

# New troop deployment and Obama's approval rating

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ALMOST a year into his tenure as President, Obama is getting bogged with problems that are making it difficult for him to back his promise for change with results. One of the problems is in Afghanistan where he is finding it difficult to finish the unfinished war of his predecessor. Another major setback is the economy. A combination of greed of leaders of the financial sector, lack of government regulation and the hundreds of billions of dollars spent in Iraq/Afghanistan wars during the Bush era (total cost of the wars is now getting close to US 1 trillion) has pushed the economy into the worst recession for decades.

In Iraq the USA seems to have come to terms with the insurgency, as it appears at this point in time. In Afghanistan, however, the war against terror has not gone as expected. Years of neglect to finish the war there to attack Iraq during the previous administration has allowed the Taliban to re-group, forcing President Obama to send 20,000 troops there in March although it did not help in turn the tide. In a speech in West Point Military Academy on December 1st given to 4000 cadets (many soon to be deployed to Afghanistan), and telecast nationwide, the President announced to send 30,000 troops over a period of six months. By the end of this year, US troops in Afghanistan would number 98,000. There are 29,950 additional US troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under NATO command of 64,500 troops, majority supplied by the NATO member countries.

The President's speech is being seen as a defining one for his Presidency. Although most Americans are wary of foreign wars, the positive turn in Iraq has enhanced their patience. Since the request made by Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, the Commander of US troops in Afghanistan, in August for additional troops to offset the gains made by the Taliban in recent years, it was widely expected that the President would

commit the additional troops. Hence, the announcement did not come as a surprise. In a survey by CNN soon after the speech, 62% of Americans favoured the additional troop deployment. The speech is, however, being criticized because of the July 2011 deadline the President also announced for the beginning of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In the same CNN poll, 58% considered the withdrawal date to be a bad idea because this will give the Taliban the option to wait out that deadline instead of fighting the strengthened US presence.

In a hearing by the Senate Armed Forces Committee a day after the West Point speech, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates was grilled by Senator McCain, a member of the Committee, on the precise withdrawal date. The Secretary told the Committee that the administration would review ground reality in December, 2010 but has not been specific whether that would or would not delay the withdrawal date. He reiterated the conviction of General McChrystal that the additional troops would be enough to reverse Taliban gains and allow the 170,000 plus Afghans to be available at that time to successfully handle the transfer of security responsibilities. He also stressed that the July, 2011 date would mark the beginning of the withdrawal, not the completion of withdrawal. General McChrystal also emphasized that the withdrawal date is a flexible one, not "absolute", making US presence in Afghanistan open ended.

McCain's grilling notwithstanding, most Americans want the US to finish its task in Afghanistan. In fact, the Senator himself talked to Secretary Gates to ensure that the US does not leave its job in Afghanistan unfinished. Americans supported President Bush almost totally when US invaded Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, who hosted them, as revenge for the 9/11 killings. Thus, they would not want Afghanistan to go back to the Taliban, even though till date 974 US men/women in uniform have died there. President Obama may have made an error in judgment, thinking that



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a firm date of withdrawal would please Americans, on an assumption that they want the troops to return home. This error is explained by the fact that 58% Americans said that declaration of the withdrawal date is a bad decision.

Apart from the decision of sending more troops, Obama's overall approval rating as a President has fallen to 48% in a CNN poll taken after the West Point speech. This is the first time the rating has fallen below 50% in his tenure. It is the economy that has brought Obama to this position along with his opponents not letting any excuse go by without attacking him. Even his recent courtesy bow to the Emperor while on a trip to Japan has been

termed a "bow gate"; a criticism that would normally not have been made but now finds acceptance because the economy has not turned around. The thousands of jobs that are being lost every month are at the heart of the concerns of most Americans. The President, conscious of the job situation, has held a job summit at the White House and has followed it with a Town hall Meeting in Pennsylvania after making his West Point speech on his Afghan Policy.

The economy is thus the key reason that is pulling the President's rating down at the moment. However, by most predictions, the country is on course for economic recovery which is now a matter of

time and the President's ratings are going to bounce back to more a comfortable zone by the end of next year when his administration sits down to review the ground reality in Afghanistan. Although job losses have continued the 11,000 jobs lost in November have been the smallest, leading many economists to predict that the trend is on the reverse mode.

