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The Afghan Dust is Settling

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Yes, it really is another Vietnam, and just as in 1972, presidential elections will make no difference,

Scarcely a word is heard about foreign affairs amid US election talk, despite the many fires around the world that the US military is either stoking or trying to douse — depending on your point of view. Other than Republican contender Ron Paul — not a serious candidate for the mainstream — no one questions the plans for war on Iran, Israel's continued expansion in the Occupied Territories, or US plans to end the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The problem is that decisions about these vital American policies are not for mere presidents or presidential hopefuls to mull over. The one principled decision that US President Barack Obama made, his first upon coming to office, was to announce that he would close Guantanamo Bay prison within a year. After all, he had voted against his predecessor's ill-fated invasion of Iraq, and it was on this basis that he was able to energise an otherwise disillusioned Democratic base and surge past the more acceptable white alternatives Hillary Clinton and John McCain.

Obama's record on foreign policy has been shocking in retrospect. His call from Cairo for a new dispensation in the Middle East soon after his vow to close Guantanamo, along with this vow, are now in history's dustbin. His enthusiastic embrace of the worst of Bush's policies, from drones, assassinations and mercenaries to Orwellian police-state security are frightening proof of the helplessness of US politicians these days.

No better evidence that this paralysis will make the next four years the most perilous in US history is found in the bloody news dripping out of Afghanistan. NATO soldiers, Afghan soldiers and police, resistance fighters, and, of course, women and children continue to be killed at alarming rates, even as the Taliban open an office in Qatar (originally denied by all parties). Peace negotiations came to a standstill last year after the assassination of High Peace Council chief Burhanudin Rabbani (Afghan president 1992-96) by a visitor posing as a peace messenger from the Taliban.

A total of 560 NATO soldiers, most of them Americans, were killed in Afghanistan in 2011, the second highest number in the 10-year war, down from a high of 711 in 2010 after the start of Obama's surge, still higher than the 521 in 2009.

But according to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, "security-related events" were up by 21 per cent in 2011 compared to 2010. By this he meant attacks such as the car bombing of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) convoy in Kabul last October which killed 17, the shooting down of a helicopter in Wardak south of the capital last August in which 30 US troops perished, and the explosion that killed at least 80 people in a shrine in Kabul on

the Shia holy day of Ashura in early December. Many ISAF deaths are at the hands of Afghan soldiers. The recent Abu Ghraib-type scandal of US soldiers defiling Afghan dead merely ups this perverse ante.

Gung-ho military types like John Nagl, a retired lieutenant-colonel who co-wrote the US army's field manual on countering guerrilla warfare, push counterinsurgency, where the occupiers "protect" the civilians against violence from the rebels. This was the logic of the surge which Obama grudgingly (who cares what he thinks anymore?) approved last year.

The counterinsurgency hurt the Taliban if only because the occupiers killed thousands of them. It no doubt caused splintering of Taliban forces, and contributed to the seemingly random violence. But it did little to endear the occupiers to the native population, and, according to a WikiLeak from former chairman of the US National Intelligence Council Peter Lavoy, seems to have prompted a new, less benign strategy. "The international community should put intense pressure on the Taliban to bring out their more violent and ideologically radical tendencies," he argues, the logic being to prevent Afghans from giving up entirely on their occupiers.

Nagl and the boys are not pleased by such candor. Aghast, he told the Guardian: "It just goes completely against the ethos of the American military not to take more risks in order to protect civilians. I find it hard to believe elements of the US military would want to deliberately put more risk on to civilians."

But he does admit the Taliban are effectively being forced by the occupiers to engage mostly in crude terrorism, stage one of Mao Zedong's famous three phases of revolutionary warfare (phase two is larger teams of rebels taking on government forces, leading to full-blown conventional war in phase three). Still, he sees no nefarious intrigue on the occupiers' part. "The Taliban have been knocked down to phase one and you see what you would expect to see, with the resulting risk of alienating the civilian population. If we can get the civilian population on our side in the south, in their heartlands, we can knock them back to phase zero," enthuses Eagle Scout Nagl.

Such clever reading of Maoist tactics cannot hide the fact that US plans for Central Asia continue to stumble, stuck in the imperial groove. Looming large is Pakistan's remarkable closure of the US drone base and its refusal to reopen supply routes after NATO killed 28 Pakistani soldiers last month. But equally foreboding is tiny Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev's quiet insistence that 2014 is the final final final date for US control of the Manas airbase, a key transfer point for Western troops and supplies to Afghanistan.

Just as Bush was boasting in 2008 of permanent US bases in Iraq, the recent Strategic Partnership agreement with the Afghan government to place permanent joint military bases in Afghanistan beyond 2024 is not a serious proposition.

Nor is the latest magic bullet — the Iron Man — being forged in NATO headquarters. The idea is to whip into shape an Afghan security force/ army and hand over nominal power by the end of 2014. But this force will be predominantly northern Tajik-speaking Afghans who make up only 28 per cent of the population and form the backbone of the current government. Less than 10 per cent of officers are Pashtun (vs 42 per cent of Afghans), and in any case the army attrition rate is 30 per cent, not to mention the infiltration rate of Taliban suicide martyrs.

Just as in 2012 in Iraq, we can expect some kind of handover in 2014 — the US people and economy simply cannot bear much more, but it will be to a chaotic police state, headed by the weak, discredited Hamid Karzai, with a confusing mix of army, police and mercenaries, much like the situation Afghanistan faced in 1993, at the end of the last US-Afghan love-in, in the 1980s. By 1996 a violent civil war had brought the country to a stand-still and the Taliban was the only way out. This scenario is about to repeat itself.

The Taliban are not the Vietnamese, with a clear, proven economic system and a powerful socialist sponsor able to help them heal. What post-2014 Afghanistan faces is less-than-friendly neighbours, including a very troubled Pakistani, with little to contribute to a post-occupation reconstruction. Perhaps the new Muslim Brotherhood governments in the Arab world will extend a more sympathetic hand, paid for by Gulf oil sheikhs. The Afghans have had quite enough of the kufars over the past three decades.

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