Resolved: The U.S. should withdraw all regular combat forces from Afghanistan.

Obama team lays out new Afghan-Pakistan approach

Shaun Tandon, AFP, March 1, 2009

WASHINGTON (AFP) — After setting a deadline to pull US forces from Iraq, President Barack Obama is shifting gears quickly to Afghanistan and Pakistan as he lays out a broad, regional approach to fighting extremism…

"We've been thinking very militarily, but we haven't been as effective in thinking diplomatically, we haven't been thinking effectively around the development side of the equation," Obama said Friday on PBS television. "Obviously, we haven't been thinking regionally, recognizing that Afghanistan is actually an Afghanistan-Pakistan problem, because right now the militants... are often times coming over the border from Pakistan," he said.

All three sides hailed the openness of the Washington talks, with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi saying that the new administration compared with president George W. Bush's is "really willing to listen to us."

But disputes are simmering just under the surface. US and Afghan policymakers accuse elements of the Pakistani military and intelligence services of turning a blind or even sympathetic eye to the Taliban -- whose regime ousted in 2001 had been allied with Islamabad.

Pakistan, in turn, is angered by US unmanned drone attacks on its territory which have killed high-level militants but also civilians -- inflaming local opinion. Pakistan has urged, so far unsuccessfully, the new Obama administration to halt the attacks and hand over the drones to them….

The Obama team's calls for a regional approach come as relations sharply improve between Islamabad and Kabul after Pakistan's civilian president, Asif Ali Zardari, took over last year from military ruler Pervez Musharraf.

But Zardari is under intense pressure. Thousands of demonstrators recently took to the street in support of his nemesis, Nawaz Sharif, after the Supreme Court banned the former prime minister from running for office. India has also been demanding more action from Pakistan and accused its powerful spy agency of helping plot November's attacks by Islamic militants in Mumbai that killed 165 people.

Senator John McCain, Obama's rival for the presidency last year, said that Washington must stop looking at Pakistan just through the lens of the Afghan conflict and treat the nuclear-armed country as important in its own right. "We should start by empowering the new civilian government in Islamabad to defeat radicalism with greater support for development, health and education," McCain said.

John Dempsey of the United States Institute of Peace said the Obama administration and its new special envoy to South Asia, Richard Holbrooke, would try to find ways the countries could work together, saying all sought less terrorism and more trade. "They do have common interests in certain areas that you should try to promote," said Dempsey, who heads the institute's Kabul office. "Pakistan, for all the criticism it gets, has been suffering from the scourge of terrorism as much as anyone," he said.

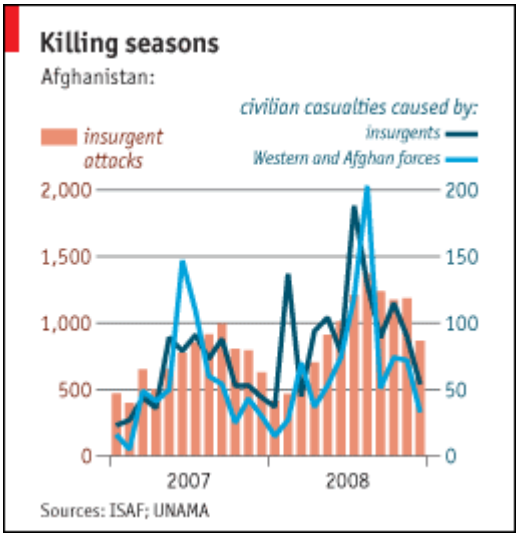
An Afghan surge: Barack Obama will deploy an additional 17,000 American soldiers to Afghanistan

Feb 18th 2009 | KABUL From Economist.com

THE big Antonov aircraft lumbered over the snow-clad mountains, landed at Kabul airport and, like a mythological whale, opened its great jaws to disgorge a consignment of Russian-designed attack helicopters. It might have been a scene from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, except that nowadays it is America that is providing the refurbished Mi-35 Hind helicopters that once terrorised the Afghan countryside, and training (or retraining) their Afghan crews. Many are veterans of the Soviet-backed forces; the commander of Afghanistan's air corps is a former MiG-21 pilot.

Such ironies will give ammunition to the many doubters who say that America is repeating the errors of the Soviet Union. Like the Soviet empire (and the British one before it), it has failed to understand that controlling Afghanistan is much harder than invading it. And like Soviet leaders, critics say, President Barack Obama is now reinforcing failure by sending thousands more troops to confront an insurgency organised from across the border in Pakistan. The White House on February 17th announced that 17,000 more troops would join the existing 65,000 Western troops "to stabilise a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires."