The President's future and the chances of delivering on his promise of change will depend on foreign affairs and not the economy. History of foreign intervention in Afghanistan does not go with the optimism that the President and his General have placed on the results of increased troop deployment. The US partner in this

offensive is Pakistan, which has its own domestic problems, some insurmountable, to dedicate itself fully to President Obama's Afghan Policy. The Karzai administration that has taken over power for a second term amidst controversy is beset with a variety of problems of which endemic corruption is the most obvious. The Karzai administration will also not be much of a help in implementing the Afghan Policy successfully by reading itself for the take over of the security responsibilities to allow the US troops to start returning home after July 2011.

President Obama's current predicament with foreign affairs and the economy are problems he has inherited from his predecessor. But as President, he has no other recourse but to own his predecessor's actions as that of the nation and treat them as issues of his administration. On the economy, the President has the advantage of hindsight to help his administration overcome the current economic problems. In his recent Pennsylvania Town Hall meeting, President Obama said that his administration will ensure that the regulations that were not used to keep the financial institutions in place will now be enforced proactively with newly added safeguards so that the country not only comes out of the recession but also ensure that such a predicament never occurs again. Afghanistan is going to be the big problem for Obama by the time he prepares for election for a second term. The Taliban, as many in the US and particularly Obama's opponents are suggesting, would probably wait out the July, 2011 deadline while engaging the US troops in limited scale to add to the death toll of 974.

The NATO countries have not matched USA's decision to send more troops. The US has been expecting 10,000 additional NATO troops but so far has a commitment of 7,000. France and Germany, the largest contributors, are unsure about sending additional troops. Afghanistan thus could become a hot potato in President Obama's hands.

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## Sense of déjà vu in Pakistan

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

GENERALS ruled Pakistan for half the time since its independence in 1947. Civilians have ruled the country only for 27 years out of 62.

Pakistan saw four periods of military rule, the last one beginning from 1999 and ending in 2008. The army first grabbed power in 1958 under General Ayub Khan a little over a decade after the independence. Second General Yahya Khan later replaced Ayub Khan in 1969.

There was a brief spell for six years when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto served as President and Prime Minister. His government was thrown out by a third military coup led by General Zia ul-Haq who ruled from 1977 until he was killed in a mysterious plane crash in

led by Bhutto's widower and President Asif Ali Zardari and PML (N) is led by former Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Zardari has needlessly antagonised his political opponents. He has linked himself to the Americans in ways that the military establishment has found both threatening and humiliating. A case in point is the Kerry-Lugar Aid Bill promising to triple spending on aid for Pakistan's poor to \$7.5 billion over the next five years to be spent on democratic, economic and social development programmes.

But conditions include a requirement that Pakistan shut down terrorist groups operating on its soil and ensure that the military do not interfere with civilian politics. The bill implicitly suggests about the need for

between the president and the military chief. Although the military chief Kayani has made clear that he supports democracy in Pakistan, his apparent distaste for the Zardari government is now barely disguised.

The General reportedly met the President, the Prime Minister and afterwards, the Pakistan Foreign Minister was dispatched to Washington to tell the Obama administration that Pakistan had deep reservations about the intentions of the bill.

The military is sending a message to the Pakistan and US governments about their dislike of limits of civilian control of the military. Furthermore, the military also wants to say that all militant groups in Pakistan are not "terrorists" and some of them are "freedom fighters" for Kashmir and

moment, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are deemed safe. The nuclear warheads are kept separate from the weapons systems. The Americans have helped install a special system of locking and unlocking that would be extremely difficult for an outsider to operate. And the warheads are separate from the missiles.

The current political environment in Pakistan evokes a sense of déjà vu. The Zardari government could hardly be more unpopular. Many blame him for creating troubles. The military establishment remains both revered and feared by Pakistanis. The political parties are seen as incompetent, indifferent, and corrupt and have done little to serve the people. Furthermore, the nationalist up-swell which restored the civilian government has dissipated and public are frustrated by the Zardari government in its failure in addressing national issues. Successive civilian governments have found themselves in similar positions in the past.

