

Barack Obama and Afghanistan: a closer look

By Mariano Aguirre

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Barack Obama announced a comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan on 27 March 2009. This recognises that a military victory is unattainable. It adopts a regional approach, focusing more intensively on Pakistan, and opens the way to negotiate with some sectors of the insurgency. More emphasis is laid on development and creating jobs in agriculture. The United States president also acknowledges [1] the need for a strategy towards the eventual withdrawal of military forces.

The strategy has been presented as a significant departure from the approach of George W Bush in 2001, which - in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington - was essentially based on defeating the Taliban and al-Qaida. By comparison, Obama has narrowed his ambitions to defeating al-Qaida, stabilising Afghanistan [4] and eliminating terrorist threats. The new aspects of the plan - governance, economic aid, social reconstruction and eventually dialogue and negotiations - are presented as means to achieve the original purpose of removing an international terrorist threat.

The continued emphasis on the military component is consistent with this overall goal. The deployment (already announced) of 17,000 extra [5] US troops is supplemented by 4,000 troops more who will act as trainers of the Afghan army and police force, as well as hundreds of civilian advisers (who will include experts in agriculture, education and law). This will take the total number of US troops in Afghanistan to 60,000.

Since 2001, intervention in Afghanistan has been described as part of the "war on terror", a nation-building mission and a test of Nato's legitimacy. By contrast, Obama has described his goal as being to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent its return to either country in the future." He has also emphasised the need to ensure that Afghanistan will no longer be used to plan attacks on the United States - which recalls (as Robert Matthews of Fride argues [6]) Donald Rumsfeld's notion of a "light nation-building footprint". In this light, the new thinking is a definite shift away from the ambition of promoting a wide-ranging agenda for democracy-promotion, civil society and governance.

The heart of Obama's plan thus stresses [7] the need to protect the United States - at a time when US intelligence services warn

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Also by Mariano Aguirre in **openDemocracy**: "America underneath New York [3]" (18 November 2004)

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"The Hurricane and the Empire [3]" (5 September 2005)

of the possibility of another 9/11-style attack in American homeland. At the same time, the insurgency in "AfPak" is in his view a crucial battle for the entire world as well as the United States; and as such, it is a task that needs to be shared globally, especially among Nato allies.

The allied dimension

The president has also indicated that allied cooperation should not be restricted to contributing more troops, but could take the shape of police training, provision of electoral advisers and support for Afghan society. This mirrors the position of European governments, which are willing to send advisers and aid but are more reluctant [8] to send further troops. Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Poland, Turkey, Croatia and Germany announced at the Nato summit [9] on 3-4 April that they will contribute up to 5,000 new troops, but most will be deployed to provide security for the presidential elections in Afghanistan in August.

Obama has also appealed to the United Nations to broaden its mandate to coordinate international action and assistance and to strengthen Afghan institutions. The White House has named diplomat Peter Galbraith [9], a harsh critic [10] of the Iraq war, as the UN's second-in-command to the mission's special representative, Kai Eide [11] of Norway. In July 2008, Eide indicated to the UN Security Council the need [12] for "a broad-based Afghan political dialogue".

The focus is on supporting Afghanistan and preserving Pakistani democracy. The attempt to build western-style democracy, as voiced by the Bush administration after 2004, is notable by its absence. The intention is to create economic security in order to win over those who (either voluntarily or under coercion) joined armed groups. At the same time, specific benchmarks and metrics will be put in place to condition aid flows to Pakistan on Islamabad's cooperation against the Taliban [13], and to monitor concrete results in Afghanistan in areas such as corruption and the fight against drug-trafficking. In this sense, the combined military and civilian "surge" is also intended to strengthen Washington's position in any future negotiations.

The regional dimension

The regional approach is fundamental to Obama's strategy: specifically the creation of a contact-group bringing together countries that have a stake [14] in the region - India, China, Russia, Iran, the central Asian states, and the Gulf nations (particularly Saudi Arabia). The hastening of cooperation with Iran, in line with the parallel diplomacy that Washington has initiated (such as the meeting with Iran's deputy foreign minister, Mohammad Mehdi Akhondzadeh, at The Hague conference [15] on Afghanistan on 31 March 2009) is especially important.

The US's outreach here echoes the proposal of two experts that the way forward lies in a "great bargain" for the region (see Barnett R Rubin & Ahmed Rashid, "From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan [16]" [*Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2008]).

The immediate responses by the two countries most affected by the strategy was positive. The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, welcomed [17] the initiative's focus on countering militant sanctuaries in Pakistan, and endorsed the plan to negotiate with some insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Pakistan's president, Asif Ali Zardari [18], was pleased with the United States's increase [19] in economic and social aid: \$1.5 billion per year during 2009-13, with a new emphasis on development and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

The five problems

The new plan faces five obstacles that must be overcome if its aims are to be achieved.

The first is its likely impact on the Taliban enemy. The US's bolstering of its military, alongside Obama's declaration that a "victory" is not possible, may encourage the Taliban and other armed groups to dig in for long-term resistance [20]. They will interpret the combination of reinforcement and doubt as evidence that their own insurgency, the passing of time, and public opinion in the west will force the "occupiers" to leave before their mission has been completed (see Paul Rogers, "Afghanistan: the last throw [20]", 3 April 2009).

