

## **CONFRONTING REALITY: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S TWO WAR INHERITANCE**

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On 20 January 2008 Barak Obama enters the White House to face a wide array of very daunting domestic and foreign challenges. Domestically, he is confronted with a dire situation: a financial meltdown, a US economy sinking ever deeper into recession, rapidly rising unemployment, a housing market in near free fall, dysfunctional health-care, energy and infrastructure systems, and a budget deficit which looks to exceed a trillion dollars. Internationally, he assumes responsibility for two land wars, a global struggle against Islamist terrorist elements, the prospect of nuclear-armed rogue states (especially Iran), diminishing American influence and power, an international financial system in crisis, and, very recently, the intense fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, among a range of other security issues. Obama's world is one full of problems and troubles.

Obama's activity during the transition period strongly suggests that his priority will be domestic problems rather than international issues. While he has remained relatively muted during the transition on international events such as the Mumbai terror attacks and the ongoing fighting between Israel- Hamas in Gaza, he has been very publicly active as President-elect in efforts to develop a massive stimulus package to be ready to sign as soon as possible after he assumes office. Reports on the stimulus plan make clear that Obama intends it to energize job creation through infrastructure investment, restore public confidence in the American economic system, kick-start a

real move towards a post-carbon energy system, and address the health care problems of the working poor. The upshot is that Obama needs to turn round the American economic plunge, and to do so very quickly, but he also sees the crisis as an opportunity to lay important foundations for altering the relationship between government and the economic and social welfare of the American people, which arguably is the heart of his campaign theme of 'change we can believe in'. The President-elect can be expected to remain deeply engaged in domestic policy after his inauguration, for it will be almost entirely on domestic issues on which the American people will judge his performance and the success – or failure – of the first term of his Presidency.<sup>1</sup>

While the new President's priority must be on engineering the recovery of the US economy to ensure that the American people do not by year end assess him a failure, this does not mean that Obama can or will ignore foreign and national security issues. Obama has recently stated that his administration once in office will move quickly to address the current fighting in Palestine and to engage Iran on its alleged drive to obtain a nuclear weapons capability.<sup>2</sup> Overseas crises and events cannot readily be disregarded. Historically, events, whether anticipated or not, usually drive US foreign policy; and foreign policy issues historically oft have a habit of biting back if they are not handled well, to the point where they can impact adversely the domestic policy agenda of a President. Equally, Obama cannot simply set aside campaign promises on important national security issues, not least as some of these were critical to his

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<sup>1</sup> There are some who foresee, almost certainly with some plausibility, that if Obama is not able to turn the US economic around, he could very well be a one-term president. See, for example, Alexander Burns, 'NYT reporter warns of one-term Obama', *Politico.com*, 11 September 2009, at: <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=C7488E66-18FE-70B2-A8600DD3DE656FF6>.

<sup>2</sup> See This Week, 'Transcript: George Stephanopoulos' Exclusive Interview with President-Elect Barack Obama', *ABC News*, 11 January 2009, at: <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=6618199>.

electoral success in his long campaign for the Presidency. Obama, widely seen as being inexperienced in foreign policy, has appointed a senior foreign policy team that is generally regarded as knowledgeable and practiced: Bob Gates to continue to run the Defense Department; Hillary Clinton to oversee State; Susan Rice as UN Ambassador; and Gen. James Jones (USMC, ret.) to serve as national security advisor. The Obama team has further identified a number of qualified individuals to fill important senior posts at Defense and State, as well as appointing people knowledgeable in foreign affairs to the Office of the Presidency. The President-elect is surrounding himself with a range of experienced people whom can advise him on foreign policy and on whom he can rely to implement the foreign policies he sets.

