

Obama and the great game

by Pat Buchanan

The day before Richard Holbrooke arrived in Kabul, eight suicide bombers and gunmen attacked the Justice and Education ministries, killing 26 and wounding 57.

Kabul was paralyzed, as the Taliban displayed an ability to wreak havoc within a hundred yards of the presidential palace.

The assault came as President Obama is both conducting a strategic review and deciding how many additional U.S. troops to send.

Earlier, there was talk of 30,000, bringing the U.S. total to 63,000. Now, there are reports Obama may commit no more than the three brigades promised in 2008, and only one brigade now.

Clearly, the United States is checking its hole card. Can we draw to a winning hand? Or is this hand an inevitable loser – and we must cut our losses and cede the pot? No longer, anywhere, is there talk of "victory."

Nor is the diplomatic news good.

Last week, Kyrgyzstan gave us six months to vacate Manas, the air base used to resupply U.S. forces. A week before, guerrillas blew up a bridge in the Khyber, cutting the 1,000-mile supply line from Karachi to Kabul. Before that, guerrillas bombed U.S. truck parks in Pakistan.

While in Pakistan, Holbrooke was told by all to whom he spoke that, while U.S. Predator strikes may be killing Taliban and al-Qaida, the deaths among tribal peoples are turning Pakistan against us.

What would winning Afghanistan for democracy profit us, if the price were losing a nuclear-armed Pakistan to Islamism?

The expulsion from Manas, after Kyrgyzstan received a reported \$2 billion in aid from Moscow, raises a question.

Is Russia restarting "The Great Game" she played against Victoria's Empire in Central Asia, which ended in 1907 with a British-Russian entente, dividing Iran into spheres of influence, with both sides agreeing to keep hands off Afghanistan?

As Russia has as great an interest in preventing an Islamist Kabul, and has assisted NATO's resupply of its forces, why would Moscow seek to expel us from a base vital to the war effort?

Does Russia simply seek to be recognized by the United States as the hegemon of Central Asia, the sole great power that decides who can and who cannot use former Soviet bases?

For if Manas is closed and the Karachi-Khyber-Kabul supply line is compromised or cut, Obama would seem to have but three options.

First would be to go back, hat-in-hand, to Islam Karimov, the Uzbek ruler charged with grave human rights violations, and ask him to reopen the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base, from which we were expelled in 2005. And what would be Karimov's asking price?

Second is the Russia option. If Moscow now holds the whip hand in the old Soviet republics, what is Moscow's price to let us remain in Manas or use other Soviet bases over which it wields veto power?

The answer is obvious. Neither Georgia nor Ukraine is to be brought into NATO. The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, won in the August war with Georgia, is not to be challenged. The U.S anti-missile missiles planned for Poland are not to be deployed.

In turn, Russia will cancel any missile deployment in Kaliningrad, recommits to the terms of all conventional forces agreements in Europe and assist in the effort in Afghanistan. Russia rejoins the West, and the West stays off Russia's front porch.

Be not surprised if the Russians come trolling before an overextended American empire an end to the Great Game in Central Asia like the one the ministers of Nicholas II offered the ministers of Edward VII.

And the third option? It is Iran.

Before 9-11, Iran was more hostile to the anti-Shia Taliban than we, and it has no desire to see them return. Indeed, Tehran was a supporter of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as both were ruled by mortal enemies.

The long way for U.S. and NATO war materiel to reach Kabul via Iran would be through a Turkey-Kurdistan-Iran supply line. The shorter would be from Iranian ports straight into Afghanistan.

Price of an entente? An end to the 30-year U.S.-Iranian cold war and a strategic bargain whereby Iran is allowed to develop peaceful nuclear power, under supervision, the United States lifts its embargo, and regime change is left to the Iranian people.

President Ahmadinejad, no fool, and facing an uncertain election this year, is already signaling interest in negotiations with Obama.

A complication. How would "Bibi" Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman regard a U.S.-Iran rapprochement "to prevent a Taliban triumph in Kabul?"

Yet, if the Taliban's enemies in Russia, Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia will not assist us, this war cannot end well. And if they will not help, Obama should cut America's losses, come home and let their neighbors deal with a triumphant Taliban.

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