



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE? EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

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### **Abstract:**

Barack Obama promised during his election campaign to draw-down the war in Iraq while providing the resources necessary to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan. In March, he announced a strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan focused on defeating al Qaeda. By August, he was calling the war in Afghanistan a “war of necessity.” But upon receiving General Stanley McChrystal’s assessment of the troops required to fulfill the new strategy, Obama began an extensive review to determine if he was on the right course. At West Point in December, the president declared both that he was sending 30,000 new American troops to the conflict, but he promised to begin withdrawing them within 18 months.

**Keywords:** Obama, Afghanistan, War of Necessity, West Point speech.

### **Resumen:**

*Barack Obama prometió durante su campaña electoral poner fin a la guerra en Irak y al mismo tiempo poner a disposición los recursos necesarios para combatir a los Talibán en Afganistán. En marzo, anunció una estrategia para Afganistán y Pakistán centrada en la derrota de Al Qaeda. En agosto, definía la guerra en Afganistán claramente como “una guerra de necesidad”. Pero tras recibir del General Stanley McChrystal la evaluación de las tropas necesarias para cumplir con la nueva estrategia, Obama empezó una extensa revisión para determinar si se seguía el curso correcto. En West Point en diciembre, el presidente declaró que se enviarían 30.000 nuevas tropas americanas al conflicto, pero prometió acometer la retirada pasados 18 meses.*

**Palabras clave:** Obama, Afganistán, guerra de necesidad, discurso de West Point.

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## 1. Introduction

In his campaign for the American presidency, Barack Obama emphasized the “right war” in Afghanistan in order both to highlight the folly of the “wrong war” in Iraq and to establish that he was not against all wars – just “dumb” ones.<sup>2</sup> Al Qaeda’s safe haven in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001 produced the plans and personnel that led to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, argued Obama, the George W. Bush administration distracted itself from the job of eliminating al Qaeda by bungling its way into Iraq. Emboldened, the Taliban began to undermine the U.S.-backed Afghan government and sought to return to power, raising the specter of a renewed training ground for Islamic extremists. As president, Obama promised the American voters, he would devote the resources necessary to successfully prosecute the counterinsurgency campaign.

In his first months in office, Obama moved swiftly to fulfill his campaign pledges. He appointed the Democratic Party’s star troubleshooter, Richard Holbrooke, as his special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He ordered a strategy review to be completed in his first months in office. Even before the review was finished, Obama had announced a substantial increase in American troops for the conflict, amidst reports that the number would grow even further as the year wore on. And in the summer he inserted as commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal, whose Special Forces background was seen as ensuring a keen understanding of what was required to wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign.

Obama’s determination to prosecute the war, however, ran into two serious problems during the course of the summer of 2009. One was the failure of Afghan President Hamid Karzai to inspire confidence in the legitimacy of his government; the August elections involved massive voter fraud, making it more difficult to gain public support, either in Afghanistan or the United States, for the American military effort. The other was the skittishness of the Democratic Party; with an economy continuing to sour and with dreams of bold new domestic programs such as health care reform, leading members of Congress such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) would just as soon draw down the military effort, particularly as the number of American battle deaths continues to rise. Obama may have come into office wanting to make a difference on Afghanistan, but pulling his party along with him to see the counterinsurgency campaign to its conclusion will be difficult.

A third problem looms. Despite Obama’s extraordinary popularity in Europe (in some countries his favorability rating is eighty points higher than that of his predecessor), he will not be able to count on sizable numbers of European combat troops to fight the Taliban as part of the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Despite their December 2009 pledge to send additional forces, European nations have neither the political will nor significant numbers of deployable combat troops to add much to their current contributions. Two of the NATO members that have engaged in heavy fighting – Canada and the Netherlands – have already set deadlines to withdraw within the next year or two. Signs that the American political landscape is shifting against the war will only hasten sentiment among Europeans that they should get out, particularly after Obama’s West Point speech announcing that the United States would begin its withdrawals in July 2011. If countries such as Canada and the Netherlands pull their troops out, American public opinion will turn even more unfavorable toward the war.

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<sup>2</sup> On Iraq as a dumb war, see Obama, Barack, Speech by US Senator, *National Public Radio* (NPR), Chicago, United States (2 October 2002) at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469>.