Despite the weight of history in Afghanistan (the defeat of British and then Soviet forces) and the yearly deterioration in security, American commanders remain bullish that the war is "winnable". Unlike the anti-Soviet *mujahideen*, they argue, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and their allies do not have the support of a superpower. America has broad international backing for its actions, and still enjoys a good measure of consent among ordinary Afghans. So, for now, American pilots and their Afghan charges dominate the air, with little fear of being shot at with anti-aircraft missiles of the kind America once gave to the *mujahideen* – from whose ranks Osama bin Laden arose.



The Afghan army is being built in mid-battle, expanding from the current 80,000 troops to 134,000 (plus embedded Western troops) by 2011. Afghan soldiers are respected by Western commanders as tough fighters, and are well-liked by most Afghans as members of one of the few functioning national institutions.

In the short term, NATO hopes that with more Afghan units and extra American troops, perhaps helped by a possible short-term deployment of as many as 10,000 more European soldiers, it will be able to secure enough of the populated areas in the restive Pushtun belt to ensure a credible presidential election in August. Commanders say that the American reinforcements will be used to improve security in provinces surrounding Kabul, to protect the ring-road that girdles the country's capital and, above all, to reinforce NATO's faltering effort in southern Afghanistan. British and Canadian forces in Helmand and Kandahar provinces respectively have been hard-pressed since 2006. The extra troops will also establish greater control of the open desert border with Pakistan in the south; they will seek to interdict fighters and weapons being smuggled into Afghanistan and drugs being taken out of it.

This may lead to a rise in violence, at least in the short term. But commanders argue that with more boots on the ground they will have less reason to use air power, which has contributed to a sharp increase in civilian casualties and has raised tensions with the Afghan government. The United Nations recorded 2,118 civilians killed in the conflict last year, 39% higher than in 2007 and the highest yearly toll since the fall of the Taliban. Of these, 55% were attributed to the Taliban and other anti-government elements and 39% were caused by Western and Afghan forces.

Few are predicting an Iraq-style improvement in security; the sanctuary enjoyed by insurgents in Pakistan gives them the ability to fight more or less indefinitely. Indeed, there is much debate over the extent of Pakistan's co-operation with NATO (or, in the view of sceptics, of its double game). Senior Americans

say cross-border liaison has improved, particularly in the east (for example along the border with Kunar province), but some Afghans in high positions think this is a sham. They note that the most important havens—in Waziristan and Baluchistan—are untroubled by Pakistani forces; Taliban leaders are said to meet freely in Karachi. For one well-placed Afghan, Pakistan is the political wing of the Taliban.

As insurgents come under pressure from NATO in the south, they may shift their attacks to areas that are less defended; the Dutch in Uruzgan, a relative success story of late, worry that the Taliban will move into their area as the Americans push into Helmand and Kandahar. Counter-insurgency requires large numbers of troops and policemen (the latter are too often weak, notoriously corrupt or drug-addled).

Abdul Rahim Wardak, Afghanistan's defence minister, says that his army needs to be much bigger than the planned 134,000. Almost everybody would agree with him. Iraq, smaller than Afghanistan in terms of land area and population, has over 267,000 troops. (The 17,000 new American soldiers are fewer than the 30,000 requested by the NATO commander, General David McKiernan.)

One problem, though, is that the Afghan army cannot grow any faster because of a shortage of literate recruits for the officer corps. Another problem is money; Afghanistan is too poor to afford even the forces it now has. But Mr Wardak says that is the wrong way to look at the problem. He suggests that: "Building, equipping and training the Afghan army is much more economical than the deployment of foreign troops".

France's Morin favours NATO Afghan withdrawal date

Reuters, Tuesday, March 3, 2009

…Defence Minister Herve Morin, on a visit to Washington for talks with top U.S. officials, said NATO could set specific timelines for achieving progress in Afghanistan in areas including security and governance.

"Once we have redefined our overall concept in Afghanistan, linked to the increased contribution by the Americans, I think we must define some dates fairly rapidly," Morin said at a forum hosted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. "And why not set, also fairly rapidly, a date that could announce the start of the withdrawal of alliance forces?"

Senior U.S. officials have stressed the need to reassure Afghans that NATO troops are not an occupying force, but none has suggested setting a withdrawal date…

There are just over 30,000 troops there from other NATO countries and U.S. allies. France, with 2,800 troops, is the fourth largest contributor after the United States, Britain and Germany.

Washington has also asked its allies for additional temporary forces to help secure Afghanistan ahead of a national election currently set for August 20.

U.S. officials have emphasized that they expect the war in Afghanistan to be a long hard fight and have expressed frustration over the reluctance of NATO allies to provide additional combat forces.

