

Editorial: Cut and run

US President Barack Obama's much-awaited announcement of his new Afghan strategy has evoked alarm and disappointment in equal measure. Obama has committed to sending 30,000 additional US troops, but also announced a withdrawal date starting from July 2011. The thrust of his message is that the US cannot fight an unending war in Afghanistan and therefore must seek an honourable exit. How honourable it may turn out to be, given the ground realities, is a moot point. As though the US president's 'cut and run' strategy is not alarming enough, his Nato allies are even less willing to come forward with additional troops, some even a continuing presence. The West as a whole then, led by the US, seems inclined once again to turn its face away from benighted Afghanistan.

The 'sweetener' meant to make the virtual surrender, sooner or later, to the Taliban more palatable, trots out the fiction that the period until July 2011 and the additional troops will train an Afghan army and police force capable of holding its own against the tough Taliban. Based on the track record in this respect of the last eight years, this seems unattainable. The numbers targeted have yet to be reached, and the quality of the trainees leaves much to be desired. They are by no stretch of the imagination capable of standing up to the Taliban and defending their country against an extremist takeover a la 1996. Nor are they likely to be, the wishful thinking of Washington notwithstanding (actually, this may also be the attempt at a justification for the impending abandonment of the Afghan people to their fate).

The Pakistani military establishment, which has been working towards some such outcome since 9/11 by attacking al Qaeda and saving the Afghan Taliban for a rainy day (one has just arrived, courtesy Obama), must be laughing all the way to the bank, followed closely by the Afghan Taliban. All Mullah Omar and his fighters now have to do is wait out the US and Nato, and Karzai's regime will fall to them like an overripe plum.

The implications of such a scenario are scary for the region, the world, and most of all for Pakistan. There is no sign that Mullah Omar, despite keeping his distance publicly from al Qaeda since 9/11, has abandoned his alliance with his 'guest' of yore, Osama bin Laden. The Haqqani shura based in North Waziristan is widely believed to be openly working with al Qaeda. That implies that if the Mullah Omars and Haqqanis once again are ensconced in Kabul (even two years from now), you could be excused for thinking that Osama bin Laden would not be too far away. The antediluvian regime of the extremists would once again be foisted by force of arms and with the backing of the Pakistani military establishment on the long-suffering Afghan people.

Such a rejuvenated regime that hosts al Qaeda once again would threaten US and Western interests globally. It may prove too wild a horse for our military establishment to ride, let alone control (remember Mullah Omar's intransigence in the face of Pakistani advice in 2001 to surrender or at the very least expel Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan?). Even more worryingly, the restored Taliban rulers in Kabul may find the temptation irresistible to fish in the troubled waters Pakistan finds itself in by backing the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. After all, in comparison with ruined Afghanistan, control over a nuclear-armed Pakistan may be too mouth-watering to ignore.

The US and the West have proved fickle allies. Their public at home has no stomach for foreign wars, especially after the shenanigans of Bush and Blair. Imperialism is passé. Afghanistan is about to be left to its own devices once again. The world may, however, once again live to regret it.