With its announcement that 30,000 additional American troops would head to Afghanistan in 2010 to reverse the momentum of the Taliban balanced against the declaration that those troops would begin coming home the following year, Obama's West Point speech highlighted that the president has no good options in Afghanistan. He does not know whether American and allied forces can train Afghans in sufficient quality and quantity to take over responsibility for protecting the government. But the larger problem for him is that his early rhetoric about the stakes involved in the conflict would suggest that the United States needed to make an all-out effort. Instead, the December 2009 speech highlighted that the president was eager to emphasize that he could find a way out. To convince Americans that the stakes warranted additional troops while at the same time assuring the public that the country's commitment was not open-ended left Obama open to criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. Democrats criticized him for doing too much, and Republicans complained that the president was talking about an exit strategy at West Point (although conservatives were cheered ten days later by the full throated defense of America's global role in the president's Nobel acceptance speech).

But while the West Point speech attempted to balance escalation with withdrawal, the news was the exit date. The White House had leaked for weeks that the president was likely to order 30,000 more troops into battle. By beginning to talk about when he would start getting out, the president reflected the larger mood of the country. At the end of eight years and in the face of continued high unemployment, Americans were tired of hearing that they needed to be at war. At West Point, Obama began to change to narrative from his earlier commitment to a "war of necessity" to a story that would make clear that his election in 2008 meant that America would not be at war indefinitely. By reminding voters that all combat troops would leave Iraq by the end of 2011 and telling them that troops would begin to leave Afghanistan at the same time, Obama signaled that his reelection campaign in 2012 would be about ending America's wars, not intensifying them.

## 2. A War of Necessity?

The distinctions Obama drew between Iraq and Afghanistan during the campaign in 2008 were vital to his candidacy, but they also contributed to the growing sense in 2009 that the Afghanistan war had now become "Obama's war." In the campaign, he scored points with the Democratic Party base by emphasizing his opposition to the Iraq war from the start (in contrast to his chief opponent for the nomination, New York Senator Hillary Clinton); he built his credentials with independents by arguing the need to transfer troops, resources, and attention away from Iraq to the war in Afghanistan. "Iraq is not the central front in the war on terrorism, and it never has been," wrote candidate Obama in a *New York Times* op-ed in July 2008. "As president, I would pursue a new strategy, and begin by providing at least two additional combat brigades to support our effort in Afghanistan. We need more troops, more helicopters, better intelligence-gathering and more nonmilitary assistance to accomplish the mission there."<sup>3</sup>

A week after the president took office, administration officials sent signals that the president sought to focus more American attention on the war, leaving development work to be done by European allies, and they made clear to Afghan President Hamid Karzai that they had no intention of tolerating his corruption. Narrowing the American emphasis, U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> Obama, Barack: "My Plan for Iraq", *New York Times*, 14 July 2008.



Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared, “If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose.” Therefore, he added, “My own personal view is that our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorists and extremists to attack the United States and our allies.”<sup>4</sup>

Two months later, the administration released its strategy review for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the president made clear that he was focused on one major objective. “I want the American people to understand,” said Obama, “that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” Following his campaign rhetoric about the central front in the war on terror, the president declared, “Al Qaeda and its allies – the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks – are in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Multiple intelligence estimates have warned that al Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan.” Combating the threat, Obama said, was not simply a matter of finding al Qaeda members and eliminating them. It also meant going after the Taliban in the south and east, a task for which he had ordered 17,000 additional American combat troops: “[I]f the Afghan government falls to the Taliban – or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged – that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can.”<sup>5</sup>

The strategy paper recognized, however, that the counterinsurgency campaign would not be successful without focusing some attention on government capacity, economic development and indigenous security capabilities in both Pakistan and Afghanistan – i.e., nation building. In his March address, the president announced his support for a bill in Congress that would provide \$1.5 billion yearly in assistance to go directly to the Pakistani people for 5 years. A further goal was to train Afghan army and police forces to create by the end of 2011 a 134,000 strong Afghan army and an 82,000 member police force (a number that many, including Holbrooke and McChrystal, deem inadequate.)

One major innovation of the new administration’s approach was linking the fate of the two nations, thereby giving rise to the term “AfPak.” As the White Paper put it, “The ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven, while insurgency in Afghanistan feeds instability in Pakistan.” It also laid out what it called “realistic and achievable objectives.” These included, however, “promoting a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan,” and “assisting efforts to enhance civilian control and stable constitutional government in Pakistan and a vibrant economy that provides opportunity for the people of Pakistan.” Not Valhalla, perhaps, but was this really either “realistic” or “achievable”? The White Paper itself noted, “These are daunting tasks.”<sup>6</sup>

A second new strategy element would be the effort to distinguish between those Taliban deemed “irreconcilable” and those viewed as willing to end their insurgency. The paper explicitly sought to get “non-ideologically committed insurgents to lay down their arms, reject al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan Constitution.” This element of the strategy reflected the perceived success in Iraq resulting from turning former insurgents into responsible participants of the developing new order.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, Helene and Shanker, Thom Shanker: “Aides Say Obama’s Afghan Aims Elevate War over Development”, *New York Times*, 28 January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Obama, Barack: “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan”, *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, Washington DC, United States (27 March 2009).