Fighting the Taliban: A strategy for avoiding defeat

From *The Economist* print edition, Feb 19th 2009

IT IS widely understood that the West's war with the Taliban in Afghanistan cannot be won inside that country's borders alone. So long as the "semi-autonomous" badlands of Pakistan's tribal areas provide refuge for terrorists, Afghanistan—and the West—will never know security. A lasting settlement must also meet the interests of other countries in the region, including Iran, India and Russia. So it is encouraging that Barack Obama's administration is embracing a "regional" approach, with the appointment of Richard Holbrooke, a punchy senior diplomat, as envoy to "AfPak". But other sources of

encouragement have been scarce of late (see article). This week's decision to send a further 17,000 American troops to Afghanistan is in part a sign of how badly the war is going.

"Victory", defined in terms that get more modest by the month, seems more distant than ever. Worse, the prosecution of the war seems to be risking an even more calamitous strategic defeat: the Talibanisation of Pakistan, an Islamic country of 170m people that happens to possess a nuclear arsenal.

That, thankfully, is still a distant prospect. The danger of Pakistan failing as a state is often overstated. The government's writ still runs in the parts where most of its people live—and the vast majority of those people have moderate views. When given the chance to vote, they unambiguously reject Islamist parties. And the election last year restored Pakistan's fragile democracy. Though notorious for corruption, Pakistan's civilian politicians have usually done better than the military men in resisting Islamist extremism. President Asif Zardari and Yusuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister, deserve patience. The alternative, military rule, is what got Pakistan into this mess.

The problem of the badlands

But even if the Talibanisation of all Pakistan is a long way off, the danger the Taliban represents should not be understated either. It is strong not just in the Pushtun borderlands of Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), where Pakistan and Afghanistan blur along a disputed border. Early this month a Polish engineer was beheaded not far from the capital, Islamabad. This week the government bought a truce in an Islamist uprising in the Swat Valley, once a famous tourist spot in NWFP, by agreeing to adopt *sharia* law there. Pakistan remains half-hearted about fighting predominantly Pushtun militants. Even now, it seems, a part of its establishment sees the Afghan Taliban as a "strategic asset"—insurance against India's ambitions and against NATO's inevitable withdrawal.

To make up for Pakistan's lack of enthusiasm for this fight American forces in Afghanistan are continuing under the Obama administration to make increasing numbers of unmanned air raids in Pakistan. These raids appear to have been highly successful in killing Taliban and al-Qaeda suspects. But they are strategically misconceived. Whatever short-term battlefield advantage the raids bring pales in comparison with the long-term danger posed by the resentment they cause: a generation of poor young Muslims growing up in Pakistan feels bombarded by American bombs on one side and by fanatical Islamist propaganda on the other.

Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War

G i l l es Dorronsoro**,** Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, From "Foreign Policy for the Next President," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2009

After seven years of war, the international community has failed to create the conditions for a sustainable Afghan state. The reality is that the international coalition now has limited resources and a narrow political time frame to create lasting Afghan institutions. Yet, building such institutions is our only realistic exit strategy.

The debate in Washington and European capitals has recently centered on how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan in 2009 as part of a *military* surge. Such a tactical adjustment is unlikely to make much of a difference in a country where the basic population-to-troops ratio is estimated at approximately 430 people per foreign soldier. Every year, we have seen small-scale surges of troops and resources, only to have more violence, growing casualties, and an ever-stronger insurgency.

Meanwhile, the Afghan and Western publics are losing patience. The real question is how combat troops should be used. The two choices we face are whether to continue playing offense by going after the Taliban, especially in the south and the east, and spreading troops thin; or whether to adopt a new strategy focusing on protecting strategic sites, namely, urban centers and key roads, to allow for the development of a strong core of Afghan institutions.

The latter strategy consists of de-escalating a war that has become a Jihad and building enough Afghan military capacity to maintain relative stability in these key areas. To accomplish that, we have one major political weapon: a progressive and focused scaling down of combat troops on our own terms. This would neutralize the Taliban's appeals for Jihad against unbelieving foreign invaders, open up space for Afghan institutions and political solutions, and allow us to focus our efforts on areas where we can still make a difference. This strategy brings its own risks, but the risks are far smaller than continuing with more of the same policies and reaching a point where we are left with no choice but to leave in chaos.

This analysis offers five main recommendations that I here refer to as a "focus and exit strategy."

1) Available resources must shape the strategy, not the other way around. The United States and its allies have nearly reached their maximum level of commitment. The more military resources the allies put into Afghanistan, the less time they have to succeed. The reason is that the financial and human costs of maintaining a high-level military presence become political liabilities.

2) Due to limited resources, the objectives have to be clear and limited. The main objective is to leave an Afghan government that can survive a U.S. and NATO withdrawal. Policies that are not part of the general strategy should not be priorities. For example, it is not possible to have an effective counternarcotics policy or to impose Western values on Afghan society.

3) The key idea is to lower the level of conflict (i.e., to reverse the current trend of ever increasing violence). The only way to weaken, and perhaps divide, the armed opposition is to reduce military confrontations. The United States must define three areas: strategic zones (under total allied control), buffer areas (around the strategic ones), and opposition territory. Policies would be very different in each area; the resources allocated to institution building would be mostly concentrated in the strategic areas.