Already, it is reported that several Taliban groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan are coordinating a new offensive to "welcome" the arriving US troops. At the same time, Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service is said to be continuing to collaborate with the Taliban, providing [21] the movement with logistical information and economic and military support. This collaboration has a long history: it started in the 1980s when Pakistan played a crucial role as the rearguard of the US support strategy for the *mujahideen* against the Soviet troops then in Afghanistan.

The second problem is that the Taliban and the Hizb-e-Islami militant opposition may not be very interested in negotiating with the US and the weak, externally-dependent Hamid Karzai government. The tactics of Obama and his special representative Richard Holbrooke [22] are reminiscent of those applied in the mid-1990s in the Balkan wars (when Holbrooke was US special envoy, negotiating with Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic among others), as well as in Iraq in the mid-2000s: an attempt to draw armed actors into consultation in the wake of military offensives of uncertain result.

The very term "Taliban" highlights the problems here - for it refers to a diversity of groups (tribal, sub-tribal and clan) that range from Pashtun tribes who are radically anti-western though not all "Taliban" to local criminal organisations and warlords. In addition, there are other non-Taliban organisations that are fighting against the foreign presence and for control of local resources and populations.

Thus, the broad range of groups and internal alliances in Afghanistan and Pakistan - and the fact that for the moment these actors believe that more can be gained from war than peace - may make them reluctant to engage in negotiations. In the same vein, neither the weak Hamid Karzai government nor the Afghan parliament have sufficient popular credibility to encourage the militant opposition to trade peace for integration in the political system.

Also in **openDemocracy** on Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Antonio Giustozzi, "**The resurgence of the neo-Taliban** [19]" (14 December 2007)

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Paul Rogers, "**Afghanistan in an amorphous war** [19]", 19 June 2008)

Paul Rogers, "**Afghanistan: state of siege** [19]" (10 July 2008)

Paul Rogers, "**Afghanistan: on the cliff-edge** [19]" (28 August 2008)

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Paul Rogers, "**A three-front war: Iraq**."

The fact that the Taliban succeeded in forcing the Pakistani government to concede economic, police and judicial control of the Swat valley area is viewed [23] as a victory that could be repeated in other areas.

Moreover, several experts have serious doubts that the US and Nato can launch an offensive and at the same time present themselves as willing to negotiate. "There is a need for a third actor", says [24] Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh of the *Centre d'etudes et Recherches Internationales* (CERI), "and nobody is playing that role. But the UN should be empowered to do it."

The third problem is that sectors of the Pakistani armed forces and intelligence services are not willing to accept the new conditions and benchmarks for Washington's aid, and fear that US strategy seeks to isolate Pakistan by supporting greater Indian influence in Afghanistan (see Kanchan Lakshman, "India in Afghanistan: a presence under pressure [24]", 11 July 2008). Both Pakistani and Indian diplomatic efforts are, in fact, using the Afghan conflict to advance their respective geopolitical agendas in the region. Pakistan and India have been in permanent tension since 1947, with intermittent armed confrontations and an ongoing dispute over Kashmir.

The fourth problem is that the regional approach is a good idea wrapped in a complex reality [25]. Afghanistan is a mirror in which are projected [26] a series of geopolitical tensions and interests: among China, Russia and Iran as well as between India and Pakistan. Ultimately, however, Afghanistan is not a priority for any of these countries. The issues at stake are commerce, access to energy resources, drug-trafficking, refugees, political instability in central Asia, the expansion of radical Islamism, and - yes - geopolitical leadership. Each of these countries is also involved in its own alliances, and there are already regional organisations in place: for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [26], which groups Russia, China and four ex-Soviet central-Asian states.

The fifth problem is that Europeans (and Canadians) are unwilling to invest resources and soldiers' lives in protecting American security. By focusing on the stabilisation of Afghanistan to protect the US from terrorist attacks, President Obama has prepared the ground for possible future disagreements in transatlantic relations. This might explain why, at the French-hosted part of Nato's sixtieth-anniversary [27] summit in Strasbourg on 3 April, Obama announced: "It is probably more likely that al-Qaida would be able to launch a serious terrorist attack in Europe than in the United States because of its proximity. This is not an American mission - this is a Nato mission, and this is an international mission".

A joint report by two Norwegian research centres - the International Peace Research Institute [28] (PRIO) and the Chr Michelsen Institute [29] (CMI) - is sceptical about the Nato rationale of increasing troops and negotiating "from strength" (see Astri Suhrke et al., Conciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan: An Overview [30] [CMI/PRIO, 2009). The authors recommend that the Kabul government, with the support of the international community, should use traditional institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan to promote local-level truces, arrangements for peaceful coexistence and reconciliation at national and local levels. At the same time, they say, the foreign missions in Afghanistan should revive [31] bottom-up peacebuilding strategies, such as promoting the conflict-resolution mechanisms of local instruments such as the *jirga* and the *shura*; as well as local development, rehabilitation and civic-education projects.

AfPak...Washington [19]
(19 March 2009)

Richard Fyjis-Walker,
"Afghanistan: a new realism? [19]" (31 March 2009)

Paul Rogers, **"Afghanistan: the last throw [19]"** (3 April 2009)

Barack Obama insisted several times during his week-long trip to Europe that he was ready to "listen" to allies and critics. The ability to listen to the conclusions of researchers on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be an important test of his presidency.

This article was translated from Spanish by Fionnuala Ni Eigearthaigh

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- [22] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7958603.stm
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