<sup>6</sup> “White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan”, *The White House*, Washington DC, United States (March 2009).



At the end of the summer, Obama reminded the American audience of his thinking on the war in an address before the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Phoenix: “[M]ilitary power alone will not win this war ...[W]e also need diplomacy and development and good governance. And our new strategy has a clear mission and defined goals: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its extremist allies.” In a fateful statement, he then argued bluntly, “This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity.”<sup>7</sup> Having said it was not a choice, he signaled that he was prepared to see it through to the end.

Ironically, the person chiefly responsible for bringing the terms “wars of choice” and “wars of necessity” into the American debate, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and author of a book comparing the two Iraq wars, suggested the president had it wrong.<sup>8</sup> Surely, said Haass, the United States had to go after the Taliban in 2002 to get at the source of the 9/11 attacks. But a war of necessity involved both “vital national interests” and a “lack of viable alternatives to the use of military force to protect those interests.” Under those criteria, Afghanistan didn’t count. If it were a war of necessity, Haass wrote, “it would justify any level of effort. It is not and does not.”

The United States given both its geography and resources usually has the luxury of choosing its wars. After all, the American homeland has rarely been under assault. The issue is not so much whether Afghanistan is a war of necessity or not, but rather, is it the right choice (a point that Haass himself made in his op-ed)? By laying down such a clear marker on the necessity of fighting the war, the president made it extremely difficult to do anything other than ramp up the American commitment. As Haass says, if it is a necessity, then the United States has to do whatever it takes to prevail.

On that score, the administration sent mixed signals as summer turned to fall. Obama did announce a troop increase after coming into office before his strategy review was even complete. But his National Security Adviser James Jones caused a stir in the summer when on a visit to Afghanistan, he made clear that asking for more troops so soon after Obama had ordered 21,000 troops to deploy (17,000 in a combat role, 4,000 to train Afghan forces) would cause the president to have a “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot” (What the f---?) moment.<sup>9</sup> According to sources close to the team advising McChrystal, as the new commander was preparing his policy review for the president, Secretary Gates also made clear that asking for more troops was unwise.<sup>10</sup>

As summer gave way to fall in Obama’s first year, the president was putting himself in an unenviable position, having declared that the war was one the United States had to win but not wanting to escalate the number of American troops any further. He had promised that Bush’s “underresourced war” would now finally get the attention it deserved. But would it?

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<sup>7</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention”, Phoenix, United States (17 August 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Haass, Richard N.: “In Afghanistan, the Choice is Ours”, *New York Times*, 21 August 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Woodward, Bob: “Key in Afghanistan: Economic, Not Military”, *Washington Post*, 1 July 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Cuddehe, Mary: “Fiasco,” *The New Republic*, 23 September 2009.





### 3. A New Commander and a New Strategy

As the Obama team prepared to assess its policy in the fall, General McChrystal's review of the situation and his recommendations going forward to fulfill the president's goals became the central focus of both supporters and critics of the war.

Obama had concurred with the senior military leadership by summer 2009 that the theater commander he inherited, General David McKiernan, was no longer suitable. No president had fired a wartime theater commander since Harry Truman sacked General Douglas MacArthur in 1951. After the success of General David Petraeus in Iraq – a creative military thinker with significant political skills – Obama decided on McChrystal for Afghanistan and unceremoniously dumped McKiernan. The former head of the Joint Special Operations Command, McChrystal could not only oversee the troops, but he was viewed as someone who could sell the strategy on Capitol Hill and work effectively with international partners.<sup>11</sup>

McChrystal moved quickly to establish two new objectives for a more successful counterinsurgency strategy. One was to protect the population of Afghanistan; the new commander was concerned that ISAF spent too much time on troop protection and not enough on providing security for the population. The second was to reduce civilian casualties, whose rise had turned the Afghan population against the Western military effort (as well as cost support for the mission in Europe). McChrystal declared, “The point of security is to enable governance....My metric is not the enemy killed, not ground taken: it's how much governance we've got.”<sup>12</sup>

