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# Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: the right war?: Obama's Afghanistan strategy

## Report

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# The Right War? Obama's Afghanistan Strategy

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History has a habit of getting in the way of president's grand visions and the presidency of Barack Obama is no exception. Obama rode to electoral victory in no small part because of his opposition to the 'bad war' in Iraq. He argued that American needed to focus on the right war in Afghanistan, but that war now threatens to eclipse his domestic agenda. It is a conflict that the young president did not start, but it is one that he ultimately decided to embrace. The challenge facing Mr. Obama is to manage the conflict in such a way that he continues to redress the critical security situation on the ground, whilst forging a sustainable long-term engagement strategy rather than escalating the conflict beyond a reasonable effort proportion of effort as the Johnson Administration did in Vietnam.

The Obama Administration's Afghan strategy was best articulated in his speech to the US Military Academy at West Point on 9 December 2009. In this speech Mr Obama quite appropriately took the middle road – he added more troops to the effort, but placed the troop increase within a framework that highlighted the dangers of Afghanistan without over inflating the actual risk posed by the situation in Afghanistan. This strategy applies pressure to the US military to make the effort work with the resources at hand, it shores up doubts amongst the Afghan populace that Washington is looking for a quick exit and it motivates the Afghan Government out of its perpetual state of endemic corruption. Unfortunately, in an effort to appease the far left of his own party, the president attached a date for troop 'withdrawal', partially undermining the very message he spent his entire speech articulating – essentially that America was engaged for the long-haul, which might have incentivized the Taliban to pursue talks with the government in Kabul. Damage control in the days following the speech specifying that the date is a start for a drawdown, not all out withdrawal seems to have allayed fears that the US would once again simply abandon Afghansitan.

## NEW PARAMETERS FOR THE AFGHAN DILEMMA

American and European involvement in Afghanistan is predicated on the idea that Afghanistan is a failing state and that if the international community failed to 'win' the war the Taliban would return to power, Al Qaeda would once again have a safe haven from which to launch attacks against the west and most critically Islamic radicals would destabilize Pakistan, toppling the quasi-democratic regime there and acquiring nuclear weapons. Over eight years the Bush Administration simultaneously conflated the numerous problems of Afghanistan whilst continually ratcheting up the extremist rhetoric to such an extent that 'failure' would seemingly result in the outright destruction of the

US and the collapse of NATO. This essentially created an atmosphere that Washington must do everything possible to win. As the President Obama noted at West Point, some commentators called “for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our [US] war effort – one that would commit us to a nation building project of up to decade.”

Instead of falling into this cyclical trap the president delineated a new course. The Administration rejected the ‘win at any cost’ mentality of the Bush era because:

it sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests. As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests. And I must weigh all the challenges that our nation faces.

With this statement the president put Kabul on notice that America’s patience in Afghanistan was not unlimited. It set conditions around which a policy mindful of matching relative means to specific ends would be implemented. So long as the US continued to believe that Afghanistan was an existential threat to the security of the country, Washington possessed little leverage over its Afghan allies. Given the extent of the corruption in the capital, if the Obama Administration was unable to shift the onus of responsibility onto Karzai, there would be little change from adding more troops and additional reconstruction efforts.

Placing the Afghanistan security risk into the appropriate context does not mean that President Obama is giving up on the war. The President appears to have little intention of walking away from the conflict. He argued to the American people that:

We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s future.

The US would thus remain engaged in the pursuit of tangible and achievable victories, without overreach. Building a democratic state in Afghanistan within ten or even twenty years was never feasible, but goals such as denying Al Qaeda a safe-haven and reversing the Taliban’s momentum are certainly within grasp. The insurgency against the government is not based on broad popular support and the new strategy recognizes this. The President went on to say that Washington would also “focus our assistance in areas – such as agriculture – that can make an immediate impact in the lives of the Afghan people.” Thus the immediate plan is military expansion, but within a defined timeframe, after which the US will remain involved, but with a much smaller military footprint. In this sense it appears the President is trying to have his cake and eat it too. He is not walking away from Afghanistan as the left of the American political spectrum would like, but he is also not going to pursue some amorphous and ultimately unachievable nation building ‘victory’. His specification of an initial drawdown date makes this clear.

## THE SURGE

The cynical analyst could argue that ultimately the president had to send additional US forces to Afghanistan if he was to provide political cover to his administration. Had he not sent additional forces and the war in Afghanistan deteriorated further, it would most certainly be a critical issue in the 2012 Presidential elections. While domestic politics were certainly part of the mix, the surge was also motivated by a firm belief amongst officials in Afghanistan and Washington that the US and its NATO allies did not have enough troops on the ground to stabilize the country effectively to achieve even Obama's more limited objectives. The surge, however, does little to redress this. According to the US Army Counterinsurgency manual the US should have roughly one trained counterinsurgent for every fifty members of the population. In Afghanistan this means that the number of troops required in Afghanistan to provide comprehensive security across the country is nearly 600,000.

