Back to the Future*

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Resumo
Regresso ao Futuro

É inquestionável o facto de o Ocidente ter decidido intervir militarmente no Afeganistão em Outubro de 2001 sem ter uma ideia clara sobre as consequências de tal decisão, bem como poderia mais tarde vir a retirar-se deste teatro de operações. Sem se aperceber, o Ocidente envolveu-se num conflito multidimensional e com múltiplos actores que se digladiam entre si há várias décadas.
Este é um conflito que coloca em confronto várias forças políticas afegãs, o Islão com o secularismo, a tradição com a modernidade, as cidades com as zonas rurais, os Sunitas com os Xiítas, os camponeses com os nómadas, os Pashtuns com os Tadjiques, os Uzbeques com os Hazaras. O conflito irá continuar a não ser que estas díades dialécticas sejam resolvidas, bem como as relações do Afeganistão com os países vizinhos, através de um processo ambicioso e continuado assente num modelo tipo *jirga* que envolva as dimensões internas e externas do país e que seja patrocinado pelos Estados Unidos e pelas Nações Unidas e apoiado pelos cinco Membros Permanentes do seu Conselho de Segurança (EUA, Rússia, China, França e Grã-Bretanha), pela NATO, pela União Europeia e pelos restantes actores regionais.

Abstract

It is unarguable that the West got into Afghanistan in October 2001 without a clear idea either of what it was getting into or of how it was going to get out. Without realising it, the West became involved in a multi-player, multi-dimensional, multi-decade civil conflict, the origins of which go back many years. It is an unresolved struggle, over the nature of the Afghan polity, between Islam and secularism, tradition and modernism, town and country, Sunni and Shia, farmer and nomad, Pashtun and Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara.
Unless and until those problems, and Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours and near neighbours, are addressed through an ambitious and continuing jirga-like process, internal and external, sponsored by the US and the UN, supported by the Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council (the US, Russia, China, France and Britain), NATO and the EU, and engaging all regional players, conflict will continue

* This article is an edited extract from the author's latest book "Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign", published in May 2011 by Harper Collins Ome.

'Tell me, how does this end?' the then Major General Petraeus of the 101st Airborne Division is said to have asked a *Washington Post* reporter in Iraq in the summer of 2003. From June 2010, when he succeeded his former subordinate, Stan McChrystal, as ISAF commander, until July 2011, General David Petraeus, more than any other individual, was in charge of deciding how this latest Afghan war ended.

Petraeus made major changes in the pace and direction of the war. As the press reported, he authorised, indeed encouraged, more violence, lifting the limits McChrystal had placed on the use of airpower and on ISAF rules of engagement. He ordered a quantum leap in the number of Special Forces strikes against *Taliban* commanders and boasted regularly of a rising body count. He launched a programme to establish local militias and apparently set aside American qualms about working with some of Afghanistan's most unsavoury warlords. More positively, he made more money available for reintegrating *Taliban* fighters. He went to great lengths to convince American politicians and press that ISAF was breaking the momentum of the insurgency and was therefore succeeding. He also tried to lower expectations, by playing down the start of the withdrawal of American troops in July 2011, focusing instead on 2014.

In her Richard Holbrooke Memorial Address in February 2011, Mrs. Hillary Clinton promised a new diplomatic surge to accompany the military and civilian surges launched by the Obama Administration two years earlier.

Linking the *Taliban* with *Al Qaeda* as part of a single 'syndicate of terror', the Secretary of State warned them that they could not wait America out and could not defeat America. But, if they broke with *Al Qaeda*, renounced violence and agreed to abide by the Afghan constitution, then they could join an Afghan-led process of reconciliation and be allowed to take part in the political life of Afghanistan.

The military surge had blunted the momentum of the insurgency. Province by province, between now and the end of 2014, NATO forces would withdraw, and Afghanistan would take responsibility for its own security, in a 'responsible' transition. The civilian surge had bolstered the government of Afghanistan, by tripling (to 1,100) the number of American development experts on the ground in Afghanistan; and it was giving the *Taliban* the economic and social incentives for participating in political life. The third leg – the diplomatic surge – would support an Afghan-led process of reconciliation within Afghanistan, and engage Pakistan and all Afghanistan's other neighbours and near neighbours behind that process. America would insist that the human rights of all Afghans, including women and minorities, were protected in this process.

