

# **The Af-Pak Strategy: A New Hope for Afghanistan**

**An Essay for**

**The Atlantic Council of Canada**

**By**

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## **The Atlantic Council of Canada – 2009 Undergraduate Student Essay Contest**

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The War in Afghanistan, which began on October 7, 2001, was the focus of US military operations in the Middle East up until the start of the war in Iraq, which began on March 20, 2003. The mission in Afghanistan had not yet been accomplished, while the Bush administration presented the President with another war that was going to be just as difficult and costly as the one in Afghanistan. This ultimately meant that military and reconstruction resources were going to be diverted and divided up between both countries. This policy by the Bush Administration, in my opinion, was not in the best interest of the NATO mission. Once the U.S. and its allies were in Afghanistan, they had a commitment to the country, a commitment which the war in Iraq made nearly impossible to fulfill. The second mission would ultimately endanger the first and Afghanistan steadily fell back into the hands of the Taliban insurgency. The progress made by the allied forces was slipping through their fingers as the war in Afghanistan became lost in the clouds of smoke over Baghdad.

The Obama Administration has pledged to re-new its commitment to Afghanistan by formulating a new strategy, which indicates their intention to make Afghanistan one of their top priorities. The strategy focuses on protecting the Afghan population, on training and partnering with Afghan security forces, and on coordinating a regional strategy with neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, India and even Iran. Moreover, the progress will be further overseen by Richard Holbrooke, a skilled diplomat, who has been appointed as special envoy to the conflict. The Obama administration is making up for lost time by investing, not only in a strong military campaign but equally in the training of the Afghan civilians and police.

On March 27, 2009 President Barack Obama articulated his comprehensive strategy, named Af-Pak, for Afghanistan and Pakistan after several years of what can best be described as a no strategy. It was a well thought out counterinsurgency strategy that contained in it the potential for success, as long as it is viewed as a long-term program with limited goals. During that speech he underlined "I want the American people to understand 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,"<sup>1</sup> an unmistakable shift from the previous Bush Administration policy of 'Bringing democracy to Afghanistan', which was a policy that had inherent ideological ambiguities and was not clear cut in its action plan. Will the Obama Administration be able to prevent Afghanistan from being a base for global terrorism and if so will peace and stability be created and maintained in Afghanistan? The answer to this question is complicated and requires a significant number of factors all working together to have the desired result. This essay will go through the main premises of the Af-Pak strategy and argue if there it will improve the lives for the Afghan people.

Firstly, Obama ordered 4,000 new troops to Afghanistan that would focus on training and better preparing Afghanistan's police and military, with the goal of increasing the size of the Afghan army from 83,000 to 134,000 by 2011<sup>7</sup>. Obama pledged to make Afghanistan a top concern for his administration and launched a review of the Afghanistan policy immediately upon taking office. The Af-Pak strategy embodies a noteworthy shift in America's perception of national security and foreign policy. Rather than solely focusing on the military component of the war, the President has pledged hundreds of civilian advisers to improve the lives of regular Afghan people. This means sending over experts in agriculture, education, and law as an integral part of the mission. The plan will "concentrate on improving life for ordinary Afghans." This is

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essential for the re-construction effort as Afghanistan is in need of skilled workers such as teachers, lawyers, doctors, police and business. Ordinary citizens want to go about living their daily lives for which they need teachers to teach their children, lawyers to interpret the law, police to implement it, doctors to heal the sick and businessmen so that the economy can thrive. This approach will improve the lives of ordinary Afghan people and also create a tangible foundation of workers to provide the society with basic services.

In addition, the Obama administration has formulated a 'Bridging Strategy' to combat growing lawlessness, which aims at strengthening Afghanistan's legal institutions. The current government is fragile with limited control outside of Kabul, which puts the areas where they do not govern at risk to falling into the hands of the Taliban. The rule of law must be upheld and implemented in Afghanistan for it is a pillar to democratic development. The emphasis of training practical and professional skilled workers, including lawyers and judges, by the Obama administration is a move in the right direction. Combined with the effort to training the Afghan people on various levels will help improve their legal system with the hopes of it becoming self-sustaining.

Furthermore, the pledged 4,000 extra troops that were dispatched to train Afghan National Security Forces will enable the Afghans to increasingly take responsibility for their own security, which is an important part taking ownership in the re-construction process. Obama stated that more resources would be devoted to civilian efforts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan to contribute to security and democratic institution building. The White House has emphasized the need to rapidly train and expand Afghan forces, rather than to argue for a prolonged direct combat role for U.S. and NATO forces<sup>8</sup>. This will give the Afghan police the necessary training to protect local villages from Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces. Since local police are familiar with places and the problems on a more personal level it will give them a sense of ownership in protecting these villages as opposed to the Americans, an outside force, having to protect them. Therefore, this will allow for the police and military to become a self sustaining branch of security policy. This particular shift in policy is clear-cut at underlining the necessity for long term peace and stability in Afghanistan, the Afghan people will be trained with the skills necessary to secure the peace to re-build their country, while the US and NATO military presence will re-assure the Afghans that they are there only to help them secure the peace.