A list of the metrics that would be used to gauge success appeared online in mid-September (after Richard Holbrooke had suggested that “we'll know [success] when we see it”).<sup>13</sup> It reiterated the basic goal laid out by the president in March: “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” But the document demonstrated the difficulty of merely disrupting terrorist networks rather than trying to create a “Central Asian Valhalla.” There were metrics clearly focused on measuring the strength of the insurgency – e.g., how much territory the insurgents hold vs. that secured by American, coalition and Afghan government forces. But a number of the metrics had to do with the effectiveness and popularity of the government in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Presumably the notion is that to be successful, one has to win hearts and minds and that means popular support for governments over terrorists and insurgents. But whereas goals such as increasing Pakistani counterinsurgency capabilities or strengthening Afghan national security forces are within reason, laying out metrics that include Pakistani public opinion of government performance and progress in that judicial system becoming free of military involvement simply set the Obama administration up for never-ending nation building.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv: “Pentagon Worries Led to Command Change”, *Washington Post*, 17 August 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, Mark and Baker, Aryn: “Starting Anew”, *Time*, 20 July 2009. Also Chandrasekaran, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> The metrics are at

[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/16/evaluating\\_progress\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_pakistan](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/16/evaluating_progress_in_afghanistan_pakistan); The Holbrooke remarks were reported, for example, at

[http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/12/holbrooke\\_on\\_success\\_we\\_ll\\_know\\_it\\_when\\_we\\_see\\_it](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/12/holbrooke_on_success_we_ll_know_it_when_we_see_it).

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the metrics document, see also McChrystal, Stanley A. and U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Eikenberry, Karl: “The United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan” (10 August 2009).



McChrystal, meanwhile, had produced his initial assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. Delivered to Washington on August 30, it was leaked to Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* and published on September 21, creating a firestorm in the nation's capital. McChrystal suggested in his report that readers not focus on force or resource requirements; "The key takeaway from this assessment," he wrote, "is the urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way that we think and operate." He reiterated that the mission had to shift its emphasis from "seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces" and focus on the Afghan population (a strategy that had led to increasing numbers of American casualties). He argued that the next year was critical for laying the ground for success; failure to gain the initiative would risk "an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible." Building up indigenous capabilities was essential, and McChrystal called for increasing the size of the Afghan army to 134,000 not by December 2011 as originally called for but by October 2010, with an eye toward then going up to 240,000.<sup>15</sup>

In the report, McChrystal blasted ISAF, calling it "a conventional force that is poorly configured for [counterinsurgency], inexperienced in local languages and culture, and struggling with challenges inherent to coalition warfare." It needed a new strategy, properly resourced, and it had to work closely with the Afghan national security forces to help promote effective governance, protect the population, and seize the initiative from the insurgency.

The Obama administration reacted initially to the report with some amount of hostility. One official told a reporter, "Who's to say we need more troops? McChrystal is not responsible for assessing how we're doing against al-Qaeda."

Presumably, that is precisely what the theater commander is supposed to do. Obama was well within his right as commander in chief to say that he needed time to discuss the report with his top advisers and take all inputs in order to make a wise deliberation. But having senior officials snipe at the general who produced a serious and honest assessment was unseemly.

The leaking of the assessment highlighted differences within the administration and on Capitol Hill. Vice President Biden had reportedly opposed the troop increases announced at the onset of the administration, and he was once again arguing against more troops and reconfiguring the strategy to focus on knocking out individual Taliban and al Qaeda leaders from afar. Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, who supported the troops increase in the spring, continued to do so in the fall as did Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who supported his military commanders. While Obama's Democratic base made clear its opposition to more troops, Republicans such as John McCain urged Obama to stand tough.

The White House made clear, however, that it was rethinking a strategy that Obama had outlined in March and reiterated in August. Although it is hard to imagine anyone was surprised that President Hamid Karzai engaged in massive electoral fraud to stay in office, some in the administration were calling his growing illegitimacy a "game-changer." Combined with Congressional Democratic opposition, an increase in American casualties, and eroding public support, that election led officials in Washington to begin to redefine their strategy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McChrystal, Stanley A.: "COMISAF's Initial Assessment" (30 August 2009); Woodward, Bob: "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure'", *Washington Post*, 21 September 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Chandrasekaran, Rajiv and De Young, Karen: "Changes Have Obama Rethinking War Strategy", *Washington Post*, 21 September 2009.



#### 4. America's Allies: Obama's Popularity has its Limits

Any discussion of a need to rethink the strategy only made Europeans more skittish than they already were. But European doubts about the war had begun far earlier, and were in direct contrast to initial American attitudes. In the United States, even staunch opponents of the war in Iraq during the Bush years supported the war in Afghanistan. After all, whereas Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction and had no connection to the September 11 plotters, Osama bin Laden had hatched his plan to murder innocent Americans from the territory of Afghanistan. Convincing Americans that they had to go after the terrorists where they lived was never difficult for the Bush administration. Convincing Europeans was another matter.