Admirable though most of these sentiments are, three and a half years is not time enough to create across Afghanistan reasonably clean, credible and inclusive institutions with both the capacity and the will to secure and govern, on a sustainable basis, the vast areas of the country and of its national life in the grip of insurgency or criminal anarchy.

Nor can one help asking whether Obama's America is up for the challenge of driving such a process forward with all the political and diplomatic resources such a strategy would require. In many respects, it was the speech Mrs Clinton should have made two years earlier. If only General McChrystal had been right when in February 2010 he promised the people of Marjah in Helmand that ISAF could deliver 'government in a box'.

Certainly, thanks to General Petraeus's tactics, the *Taliban* took a hammering and pulled back into their sanctuaries within Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. Undoubtedly, some of them are more willing to parley. But the chances of acceptable governance filling, in any lasting way, the spaces being created by those tactics are not good. Such a military-focused approach risks making Afghanistan safe not for better governance, but for the warlords and narco-mafias whom the *Taliban* originally targeted when they took power in the mid-1990s. Once again, the poor Afghan people – the population whom McChrystal rightly spoke of protecting – could be the losers.

Acts of anti-state terrorism, even on the obscene scale of 9/11, seldom in themselves do significant objective damage to the interests of their target state. But real harm can be done when, as the terrorists hope, the attacked state is provoked into an irrationally disproportionate reaction, doing in the longer run far more damage to that state's interests than the original terrorist attack. In the late 1940s, the US diplomat George Kennan devised the doctrine of containment, precisely because he feared such an irrational overreaction by the great democracy he served, to another perceived threat, that from Soviet Russia. I guess that Kennan would have been appalled by Bush's reaction to the 9/11 atrocities: he would, I am sure, have wondered how any sensible statesman could declare war on 'terror', any more than he could declare war on evil or on war itself.

When, in earlier centuries, empires, such as those of Rome, Russia or Britain, were attacked from ungoverned territory across the imperial frontier, they reacted generally in one of three ways: they launched a punitive expedition to deter and punish those responsible for the offence, and withdrew as quickly as possible; or they established a client kingdom in the offending territory; or, very much third best, they annexed the offending territory and brought it within the imperial *limes*.

For an America wounded and vengeful in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan was just such a troublesome territory, abutting the American empire's mental frontier. Somehow, the source of the attack had to be dealt with, and those directly and indirectly responsible punished, swiftly and violently. What followed has been an uneasy transition from the first option – an in-and-out punitive expedition – to the second – trying to establish a reliable client state, by means of a dysfunctional multinational mandate.

The enterprise has proved to be a model of how not to go about such things, breaking all the rules of grand strategy: getting in without having any real idea of how to get out; almost wilful misdiagnosis of the nature of the challenges; continually changing objectives, and no coherent or consistent plan; mission creep on an heroic scale; disunity of political and military command, also on an heroic scale; diversion of attention and resources (to Iraq) at a critical stage in the adventure; poor choice of local allies, who rapidly became more of a problem than a solution; unwillingness to co-opt the neighbours into the project, and thus address the mission-critical problem of external sanctuary and support; military advice, long on institutional self-interest, but woefully short on serious objective analysis of the problems of pacifying a broken country with largely non-existent institutions of government and security; weak political leadership, notably in subjecting to proper scrutiny militarily heavy approaches, and in explaining to increasingly, and now decisively, sceptical domestic press and public the benefits of expending so much treasure and blood. As Sir Rodric Braithwaite suggested in his book *Afgantsy*, without ever saying so explicitly, the parallels with the tragedy of Soviet Russia's failed attempt to stabilise Afghanistan are too many and too close for comfort.

Most tragically of all, intervening in Afghanistan in such haste in 2001 may not have been necessary, any more than Britain should have attacked the Irish Republic in the wake of an IRA bombing on the English mainland. In October 2001 the *Taliban* convened in Kandahar a great *jirga* to decide how to respond to American demands that *Osama bin Laden* and those responsible for the 9/11attacks be handed over. Some of those present believe that, given a bit more patience and pressure, the majority would gradually have swung in favour of expelling those Arabs and other foreigners who had abused Pashtun hospitality by orchestrating the 9/11 attacks from Afghan territory.