The logic of the Obama surge in Afghanistan (really surge number two following the addition of 17,000 US troops in March) is predicated on the success of the Iraq surge of 2006. The problem is that Afghanistan is not Iraq. First, Afghanistan has a population of 33 million and is 647,500 square kilometers in size, whereas Iraq has a population of just 28 million and in an area two-thirds as large. In Iraq the US had approximately 140,000 troops at the peak of the surge and Iraqi security forces also numbered closer to 600,000. In Afghanistan there will be only 145,000 NATO troops. Furthermore, the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police forces number around 180,000. The Afghan forces are also considerably less proficient at providing security than the Iraqis which compounds the problem. The Afghan force-to-space ratio problem is further complicated by Pakistan, a country with a population of 176 million inhabiting 796,000 square kilometers that shares a disputed 2,430km border with Afghanistan. The Taliban and Al Qaeda forces used Pakistani territory to evade the US after the initial assault in October 2001 and continue to make excellent use of the region.

The basic problem is that the current US strategy overlooks that fact that the insurgency in Iraq was centered in cities and was driven by a minority group (the Sunnis) against the newly dominant Shia Government in Baghdad. Peace was brought about because General Petraeus was able to separate the Sunni insurgents from Al Qaeda fighters whilst incentivizing the Maliki Government to stop backing some of the most brutal Shia militias and to engage in a peace settlement. Afghanistan is a decidedly different context where the US will not achieve a similar outcome in Afghanistan for three reasons. First, the Afghan government is not strong or dominant enough to engage in such a deal. Second, the Afghan insurgency is rural rather than urban making it more difficult to provide full spectrum security. Third, the force to space ratio is far too low to be effective.

So while additional US and European troops may well be able to secure now volatile areas such as Helmand and Kandahar, the insurgents if they are smart will simply move on to other provinces where the international forces are not as dominant. Without the forces to secure the entire country adding 30,000 more US troops will just be a rather ineffective drop in the bucket. As Rory Stewart pointed out in the New York Review of Books in January "the surge is a Mephistophelian bargain, in which the president has gained force but lost time." This is because Obama's surge will do little on the ground in Afghanistan, but a larger troop presence does mean more public attention back home at a time when polities in Europe and America want withdrawal than escalation. Given that the road to a comprehensive peace settlement with the Taliban will take a long time and a lot of patience, the increase may ultimately undermine Obama's ability to reach even his limited goals.

## **AVOIDING THE AID TRAP**

Aside from the military campaign the President's new policy is aware of the faulty logic that has compelled American involvement in nation-building efforts since 1945. The occupation of Germany and Japan and their subsequent reconstructions were praised by many Americans as shining examples of what humane American activism could achieve. Rather than punishing Germany and Japan the US rebuilt them making them rich, free and peaceful societies. Throughout the Cold War this myth of benevolent American nation-building was built up with that hopes that economic and development assistance in places such as Asia and Latin America would lead those countries to aspire to emulate Western liberalism and reject Communist ideals. This same agenda came to dominant democratization programmes in the 1990s and after 2001 development and democratization was seen in both America and Europe as a critical component of risk management in ungoverned spaces such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Sadly development programmes to advance the US national security agenda have a dismal record.

In 1966 South Vietnam received 43 percent of USAID's worldwide budget. The \$8.5 billion in economic aid, however, from 1954 to 1974 and the \$17 billion in military aid on top of the billions more spent by Washington in theatre did little more than fuel the black market, embed corruption and make much of the country dependent welfare zones. Vietnam was the first war where the United States utilized military forces not to win, but to buy time for the war to be won by civilian social programmes. A similar pattern has been repeated in many other theatres with the most recent being Iraq and Afghanistan. Throwing money at the Afghan problem, however, has done little more than make the situation deteriorate even faster. Large amounts of development funds are simply recycled back to the west via development advisors and international corporations. Considerable amounts are skimmed off the top by corrupt officials and the government in Kabul is incentivized to not address the security situation so as to ensure continued economic assistance from the international community.

The new Obama strategy will maintain assistance to the Afghan government, but it no longer offers a blank cheque. Indeed, under this new approach the Afghans would do better to clean up their act so as to ensure long-term American development and security support, as opposed the more withdrawn military approach advocated by Vice President Biden. If the Obama surge fails to provide security and the Afghan Government does not reform itself, the US will switch to a disrupt the grid strategy that may keep America safe, but will ultimately do little to advance the security of Afghans.

## THE REAL 'LONG WAR'

The Bush Administration believed it was engaging in a long war against terrorism, but terrorism is a tactic, not an opponent. Many argued that the real issue was a lack of development in places like Afghanistan that enabled radical Islamist groups to come to power and support international terrorism. The answer to ending terrorism was to be found in a radical development and nation-building agenda. While it is true that ungoverned spaces do offer shelter to nefarious actors intent on disrupting international security, it would be wrong to assert that the US and its European allies can carry out intrusive nation building campaigns in countries around the world.

If such logic were to win out, NATO forces would soon be on their way to Yemen, and then thereafter to Somalia, and from there onto another ten failing states. The Obama strategy in Afghanistan recognizes the limitations of American power. It does not abandon the hope of a better future. It does offer an ultimately more sustainable approach. It recognizes that 'democracy' will not be an 'out' for NATO or the US in Afghanistan. By realistically appraising the issue in terms of probability as opposed to possibilities the president has offered NATO and America a solution to the terrible problem of Afghanistan. A series of steps over the last twelve months, such as a reduced reliance on airpower, a people-centric approach to security and additional economic development, have all helped to create an atmosphere where 70 percent of Afghans feel that their country is headed in the right direction (up from 40% in 2009). Around 71 percent believe things will be even better next year; Obama's new approach may very well make this hope a reality. ■