

America's "Afghan Exit" May Depend on Obama's Dwindling "Syria Options"

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Washington's options in Syria are dwindling – and dwindling fast.

Trumped up chemical weapons charges against the Syrian government this month failed to produce evidence to convince a skeptical global community of any direct linkage. And the US's follow-up pledge to arm rebels served only to immediately underline the difficulty of such a task, given the fungibility of weapons-flow among increasingly extremist militias.

Yes, for a brief few days, Syrian oppositionists congratulated themselves on this long-awaited American entry into Syria's bloodied waters. They spoke about "game-changing" weapons that would reverse Syrian army gains and the establishment of a no-fly zone on Syria's Jordanian border – a la Libya. Eight thousand troops from 19 countries flashed their military hardware in a joint exercise on that border, dangling F-16s and Patriot missiles and "superb cooperation" in a made-for-TV show of force.

But it took only days to realize that Washington's announcement didn't really have any legs.

Forget the arguments now slowly dribbling out about why the US won't/can't get involved directly. Yes, they all have merit – from the difficulties in selecting militia recipients for their weapons, to the illegalities involved in establishing a no-fly zone, to the fact that more than [70% of Americans](#) don't support an intervention.

The *single* most critical reason for why Washington will not risk entering the Syrian military theater – almost entirely ignored by DC policy wonks – may be this: the 2014 US military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"Help, we can't get out"

There are around 750,000 major pieces of American military hardware costing approximately \$36 billion sitting in Afghanistan right now. The cost of transporting this equipment out of the country is somewhere close to the \$7 billion mark. It would be easier to destroy this stuff than removing it, but given tightening US budgets and lousy economic prospects, this hardware is unlikely to be replaced if lost.

Getting all this equipment into Afghanistan over the past decade was a lot easier than getting it out will be. For starters, much of it came via Pakistani corridors – before Americans began droning the hell out of that country and creating dangerous pockets of insurgents now blocking exit routes.

An alternative supply route through Afghan border states Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan called the Northern Distribution Network was set up in 2009, but is costlier and longer than going via Pakistan. And human rights disputes, onerous conditions on transport and unpredictable domestic sentiment toward the Americans places far too much leverage over these routes in the hands of regional hegemon Russia.

Unlike Iraq, where the US could count on its control over the main ports and Arab allies along the Persian Gulf border, Afghanistan is landlocked, mountainous and surrounded by countries and entities now either hostile to US interests or open to striking deals with American foes.

In short, a smooth US exit from Afghanistan may be entirely dependent on one thing: the assistance of Russia, Iran, and to a lesser degree, China.

All three countries are up against the US and its allies in Syria, refusing, for the better part of 18 months, to allow regime-change or a further escalation of hostilities against the state.

In the past few months, the Russian and Iranian positions have gained strength as the Syrian army – with assistance from its allies – pushed back rebel militias in key towns and provinces throughout the country.

Western allies quickly rushed to change the unfavorable equilibrium on the ground in advance of political talks in Geneva, unashamedly choosing to further weaponize the deadly conflict in order to gain “leverage” at the negotiating table.

But none of that has materialized. As evidence, look to the recent G8 Summit where western leaders sought to undermine Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling him “isolated” and referring to the Summit as “G7+1.”

In the meeting’s [final communiqué](#), Putin won handily on every single Syria point. Not only was it clear that the international community’s only next “play” was the negotiations in Geneva, but there was no mention of excluding President Bashar al-Assad from a future Syrian transitional government, once a key demand of opponents. Furthermore, the declaration made it clear that there was no evidence linking chemical weapons use to the Syrian government – had there been any “evidence” whatsoever, it would have made it to paper – and Syrian security forces were empowered, even encouraged, to weed out extremist militias by all the G8 nations.

This was not an insignificant victory for the Russians – it was the first public revelation that Washington, London and Paris have conceded their advantage in Syria. And it begs the question: what cards do the Russians hold in their hand to bring about this kind of stunning reversal, just a week after Washington came out guns blazing?

America – choose your Afghan exit

The US military establishment has, for the most part, stayed out of the fray in Syria, where special ops have been ceded to the CIA and external contractors.

But as the gargantuan task of extricating the US from its decade-long occupation of Afghanistan nears, President Barack Obama has scrambled to accommodate the Pentagon’s top priority. Having assiduously avoided a negotiated political or diplomatic solution with the Taliban for years, he hopes to now pull a face-saving, 11th hour deal out of his hat with foes

who will sell him down the river at a moment's notice.

"The Americans are deeply worried that if the war continues the Kabul government and army might collapse while American bases, advisers, and special forces remain in the country, thereby putting the U.S. in an extremely difficult position," [says Anatol Lieven](#), a professor and Afghanistan expert at King's College London, about the already-stalled US-Taliban talks in Doha last week. "They would obviously like to bring about a ceasefire with the Taliban."

Even if Americans could get to the table, there are a myriad issues that could conclusively disrupt negotiations at any time – in a process that "could take years," as various US officials concede.

For starters, the involved parties – Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government (which consists of competing ethnic and tribal leaders) and the "new Taliban" – now have multiple interests with regional players like Iran, Pakistan, Russia, China, and the neighboring "Stans" which puts a serious strain on any straightforward negotiation goals.