Whatever the truth of that claim, it is unarguable that the West got into Afghanistan in October 2001 without a clear idea either of what it was getting into or of how it was going to get out. Without realising it, we have become involved in a multi-player, multi-dimensional, multi-decade civil conflict, the origins of which

go back many years. It is an unresolved struggle, over the nature of the Afghan polity, between Islam and secularism, tradition and modernism, town and country, Sunni and Shia, farmer and nomad, Pashtun and Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara. Unless and until those problems, and Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours and near neighbours, are addressed through an ambitious and continuing *jirga*-like process, internal and external, sponsored by the US and the UN, supported by the Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council (the US, Russia, China, France and Britain), NATO and the EU, and engaging all regional players, conflict will continue. To have any chance of succeeding, such a process will need sustained and vigorous diplomatic engagement by the United States, from the President and Secretary of State down. In particular, America will need itself to talk to all the internal and external parties to the conflict, including the *Taliban*.

Better late than never, in March 2011, Lakhdar Brahimi and the distinguished retired US diplomat, Tom Pickering, recommended just such approach: that the US should promote a negotiated political settlement, involving all the internal and external parties to the conflict. In pursuing a peace settlement, we will need to accept, as we are already having to do, that often it may be better to let the Afghans themselves do a job badly than for us to do it for them. Even if the Afghan way may be less effective, and more corrupt and inefficient, than the Western way, it may be wiser to let the Afghans make their own mistakes, and learn from them. However imperfect the results of such a process, they may last longer than attempts by outsiders to buck the Afghan market.

If, as is quite likely, the results of the three American surges – military, civilian and diplomatic – are ambiguous, our troops will still leave the Afghan battlefield. Our taxes will still subsidise, and the civilian apostles of stabilisation still support, whatever Afghan state we leave behind. But, as the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee pointed out in its report of March 2011, calling for a political surge, unless we somehow in the next three years engineer a sustainable Afghan political settlement, we risk finding that we get out, militarily, only to have to get back in, perhaps several decades from now, and in another form. If that happens, our present sacrifice may have been largely in vain.

The killing of *Osama bin Laden* on 2 May 2011 by US Special Forces changed everything and nothing. On the one hand, it brought to an end a man-hunt that had lasted nearly a decade, had caused America to invade and occupy two Muslim lands, and had cost America alone some $2,000 bn. It exposed, in compelling fashion, the dual nature of Pakistan's relationships, with America, with terrorism, and with the truth. It showed how the war in Afghanistan had indeed been, in Richard Holbrooke's words, against "the wrong enemy in the wrong country". And it gave

Obama, running for re-election in 2012, the arguments he needed to bring the boys back home faster than his generals wanted. Most important, it offered an opportunity to begin healing the wounds of 9/11, and for a fresh start in the relationship between America and Islam.

And yet in another sense what many Muslims saw as a revenge killing changed little.

The Arab Spring of 2011 had shown how irrelevant *Al Qaeda* and its leader already were. The reasons for Muslim antipathy towards America, focused mainly on its one-sided approach to Israel/Palestine, remained. Islamic terrorism would continue, some of it perhaps inspired by bin Laden's "martyrdom" and still bearing the AQ brand. The difficulties of extracting ourselves from Afghanistan any time soon while leaving behind an acceptable and enduring state able and willing to secure and govern its own territory were as great as ever. The unremitting pressures of US domestic politics would still limit the American Republic's ability to do the right thing abroad, in this case pressing hard and from the highest level for political settlements in and around Afghanistan, and between Israel and Palestine.

But none of that meant that, with his new diplomatic A team in place, an American President who had always understood the realities better than most wouldn't give it his best shot, within the limits of the politically possible. As Walter Cronkite had pointed out for another war in another century, only thus could there be peace with honour. Only thus could we turn the temporary and local gains made at such cost by the military into long-term strategic success.

And only thus could we look in the eye the widows and orphans, and the wounded, and the eager recruits, and the sceptical veterans of several tours in the Pathan badlands, and with a clear conscience assure them that the sacrifice had been worthwhile, that in Afghanistan "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*".