4) The only meaningful way to halt the insurgency's momentum is to start withdrawing troops. The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban. Combat troop reduction should not be a consequence of an elusive "stabilization"; rather, it should constitute an essential part of a political-military strategy. The withdrawal must be conducted on U.S. terms only, not through negotiations, because negotiations with the armed opposition would weaken the Afghan government. Negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban cannot bring positive results until the Taliban recognize that the government in Kabul is going to survive after the withdrawal.

5) Withdrawal would allow the United States to focus on the central security problems in the region: al-Qaeda and the instability in Pakistan. The withdrawal would allow Pakistan to define common interests with the United States instead of playing the constant double game we have witnessed in recent decades.

Winning In Afghanistan

Victory there won't look like you think. Time to get out and give up on nation building.

Andrew J. Bacevich, NEWSWEEK, December 31, 2008

In Afghanistan today, the United States and its allies are using the wrong means to vigorously pursue the wrong mission. Persisting on the present course—as both John McCain and Barack Obama have promised to do—will turn Operation Enduring Freedom into Operation Enduring Obligation. Afghanistan will become a sinkhole consuming resources neither the U.S. military nor the U.S. government can afford to waste.

The allied campaign in Afghanistan is now entering its eighth year. The operation was launched with expectations of a quick, decisive victory but has failed to accomplish that objective. Granted, the diversion of resources to the misguided war in Iraq has forced commanders in Afghanistan to make do with less. Yet that doesn't explain the lack of progress. The real problem is that Washington has misunderstood the nature of the challenge Afghanistan poses and misread America's interests there.

One of history's enduring lessons is that Afghans don't appreciate it when outsiders tell them how to govern their affairs—just ask the British or the Soviets. U.S. success in overthrowing the Taliban seemed to suggest this lesson no longer applied, at least to Americans. That quickly proved an illusion.

In Iraq, toppling the old order was easy. Installing a new one to take its place has turned out to be infinitely harder.

Yet the challenges of pacifying Afghanistan dwarf those posed by Iraq. Afghanistan is a much bigger country—nearly the size of Texas—and has a larger population that's just as fractious. Moreover, unlike Iraq, Afghanistan possesses almost none of the prerequisites of modernity; its literacy rate, for example, is 28 percent, barely a third of Iraq's. In terms of effectiveness and legitimacy, the government in Kabul lags well behind Baghdad—not exactly a lofty standard. Apart from opium, Afghans produce almost nothing the world wants. While liberating Iraq may have seriously reduced the reservoir of U.S. power, fixing Afghanistan would drain it altogether.

Meanwhile, the chief effect of allied military operations there so far has been not to defeat the radical Islamists but to push them across the Pakistani border. As a result, efforts to stabilize Afghanistan are contributing to the destabilization of Pakistan, with potentially devastating implications. September's bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad suggests that the extremists are growing emboldened. Today and for the foreseeable future, no country poses a greater potential threat to U.S. national security than does Pakistan. To risk the stability of that nuclear-armed state in the vain hope of salvaging Afghan-istan would be a terrible mistake.

All this means that the proper U.S. priority for Afghanistan should be not to try harder but to change course. The war in Afghanistan (like the Iraq War) won't be won militarily. It can be settled—however imperfectly—only through politics.

The new U.S. president needs to realize that America's real political objective in Afghanistan is actually quite modest: to ensure that terrorist groups like Al Qaeda can't use it as a safe haven for launching attacks against the West. Accomplishing that won't require creating a modern, cohesive nation-state. U.S. officials tend to assume that power in Afghanistan ought to be exercised from Kabul. Yet the real influence in Afghanistan has traditionally rested with tribal leaders and warlords. Rather than challenge that tradition, Washington should work with it. Offered the right incentives, warlords can accomplish U.S. objectives more effectively and more cheaply than Western combat battalions. The basis of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan should therefore become decentralization and outsourcing, offering cash and other emoluments to local leaders who will collaborate with the United States in excluding terrorists from their territory.

This doesn't mean Washington should blindly trust that warlords will become America's loyal partners. U.S. intelligence agencies should continue to watch Afghanistan closely, and the Pentagon should crush any jihadist activities that local powers fail to stop themselves. As with the Israelis in Gaza, periodic airstrikes may well be required to pre-empt brewing plots before they mature.

Were U.S. resources unlimited and U.S. interests in Afghanistan more important, upping the ante with additional combat forces might make sense. But U.S. power—especially military power—is quite limited these days, and U.S. priorities lie elsewhere.

Rather than committing more troops, therefore, the new president should withdraw them while devising a more realistic—and more affordable—strategy for Afghanistan.

Bacevich is professor of history and international relations at Boston University, and the author, most recently, of "The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism."

