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AfPak: President Obama's Two Wars

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Abstract

The nature of the American effort in the region it once called AfPak has gone full circle. The administration headed by President Barack Obama started with the notion that it was fighting one war being waged in the areas on either side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Inhabited mostly by the Pushtuns, Washington called it the AfPak region and appointed one person, the late Richard Holbrooke, to handle the framing and execution of the American policy.

The term AfPak fell into disuse once it was recognised that these were in fact two wars, one against the Taliban group that wanted to defeat the Americans in Afghanistan and several other groups of Taliban operating in Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban had a number of different objectives. These included not only assisting the Taliban fighting the Americans in Afghanistan, but also bringing Pakistan under the influence of Islam. Now the Americans have concluded that they should be engaged in just one war – that in Afghanistan with very limited objectives to be achieved within a period of three years, 2011-14.

When, on 1 December 2009, President Barack Obama announced his intention to escalate the war in Afghanistan, it was also his intention to keep the country fully informed about the success or failure of the new approach. There were three significant parts of the new strategy. The first was the decision to increase the size of the American force operating in Afghanistan by adding another 30,000 soldiers, thus bringing the total to 100,000. The second was to shift the focus of America's involvement away from obtaining an outright victory over the Taliban

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but to create instead areas which would be virtually free of the presence of the enemy. This was more likely to be in the country's urban areas where the government, aided by the expanding Afghan military force, could establish its control. There was also the expectation that once these areas had been pacified, economic development would win the hearts and minds of the people.

The third element of the strategy was to induce Pakistan to play a more aggressive role in helping the Americans achieve their limited aims. In return for Islamabad's help, the Obama administration promised the country generous economic and military support valued at US\$9.5 billion of which US\$7.5 billion was for economic development and was to be disbursed over a period of five years. To convince Pakistan that this assistance would be available for a reasonably long time, the United States (US) Congress passed what came to be known as the Kerry-Lugar Bill. America, in other words, was preparing to fight two wars, one each in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Americans also indicated that they will use unmanned aircrafts, the drones, to kill the leaders and commanders of the Taliban operating out of the tribal areas of Pakistan. This was to be done with the tacit approval of the Pakistani government. It was expected that Islamabad would continue to condemn the attacks while secretly providing the Americans intelligence about the targets to be attacked.

Following the announcement of the new policy, President Obama promised that a full review would be carried out and released for public view a year from the adoption of the new approach. That has happened; on 16 December 2010, the White House released its appraisal of the United States' effort in the region which the Obama administration had once called 'AfPak'. The *Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review* begins with a quote from President Obama's address at the West Point military academy on 1 December 2009. 'Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and its allies in the future.'² The December 2010 review presented a positive picture of the situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. 'Specific components of our strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan are working well and there are notable operational gains. Most importantly, al-Qa'ida's senior leadership in Pakistan is weaker and under more sustained pressure than at any other point since it fled Afghanistan in 2001. In Pakistan, we are laying the foundation for a strategic partnership based on mutual respect and trust, through increased dialogue, improved cooperation and enhanced exchange and assistance programs and in Afghanistan, the momentum achieved by the Taliban in recent years has been arrested and reversed in some key areas, although these gains remain fragile and reversible.'³

² The White House, 'Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review', www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review (16 December 2010). Accessed on 22 December 2010.

³ *Ibid.*

The review said that there was palpable progress in the United States' war that was aimed particularly in the country's south. There were many successes in and around the city of Kandahar, the area from where the Taliban had risen a decade and half earlier. However, in presenting his report to the public, President Obama said that gains made needed to be reinforced by progress in other areas – in the quality of governance available to the Afghan people and economic development they could expect from the combined efforts of the government and the community of donors. According to one assessment, 'the review coincides with the administration's bid to reverse what Robert Gates, defense secretary, acknowledged was public opposition to the war in both the US and its more than 40 partners'.⁴

Although the public policy community quickly reached the conclusion that there was nothing unexpected in the review, one part of the assessment stood out. President Obama, while signaling to Pakistan that much more was expected of it for America to succeed in Afghanistan, there was also growing recognition in Washington that Islamabad's options were limited. The American military leaders in the field were now of the view that their country's limited goal – creating an environment that would help the US to begin to pull out of Afghanistan by July 2011 – could be achieved even if Pakistan was unable – or unwilling – to close the sanctuaries in North Waziristan. In other words, America was concentrating on fighting one war not two, the other being waged with the help of the Pakistani army on the other side of the border. Success, the military strategists now believed, could be achieved without a thorough cleansing of the forces of resistance operating from the Pakistani side of the border.

Reducing the pressure on Pakistan to act was the result in part of the better appreciation of the difficulties Islamabad faced in removing the Taliban from all the areas in which they had established themselves since 2001. That Pakistan's all out support for the American effort across the border in Afghanistan could have grave consequences for the country was underscored by a suicide attack by two bombers in the tribal agency of Mohmand. The army has been fighting in Mohmand for nearly two years, but so far has had little success in clearing the area of militants. The attack was carried on 6 December 2010, ten days before the American review was made public. This was a part of the strategy the Taliban were carrying out, to signal their presence in a brutal way whenever a major event was scheduled in the war against them. The attack killed 40 people including two journalists from Pakistani television channels who were attending a 'peace jirga assembled to plan strategy to stand up to the Taliban...Such attacks have by now become familiar tactics. Insurgents have often

⁴ Daniel Dombey and Quentin Peel, 'US claims "fragile" progress in Afghanistan', *Financial Times* (17 December 2010), p.1.

struck with suicide bombers at meetings of government officials and tribal elders to prevent them from forming anti-Taliban militias'.⁵

There was also growing frustration in Europe about what was received as an unwinnable war. In fact on the day the US administration released its assessment, Germany, which has the second largest force in Afghanistan, announced that it will start withdrawing its contingent of 4,800 soldiers as early as next year and complete the pull back by 2014. This was also the date when the Americans were expecting to be out of the country, handing over the security of their country to a large – and it was hoped – a well trained and motivated Afghan force.

In designing its own strategy, Pakistan has to take note of a number of developments that include: increased American resolve to quit the Afghan scene starting in 2011 and completing the process by 2014; unwillingness on the part of America's NATO allies to stay engaged in the country; partial success by the US in bringing peace to some of the contested areas; and some doubt on the part of the American military commanders as to the sustainability of their success in the battlefield. The positive tone of the assessment notwithstanding, the fact remains that there are still many things that could go wrong in the battlefield and in the political and economic environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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⁵ Ismail Khan and Salman Masood, 'Bombers in Pakistan strike anti-Taliban conference', *The New York Times* (7 December 2010), p.A8.