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The United States in Afghanistan: President Obama decides to fight the war his way

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Abstract

The decision to send in more American troops to Afghanistan was a long time coming. The strategy was finalised by President Barack Obama after he met with his war council on Monday, 23 November 2009. This was the tenth high level meeting chaired by the president a couple of days after his return from his first visit to Asia. The decision was announced on 1 December 2009 in a televised address to the nation delivered in front of the cadets of the West Point Academy. In that respect the president was following the precedence set by former president George H. W. Bush who had used the military as the backdrop for announcing some of his strategies. President Obama revealed at the point when he held the press conference with the visiting Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, that he had made up his mind of the troop level the United States will maintain in Afghanistan. The president walked a fine line between the two positions taken by his advisers: some wanted him to pursue what has come to be called the counter-insurgency approach while the latter advocated a counter-terrorism strategy. The first is aimed at using considerable amount of force to overcome insurgency while undertaking intensive development of the liberated terrain. The second is aimed at concentrating fire power on the strongholds from where the terrorists are launching their attacks. The strategy adopted by President Obama calls for a rapid build-up of the force in Afghanistan with the promise to begin the process of drawdown eighteen months after the troop build-up. During this period the Afghan force is to be built up with the expectation that as the Americans withdraw, the country's own military and police force would be able to take care of security.

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Background

The military did not get all it wanted but it got more than President Obama's most ardent supporters would have wanted him to provide. Two groups have emerged among President Obama's close advisers. One, led by Vice President Joseph Biden, wants to follow a counter-terrorism approach that would require fewer American troops and greater concentration of the military effort on eliminating or weakening the terrorists at the bases from where they are operating². This would have meant concentrating the battle in Pakistan where the al-Qaeda now seems to be concentrated. Several important Congressmen, in particular those occupying committee chairs in Congress were sympathetic to this approach. It would cost less and would probably have greater support of the public that has grown increasingly uncomfortable with the war that has been ongoing for eight years. Their preference was for a quick pull out, leaving Afghanistan to its own devices.

The other group comprises Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates – dubbed as “hawks” by the media – that argued for a counter-insurgency approach that had been tried successfully in Iraq. That implies using a large force to pacify one troubled area at a time and then staying there to introduce economic development and thus focusing on improving the lot of the common people. This approach also has the support of the military commanders.

On the same day that Obama told the press that he would be laying down before the American public his strategy for Afghanistan, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi described what she “called ‘serious unrest’ in her caucus over the prospect of another vote to finance billions of dollars for an expanded war. It is, she said, the most difficult vote she can ask of the members of her party...Pelosi met with Obama at the White House on Tuesday [24 November] and later sat next to him at the state dinner he held that evening [for the Indian prime minister]. Both sides declined to comment on Wednesday about the substance of the roughly hour-long discussion.”³

Members of Obama's Democratic Party were opposed to the build-up of American troops for a number of reasons; by far the most important of these was the strain on the already stretched budget. It is estimated that one additional soldier would cost one million dollars a year. Increasing the force level by 30,000 would mean an additional expenditure of US\$30 billion per annum. In June, Speaker Pelosi strong-armed Democrats into voting for a US\$100 billion measure to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During an interview in July she recounted her appeal to the lawmakers. “Will you change your mind one more time and vote for war funding?” she told the lawmakers. “This is the very last time”, she promised. Asking them again would seriously hurt her credibility⁴.

² James Traub, After Cheney: Joe Biden could be the second-most powerful vice president in history”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 November 2009, pp. 34-41.

³ Michael D. Shear and Paul Kane, “President vs. party on troop increase”, *The Washington Post*, 26 November 2009, pp. A1 and A21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The long process of deliberation that resulted in the decision to send 30,000 additional soldiers – a process the president’s detractors called “dithering” – resulted in giving the commanders additional troops so that they could concentrate their effort in the south and south east provinces bordering Pakistan. The build-up in troops has one more dimension that is not well known. Aiding the present American contingent are 100,000 contractors performing various functions that had been outsourced for the military. Adding another 30,000 troops would increase the number of consultants by at least 50,000. There are problems associated with such a large civilian presence when controls on the people that constituted it were not particularly good. This was demonstrated by the experience in Iraq. The most egregious example of this was the alleged involvement of the consultants working for Blackwater, the American security firm, in the massacre of more than a dozen Iraqis.