A Strategy for Afghanistan

By Henry A. Kissinger

The Washington Post, Thursday, February 26, 2009; A19

The Obama administration faces dilemmas familiar to several of its predecessors. America cannot withdraw from Afghanistan now, but neither can it sustain the strategy that brought us to this point.

The stakes are high. Victory for the Taliban in Afghanistan would give a tremendous shot in the arm to jihadism globally -- threatening Pakistan with jihadist takeover and possibly intensifying terrorism in India, which has the world's third-largest Muslim population. Russia, China and Indonesia, which have all been targets of jihadist Islam, could also be at risk.

Heretofore, America has pursued traditional anti-insurgency tactics: to create a central government, help it extend its authority over the entire country and, in the process, bring about a modern bureaucratic and democratic society.

That strategy cannot succeed in Afghanistan -- especially not as an essentially solitary effort. The country is too large, the territory too forbidding, the ethnic composition too varied, the population too heavily armed. No foreign conqueror has ever succeeded in occupying Afghanistan. Even attempts to establish centralized Afghan control have rarely succeeded and then not for long. Afghans seem to define their country in terms of a common dedication to independence but not to unitary or centralized self-government.

The truism that the war is, in effect, a battle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan population is valid enough in concept. The low standard of living of much of the population has been exacerbated by 30 years of civil war. The economy is on the verge of sustaining itself through the sale of narcotics. There is no significant democratic tradition. Reform is a moral necessity. But the time scale for reform is out of sync with the requirements of anti-guerrilla warfare. Reform will require decades; it should occur as a result of, and even side by side with, the attainment of security -- but it cannot be the precondition for it.

The military effort will inevitably unfold at a pace different from the country's political evolution. Immediately, however, we are able to make sure that our aid efforts, now diffuse and inefficient, are coherent and relevant to popular needs. And much greater emphasis should be given to local and regional entities.

Military strategy should concentrate on preventing the emergence of a coherent, contiguous state within the state controlled by jihadists. In practice, this would mean control of Kabul and the Pashtun area. A jihadist base area on both sides of the mountainous Afghan-Pakistani border would become a permanent threat to hopes for a moderate evolution and to all of Afghanistan's neighbors. Gen. David Petraeus has argued that, reinforced by the number of American forces he has recommended, he should be able to control the 10 percent of Afghan territory where, in his words, 80 percent of the military threat originates. This is the region where the "clear, hold and build" strategy that had success in Iraq is particularly applicable.

In the rest of the country, our military strategy should be more fluid, aimed at forestalling the emergence of terrorist strong points. It should be based on close cooperation with local chiefs and coordination with their militias to be trained by U.S. forces -- the kind of strategy that proved so successful in Anbar province, the Sunni stronghold in Iraq. This is a plausible approach, though it seems improbable that the 17,000 reinforcements President Obama recently committed are enough. In the end, the fundamental issue is not so much how the war will be conducted but how it will be ended. Afghanistan is almost the archetypal international problem requiring a multilateral solution for a political framework to emerge. In

the 19th century, formal neutrality was sometimes negotiated to impose a standstill on interventions in and from strategically located countries. This provided a framework for defusing day-to-day international relations. (Belgian neutrality, for example, was not challenged for nearly 100 years.) Is it possible to devise a modern equivalent?

In Afghanistan, such an outcome is achievable only if its principal neighbors agree on a policy of restraint and opposition to terrorism. Their recent conduct argues against such prospects. Yet history should teach them that unilateral efforts at dominance are likely to fail in the face of countervailing intervention by other outside actors. To explore such a vision, the United States should propose a working group of Afghanistan's neighbors, India and the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Such a group should be charged with assisting in the reconstruction and reform of Afghanistan and establishing principles for the country's international status and obligations to oppose terrorist activities. Over time, America's unilateral military efforts can merge with the diplomatic efforts of this group. As the strategy envisaged by Petraeus succeeds, the prospects for a political solution along these lines would grow correspondingly.

The precondition for such a policy is cooperation with Russia and Pakistan. With respect to Russia, it requires a clear definition of priorities, especially a choice between partnership or adversarial conduct insofar as it depends on us.

The conduct of Pakistan will be crucial. Pakistan's leaders must face the fact that continued toleration of the sanctuaries -- or continued impotence with respect to them -- will draw their country ever deeper into an international maelstrom. If the jihadists were to prevail in Afghanistan, Pakistan would surely be the next target -- as is observable by activity already taking place along the existing borders and in the Swat Valley close to Islamabad. If that were to happen, the affected countries would need to consult each other about the implications of the nuclear arsenal of a Pakistan being engulfed or even threatened by jihadists. Like every country engaged in Afghanistan, Pakistan has to make decisions that will affect its international position for decades.