In his quest for the presidency Obama campaigned very forcefully against the Bush administration's national security strategy. Central to his critique of the Bush administration was his argument that the Iraq war was misguided, lacked a clear strategic objective and distracted from the real threats that face America – which he contended was Islamist extremists against whom the central front is Afghanistan and Pakistan. Obama's emphasis on ending the war in Iraq, and the public focus on this issue, obscured that this issue was part of an overarching counterterrorism strategy he articulated for making the US secure. In a speech at the beginning of August 2007 he argued that 'we will wage the war that has to be won, with a comprehensive strategy with five elements: getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan; developing the capabilities and partnerships we need to take out the terrorists and the world's most deadly weapons; engaging the world to dry up support for terror

and extremism; restoring our values; and securing a more resilient homeland.’<sup>3</sup> The exact elements of his proposed national security strategy did vary in different speeches, perhaps due to the particular audience or to shifting political winds, or perhaps because his thinking evolved as his knowledge of US security issues deepened. In mid July 2008, for instance, the five elements he articulated were ‘ending the war in Iraq responsibly; finishing the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban; securing all nuclear weapons and materials from terrorists and rogue states; achieving true energy security; and rebuilding our alliances to meet the challenges of the 21st century.’<sup>4</sup> Obama’s thinking may have evolved, but consistent as the first, or first two elements, of his articulated views on US national security strategy has been to end the war in Iraq and re-engage more forcefully in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These two wars that Obama has inherited are core national security issues that he obviously must address, and address successfully. President-elect Obama has publicly assured that he would move forward to fulfill his campaign promises to extract the US from Iraq in the first days and weeks of his administration, and that he would work to develop a new approach to Afghanistan. Obama needs to manage these two wars very carefully, for if either goes wrong the consequences could be disastrous on the ground and could easily spill over to affect his foreign and domestic policy agendas. Political promises made in the heat of a campaign may seem clear-cut, but such promises can prove inordinately difficult to fulfill once one is in government. President-

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<sup>3</sup> Text of Senator Obama’s address on national security at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, reprinted in Sam Graham-Felsen, ‘Senator Obama Delivers Address on National Security’, *Obama for America*, 1 August 2007 at [http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post\\_group/ObamaHQ/CpHR](http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post_group/ObamaHQ/CpHR)

<sup>4</sup> See Amanda Scott, ‘A New Strategy for a New World’, Speech by Senator Barak Obama, Washington, D.C., *Obama for America*, 15 July 2008, at <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/amandascott/qGxkFr>.

elect Obama will confront the reality of this as he seeks to fulfill his campaign promises to take American out of Iraq and into the Hindu Kush.

### **Out of Iraq.....**

A key component of the President-elect from his nomination campaign through his presidential election has been his constant, vigorous opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and his promise to withdraw US forces from that country on a defined timetable. Iraq may have faded as a critical public issue by the time of the presidential election, overtaken by the financial crisis that has and continues to severely impact the US economy and most Americans, but it nonetheless remains an issue that President Obama needs to address quickly. The central tenant of Obama's campaign promises with respect to Iraq was that he would, if elected president, act quickly to implement a phased withdrawal of American combat forces from Iraq within 16 months. The new President's promise to pull out American forces, at a possible pace of one to two combat brigades per month, however, is only one aspect of a broader plan for ending this war that has three main elements.

The first strand of his Iraq policy, which encompasses the phased withdrawal of American combat forces, contains more nuance than perhaps many people appreciated. One such fine distinction was that, as long as Iraqi officials are making progress toward political reconciliation, his plan calls for a substantial US military force to remain in Iraq and in the region to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions against al Qaeda in Iraq, protect American diplomatic and civilian personnel, and continue to train and support Iraqi security forces. Although Obama's plan openly

excludes the US from maintaining a permanent base in Iraq, this residual force, as his campaign team has admitted, could very well be upwards of some 50,000 American service personnel. Another important policy shading resided in his argument that the withdrawal of American military forces should be accomplished 'responsibly'. As he often said, the US needs to be 'as careful getting out of Iraq as we were careless getting in'.<sup>5</sup> Thus lurking in the shadows of Obama's repeated campaign promises on withdrawing American combat forces from Iraq is the clear sense that Obama and his team are very alert to the real possibility that pulling out American forces could have a destabilizing impact which could lead to rising sectarian violence and a worsening humanitarian disaster which the US, for moral and strategic reasons, could not simply ignore.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of Obama's overarching plan is to press Iraqi officials to assume responsibility for Iraq's future, including the Iraqi government taking responsibility for the countries' reconstruction as well as security needs. The main aim of this element is to apply US diplomatic resources to convince representatives at all levels of Iraqi society, both in and out of government, to undertake real political accommodation to resolve both political and sectarian differences, such as 'on oil revenue sharing, the equitable provision of services, federalism, the status of disputed territories, new elections, aid to

