

Obama's New Afghanistan Strategy: The Same Old Pax Americana

First, the good news (or sort of): In his much-anticipated address outlining his strategy for Afghanistan on Tuesday night, President Barack Obama refrained from employing the kind of fantasy-infused rhetoric about democratizing the Middle East that his predecessor tended to apply to the marketing his own war plans to the American public.

Speaking before an audience of West Point cadets, staff and guests on Tuesday, Obama avoided any reference to the United States promoting an ambitious Freedom Agenda that would supposedly give birth to a Jeffersonian democracy in Hindu-Kush. In fact, Obama did not mention any grandiose American plan for nation building in Afghanistan, a point stressed by his press secretary Robert Gibbs earlier in the day. "This can't be nation-building," Gibbs insisted.

Nor did Obama insert in his Tuesday address the Manichaeian metaphors that former President George W. Bush liked to interject into his war addresses when he portrayed American military encounters in the Greater Middle East as a quasi-religious battle between Good and Evil.

So in a way, Obama did not sound very Wilsonian or messianic when calling on the American people to support for his plan to deploy 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan within six months. Indeed, in terms of the tenor of the speech, Obama could only be described as the anti-Bush: very cautious and very methodical; not an idealist, but a realist. "As president, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests," Obama stressed, reflecting an approach to national security that has been traditionally advocated by the kind of Realpolitik types that advised President Bush the First (which explains why **that** Bush decided not to occupy Iraq).

After all, it has taken Obama several months to deliberate about the Afghanistan strategy, including numerous meetings with his national security advisors and outside experts. "As your commander in chief, I owe you a mission that is clearly defined, and worthy of your service," Obama told members of the audience that included veterans of the war in Afghanistan and some who would probably be deployed there in the future.

And unlike Bush, Obama put an emphasis on the need to consider the expected economic costs of America's wars. "Over the past several years, we have lost that balance and failed to appreciate the connection between our national security and our economy," Obama said, insisting that "our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended -- because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own."

As noted, those were the encouraging sounds of what was probably Obama's most important speech to date. But scratch the rhetorical surface of the non-Bush oratory, and you discover that the strategy proposed by Obama would probably end-up strengthening the foundations of the post-9/11 hegemonic project for the Greater Middle East; Bushchenuism with an Obama face.

Indeed, notwithstanding the Realpolitik tone of Obama's address, his suggestion that the deployment of more U.S. troops would quicken the transfer of responsibility to the Afghani government and allow most U.S. troops out of Afghanistan in 3 years had an air of pure fantasy.

That is clearly the case if you consider the ambitious goals that Obama has set for U.S. strategy: reversing the Taliban's momentum and denying it the ability to overthrow Afghanistan's government while strengthening Afghanistan's security forces and government. That has all the making of nation-building, since it will require that Afghanistan - one of the world's least advanced economic and political entities and a mish-mash of fighting-forever tribes -- will have a legitimate and effective government, including functioning security forces. And as any student of Afghanistan will tell you, that ain't going to happen in 3 or in 5 or even in 15 years.

Which means that the U.S. forces will either have to remain in Afghanistan for many, many years to come - with Washington being forced to send even more troops and increase its economic assistance to Afghanistan - or that the rising costs of the American occupation will ignite more opposition from the American public and lead to a humiliating U.S. withdrawal a la Vietnam that could prove to be detrimental to U.S. and Western interests. In short, the timeframe for transition set by Obama is unrealistic and meaningless.

Indeed, contrary to the pledge he made on Tuesday, the strategic goals for Afghanistan outlined by Obama "go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests." These goals seem to disregard the fact that Al-Qaeda has ceased to be a viable force in Afghanistan and are also based on the dubious assumption that "Taliban's momentum" was a direct threat to U.S. interests while failing to take in consideration the nationalist Pashtun component of the Taliban insurgency or the complex relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda - in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

The bottom line is that Obama has embraced the conventional wisdom of the foreign policy elites in Washington that the United States needs to maintain its military presence in Afghanistan as part of an effort to protect the pro-American political and military elites that control Pakistan and its nuclear military installations. At the same time, one should expect that U.S. military forces will also stay in Iraq for many years to come. If anything, against the backdrop of growing tensions with Iran, the number of U.S. troops in the region would probably start rising soon.

At the end of the day, as Washington continues maintaining its costly hegemonic project and to be drawn into the military quagmires in the Greater Middle East - let's not forget Lebanon and Israel/Palestine - it only provides more incentives for the Europeans and other allies to continue their free-riding on U.S. military power and it helps accelerate China's emergence as the preeminent global power.