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## WikiLeaks Intensifies Afghanistan Debate

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On the face of it, they are not particularly revealing documents. The over 90,000 classified U.S. military papers released by WikiLeaks are apparently intended to unveil what was unknown about the conduct of the war in Afghanistan. To those who have followed that war closely, there is not much that is strikingly new in the revelations. Nevertheless, the exposé is significant on at least two counts.

First, within hours of their publication they have begun to strengthen anti-war sentiment, both among those who were against the war from the start, as well as those who were watching and waiting, and growing increasingly skeptical of a costly exercise in a faraway wilderness that was taking more and more American lives, with no winning outcome in sight. Such sentiments abound on the left and the right of the political spectrum, and which are also gaining strength on Capitol Hill. And, frankly, one cannot be certain exactly where President Obama stands on this issue.

One could go by what his press secretary, Robert Gibbs, said the day after the papers were published: “We are in this region because of what happened on 9/11.” The United States, said Gibbs, wanted to “ensure that there is not a safe haven in Afghanistan by which attacks against this country and countries around the world can be planned.” But, given the changing political climate, will President Obama and his administration be able for long to maintain the determination necessary to see a messy war through?

On the one hand, there are statements like the press secretary’s, along with the measured views expressed by Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of State Clinton from time to time, and the resolve of candidate Barack Obama to restore U.S. attention to Afghanistan from which concentration and resources had been unfortunately deflected to Iraq by the Bush administration.

On the other hand, there has not really been any FDR-like rallying of the American people to the cause of an apparently necessary war, the importance of which is seemingly understood only by the policy and think tank community. Besides, there is that tactically troublesome matter of the President announcing a date—July 2011—when withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan would begin.

True, waging war is not the same as it used to be. When FDR and Churchill led war efforts they did not have to follow daily tracking polls—television as raucous public town square had not been invented—and the depth and intensity of democratic dissent did not extend too far beyond national shorelines. There were anti-war protesters, but articulate leaders could rally an overwhelming majority to support the

**Gautam Adhikari, FICCI-EWC Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “The over 90,000 classified U.S. military papers released by WikiLeaks are apparently intended to unveil what was unknown about the conduct of the war in Afghanistan. To those who have followed that war closely, there is not much that is strikingly new in the revelations. Nevertheless, the exposé is significant on at least two counts.”**

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war effort. Not so today. National leaders now have to look constantly over their shoulders, especially when a complex war drags on, and victory is hard to define.

But try to imagine a scenario in which a President Roosevelt on the eve of D-Day also announces that Allied forces would begin to withdraw from, say, June 1945. What would be the tactical response in the Axis camp? It is hard to imagine, but in Afghanistan something akin to such a scenario is already taking place. Negotiations have begun at various levels to jockey for position in a post-U.S. presence situation.

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That is the second notable significance of the revealed documents. If a quick—or hasty, depending on one’s perspective—winding down of the U.S.-NATO war effort in Afghanistan is forced by public opinion, the noteworthy victor in the long struggle would be the ISI and Pakistan’s military. For it is likely that if a large chunk of southern Afghanistan were to be handed over to the Taliban after extracting a promise that al-Qaeda would not get shelter there, and the remaining part parceled out among other factions, Afghanistan would return to more or less what it was before September 11, 2001.

Hamid Karzai might continue for a while as the landlord of Kabul, but the tyrannical Taliban would hold sway once again over much of the land under the manipulative gaze of the ISI, which would bide its time for Karzai to plan his retirement. Pakistan’s military would gain the “strategic depth” it seeks against India, and reinforce its stranglehold over the polity and economy of Pakistan.

But the United States would have first extracted a promise from the Taliban that they would not allow al-Qaeda to re-enter Afghanistan, right? Yes. And the ISI can be relied on to ensure that the Taliban stick to that promise! The trouble is that al-Qaeda notables, including chairman Osama bin Laden and CEO Ayman al-Zawahiri, live right across a hallucinatory border with Pakistan. Pakistan has not been able in nine years to deliver these wanted terrorists from within its borders. How can one expect that terrorists of all hues will not again be free to roam over that area, shuttling between Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan?

In 2001, before 9/11 happened, that was pretty much the scene in that region. The Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan, allowed al-Qaeda free play, and took guidance from the ISI and General Hamid Gul. Their opponents in one part of the country were the Northern Alliance, led by the charismatic Ahmad Shah Masood. On September 10, 2001, Masood was assassinated, probably by al-Qaeda.

The tragic unfolding of events the next day in New York and Washington were the prime cause of war being declared against the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. After nine years of war, does the world really want to go back there by patching together a hastily crafted peace?

The good news is the leaked papers have brought such questions out into the open.