Zardari may face criminal charges again after the expiry of the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that protected him. Political tensions bubbled to the surface over the expiry of the NRO, promulgated by General Musharraf in October 2007.

The Supreme Court on July 31 2009 set a November 28 deadline for the NRO to be approved by the parliament or else it would lapse. The government is too weak to win an extension. Last month the administration tabled the Ordinance in parliament but quickly withdrew it after sensing that the political opposition was too strong.

On 9th November 2009, former military ruler Pervez Musharraf said about the Pakistani president who succeeded him last year: "Asif Zardari is a criminal and a fraud. He'll do anything to save himself. He's not a patriot and he's got no love for Pakistan. He's a third-rater." The former President reportedly wish to return and join politics in Pakistan and he has contacted Pakistan Muslim League (Q) which supported him while he was in power.

Furthermore, on 2nd December 2009, the Chief Justice of Pakistan ordered a hearing on December 7th on the amnesty which has been protecting the President and key aides from corruption cases until the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) expired, steering the nation towards uncertainty.

The question on Pakistani minds is whether the unpopular civilian government can remain and fulfil its whole term. In the past the civilian governments were undone by their own vice and undercut by a powerful military. Familiar developments such as incompetent government, unpopular President, and a war have emerged. This military may remain silent but for how long is the question.

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## Emerging China and the Bay of Bengal

JAHANGIR KABIR

THE mariners always feared the Bay of Bengal for its turbulence.

However, the advancement of science and technology made the turbulent water the backyard of many powerful navies. The key to control of the waves is innovation. With the technological emergence of China, the Bay of Bengal is slowly gaining a different momentum. It still is a long shot for China to contest the international maritime order. However, if China emerges to its potential, the vitally important Indian Ocean will feel its presence. The maritime security of the narrow Malacca Strait between Malaysia and Sumatra of Indonesia will be the chokepoint of China's maneuver towards the Indian Ocean. The Bay of Bengal will provide the bridgehead of its westerly thrust.

China has the option of avoiding the dangerous Malacca Strait by directly entering into the Arakan coast of friendly Myanmar by land from the Yunnan province. The military regime of Myanmar is leaning on China for its survival. However, allowing direct access to the Bay of Bengal will destabilize the maritime order and provoke the west. All depends on how China grows and weaves its growth internally and internationally.

In the global financial meltdown, China has converted the difficulty of slower growth into an opportunity to pump in hundreds of billions from its surplus to correct the internal structural and economic disparity unattended so far. The economic discrepancy between the prosperous coastal south and the 1.34 billion nationalities of the west and north China is too enormous to correct on a short-lived glutinous feed. The attention given to the infrastructure when world economy was buying 'made in China' less has given solace to the China lovers. The third quarter growth of 8.7% and promising performance in this quarter is a clear sign that it is growing again. The danger of internal combustion nevertheless remains high until disparity of economic benefits is mollified by sustained effort.

China has a habit of moving cautiously and patiently. It invested generations of hard labour for centuries to build and improve the Great wall to stop invasion from the north. It waited for Hong Kong to join back and designed two economies in one country. If history has any lesson to offer, China is likely to take guarded steps in the world arena while trying to expand its zone of influence. It is soon going to overtake Japan as number two economy of the world. It may add some prestige but China will not be anywhere near challenging the USA and the west combined. Maritime order for another quarter of a century will safely remain in the hands of the aging west. With India as the strategic partner of America, the west is getting ready to meet the future challenges. China is likely to continue adopting soft diplomacy than demand accommodation immediately in the high seas.

Meanwhile, China has bought nearly a

trillion dollar worth of treasury bond to bail USA out of the ongoing economic crisis. President Obama visited China recently and assured that America will not stand in the way of its growth. Cautious optimism is afoot that a new era of China-US cooperation is in the offing. Such optimism has its drawbacks. Sensitive issues like the integration of Taiwan with the mainland can blow out of proportion anytime. The danger is the value system of China is not compatible with the west.