Since the re-emergence of Taliban-led insurgent activities, securing the peace has not come easy in Afghanistan. Crucial resources have been diverted to fight the war in Iraq, which was not a NATO-sanctioned mission. The dash by the United States to fight another war in Iraq has left fewer soldiers per area in Afghanistan. Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA) stated, "[W]e have under-resourced Afghanistan for too long, we took our eye off the ball when we went into Iraq. All of our resources were devoted to that effort."<sup>1</sup> The Bush administration rushed to a war in Iraq on a hunt for Weapons of Mass Destruction, which they never found, and become concurrently involved in two costly wars. As troops and resources were diverted to Iraq, the Taliban re-established themselves in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. The years that followed were marked by an increasing focus on the war in Iraq, which ultimately saw the goals in Afghanistan become secondary. After taking office, President Obama and his administration pledged to provide more troops to Afghanistan as they bring the War in Iraq to an end. This policy will provide the current military operations in Afghanistan with more soldiers, at little

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extra cost since these soldiers were already fighting in Iraq. Moreover, it will give re-assurance to the NATO allies of the commitment from United States in the first NATO mission beyond the shores of Europe.

The latest concern in the region was along the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tensions have grown between the USA and Pakistan due to that the entrance of coalition troops into Pakistani territory hunting down Taliban fighters in hot pursuit. Problems in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the region threaten peace and security. The internal problems of Pakistan and Afghanistan are interlinked and a destabilized Pakistan means a destabilized Afghanistan. The Obama Administration's new foreign policy may help to ease the tensions between both nations, which include financial aid resources of \$1.5 billion annually to Pakistan over the next 5 years to stabilize Pakistan and to counter radical movements. Additionally, the plan includes an increased regional focus, recognizing that stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be obtained without the consultation and cooperation of other countries in the region. President Obama has he identified Afghanistan's problems as being interrelated with those of Pakistan, which demonstrates his understanding of the issues underlying the insurgency. As National Security Advisor General James Jones put it, the United States "will treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries, but as – with one challenge in one region". The new plan will involve regional co-operations between Pakistan, India and possibly even Iran. An important strategy that was also stressed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon who stated "The contributions of Afghanistan's neighbours and other SCO members are indispensable to the stabilization of the country and the international effort in Afghanistan"<sup>2</sup> When it comes to stabilizing any country, its neighbouring countries play key role. After all, a stable and prosperous neighbour is very much in everybody's interest. It is very common for internal problems to become regional problems as is happening along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Taliban have sought refuge in the Swat Valley and an internal problem to Afghanistan has leaked over into the borders of Pakistan.

Peace and stability are being threatened not only by Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces but also by the heroin trade. Afghanistan has reached record-high levels of illegal drug production. Just as in South America where coca farmers have chosen to cultivate Coca with the ends of creating coca paste, which gives them earnings enough to survive so have the Afghani farmers started to cultivate poppy seed to sell them on the black market to war lords in Afghanistan. This will be one of the greatest challenges for the US and its NATO allies. It is crucial to integrate a grassroots alternative livelihood training program in Afghanistan that can also create a clear strategy for combating Afghanistan's ballooning and all-encompassing opium poppy trade. Alternative agriculture and alternative livelihoods should be an important component of Obama's strategy.

In hind sight, the Bush Administration did not have a strategic development plan for Afghanistan. The idealistic goals of bringing democracy to Afghanistan were sidelined by the war in Iraq. This new war drained the troops stationed in Afghanistan of resources, inhibited them from securing the peace in Afghanistan, and helped the Taliban re-establish along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

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The Obama Administration strategy is to combat growing lawlessness, to train civilian experts, to provide necessary funding, to enhance greater dialogue with local leaders and future talks with moderate sections of the Taliban. In many ways, these goals compliment the goals of the Bush Administrations and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the Obama administration goals are more realistic but with the ends of preventing Afghanistan from being used as a base for global terrorism. Peace and stability are the precursors for democracy. Therefore, only while maintaining peace and stability, by ridding the country of terrorism, can the Afghan people build a prospering and healthy democracy that can be sustained for the years to come. These goals still encompass the fact that democratic development happens in a stepwise manner and the Obama strategy supports and facilitates such an approach. President Obama's speech marked a fundamental departure from the approach of the previous administration. Critics say that after the Soviets retreated from Afghanistan, the United States forgot about the Afghani people. This mistake cannot be repeated. Foreigners have tried to rule the Afghanistan for decades, but only the Afghans can rule for themselves. This is understood by the Obama administration. Instead of 'bringing democracy' to Afghanistan, they are preventing Afghanistan from being used as a base for global terror and are applying the entire spectrum of American power, civilian and military, to greatly diminish the threat from al-Qaeda. Therefore, the Afghan people will gain the tools and the relative security that is instrumental for society building. These two factors combined will allow the Afghan people to rebuild their country. The modest but clear-cut goals of the Obama administration have focused on long term prosperity and the hope that one day Afghanistan will have a thriving democracy free from the grips of terror.

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