The Europeans had good reason to be unhappy with the initial American approach to Afghanistan. Although NATO had invoked Article 5 for the first time in its history on September 12, 2001, conveying European solidarity with the United States, the Bush administration had not sought to run the war through NATO, believing that the lesson of the Kosovo war was that alliance management was too unwieldy. It was only after American troops got bogged down in Iraq in 2003 that the Bush team turned to NATO to take over the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force in Kabul.

Given European opposition to the Iraq war and their tremendous mistrust of George W. Bush, and viewing the ISAF request as an effort to bail out the Americans in the midst of their misadventure there, European publics were wary of the Afghanistan mission. But European leaders presented the objectives to their populations as humanitarian: they would be there to assist the Afghan population in building roads and schools and purifying water.

As time went on, the United States asked ISAF to expand its writ to the dangerous areas of the south and east. Few countries were willing to venture into a difficult counterinsurgency campaign, and many issued "caveats" that limited what their troops would do and where they would go. (For example, German troops were not allowed to go off base at night.) Only Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (and to a lesser extent, Denmark and Romania) were willing to engage in serious combat operations (in addition to non-member Australia). By early 2008, Gates was decrying what he called a "two-tiered alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not."<sup>17</sup>

Even those willing to fight were not going to do so indefinitely. The Canadians believed it was unfair of them to shoulder a burden so many allies were not, and they set 2011 as a firm deadline for withdrawing combat forces from Afghanistan; the Dutch meanwhile, declared they would be gone by 2010.

Obama may have believed his tremendous popularity in Europe as he entered office would change the dynamics, but it had almost no effect on European attitudes. He went to Europe three times in his first six months in office, but had little to show for his efforts. In fact, he got more help from Moscow (the Russians gave permission for transit into Afghanistan) than from his European allies.

The United States by fall 2009 was projected to have nearly 70,000 troops serving in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom was contributing 9,000, the Canadians nearly 3,000, and

<sup>17</sup> Gray, Andrew: "Gates Says Two-tiered NATO Puts Alliance at Risk", *Reuters*, 10 February 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSL1027452420080210>.





the Dutch less than 2,000. Of countries supplying troops largely for reconstruction efforts rather than combat, Germany had 4,000 troops serving in the north, France and Italy each had around 3,000 and Poland had sent 2,000.

The allies did agree at the April 2009 April summit to send 5,000 additional troops to assist with election security in August, with the Italians agreeing to send 800 more troops, Spain 450, Britain 900, and Albania 140. That mission was important given the threats that the Taliban issued to those daring to vote, but it did not signify that NATO had agreed to engage in counterinsurgency (although the British decided to keep their additional troops indefinitely and in November announced plans to send 500 more).

There are two core problems for NATO in Afghanistan, and neither one is conducive to Obama's powers of persuasion. One is the issue McChrystal identified in his report: the inability of NATO forces to perform counterinsurgency missions. The force, argues McChrystal, is a conventional force. Troops are not able to interact with the population, lacking both language skills and knowledge of local culture. But whereas it would be a lot to ask NATO troops to have significant knowledge of language and customs, the larger problem remains: Europe on the whole has neither the equipment nor the deployable troops necessary to fight these missions. The second is political will. For Europe, Afghanistan is a humanitarian mission; it is not the defining threat that Obama has declared it. Most Europeans do not believe that their security is "also being defended at the Hindu Kush," as then-German Minister of Defense Peter Struck declared in 2002.<sup>18</sup> As European troops get killed (particularly as the Taliban takes the fight to new parts of the country where the European missions are ones of reconstruction not combat), publics will increasingly demand their removal. Those demands will accelerate if the United States is seen as shifting its thinking on the war.

## **5. Obama, the Democrats, and the Politics of National Security**

When Obama entered office in January, he had an opportunity that no Democrat had had since the onset of the Vietnam war: he could refashion the Democratic Party as the new party of national security. For his two most recent Democratic predecessors (Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton), Vietnam and its aftermath made that impossible. The Democrats had split badly over the war in Southeast Asia, and in the 1970s, Republicans became seen as the real stewards of American national security. The tough anti-communism of Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy had given way on the left to a strong anti-militarism and anti-interventionism. Ronald Reagan's firm stand against the Soviet threat followed by the collapse of the USSR led many to believe the Democrats could no longer win at the national level due to their inability to project a seriousness on national security.