Other countries, especially our NATO allies, face comparable choices. Symbolically, the participation of NATO partners is significant. But save for some notable exceptions, public support for military operations is negligible in almost all NATO countries. It is possible, of course, that Obama's popularity in Europe can modify these attitudes -- but probably to only a limited extent. The president would have to decide how far he will carry the inevitable differences and face the reality that disagreements concern fundamental questions of NATO's future and reach. Improved consultation would ease this process. It is likely to turn out, however, that the differences are not procedural. We may then conclude that an enhanced NATO contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction is more useful than a marginal military effort constrained by caveats. But if NATO turns into an alliance a la carte in this manner, a precedent that can cut both ways would be set. Those who tempt a U.S. withdrawal by their indifference or irresolution evade the prospect that it would be the prelude to a long series of accelerating and escalating crises.

President Obama said Tuesday night that he "will not allow terrorists to plot against the American people from safe havens halfway around the world." Whatever strategy his team selects needs to be pursued with determination. It is not possible to hedge against failure by half-hearted execution.

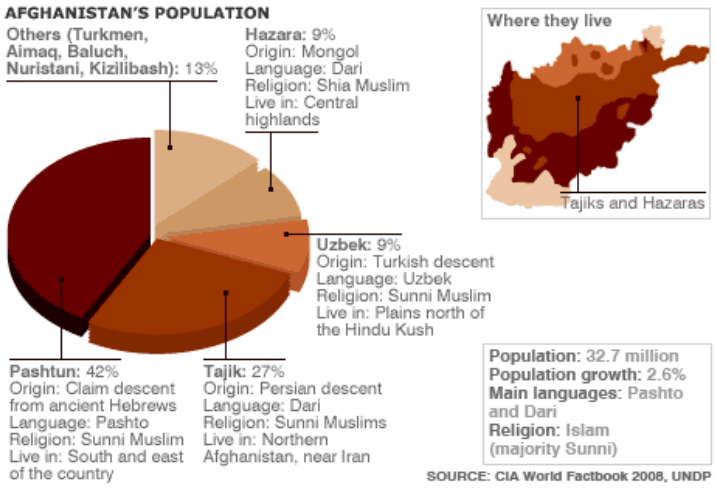
Life in Afghanistan

BBC News – Afghanistan continues to struggle to find stability as the increasing Taleban insurgency and refugee problems cast a shadow on advances in education and the economy.

Afghanistan continues to suffer from the many contending ethnic, religious and regional rivalries.

Regional commanders, the illegal drugs trade and the continuing Taleban insurgency hamper the rule of law, development and aid efforts. Millions of people have left their homes to flee conflicts in recent years.

About five million Afghans have returned since the fall of the Taleban in 2001. Some three million remain abroad. There has been massive internal displacement, especially in the south as a result of the insurgency - which has intensified since 2006. The number of people being killed in the Afghan conflict has soared in recent years as violence has returned to levels not seen since the Taleban were driven from power in 2001.



The UN says that from January to August 2008 1,445 civilians were killed - a rise of 39% on the same period for 2007. Most deaths were attributed to the Taleban but the number of civilians killed by pro-government forces - the majority in air strikes - also rose sharply. Afghan and foreign forces say hundreds of militants have also been killed - it is impossible to verify precise numbers. Military fatalities among foreign and Afghan forces have also soared.

HEALTH

Afghanistan has some of the world's worst health indicators, with an average life expectancy of 43. About one in five children dies before his or her fifth birthday.

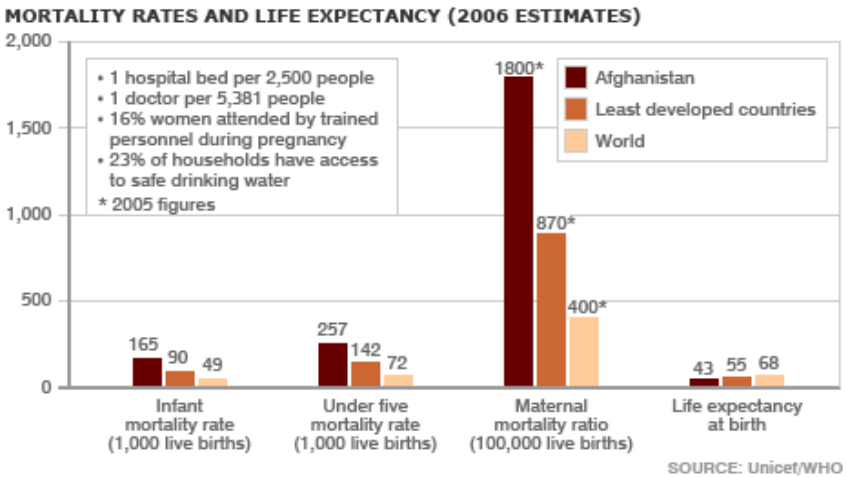
Most women - particularly in rural areas - are never seen by a health professional during pregnancy and childbirth, and the country has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world - at nearly one in 50 births.