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<sup>5</sup> Barak Obama and Joe Biden, 'Plan for Ending the War in Iraq', *Barak Obama and Joe Biden: The Change We Need* (Obama Campaign Website), at: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/iraq/>. Also see also, for example, Barak Obama, 'My Plan for Iraq', *New York Times*, 14 July 2008,; and 'Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Turning the Page in Iraq September 12, 2007', Clinton, IA , 12 September 2007, at: [http://www.barackobama.com/2007/09/12/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_23.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/09/12/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_23.php) . In the official campaign plan it stated that, even after the US has drawn down its forces, the US has 'both a moral obligation and a responsibility for security that demands we confront Iraq's humanitarian crisis'.

<sup>6</sup> The plan as laid out on Obama's campaign website says under the subheading of 'Preventing Humanitarian Crisis', 'They [Obama and Biden] will reserve the right to intervene militarily, with our international partners, to suppress potential genocidal violence within Iraq.' This statement is not connected in any obvious way to the planned withdrawal of American forces, indeed is related to the discussion of post-withdrawal considerations, but the implication is that Obama could very well intervene should the situation in Iraq start to spiral out of control while American forces are still being withdrawn. Barak Obama and Joe Biden, 'Plan for Ending the War in Iraq'

displaced Iraqis, and the reform of Iraqi security forces.’<sup>7</sup> Underpinning this promised diplomatic effort is the expressed view that the ‘responsible’ phased withdrawal of US forces will focus Iraqi’s attention on the real need to craft the range of political compromises that must occur if reconciliation is to be accomplished and sustained.

The third strand is to work diplomatically with Iraq’s neighbours, including Iran and Syria, to agree a regional compact that will: ‘secure Iraq’s borders; keep neighboring countries from meddling inside Iraq; isolate al Qaeda; support reconciliation among Iraq’s sectarian groups; and provide financial support for Iraq’s reconstruction and development’.<sup>8</sup> A critical element of this effort will be to ensure that Iran is not able to interfere politically or militarily in Iraq with the intent to gain greater influence there and elsewhere in the region, for this would have potentially dire consequences for stability and security in Iraq itself as well as for stability across the region.

This three strand plan– the responsible withdrawal of US forces, encouraging political accommodation within Iraq, and a regional agreement assuring the security of Iraq and the region – was initially developed in early to mid-2007 when the situation in Iraq was different than it is today. In the beginning of 2007 when Obama began his arduous campaign for the Office of the President, many in America felt that the war was going very badly and getting worse, with there being no way to rescue the situation. Yet it was also at the beginning of 2007 when the US began to reorient its approach in Iraq, a process led by Gen. David Petraeus, with his deputy commander Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Central to this reorientation was their identification of the critical need to focus on securing the population instead of largely

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

going after insurgents and, with this as the foundation, to foster political accommodation amongst Iraqis. To this end they developed a new political-military strategy that had many different military operational aspects, that built on and extended emerging and subsequent tribal dynamics within Iraq, and a sustained, and often forceful, political engagement with the Iraqi leadership to encourage reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> This understanding simplifies significantly why the realignment instituted by Petraeus and Crocker worked so far; progress has been the result, as T.X. Hammes has nicely summed it up, 'a number of mutually reinforcing factors on top of the addition of five combat brigades: a major political effort to reconcile the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish factions; a shift of emphasis from hunting terrorists to protecting the Iraqi population; a shift in operational approach from operating from large hard bases to living among the people; the application of a new doctrine based on an understanding of the insurgency across U.S. forces in Iraq; a shift in the political stance of many Sunni tribal leaders from fighting the Americans to assisting us in providing security for their neighborhoods; and Moktada al-Sadr's declaration of a truce.'<sup>10</sup> The gains made in the past two years from the (misnamed) 'surge' have created the circumstances which has convinced the Pentagon that it could reduce the number of combat brigades in Iraq from 15 to 14 six weeks earlier than originally planned.<sup>11</sup> Thus in a real sense, the success of the 'surge', which Obama had originally argued would not work, has improved conditions on the ground in