Ironically, while Republicans viewed the end of the Cold War as their triumph, it meant Americans no longer cared if their president could handle foreign policy. Bill Clinton won the presidency on his message about the economy. But Republicans hounded him mercilessly on his lack of bona fides as commander in chief. Issues early in his presidency such as gays in the military and the Black Hawk down incident in Somalia only further cemented the notion that Clinton was not capable of leading the troops.

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<sup>18</sup> Lobjakas, Ahto: "NATO at 60: The Alliance's Article of Faith," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2 April 2009, at [http://www.rferl.org/content/NATO\\_At\\_60\\_Alliances\\_Article\\_Of\\_Faith/1600763.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/NATO_At_60_Alliances_Article_Of_Faith/1600763.html).



By the end of the 1990s, Clinton was a different person. He had led NATO forces in a successful war against Serbia. But Republicans were still seen as the party of national security. George W. Bush's appointments of heavyweights such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Colin Powell solidified this notion, and the attacks of September 11 allowed Bush to further buttress Republican advantages on national security policy in the minds of the American public.

By 2006, however, whatever advantages the Republicans had claimed since the second half of the Cold War were gone. By the time Bush introduced a "surge" of forces in Iraq, it was too late. Barack Obama was just as inexperienced on national security matters as Bill Clinton, and he had to run a general election campaign against war hero John McCain, but he stood toe-to-toe with McCain in discussions of national security, and no one seriously questioned his fitness to serve as commander-in-chief. Most significantly, Obama never seemed to fear that Republicans would label him as weak, which was a marked contrast with Clinton, who (along with his top advisers) always seemed to pursue policies (e.g., toward Iraq, missile defense, or China) designed to minimize Republican charges that the Democrats were not tough enough on national security.

When Obama entered office, it seemed he had huge advantages in recreating a sense of Democratic abilities to manage national security policy in ways the party had not seen since the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Obama appointed retired General James Jones to serve as national security adviser, presumably to project confidence that the president would manage the drawdown in Iraq and the escalation in Afghanistan effectively. He put retired General Eric Shinseki, a hero in the army for having correctly called for more troops initially in the war in Iraq (and been fired by Bush for it) in charge of veteran affairs. Hillary Clinton came into the job of secretary of state having spent the Bush years in the Senate working hard on the Armed Services Committee to develop a strong relationship with the military. Michelle Obama promised that as first lady she would focus on the plight of military families. Meanwhile, in important positions in government came a number of Democrats who had worked during the Bush years to develop strong positions on defense, including Michele Flournoy, who joined the Pentagon as Undersecretary for Policy.

But as American casualties mounted in Afghanistan over the summer, Obama faced a traditional hurdle: the left wing of the Democratic Party, which had powerful voices on Capitol Hill. "I and the American people," declared Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI), "cannot tolerate more troops without some commitment about when this perceived occupation will end." Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) laid down her own marker, telling reporters, "I don't think there is a great deal of support for sending more troops to Afghanistan in the country or in Congress." And even Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), whose support on Armed Services would be critical to Obama's ability to garner Congressional support emphasized the need to build up Afghan forces, not add new American ones. "I think there are a significant number of people in the country – and I don't know the exact percentage – that have questions about adding troops in Afghanistan."<sup>19</sup>

Obama's challenges in promoting the Democrats as the new party of national security was running into obstacles similar to those that Clinton had run into in his efforts to create a Democratic Party more supportive of free trade. Clinton came into office preaching the need for America to embrace globalization, arguing that protectionism – supported by the labor

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<sup>19</sup> Cooper, Helene: "G.O.P. may be vital to Obama in Afghan war", *New York Times*, 3 September 2009; Dimascio, Jen and Isenstadt, Alex: "Levin Complicates W.H. Afghan Strategy", *Politico*, 11 September 2009.



unions that formed the backbone of the Democratic Party – was counterproductive. Jobs that had gone overseas, argued Clinton, were not coming back, and he suggested that training Americans for the new economy that would result from the information technology revolution was more appropriate. In his first year in office, he pushed hard to get the North American Free Trade Agreement (signed by his predecessor) passed through Congress.

Clinton's travails in that battle are instructive. The Republicans supported trade but were unwilling to let him avoid a fight within his own party. So they promised him half the votes needed for passage and told him to get the other half from the Democrats. A bruising battle ensued, and the president barely got more than 100 votes from his own party. (At the end of the day, the Republicans did give him the rest, and NAFTA passed.)<sup>20</sup>

For Clinton, it was a significant achievement, but over time he came to realize the high price the battle exacted. Many Democrats still believe that the anger it stoked among the unions led labor to sit on the sidelines in the midterm elections a year later, thereby contributing to the Republican takeover of both the House and the Senate for the first time in forty years.