Doubts by the Democrats about the surge in the number of troops proposed by General Stanley McChrystal, the American commander in Afghanistan, was not confined to the members of the legislature. Vice President Joseph Biden was highly sceptical. Also many who belonged to what the Americans call the “base” of a politician opposed President Obama’s decision to send more troops to Afghanistan and spend more money on a war that does not seem to affect the United States. “Where’s that additional money going to come from?” asked the columnist Colbert I. King, once an ardent Obama supporter. “Obama need to address that question. This country has an accumulated debt of \$12 trillion that is forecast to rise to \$21 trillion in 10 years”, he wrote in a column for *The Washington Post*. “The nation’s unemployment rate is 10.2 percent, a 26 year high. These people will be waiting to hear why adding to the \$10 billion monthly price tag for Iraq and Afghanistan will help find them work. African American men, 17.1 percent of whom are unemployed, want a word from Obama on this.”⁵ King is an African-American journalist of great repute.

On the eve of the speech

Having done the analytical work needed to define a strategy in Afghanistan, President Obama prepared himself and his administration to reveal its content to the public. An extensive roll-out was developed that included telephone calls on Monday, 30 November 2009 to United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown, French President Nicholas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen, and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. It was revealed to the press by the way of leaks. The president also briefed Presidents Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. President Obama plans to send 30,000 additional American troops, 10,000 shy of the request by General Stanley McChrystal. But the US was requesting its partners in the war to step up to the plate. The allies, 43 in all, were finding it difficult to comply with the US demands. President Obama spoke with President Sarkozy of France for 40 minutes, a day before his public address, but failed to convince him to add more soldiers to the 3,750 soldiers and 150 police officers in the French contingent in Afghanistan. The UK was prepared to help marginally, increasing its already large presence by the promise of an additional 500 soldiers. That addition would bring the British total to 10,000 soldiers. According to a press report, “On top of previous reinforcements already sent this year,

⁵ Colbert I. King, “Get real on Afghanistan”, *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2009, p. A19.

the troop build-up will nearly triple the American military presence in Afghanistan that Mr. Obama inherited when he took office and represents a high-stakes gamble by a new commander in chief that he can turn around an eight-year-old war that his own generals fear is getting away from the United States.”⁶

The Speech

On 1 December 2009, President Obama spoke for 36 minutes surrounded by West Point cadets. “His speech was sobering, and so was his manner...His body language was as restrained as his promises; he spoke without fanciful flights or filigree. In short, Mr. Obama projected all the caution and sober consideration that he suggested his predecessor had thrown to the winds.”⁷

He told his audience that it was neither his intention to go over the distraction of the war in Iraq from America’s mission in Afghanistan nor to repeat the “wrenching debate over the Iraq war”⁸. Instead he wished to detail why America needed to recommit itself to winning the struggle against extremism. He wanted to speak to the nation “about our effort in Afghanistan – the nature of our commitment there, the scope of our interests, and the strategy that my administration will pursue to bring this war to a successful conclusion”.

He acknowledged that mistakes had been made under the watch of his predecessor although he did not refer to them as mistakes or directly referred to the policies pursued by former president George W. Bush. “But while we’ve achieved hard-earned milestones in Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. After escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002, al Qaeda leadership established a safe haven there. Although a legitimate government was elected by the Afghan people, it’s been hampered by corruption, the drug trade, an underdeveloped economy and insufficient security forces.” The implication of this was clear: the American president was challenging President Hamid Karzai to improve the quality of governance in his country.

President Obama told the American nation – and the world – that he planned to send an additional 30,000 troops and ask NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies for several thousand more. With these additions the US contingent would increase to almost 100,000. But “this burden is not ours alone to bear. This is not just America’s war.” The NATO forces were likely to increase to 40,000. The additional American troops would be moved quickly but it would take six to eight months to complete the deployment. By late July or early August 2010, the full American force will be present on the ground. This would be the peak of the fighting season in the country. Most of the American troops would be concentrated in the provinces bordering Pakistan, particularly around Kandahar and the province of Helmand. In fact, orders had gone out to the commanders to deploy the additional force even before the president’s address.

⁶ Eric Schmitt, “Obama Issues Order for More Troops in Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 1 December 2009, p. A1 and A14.

⁷ Alessandra Stanley, “Before audience of cadets, a sobering message of war”, *The New York Times*, 2 December 2009, p. A17.

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated all the quotations are from President Obama’s speech on 1 December. The text used is from the White House website.

The president promised an honest accounting of the financial resources this strategy would involve. It was estimated that the Americans had already spent \$200 billion on eight years of war in Afghanistan. The new strategy would add another \$30 billion a year to the cost. This was to be a time-bound commitment. The president indicated that he plans to begin the drawdown of the American troops by July 2011. This will depend on the conditions on the ground. But he made no promise about when all American forces will be gone from Afghanistan.