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<sup>9</sup> On the development and implementation of this shift in strategy, often referred to as the 'surge' see Gen. David Petraeus, 'Transcript of Gen. David Petraeus' Special Presentation Oct. 7, 2008', *Association of the United States Army*, at: [http://www.ausa.org/news/latestnews/NewsArchive\\_2008/Documents/2008AnnualMeetingPetraeusTranscript.pdf](http://www.ausa.org/news/latestnews/NewsArchive_2008/Documents/2008AnnualMeetingPetraeusTranscript.pdf); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); and Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> T.X. Hammes, 'The Art of Petraeus', *The National Interest*, Issue 98, Nov/Dec 2008, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Scott Tyson, 'Combat Brigade Is Cut 6 Weeks Early in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 23 November, 2008, p. A10.



Iraq to an extent which make the President-elect's promised timetable seemingly more practicable than had been the case even a year ago.

There is a degree of convergence in Obama's campaign promises with the Pentagon's perspective that the advances in Iraq have changed the situation in Iraq sufficiently to allow for the careful and deliberate drawdown of US combat forces in Iraq, but there are essential differences between Obama's proposed timeline and the military's view. While the 'surge' strategy has resulted in substantial progress having been made in Iraq, complete success has not been achieved and is far from assured. In spite of the improvement in Iraq, there remain many serious problems, including among others: important ethnic and political divisions persist between Sunni versus Shi'ite, Kurd versus Arab, and central government versus regional autonomy; the leadership of the Shi'a remains contested; serious fighting continues in Mosul and other parts of the north; the status of Kirkuk is still disputed; the contentious issue of sharing oil revenues is not settled; and the recent upsurge in terror attacks makes clear that the insurgency may have receded but it has not ended. Also there are three important elections in Iraq in 2009 which are expected to shape the future of Iraq, and these are likely to spur a new round of sectarian, ethnic and political violence which could spiral out of control.<sup>12</sup> When all is said and done, Iraq remains close to the edge in spite of

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, David Ignatius, 'A Critical Stage in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 22 October, 2008, p. A19; Toby Dodge, 'Despite the optimism, Iraq is close to the edge', *The Observer*, 21 December 2008, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/dec/21/iraq-georgebush/print>; Allysia J. Rubin, 'Iraq Unsettled by Political Power Plays', *New York Times*, 25 December 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/world/middleeast/26baghdad.html?hp=&pagewanted=print>; Anthony Shadid, 'In Iraq, the Day After', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 January, 2009, p. A01; Timothy Williams, 'This Time, Iraqis Hear and See Candidates' *New York Times*, 6 January, 2009, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/07/world/middleeast/07election.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/07/world/middleeast/07election.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y); and Andrea Stone, 'In high-stakes elections, Iraqis learn the art of campaigning', *USA Today*, 7 January 2009, p. 1A.

the progress of the past two years.<sup>13</sup> The American military understands the precariousness of the situation in Iraq, and so perceives the progress in Iraq as fragile and reversible. Their preference is to withdraw combat forces as conditions on the ground permit, rather than on a strict timeline as articulated by Obama, lest a too hurried pull out precipitate the unraveling of progress to date and a return to widespread sectarian killing.<sup>14</sup> So while there is a general convergence between Obama and the US military on the desirability of exiting Iraq, there is an evident divergence in views on the timelines by which this should, or can, realistically occur.

This difference raises the possibility that the new President and the military could clash over the question of how fast and in what manner to draw down US forces in Iraq.<sup>15</sup> The US military has reviewed and revamped its plans for the drawdown of US combat troops since the presidential election. This plan, which was briefed to the President-elect in mid-December 2008, calls for the withdrawal of two more combat brigades by June 2009, with two more to be redeployed by the end of the year, conditions in Iraq permitting. But military officials have indicated that, under the plan, the complete pull out of all US combat forces would not occur until well after May 2010, which would be the end date for Obama's 16 month timeline.<sup>16</sup> That the military

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<sup>13</sup> On the fragility of Iraq and the possibility of civil war, see Dodge, 'Despite the optimism, Iraq is close to the edge', *op cit.*; and Toby Dodge, 'Iraq and the Next American President', *Survival*, 50/ 5 (October–November 2008) pp. 37-60.