Congressional Democrats have an eye firmly on the midterm elections of 2010, and they will not let Obama bring them down over Afghanistan. As polls show more and more Americans opposed to sending more troops to fight the insurgency, Democrats in Congress will ratchet up their rhetoric against the current strategy.

Many observers saw Obama's appointment of General Jones as national security adviser and the retention of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as helpful politically to ward off possible criticism of the president as he fulfilled his campaign promises to end the war in Iraq and turn attention to the war in Afghanistan. Gates in particular is extremely useful politically – but only with the right. Whatever difficulties Obama finds himself in with respect to either conflict, Gates' support for the policy will be critical in muting Republican opposition. But Jones and Gates do not help Obama on the left, and that is where the major opposition to escalating involvement in Afghanistan lies. Once the president acceded to his military's requests to add more troops in Afghanistan, he made himself more reliant on Republican support going forward, and no doubt Republicans will relish the ensuing split within the Democratic Party.

Clinton was willing to take on the left wing of the Democratic Party to push free trade. Indeed, one observer argued in January 2001, that Clinton's ability to turn the Democratic Party into a free trade party would be his lasting achievement.<sup>21</sup> As it turns out, the party reverted to its protectionists instincts as soon as Clinton left the White House. It is too soon to know how Obama will fare as a national security president since he will be judged by the success of his war strategy, but regardless he will find it as hard to hold his party together around these issues as Clinton did on trade.

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<sup>20</sup> See Chollet, Derek and Goldgeier, James (2008): *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11*, New York, Public Affairs, chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, Robert: "Clinton's One Big Idea", *New York Times*, 16 January 2001.



## 6. The Strategic Challenge Ahead

A further problem for Obama is that a range of observers called into question the assumptions underpinning his strategy. After all, the problem in Afghanistan is no longer al Qaeda, which has fled into Pakistan. The central issue is a resurgent Taliban, which has reestablished a network throughout major areas of the country. The assumption of American policy has been that a Taliban victory would reopen the door to renewed al Qaeda activity and thus U.S. and coalition forces must prevent the insurgency from succeeding.

Counterarguments have emerged, however. Paul Pillar, for example, the CIA's deputy chief of counterterrorism in the late 1990s, has noted that al Qaeda and other jihadist networks no longer rely on physical havens to carry out attacks; technology has made territory such as Afghanistan less important to them.<sup>22</sup> *Washington Post* columnist George Will has suggested that the United States operate largely from a distance, using long-range missiles (with intelligence, however, provided by special forces on the ground), in order to strike at targets along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, but it should forget about counterinsurgency in a country with a weak state and corrupt government. Will also noted that al Qaeda operates in places like Yemen and Somalia that the United States is not considering invading, so why should America be engaged in major combat operations in Afghanistan?<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, a group of realist scholars of international relations and foreign policy, many of whom had opposed the Iraq War, issued an open letter to Barack Obama on September 15, 2009.<sup>24</sup> In it, they argued that America's objectives had grown too ambitious, and that its war strategy was only driving the Taliban and al Qaeda closer together. To succeed in fostering a stable, effective government in Afghanistan was simply beyond the scope of American policy; it would require a state-building effort that would last decades and would probably never succeed in any event.

## 7. The Obama Dilemma

As Obama's first year in office drew to a close, Afghanistan was fast becoming his most intractable and significant challenge as president. Politically, he was increasingly at odds with his Democratic Party base. European publics remained skeptical. If he hadn't agreed to military requests for more troops, he would have risked a tremendous civilian-military rift; since he did agree, he risked being compared to Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam.

Obama was elected by promising to end the "bad war" in Iraq and to resource the "good war" in Afghanistan. He promised early in his presidency to focus not on unrealistic objectives but rather in eliminating the threat posed by al Qaeda. Recognizing that Pakistan was as big a problem as Afghanistan, he developed a strategy for thinking about these two countries in tandem. And he told the American public that the war was one of "necessity."

But by fall, he realized that he was being asked to send more troops to a conflict whose objectives had once again grown. To eliminate al Qaeda and prevent the Taliban's return was

<sup>22</sup> Pillar, Paul R: "Who's Afraid of a Terrorist Haven?", *Washington Post*, 16 September 2009. See Partlow, Joshua: "In Afghanistan, Taliban surpasses al-Qaeda", *Washington Post*, 11 November 2009, for a discussion of how al-Qaeda has become more reliant on a resurgent Taliban.