Most people lack access to safe drinking water and sanitary facilities. Disease, malnutrition and poverty are widespread and millions of people are dependant on food aid.

International organisations are helping the ministry of health provide a basic healthcare service to the entire population. In 2006 a campaign was launched to immunise children against polio.

EDUCATION

Afghanistan has seen a massive increase in school enrolment since the fall of the Taleban in 2001, with more than 4.2 million children returning to school.



Although girls make up just 35% of the school population, that is a huge increase even compared to the years before the Taleban banned them from schools.

More than two-thirds of Afghans over the age of 15 cannot read and write. Increased attendance has placed pressure on the educational system which

faces a shortage of teachers and materials.

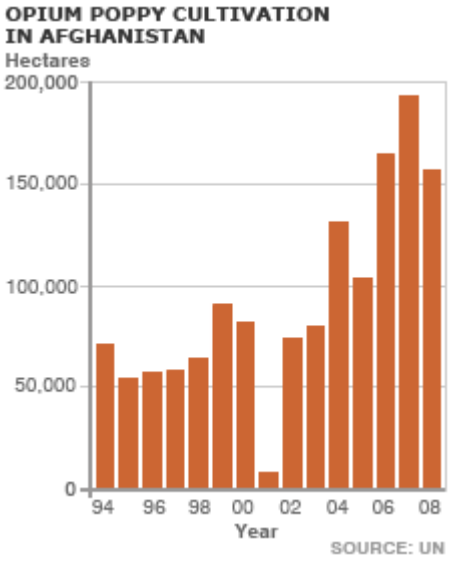
Hundreds of schools - and students - have been attacked by insurgents and President Hamid Karzai has said that several hundred thousand students are missing out on an education because of the insurgency.

ECONOMY

Afghanistan's economy has recovered greatly since the fall of the Taleban in 2001 but the country still remains one of the world's poorest, according to the World Bank. Farmers and nomads comprise about three-quarters of the Afghan population, although only about 12% of the land is arable.

War and drought have left about half of the rural population in poverty. The current drought - one of the worst in living memory - has affected traditional food crops such as are corn, rice, barley, wheat, vegetables, fruits and nuts.

Trade with key economic partners in the region - Pakistan, China and Iran - has grown and neighbouring countries have helped rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure - from roads to schools.



Drug manufacture is still a tempting solution for many rural households. Opium production is banned by the government, but it is far more lucrative to growers than conventional crops. Evidence shows that villages that have received assistance are less likely to grow opium. In the centre-north, despite poverty, 18 provinces are now "opium-free" compared with 13 in 2007 and just six in 2006.

POLITICS

The shape of Afghanistan's new and democratic government was set out in the constitution approved in January 2004 by Afghan elders and local dignitaries.

The constitution established Afghanistan as an Islamic republic where men and women have equal rights and duties before the law.

Hamid Karzai won the country's first direct elections for president in 2004. The first parliamentary and provincial elections since the fall of the Taleban were held in September 2005.

In 2006, three multi-ethnic opposition blocs, including jihadis, leftists, independents and women, were formed. Presidential elections are due to take place in 2009 and parliamentary elections will follow in 2010.

BBC News: Who are the Taleban?

Islamic law

The Taleban first came to prominence in the autumn of 1994. Their leader was a village clergyman, Mullah Mohammad Omar, who lost his right eye fighting the occupying forces of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Their target was the feuding warlords known as the mujahideen who had forced Soviet troops out of the country.

The Taleban's promise was to restore peace and security and enforce Sharia, or Islamic law, once in power. Afghans, weary of the mujahideen's excesses and infighting, generally welcomed the Taleban…

Their early popularity was largely due to their success in stamping out corruption, curbing lawlessness and making the roads and the areas under their control safe for commerce to flourish. From their birthplace in the province of Kandahar in south-western Afghanistan, the Taleban quickly extended their influence. They captured the province of Herat, bordering Iran, in September 1995.

Exactly one year later, they captured the Afghan capital, Kabul, after overthrowing the regime of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his defence minister, Ahmed Shah Masood. By 1998, they were in control of almost 90% of Afghanistan.

Pakistan 'the architect'

The circumstances of the Taleban's emergence remained the centre of controversial debate. Despite repeated denials, Pakistan is seen as the architect of the Taleban enterprise. Suspicions arose early on when the Taleban went to the rescue of a Pakistani convoy stranded in Kandahar following attacks and looting by rival mujahideen groups.

Many of the Afghans who joined the Taleban were educated in madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan. Pakistan was also one of only three countries, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which recognised the Taleban regime. It was also the last country to break diplomatic ties with the Taleban. The US put Pakistan under pressure to do so after the 11 September, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington.

