

“Spending Taxpayer’s Dollars Wisely”

By Selina Adam Khan

Obama’s campaign slogan, “Change We Can Believe In” was music to the ears of disillusioned Americans in the wake of the Bush presidency. The rest of the world was both wary of and hopeful for the promise of ‘Change’ that had ushered in the first ever African-American president. Slightly less than two years into his presidency, critics are wondering if the promise of ‘change’ is old wine in new bottles or if the distinctive (from Bush) image that Obama is trying to carve out for himself is really something different and more importantly, substantive. Thus far while directives to shut down Guantánamo Bay or professed goals of a world free of nuclear weapons are noble and radical departures (‘change’) from the aspirations of his predecessor, the fact remains that the President’s own aspirations are beginning to sound a bit hollow: with no clear or well thought of game plan, Obama’s pledges leave unresolved complex problems.

Obama has the unsavory mandate of picking up the pieces of a shattered economy as well as inheriting two wars that have been detrimental to the American economy and pivotal (albeit amongst other factors) in plunging it into recession . Significant in the compulsions for a review have been economic ones: the recession has served as a wake-up call for the American leadership by bringing home the point that military strategies across the globe have to bow down to economic compulsions and restraints. The only sustained reference to the economy takes up less than a page in the review, titled National Security Strategy. While addressing issues such as the deficit, a call for greater transparency as well as the need to work with global allies, Obama doesn’t dwell on the exorbitant cost of the wars for too long - strange given that the protracted wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been instrumental in bringing the American economy down on its knees. Alongside the reasons behind the review is the question of whether the Obama administration has gone far enough in taking the nation out of the economic doldrums?

The recession has brought with it the realization that the Bush Administration was wrong about the benefits of the wars and drastically miscalculated the costs – the supposed \$200 billion projected cost of the war in Iraq alone is likely to top \$3 trillion , by conservative estimates and the current estimates for the conflict in Afghanistan project more than \$8 billion a month . The ‘quick, inexpensive conflict(s)’ have been anything but quick and inexpensive and the American people want out – now! At a time when more and more Americans see the wars as bleeding their already weak economy dry, ‘Obama concluded that the situation required “more, sooner,” ’ rather than focusing on deployment that would take up to a year. The timeline for withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has been set for 2011 – incidentally, July 2011 is also when the US

presidential election season starts. In the run-up to the 2008 elections, polls showed that the number one concern amongst Americans was the economy and not the war; however the economy cannot be extricated from the cost of wars and the Obama Administration understands that. Although the withdrawal of American troops will not cease the costs incurred in the conflict altogether nor immediately and critics argue that there might be only negligible gains in the short run, the fact remains that the psychological boon of an 'on the surface' withdrawal will be great to the people who in turn tie in with the economic cycle of expectations. This psychological boon may very well be what Obama is hoping to cash in during the 2011 presidential election season.

The withdrawal will allow Obama some respite, before the next item on the economic agenda is forced on the forefront, given that an end to conflicts will not solve all of America's economic woes. The staggering daily cost of the wars aside, America will have the added burden of debt-servicing given that the wars were financed by borrowed money making up a part of the country's deficit and a spike in oil prices from less than \$25 a barrel before the 2003 invasion to more than \$100 barrel after, thus raising the cost of production and prices across the spectrum. As such 'the total loss from this economic downturn – measured by the disparity between the economy's actual output and its potential output – is likely to be the greatest since the Great Depression'.

Exacerbating the situation is Europe's increasing reluctance to invest further in NATO missions in Afghanistan and around the world in terms of weapons and equipment. Washington argues that European contribution is undermining NATO's shared security objectives; in fact by March 2010, NATO's 2010 budget had already reached a shortfall of hundreds of millions of euros in the first three months of its fiscal year. As such in the words of the NATO Secretary General Fogh Rasmussen, the 'growing discrepancy between the United States and NATO's European allies (is) a potential problem' and one that Washington sees 'as a symptom of deeper problems with how NATO sets priorities and how European societies perceived the role of the military'. Whatever the reason behind the reluctance, be it economic concern, decreasing allocation for troop development or a near exhaustion of Europe's hardware and personnel, the ground reality is that the shortfall in equipment such as helicopters, aerial refuel tankers, unmanned aircraft for surveillance and intelligence and cargo plans directly impacts operations in Afghanistan. Bush's abandonment of constructive leadership in Afghanistan coupled with the dawning ground reality of the Afghan War, billions required in reconstructive efforts and more needed to prosecute the war have led to a sharper divergence in priorities than before: the US and her European allies neither possess a common vision for goals in the Hindu Kush nor do they agree to an equal sharing of the burden. If the troop surge of 2010 signifies the beginning of the end of the conflict in Afghanistan, 'the whispering in European corridors of power is...then why should it cost more in treasure and men?' In the words of a defense analyst close to the German Ministry of

Defense, 'we cannot further nor deeply commit ourselves to a strategic concept that is not completely and tightly ironed out. What constitute the parameters of the mission objective, what means success or defeat and is it worth the cost? ' These are questions that Obama himself has to struggle with.

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