<sup>14</sup> This view that progress is considerable yet delicate and so the US needs to be cautious in withdrawing appears to be widely shared within the top level of the Pentagon. Adm. Mike Mullen (USN), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Obama's principle military advisor, General David Petraeus (USA), the Commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) who exercises overall command of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and General Ray Odierno (USA), the commander of US forces and military operations in Iraq, each have publically made clear on many occasions their concern about the delicateness of what has been achieved and the need to exercise considerable prudence in drawing down combat force levels.

<sup>15</sup> On the possibility of a clash between Obama and the military, see Alec MacGillis and Ann Scott Tyson, 'Sometimes Continuity Trumps Change', *Washington Post*, 10 November 2008, and Robert Dreyfuss, 'Obama's Iraq Challenge', *The Nation*, 13 November 2008, at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081201/dreyfuss/print>.

<sup>16</sup> See Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, 'Generals Propose a Timetable for Iraq', *New York Times*, 17 December, 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/18/us/politics/18military.html?hp=&pagewanted=print>; and Julian E. Barnes, 'Troop Withdrawal

presented this plan to Obama, knowing it did not meet his preferred timeline, is suggestive of how strongly they feel about pursuing a deliberate and careful disengagement. The US military also may find support for their position within Obama's administration, for Secretary of Defense Gates and national security advisor Jones, also believe that care must be taken in drawing down combat forces in Iraq.

Obama as Commander in Chief certainly can simply order the removal of US forces at the pace and on the timeline set out in his campaign plan for Iraq, for he will be when President the person, as he himself has noted, who determines American policy.<sup>17</sup> To force the issue in such a blunt way, however, would not endear the new President to the military. Since the Vietnam war a wide gap has emerged between the military and the Democrats, and the military generally speaking distrusts Democrat leaders as being soft on defence and intellectually fuzzy on national security. A December 2008 Military Times poll of some 1,900 active duty military personnel indicated that some 60% were uncertain and worried about Obama's leadership. Although the poll results undoubtedly reflect the general mistrust of the Democrats by the military, one reason given for the expressed wariness was Obama's stated 16-month timetable for pulling combat troops out of Iraq.<sup>18</sup> For Obama to force the issue thus could be very harmful to civil-military relations his administration. To lose the confidence of the US military can pose serious problems for a president. A Commander in Chief, particularly one who does not have the trust of the military, will find the Pentagon can be very difficult to move on issues,

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Plan Diverges with Obama's', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December, 2008, at: [http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/washingtondc/la-na-obama-troops19-2008dec19\\_0,1952366,print.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/washingtondc/la-na-obama-troops19-2008dec19_0,1952366,print.story)

<sup>17</sup> Obama made this point, for example, in an interview with Barbara Walters. 'Barak Obama: The Barbara Walters Interview', *ABC News*, 24 November, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Other reasons expressed were Obama's lack of military service and lack of experience in leading military forces, his expressed desire to end the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy on gays and lesbians in the military and the prospect that he may push for a change in their missions, policies and values. See Brendan McGarry, '2008 Military Times poll: Wary about Obama', *Army Times*, 2 January 2009, at [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/12/military\\_poll\\_main\\_122908/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/12/military_poll_main_122908/)

especially if it digs in its metaphorical heels. President Bill Clinton discovered this when, in order to satisfy an important political constituency, issued in the opening days of his Presidency an executive order which directed that gays and lesbians be allowed to serve openly in the US military. The US military hierarchy strongly resisted and forced the President to back down, putting Clinton on the defensive with respect to the Pentagon which in turn gave it a degree of leverage over the President for the rest of his tenure in the Oval Office.<sup>19</sup> Not to put too fine a point on it, Obama can ill-afford to be odds with the Pentagon in the opening days of his administration because of the real potential that the alienation of the military could have repercussions for his political effectiveness in the realms of both domestic and foreign policy.