China appears to have established some communication facilities on Coco Island in the Arakan coast of Myanmar, not very far from Bangladesh maritime boundary. Although no major Chinese naval armada has called on Coco Island nor any facility built for any large ships, her communication facilities, radar station, and presence of some personnel has put the west on alert. Many observers are of the view that it is kind of a listening post to observe the naval movements in the Bay of Bengal.

It is difficult to predict the future of China at this stage. With the adopted market economy shining as the driving force, the inevitable growth of rich and middle class will ask for freedom of choice - individually, ethnically and politically. Is China ready to accommodate all these? It is too big to be destabilized from outside; but the economic affluence will invariably ask for liberal values and political choices. If Beijing behaves like Moscow of erstwhile Soviet Union the friction within is unavoidable.

There is growing realization in the world that war cannot resolve the problems but cooperation can bring mutual accommodation. The world is moving faster, many state of art technologies are at fluid state now. Modern technologies will decide the future of conflicts. With the existing stockpile of nuclear weapons and delivery system, direct confrontation is already unthinkable.

If China is assured of its maritime routes in the vitally important Bay of Bengal towards energy rich Middle East and in the Indian Ocean littoral states, it will have less compulsion for show of force in this area. As people are demanding more value for their money cheaper merchandise has added an irresistible dimension in the international strategy. For this very reason the USA has become the most attractive market of Chinese products. China is showing remarkable flexibility and caution outside its territory.

Bangladesh has barely three hundred miles of coastline that opens to sea-lanes with rest of the world. Between Indonesia and Bangladesh, the countries have high stakes in the peace and security of the water of Bay of Bengal. Littoral countries should take proactive strategy to provide maritime security of the area. Bangladesh has a small naval flotilla but not all the time on the waters of the Bay of Bengal. It is the right place for Bangladesh to participate in the collective maritime security.

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PHOTO: AP

August 1988.

From 1988 to 1997 Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif served as Prime Ministers. The fourth military takeover took place in October 1999 by General Musharraf who ousted the Nawaz Sharif civilian government which took power in 1997. General Musharraf had to resign under pressure from the US in August 2008. General Musharraf became the second longest-serving Army Chief after Zia ul-Haq.

All civilian governments in Pakistan were weak because of their confrontational attitude towards the opposition political parties and people were fed up of all the corruption, nepotism and lack of good governance. The military, taking advantage of the people's sentiments, ousted routinely the unstable civilian governments with the people supporting them all the way.

This time the civilian government of Zardari has been suffering from its fragility. The PPP and PML (N), the two largest parties in Pakistan, are deeply split on national issues. PPP is

stronger civilian oversight of the military including over promotions in the chain of command.

The President, Asif Ali Zardari, has championed the bill, pitting himself against the army brass, opposition political parties and many Pakistani analysts and commentators. The legislation in Pakistan has cut such a wide swath that even civic leaders and lawyers who took to the streets two years ago against the military ruler offered no vocal support for the bill, presumably because the bill affects the Pakistani ego.

It is reported that the military chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani is understood to have described the bill at a meeting of top military leaders on 7th October 2009 as "intrusive". In the statement, apparently aimed at the US, General Kayani is quoted as saying "Pakistan is a sovereign state and has all the rights to analyse and respond to the threat in accordance with her own national interests."

The bill, rather than boost the civilian government's image, has laid bare the deteriorating relationship

the US has a responsibility to ensure a just solution on Kashmir because it has been the source of tensions between India and Pakistan.

Although the Taliban is fighting very strongly in Afghanistan, their main game is to capture Islamabad. Pakistan is under assault from the Pakistani Taliban, allied with the Afghan Taliban and with Al-Qa'ida. It is also under assault from other Islamist and terrorist groups, many of which it originally created or funded (just as it was involved in the founding of the Afghan Taliban).

The rift between civilian government and military leadership may not eventually help the US in combating terrorists' attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan as Taliban have found new strength, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and struck back more viciously than ever.

Pakistan possesses 75 to 100 nuclear weapons and the deepest concern for the US and its allies is the fear of the Taliban gaining control of these nuclear weapons. At the