onslaught has been Pakistan. With the Western alliance forces struggling to contain the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, the fallout of this on Pakistan, supposedly Washington's closest non-North Atlantic Treaty [Organization](#) (NATO) ally in the "[war on terror](#)", has been cataclysmic. Much of this comes from its own shortcomings, but as much from the US failing to comprehend Pakistan's predicament of having to fight its own people.

As Pakistan battles to keep the Taliban at bay within its territory and simultaneously prevent them crossing the porous border to confront the coalition forces in Afghanistan, it runs up a bill it is unable to pay. Its government is therefore in dire need of such US largesse as the promised Kerry-Lugar aid bill - which earmarks US\$1.5 billion of annual assistance to Pakistan for five years - along with supplementary assistance from the Friends of Democratic Pakistan. This is in addition to the [military hardware](#) needed to fight the war.

But, in exchange for their continued largesse and arms, the Americans demand credible evidence that [Osama bin Laden](#) and al-Qaeda are no longer headquartered in Pakistan, as alleged recently by Admiral Michael Mullen, the commander of the regional US forces, and earlier by Peter Bergen in his CNN [News article](#), "Where is Osama bin Laden?" And, with Pakistan unable to deliver a satisfactory answer on this, it seems the US has taken it on itself to unearth the man accused of masterminding the 9/11 bombings from its Afghan base.

The outcome has been the US Senate Appropriations Committee's unanimous approval of \$636 billion as the Defense Department budget in the coming year, with \$128 billion of this marked for Iraq and Afghanistan to up the ante of the Iraq-Afghanistan war chest to more than \$1 trillion. This comes together with the assurance that the US is not about to leave Afghanistan in the lurch, as it had done after the Soviet [withdrawal](#) in 1989.

There is every reason then to surmise that the US troop surge, over and above the 21,000 already assigned, is a certainty - more so with such hawks as Republican Senator John McCain pleading the case of the field commanders in Afghanistan for an additional force of 45,000. (See [Obama faces backlash over Afghanistan](#), Asia Times Online, September 16, 2009.)

Taking up the cudgels on behalf of the expanded US troop surge belligerently are senators McCain and Lindsay Graham, with Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman among those riding in the posse. This becomes manifest in their joint [Wall Street Journal](#) statement, "Only force can prevail in Afghanistan", the title of which speaks for itself.

With this in view, Democratic Senator Carl Levin's suggestion that the Afghan military should be helped "to become self-sufficient before we consider whether to increase US combat forces", falls flat. So, too, do, [House of Representatives](#) Speaker Nancy Pelosi's announced reservations, likely based on a recent CNN poll showing 57% of the American public standing opposed to the war.

To most vigilant analysts, however, all of this is easily decipherable as a "good-cop-bad-cop" routine, with the scrapping of the planned missile defense shield in Eastern Europe making headlines. But should, as a consequence, Obama win [Russia](#) over to the US side with this startling new initiative, it would make for a game-changing scenario in which other aspiring regional players could be relegated to the sidelines.

Obama's surprise move has taken not a few notable observers seriously aback. Asia Times Online's MK Bhadrakumar, for one, suggests it could be unproductive. Writing under the title [Obama drops a missile bombshell](#) (Asia Times Online, September 19, 2009), the eminent author mulls over a "seemingly weakening" Obama administration and "stunning national security reversal" meriting few dividends.

Others remain skeptical as well. Among these, Meir Javedanfar, in an article titled "Did the US do a deal with Russia" writes in The Guardian, "To some, especially American neo-conservatives, Washington's decision to scrap the system may be interpreted as capitulation to Russia." However, he concludes with a telling "Although the missile defense shield is important, stopping Iran from becoming armed with nuclear weapons is far more vital." Javedanfar reminds at the same time, "America could always replace the system in the future."

For all of this, Obama is finally making his presence felt on the international circuit. And, the bottom line of that could be the long-awaited thaw in US-Russia relations with the expectation by the US of Russia persuading Iran to open its nuclear facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. Should that somehow come to fruition, the open confrontation between the US and Iran could become less pronounced and, with that, the needed prolonged presence of the US in Afghanistan secured.

Yet, the Obama administration is leaving nothing to chance. Not too long ago, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of a "defense umbrella" in the Persian Gulf if Iran refused to agree to IAEA inspections. But with the Gulf states serving notice of their reluctance to endorse any action against Iran, more likely the "umbrella" will serve as a "Rapid Deployment Force" back-up of the US's "eagle's nest" overseeing the region from its strategic perch in Afghanistan.

Should Russia somehow reconcile to this as a *quid pro quo*, the US could comfortably move forward on its dual mission of evicting al-Qaeda forcibly from the immediate area and focus on reconstruction and rehabilitation. A free run for that would naturally also need the cooperation and tacit approval of China, which may not be too long in the coming, given the economic interdependence of these two great world powers and the unrest in its adjoining Xinjiang province.

But the US-Russia detente is as yet not a "done deal", with the Republican neo-con brigade active and resistant to the type of change Obama appears to envisage with the US-Russia trust deficit. The president of the United States will make history if he follows through, but unfortunately reports filtering in indicate he has already begun to backtrack on the issue. That does not augur too well for peace in Afghanistan in the immediate future.