The prospect of such an internal political wrangle occurring over Iraq, however, should not be overdrawn. Obama is certainly aware of the problems that could result should he not have the confidence of the US military. Gates, who will have immediate responsibility for overseeing the withdrawal of forces from Iraq, is well liked and trusted within the Pentagon, and Obama almost certainly had this in mind when he decided to keep him on as Secretary of Defense. Further, his appointment of Jones as his national security advisor and of Gen. Eric Shinseki (ret), the former Army Chief of Staff, as the Secretary of Veteran Affairs appear to be designed to signal the military that the new President, while lacking military service and leadership experience, will be sensitive to its concerns.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more significant is that Obama himself appears to be moving towards the Pentagon's position on needing to proceed with caution. In publicly announcing his national security team on 1 December 2008, Obama reinforced his

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<sup>19</sup> On Clinton and his troubles with the US military, see David Halberstam, *War in a time of peace : Bush, Clinton, and the generals* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2001). On the impact of 'don't ask, don't tell, see esp. pp. 204-07, 415, and 417.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, E. J. Dionne Jr., 'Obama's Military Bridge Builder', *Washington Post*, December 9, 2008, p. A19.

commitment to withdraw US combat forces from Iraq within 16 months but noted that he would consult with the US military and listen closely to what they had to say in determining 'as to how we move that pace -- how we proceed in that withdrawal process', and that his 'number one priority' would be to ensure the safety of American military personnel and the security and safety of Iraqi citizens.<sup>21</sup> A week later, in an interview on NBC's 'Meet the Press', Obama in responding to a question of when the drawdown of troops would begin and end, contended that he would 'tell the Joint Chiefs let's do it as quickly as we can to maintain stability in Iraq, maintain the safety of U.S. troops, to provide a mechanism that Iraq can take more responsibility as a sovereign nation for its own safety and security, ensuring that you do not see any resurgence of terrorism in Iraq that could threaten our interests'.<sup>22</sup> So not only does it appear that Obama is sensitive to the need to gain the confidence of the Pentagon, but also that he is aware of the potential dangers involved in withdrawing hastily.<sup>23</sup> The President-elect is seems to be listening carefully to the military,<sup>24</sup> as he has said he would, to the point that he appears to be moving at least partially towards its position on the need to exercise prudence in removing US forces from Iraq.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Obama's National Security Team Announcement: Transcript', *New York Times*, 1 December 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/01/us/politics/01text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>.

<sup>22</sup> Barak Obama. 'Interview: Meet the Press' *MSBN.com* (Video) 7 December 2008, at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/28096701#28096701>

<sup>23</sup> In an interview, in response to a question 'what's happening in Iraq... is it good enough', Obama observed that 'I think the possibilities of ethnic strife breaking out again are still present, precisely because the political system has not stabilized itself yet.' Joel Klein, 'Swampland: The Full Obama Interview (transcript)', *Time*, 23 October 2008, at: [http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2008/10/23/the\\_full\\_obama\\_interview/](http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2008/10/23/the_full_obama_interview/).

<sup>24</sup> Secretary of Defense Gates, the day after Obama officially introduced him as part of his national security team, hints at this when he observed that: '[Obama] repeated his desire to try and get our combat forces out within 16 months. But he also said that he wanted to have a responsible drawdown, and he also said that he was prepared to listen to his commanders. So I think that that's exactly the position a president-elect should be in.' Quoted in David Stout, 'Gates Says He and Obama on the Same Page on Iraq', *New York Times*, 2 December 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/02/washington/02cnd-Gates.html?intemail0=y&r=1&emc=tnt&pagewanted=print>

The implication of this seemingly emerging *modus vivendi* is that the US will continue to remove its combat forces from Iraq, though not necessarily based on Obama's 16 month time line and almost certainly not at the rate of one to two combat brigades a month which Obama contended was safely possible during the campaign. What appears likely is that the withdrawal will be carried out in a measured, careful fashion designed to mitigate adverse consequences on the ground, probably slower than Obama has promised and faster than the Pentagon might wish. Such a *modus vivendi*, however, could potentially involve Obama compromising on what was an important campaign promise, or at least he could be perceived as backing away from his campaign promise. Anti-war activists that supported Obama are already expressing some concern about the security team he has put in place, for they see these individuals as largely having supported the Iraq war and question their commitment to implementing the President's promise to withdraw combat forces in 16 months.<sup>25</sup> They are also worried by the implications of Obama's apparent hedging on the withdrawal from Iraq as suggested above.<sup>26</sup> Further, the broader American public may be much more concerned about the economy and other domestic issues, but the majority still oppose the war, and want the new President to fulfill his campaign promise to end the war.<sup>27</sup> A failure to honour explicitly his campaign could result in his losing some public support, particularly from the anti-war wing of the Democrat party. Moreover, for Obama to compromise on the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq may lead to some

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<sup>25</sup> See Paul Richter, 'Antiwar groups fear Barack Obama may create hawkish Cabinet', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 November 2008.