<sup>23</sup> Will, George F.: "Time to Get Out of Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, 1 September 2009.

<sup>24</sup> The letter can be found at [http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/archives/2009/09/letter\\_to\\_presi.php](http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/archives/2009/09/letter_to_presi.php).



not just about eliminating bad guys and retaking territory; it was, as it was in the Bush years, about winning hearts and minds. McChrystal argued that the United States had to show the population why it should support the American-led effort. That meant protecting Afghans, and helping Afghanistan create an effective government. It meant shoring up the government of Pakistan and rooting out corruption there or risk facing a backlash from the population. But it doesn't take a realist to recognize how high a bar that is. Even if one isn't trying to build a "Central Asian Valhalla," the prospects of a stable, effective central government emerging in the poorest country on earth even with significantly more numbers of American troops are slim at best.

The root of the problem in fact is Obama's own making. He made an argument about Afghanistan in 2008 that was correct in 2003, but not necessarily relevant five years later. He followed that campaign rhetoric with a strategy to fulfill it in the first months of his presidency. That top advisers like Vice President Biden would try to talk him out of it is no surprise. His decisions in the fall of 2009 were momentous: for the troops and their families, for his presidency, and for the Democratic Party. And potentially for the safety and security of the American people.

In the midst of these dilemmas, Obama went to West Point on December 1 to lay out his strategy before the country, the allies, the Afghan people, and the world.<sup>25</sup> The speech was the culmination of a review process that had involved national security deliberations at the highest level over several months, leading to charges by former Vice President Dick Cheney and others that the president was "dithering." Obama insisted that in-depth discussion was necessary to come up with the right answers, and that seat-of-the-pants decision-making in the previous administration had generated many of the problems he inherited.

The president began his speech with his usual remarks: the war was legitimate, the Bush administration never provided sufficient resources, and the problem was growing worse. And then he delivered the results of his review: "As Commander-in-Chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home." It was a surge, but one that came with a time limit. The Afghan government would know that America was going to do more to reverse the momentum the Taliban had built in recent months, but there would be no "blank checks" or open-ended commitments. President Karzai was on notice that he had a limited amount of time to shore up the capabilities of his government to take responsibility for security.

The president's announcement helped him with different constituencies. By providing General McChrystal with most of the troops he wanted, Obama avoided a rift with his military leaders. By announcing a time frame for beginning to bring troops home, he signaled to his Democratic Party base that he understood the country could not afford to let the war drag on indefinitely.

But the obvious contradictions in those core two sentences of the speech left him open to criticism from the left and right. For those in the Democratic Party who see the costs of the war as weighing down the American economy, the addition of 30,000 troops was unwelcome news. Meanwhile, many on the right believe that announcing a withdrawal date merely gives comfort to the Taliban that they can simply wait out the American presence.

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<sup>25</sup> "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan", *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, Eisenhower Hall Theatre, United States Military Academy at West Point, West Point, New York, United States (1 December 2009).





The problem is not just political. The argument that the United States has a vital national interest requiring it to send more troops but that it can begin to bring some troops home in July 2011 is contradictory.

“I make this decision,” said the president, “because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” If American security was at stake in December 2009, it will still be at stake in July 2011. The Karzai government is unlikely to be ready to begin standing on its own. The Taliban will continue to operate. Al-Qaeda will not have disappeared. If the war is still one of necessity, in which core interests are threatened, then the United States has to remain for as long as it takes. If America’s vital interests are not sufficient to require an indefinite commitment, then what is the rationale for sending more troops at all?

Essentially, like many presidents before him, he had kicked the can down the road. Given that any withdrawals would occur only if conditions warranted, he bought himself a year and a half to see if the counterinsurgency strategy might work.

It might, but we won’t know much by July 2011. There is simply too much work to be done, particularly in training Afghan troops. And the central problem the president has in explaining the policy to the American people remains: what threat exists in Afghanistan that justifies the presence of 100,000 American troops? Al Qaeda operates in many locations, as the president noted in his remarks. And what will constitute “winning”? The president was careful to talk about reversing the momentum of the Taliban rather than defeating them. But that means that at the end of his first year, and despite two strategic reviews and several major speeches, he still has not made a decision about what he really thinks of the war in Afghanistan: necessity or not?

Understandably, Obama does seem to want to be the president that ended the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And that may provide the real clue as to how he sees himself as a national security Democrat: recognizing that America’s power is limited, that its financial resources are constrained, and therefore its objectives are limited. He will combat threats, not because he believes he can eliminate them but to make problems manageable. And he will do so by working closely with other nations and international institutions in order both to make America a more responsible power but also a less burdened one.