

An Achilles Heel

One step closer to peace in Afghanistan? Not really. Then failure is not an option for the Obamas. And all players involved in Afghan theatre understand what is at stake while hoping, not against hope, to reach an agreement as the timetable for the much publicised American troops withdrawal is approaching very fast. But the United States is unlikely to give up its strong military presence in South Asia even as it prepares to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan because Obama has too many domestic compulsions. Economic crisis apart, a recent opinion poll showed nearly 70 percent of Americans demanded withdrawal as soon as possible. And Obama will have to seek re-election next year. All this counts in expediting America's phased departure.

If anything America's exit policy involves much more than removing troops from Afghanistan. It's a comprehensive plan covering military, political and diplomatic aspects of the US mission in that hapless country where people have forgotten to live in peace. No doubt Obama is trying to get rid of the quagmire called Afghan war but it is too misleading to believe the stuff dished by the mainstream American media that the war was finally coming to an end. A little bit of 'troops calculus', is simply puzzling, if not intriguing. When Obama took office in 2009 there were 32000 US troops in Afghanistan. By December 2009 when this number had grown to 68000, the Obama administration announced an 'Afghan surge' to add over 30000 US soldiers. What all they are talking about withdrawal is just 33000 surge troops, 10000 by the summer of 2011 and the rest by 2012. In other words by the end of 2012, there will still be 68000 troops in Afghanistan—twice as many as the 32000 when Obama took office. Also, there are 50,000 NATO troops and approximately 100000 military contractors who do not figure on Obama's exit agenda. Since last year, the US has invested billions of dollars in expanding military bases in Afghanistan. In short they are not pouring huge money into the Afghan cesspool to organise a charity show. They intend to maintain a commanding military presence even after Afghan forces take over the brunt of security duties.

Not that the US invaded Afghanistan to avenge the 9/11 tragedy. In truth the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 grew out of a decade of US planning before 9/11, aimed at achieving US objectives—to fill up a strategic vacuum in regional geo-politics, particularly after the decline of Soviet Russia. America's military expenditure in Afghanistan runs at \$100 billion a year while the full cost of the whole 'war on terror' may be as high as \$3.7 trillion and is still counting. Given the acute economic crisis, the war in Afghanistan has become increasingly unsustainable. So the partial withdrawal of troops seems more than urgent for Obama to minimise unproductive expenses. Also, the focus on 'war on terror' is being shifted to new pastures as the jihadists have been forced, particularly after the killing of Osama bin Laden, to move their bases from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Yemen and parts of North Africa.

Afghanistan, one of the poorest and most oppressed on the planet earth, is a backward Asian country of some 30 million people, with a largely rural economy. And yet the lone superpower, with its high-tech military, has failed to conquer this nation after nearly a decade of all-devastating war. Afghans are fiercely independent minded. Today the Islamic militants are in the lead, tomorrow some other actors may come in the field. The British failed to

subjugate them, the Russians suffered enormously for their Afghan adventure and now Americans are testing the bitter fruit of Afghan war.

American presence, rather their brutal presence, has helped Taliban regroup and make things difficult for the Afghan ruling elites to exercise their effective control beyond Kabul without logistics support from American and NATO soldiers.

Nightraids, special operations, covert political assassination, extra-judicial killings, drone strikes, the use of military contractors, massive detentions and torture and all-round terror form Washington's Afghan policy. Today ordinary Afghans are more scared of the Americans than of the Taliban because of these night raids. Even a recent UN report admits, in no uncertain terms, how American action in Afghanistan, has resulted in 'excessive use of force, ill-treatment, death and injury to civilians and damage to property'.

American troops withdrawal drama is actually aimed at Afghanising the Afghan security establishment while paving the way for the emergence of a new client as their man in Kabul Hamid Karzai is a totally discredited person for inefficiency and collusion with the corrupt to loot the exchequer. The hard reality is that the relationship between American Leaders and Hamid Karzai is strained at best. Karzai, realising his declining importance to the Obama government has often spoken out against US presence in his country, compounding, if anything, American embarrassment. Then America's strained relations with Pakistan, their trusted flunkey in the region for the last six decades, might have a detrimental impact on Afghanistan future.

Right now America is exploring many avenues at many levels to stabilise the Afghan situation and reduce its war costs. There is a six plus two formula to solve the Afghan crisis. This plan, as proposed by Richard Haass, President of the US Council on Foreign Relations, envisages the involvement of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India and Pakistan plus America and Afghanistan. But there are not many takers for this gambit. Then direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban, are going on but they are still up in the air. Taliban's conditions may make these talks a futile exercise as one of the Taliban's main demands that all foreign troops should withdraw from Afghan soil which will preclude reconciliation of any kind, is totally unacceptable to Uncle Sam. Despite America's phased withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, South Asia continues to remain a flashpoint and India can hardly avoid spill-over effects stemming from the current Afghan imbroglio. □□□