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Barack Obama: Winds of Change in the War on Terror?

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President-elect Barack Obama's campaign promise of drastic changes in America's strategy against terrorism appears good for domestic consumption. However, any policy by the new administration will have strategic consequences for the global war on terror and for US relations with its key allies.

BARACK OBAMA'S victory in the 2008 US presidential election has a lot to do with his ideas emphasizing "change". As he enters the White House, he will inherit a number of problems that were legacies of the outgoing President George W. Bush, especially the US war on terror. During his campaign, Obama pledged to end the war in Iraq, stabilize Afghanistan and defeat Al-Qaeda operating in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which he claims, is the central front of the war on terror. However, due to the complexities involved, any policy made by Washington will carry significant strategic consequences for the war on terror as well as for US relations with its key allies. Obama's options appear limited.

US disengagement from Iraq

During the campaign, Obama outlined a 16-month timetable for combat troop withdrawal from Iraq so that the US can refocus its resources in Afghanistan. However, both the timing and the manner of disengagement in Iraq are crucial. First, Iraqis themselves must be in a position to manage their own affairs, especially security. Second, an ill-considered withdrawal is likely to embolden jihadists who can claim that they have defeated another superpower.

Despite the optimism in recent months, Iraq remains "fragile". The country is a mosaic of competing interests within and among internal and external stakeholders. Contradictory and conflicting interests among these parties limit power consolidation and state-building initiatives in the country. Current security gains, as highlighted by the former Commander of US troops in Iraq, General David Petraeus, are short-lived and "not irreversible".

Attacks and suicide bombings occurring almost on a daily basis in Baghdad and elsewhere

demonstrate the limitations of military achievements after the 2007 surge. Iraqi government and national security forces are still too weak to enforce security in the country and incapable to heal the broken fabric of the society. A rapid US rollback, therefore, could bring back chaos and possibly civil wars; and the domino effect could threaten the whole Middle East and beyond.

Comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan

Obama aims to help the Afghan government extend its writ beyond Kabul. He wants to deploy more troops in Afghanistan to deal with growing Taliban insurgency. At the same time he wants to explore the possibility of negotiating with willing parties to bring them into mainstream politics. However, this is easier said than done.

Firstly, to achieve this aim, long-term joint efforts involving the US, the NATO countries and other stakeholders and the Afghan government are necessary. Still, it is unclear as to whether the Obama administration would back the re-election of Hamid Karzai as President of Afghanistan when and if elections take place in October 2009. Fissures have also appeared among NATO countries about the Afghan strategy. Secondly, negotiating with willing insurgents is not an easy task.

But there are those who feel empowered because of Al-Qaeda's support and training and consider that it is justified in fighting to the bitter end. Taliban leaders like Mullah Mohammad Omar have insisted that unless there is immediate disengagement of the US and its allies from Afghanistan, there would be no negotiations. Thirdly, by empowering tribesmen to fight against militants, the US could complicate tensions among tribal factions, and eventually risk making the rule of warlords legitimate.

Pakistan challenge

Obama has also stressed that a part of the answer for Afghanistan is to be found in Pakistan, since security situations of the two countries are interconnected. Al-Qaeda continues to regroup, operate and launch cross-border attacks against civilians and NATO troops from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Obama said he would pressure Islamabad to crack down these elements, failing which Washington would do it itself with direct military action. However, any direct US military involvement would be extremely counterproductive.

Already air-strikes against terrorists operating in the tribal belt are being condemned as gross violations of Pakistani sovereignty. This has contributed to growing anti-American sentiment throughout Pakistan. A sharp increase of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in the country was believed to be a consequence of American air-strikes. To make matters worse, anti-Americanism is being exploited by Al-Qaeda to incite more hatred and increase its pool of recruits.

Iran: a New Front for Jihad?

Iran has added a new dimension to the war on terror. This is due to its capacity to project its influence in Iraq, support militants to attack foreign troops in the region, and threaten the West and its allies, like Israel, with its nuclear weapons programme. Ultimately, Iran aims to curtail US influence in the Middle East. Iran desires to eliminate Sunni-ruled regional rivals in Iraq and Afghanistan to pave the way for the long-awaited Shiite restoration. A military confrontation with Iran is likely to worsen the confrontation with pro-Iran Islamist movements worldwide. It remains to be seen how Obama's "tough and direct diplomacy" would be able to counter Iran's overarching strategy.

Implications for Southeast Asia

The victory of Obama in the 2008 US election has been celebrated worldwide. Leaders in Southeast Asia expect that Obama would engage more with the region, thanks to his proclaimed diplomacy-

oriented approach and unique childhood experience in Indonesia. However, many Muslims in the region are disappointed with Obama's outspoken and excessive support for Israel during his election campaign. Radicals perceive that American policies would continue to be the "same as always" -- a stance of hostility against Islam and the Muslims as re-emphasized by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahri's recent message.

Like their counterparts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia's terrorist groups, including several homegrown militants, have been united by a common hatred of the West, especially the US and its foreign policies. The execution of the Bali bombers will not end the ideology that propelled the militants to terrorism as there would be others to pursue the same campaign. Therefore, a change of administration in the US is not likely to be a source of solid comfort for the regional governments against the threats of terrorism and extremism.

Iraq is both a magnet and a lightning rod for the jihadist movement. An untimely and ill-considered disengagement from Iraq by the US could create a state of chaos in the country, strengthen jihadists' pool of recruits, provide opportunities for training and transmit their ideology worldwide. This would be like what happened after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. With a self-proclaimed victory in Iraq, militants could spread out and lend their combat experiences to local insurgent movements in other parts of the world.

For groups like Al-Qaeda, there is no fixed agenda; their objectives are zero-sum. Bush is not their only enemy; nor are they resisting his policies alone. The Obama administration and other governments bear the responsibility to forestall the spread of Al-Qaeda's ideology in the long term. This could only be achieved when the US policies in the conduct of the war on terror are pursued with careful judgment and international support.

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