As an example, the very same Taliban delegation now sitting with the Americans in Doha, were [traipsing through Tehran](#) late last month – ostensibly with the knowledge of all parties. And this was certainly not the first visit between the two.

While the US arrogantly kept its Afghan foes at arm's length for years, the Iranians were busy employing soft power in their neighborhood – a task facilitated by a decade of [US regional policy mismanagement](#) that has aggravated its own allies in and around Afghanistan.

This isn't just a matter of Pakistan and Iran inaugurating a once-inconceivable gas pipeline, as they did earlier this year. Iran is now participating in infrastructure and social service projects in the heart of Kabul, has forged working relationships with Pakistani intelligence on a variety of mutual security issues, and has built deep networks within Afghanistan's political and tribal elite – even with the Taliban, courtesy of mentors in Islamabad.

A US security expert and frequent advisor to US military forces inside Afghanistan and Iraq gives me the bottom line:

"Iran has basically exploited our vulnerabilities and filled those gaps well. The US's very presence in Afghanistan has helped Iran gain tremendous influence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan because of widespread disdain for US military activities and intervention, period. This is where Iranian diplomacy has excelled. Iran and Pakistan have ramped up their relationship both in military terms and with local insurgents during the past seven years. Iran has moved in and built mosques, schools in the middle of Kabul, for God's sakes."

The Iranians may be able to upset hopes of a smooth US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, but, this source warns, the Russians can potentially play "spoiler" in a big way as well:

"In Kyrgyzstan we have a base there to airlift a lot of supplies – mostly food, small scale things, not heavy equipment – for US soldiers and troops inside Afghanistan. Russia has so much influence there that at one point they

threatened to give the Kyrgyz more money for the base that we were renting to kick us out and shut down that essential supply route. We were forced to heavily increase our rent payments to stay there.”

A few days ago, the [Kyrgyz parliament voted overwhelmingly](#) to shut down this very Manas base by July 2014, a full six months before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is set to complete. Was it a coincidence that the vote came up around the time of the G8 huddle in Ireland, dominated almost entirely by news about a stand-off on Syria?

The US military source also explains how easily the Russians can sweeten the pot for the Pentagon:

“We have, concurrently, gained some support to withdraw from Afghanistan thru neighboring Tajikistan with the help of the Russians – and in return we are going to have to help build some infrastructure, like roads, under the auspices of US aid. These negotiations within and between the US and Tajik governments are ongoing. On this, the Russians have given their word that if we can find a way to exit through any of these countries, they will not interfere. Of course, the politics are fluid and anything can change at anytime.”

In April, [NATO reached out to Moscow](#) for help and advice on their military withdrawal from Afghanistan. NATO is keen to ensure the cleanest exit possible, but is also concerned about volatility in the aftermath of its departure – and desperately wants to avoid the perception of “mission defeat.”

What about the Chinese?

“China’s interests are a bit different. Less focused on our military withdrawal, more inclined to undermine our long-term influences and goals,” explains my source. “The Chinese are hell-bent on influencing countries for resource extraction and allocation, given their huge domestic demand. They are very competitive with the US and are going after the same resource pool. They undermine US influence because they play the game differently – they will bribe where we have strict rules on bidding, etc., and therefore enjoy more flexibility going after these same resources.”

In other words, like just about everybody else in that neighborhood, China will edge out any US gains made over the past decade – in both the political and economic sense.

In terms of near-term domestic and international political perception, however, that loss will pale in comparison to a failure by the Pentagon to secure the safe exit of its assets from Afghanistan.

“In the final analysis,” says the US military source with great irony, “if we want to get out of Afghanistan quickly and with minimum sacrifice to troops and hardware, it would save us a great deal of trouble if we could exit with the help of – and through – Iran.”

Enter [James Dobbins](#), who was named Obama’s special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan in May. The veteran US diplomat, who I had the opportunity to interview in Washington three years ago, is an interesting choice for this position precisely because he has been so vocal in [advocating for US-Iranian negotiations](#) when few others dared.

Dobbins, notably, [engaged actively with Iran](#) in the aftermath of the US invasion of Afghanistan, based on a mutual interest of replacing the extremist Taliban with a more moderate, inclusive government. But further dealings came to an abrupt halt just weeks later, when then-US President George W. Bush delivered his infamous “Axis of Evil” speech, including Iran in this trio of top American foes.

It is doubtful that Dobbins or the Doha talks can work any miracles though. The kind of exit the US needs from Afghanistan must rely on a constellation of determined players and events that would be quite remarkable if amassed.

While it is obvious to all that the combined weight of Russia, Iran and China could tip that balance in favor of an expeditious American exit, what would motivate any of these three – who have all recently been at the receiving end of vicious US political and economic machinations – to help?

A grand bargain over Syria would surely be a sweetener: you and your allies exit Syria, we’ll help you exit Afghanistan.

The problem with Washington though, is that it never fails to botch up an opportunity – always striving for that one last impossible power-play which it thinks will help it gain dominance over a situation, a country, an enemy.

There remains the concern that the US’s oft-repeated Al Qaeda mantra – “disrupt, dismantle, defeat” – will prove to be its one-stop solution for every problem.

And that is the exception to my premise about a Syrian exit. That US spoilers who cannot accept even the perception of vulnerability – let alone an outright defeat – may instead choose to catapult the entire Mideast into a region-wide war for the sake of avoiding a painful compromise.

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