Pashtun sympathies

The Taleban were overwhelmingly Pashtun, the ethnic group that forms the majority of Afghanistan's diverse population and also inhabits the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan in neighbouring Pakistan.

Even now, the resurgent Taleban draw considerable sympathy from fellow Pashtuns in Pakistan. Some of their fugitive leaders are able to find refuge across the long and porous border in NWFP, Balochistan and the semi-autonomous tribal areas.

Once in power, the Taleban set up an authoritarian administration that tolerated no opposition to their hard-line policies. Islamic punishments - such as public executions of convicted murderers and adulterers and amputations of those found guilty of thefts - were introduced. Television, music and cinema were banned after being adjudged frivolities.

Girls aged 10 and above were forbidden from going to school - working women were ordered to stay at home. Men were required to grow beards and women had to wear the all-covering burqa. The Taleban's religious police earned notoriety as they tried to implement these restrictions. Taleban policies, particularly those concerning human and women's rights, also brought them into conflict with the international community.

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda

But what was to bring much greater conflict was the Taleban's role as host to Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda movement. The August 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that left more than 225 people dead prompted Washington to present the Taleban with a difficult choice. They were required to expel Bin Laden, whom the US held responsible for those bombings and other attacks, or face the consequences.

When the Taleban refused to hand over their Saudi-born guest, US President Bill Clinton ordered a missile attack on a Bin Laden camp in southern Afghanistan. As further punishment, the US persuaded the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Taleban-ruled Afghanistan in 1999.

Harsher UN sanctions were put in place in 2001 in another effort to force the Taleban to deliver Bin Laden. The sanctions, and the denial of Afghanistan's seat in the UN to the Taleban, increased the political and diplomatic isolation of their regime.

It also prompted them to pursue a more isolationist and fundamentalist agenda. For example, the Taleban went ahead with the destruction of the famous Bamiyan Buddha statues carved out of a mountain cliff in central Afghanistan, despite international outrage.

US onslaught

The events of 11 September 2001 signalled the beginning of the end for the Taleban's control of Afghanistan. The US reiterated its demand that the Taleban hand over Bin Laden to face trial for masterminding the attacks on US soil.

But again, the Taleban defended Bin Laden and refused to expel him. On October 7, 2001, a US-led coalition intervened militarily in Afghanistan and by the first week of December the Taleban regime had collapsed.

Mullah Omar and most of the other senior Taleban leaders, along with Bin Laden and some of his senior al-Qaeda associates, survived the American onslaught. Mullah Omar and most of his comrades have evaded capture despite one of the largest manhunts in the world and are believed to be guiding the resurgent Taleban.

The Taleban retreat enabled them to limit their human and material losses. However, differences on strategy and Mullah Omar's authoritarian style have prompted some Taleban to quit the movement or become inactive.

From Wikipedia articles on Afghanistan

Soviet invasion and civil war

In order to bolster the Parcham faction, the Soviet Union—citing the 1978 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborliness that had been signed between the two countries—intervened on December 24, 1979. Over 100,000 Soviet troops took part in the invasion backed by another 100,000 plus and by members of the Parcham faction. Amin was killed and replaced by Babrak Karmal.

In response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and part of its overall Cold War strategy, the United States responded by arming and otherwise supporting the Afghan mujahideen, which had taken up arms against the Soviet occupiers. …

The Soviet occupation resulted in the killings of at least 600,000 to 2 million Afghan civilians. Over five million Afghans fled their country to Pakistan, Iran and other parts of the world. Faced with mounting international pressure and great number of casualties on both sides, the Soviets withdrew in 1989.

Soviet personnel strengths and casualties

Between December 25, 1979 and February 15, 1989, a total of 620,000 soldiers served with the forces in Afghanistan (though there were only 80,000-104,000 serving at one time)…After the war ended, the Soviet Union published figures of dead Soviet soldiers: the total was 13,836 men, on average, and 1,537 men a year. According to updated figures, the Soviet army lost 14,427, the KGB lost 576, with 28 people dead and missing

Damage to Afghanistan

Over 1 million Afghans were killed.[64] 5 million Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran, 1/3 of the prewar population of the country. Another 2 million Afghans were displaced within the country. In the 1980s, one out of two refugees in the world was an Afghan.[65]

Along with fatalities were 1.2 million Afghans disabled (mujahideen, government soldiers and noncombatants) and 3 million maimed or wounded (primarily noncombatants).[66]

Irrigation systems, crucial to agriculture in Afghanistan's arid climate, were destroyed by aerial bombing and strafing by Soviet or government forces. In the worst year of the war, 1985, well over half of all the farmers who remained in Afghanistan had their fields bombed, and over one quarter had their irrigation systems destroyed and their livestock shot by Soviet or government troops, according to a survey conducted by Swedish relief experts [67]