What purpose was to be served by this build-up in the size of the American contingent? “Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.” The new mission will last at its peak for a period of 18 months after which “our troops will begin to come home. These are the resources that we need to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.”

President Obama recognised that nothing would succeed in Afghanistan unless Pakistan was helped to stabilise its economy and equipped to handle insurgency. “...we will act with the full recognition that our success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan. We’re in Afghanistan to prevent a cancer from spreading through that country. But this same cancer has also taken root in the border region of Pakistan. That’s why we need a strategy that works on both sides of the region. In the past, there have been those in Pakistan who’ve argued that the struggle against extremism is not their fight, and that Pakistan is better off doing little or seeking accommodation with those who use violence. But in recent years, as innocents have been killed from Karachi to Islamabad, it has become clear that it is the Pakistani people who are the most endangered by extremism. Public opinion has turned. The Pakistani army has waged an offensive in Swat and South Waziristan. And there is no doubt that the United States and Pakistan share a common enemy.”

This time around, President Obama promised an enduring relationship with Pakistan that would go beyond contacts with the military and the intelligence services. He had already signed into law the Kerry-Lugar bill that promised Pakistan US\$1.5 billion of economic assistance a year spread over a period of at least five – possibly ten – years. He also stated that, “In the past, we too often defined our relationship with Pakistan narrowly⁹. Those days are over. Moving forward, we are committed to a partnership with Pakistan that is built on a foundation of mutual interest, mutual respect, and mutual trust. We will strengthen Pakistan’s capacity to target those groups that threaten our countries, and have made it clear that we cannot tolerate a safe haven for terrorists whose location is known and whose intentions are clear. America is also providing substantial resources to support Pakistan’s democracy and development. We are the largest international supporter for those Pakistanis displaced by the fighting. And going forward, the Pakistan people must know America will remain a strong supporter of Pakistan’s security and prosperity long after the guns have fallen silent, so that the great potential of its people can be unleashed.”

⁹ There was a great deal of debate in Pakistan about the merits of the Kerry-Lugar bill. The debate culminated in a visit to Washington by Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan’s foreign minister and a letter by the sponsors of the bill that it was not the intention of the American legislature to dictate conditions to Pakistan. See Shahid Javed Burki, “The bill explained”, *Dawn*, 20 October 2009, p. 7.

The response in Pakistan to the country's inclusion in the refined Afghan strategy was mixed. Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani worried about the movement of the Afghan insurgents into Balochistan as the pressure on Afghanistan's province of Helmand increased. He wanted some assurance that the American troops will block these escape routes. Former president, Pervez Musharraf, wrote an article for *The Wall Street Journal* expressing the fear that the Americans will not be able to sustain their stay and will eventually walk out of the country as they had done in 1989¹⁰.

Conclusion

In the lead up to the decision by President Obama on the question of the next phase of America's Afghan strategy, certain words and phrases had become loaded with all kinds of meanings. "Surge" was identified with the dispatch of a large number of additional US troops to Iraq by the administration of President George W. Bush. This strategy was bitterly resisted by the Democrats in US Congress and was not favoured by candidate Barack Obama during the presidential campaign. The other phrase was "exit strategy" which was talked about a great deal as President Obama deliberated on the approach to the Afghan problem. The final strategy as revealed in the West Point speech has both components. In a long interview with Jim Lehrer of Public Broadcasting Service a day after the presidential address, Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained that the decision to start the drawdown of US troops did not mean that the Americans were going to walk out of the country beginning in July 2011. The plan was to partner with the Afghan forces, teaching them combat in a guerrilla situation. As the Afghan forces gain confidence, they will be entrusted with the responsibility district by district and province by province. The Americans will remain committed for many years reviewing the situation as time passes and the situation changes on the ground. *The Washington Post* summed up well in an editorial the reaction to the Obama Afghan-Pakistan strategy: "Many in America and around the world have wondered about Mr. Obama's personal dedication to winning the war. The president's speech offered a qualified answer. He said he must 'weigh all of the challenges our nation faces', and argued against as more expansive commitment to Afghanistan 'because the nation I am most interested in building is our own'. But he also described powerfully the threat posed by 'violent extremism', and said, 'it will be an enduring test of our free society and our relationship in the world'. With obvious reluctance but with clear-headedness, Mr. Obama has taken a major step toward meeting that test."¹¹

¹⁰ Pervez Musharraf, "The Afghan-Pakistan solution", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2009, p. A13.

¹¹ *The Washington Post*, "An Afghan strategy", 2 December 2009, p. A22.