<sup>26</sup> See Carol E. Lee, and Nia-Malika Henderson, 'Liberals voice concerns about Obama', *Politico.com*, 8 December 2008, at <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1208/16292.html>

<sup>27</sup> A December 2008 poll found that 70% of those polled felt that Obama should fulfill his campaign pledge on the timeline for withdrawing from Iraq. Michael A. Fletcher and Jon Cohen, 'Poll Finds Support for Obama's War Views', *Washington Post*, 16 December, 2008, p. A01. For further details about the poll results, particularly views on domestic issues, see Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta, 'Optimism High About Obama Policies, Poll Finds Majorities Concur on Economy, but Rifts Abound on Initial Priorities', *Washington Post Sunday*, 21 December, 2008, p. A01.

disgruntlement amongst the ranks of Democrats in Congress. Many members of Congress are personally committed to ending the war, while others may see ending an expensive and unpopular war as soon as possible as a practical matter of fiscal prudence or even necessity in a time of economic crisis.<sup>28</sup> Such possible Congressional Democratic dissatisfaction over Iraq could pose a problem for other elements of Obama's policy agenda down the road.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Obama to compromise on his promised timetable for the American withdrawal from Iraq carries the risk of incurring some domestic political costs.

Very important in planning the withdrawal from Iraq is the recently negotiated US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) which was passed by the Iraqi parliament in late November<sup>30</sup> and the Iraqi presidential council in early December 2008.<sup>31</sup> The Iraq SOFA, which entered into force on 1 January 2009, sets forth the legal terms and conditions for the continued operation of US forces in support of the Iraqi government as part of an agreed three-year handover of responsibility for Iraqi security from the US to the Iraqi government and its forces.<sup>32</sup> The terms set forth in the SOFA for the withdrawal of US military forces generally aligns with Obama's professed desire to remove US forces to an established timetable; indeed Obama's election to the

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the cost saving in ending the Iraq war, see David R. Francis, 'Will Obama's war strategy produce a peace dividend?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 December 2008, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/1222/p16s01-wmgn.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Democrats in Congress have shown that they will not simply roll over for Obama by their challenging aspects of his stimulus bill. Shailagh Murray and Paul Kane, 'Democratic Congress Shows Signs It Will Not Bow to Obama', *Washington Post*, 11 January, 2009, p. A05.

<sup>30</sup> Alissa Rubin, Campbell Robertson and Stephen Farrell, 'Iraqi Parliament Approves U.S. Security Pact' *New York Times*, 27 November 2008, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/28/world/middleeast/28iraq.html?\\_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/28/world/middleeast/28iraq.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=print)

<sup>31</sup> Campbell Robertson, 'Iraq Gives Final Approval to Pact on Day of Violence', *New York Times*, 5 December 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/06/world/middleeast/06iraq.html?ref=world&pagewanted=print>.

<sup>32</sup> See 'Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq' (hereafter 'Iraq SOFA'), no date.

Presidency reportedly served to reassure the Iraqi leadership that the US would not renege on the timeline they negotiated with the Bush administration.<sup>33</sup>

Basing the removal of US forces from Iraq within the SOFA framework offers some positive benefits. First, is that the Iraq SOFA sets a date-certain by which 'all' US military forces will be out of Iraq. Second, is that the overarching timetable for withdrawal has been set by the Iraqi government rather than imposed by the US,<sup>34</sup> one based on the Iraqi's government's own assessment of the progress of their military and police forces in being able to deal with the continued insurgent threat and latent sectarian violence. Put another way, the intent of the SOFA is for the Iraqi government to assume all of its sovereign responsibilities for Iraq's future by the end of 2011, a move which conforms with Obama's thinking. Third, is that within the overarching timetable the precise timing of the removal US military forces is mutable. The terms of Iraq SOFA establishes that both sides will agree on the 'mechanisms and arrangements to reduce the number of the United States Forces', meaning that the process and timing of redeploying US military forces is to be negotiated, and the terms of the agreement further permit either side to negotiate an alteration of the timing of the extraction of US military forces.<sup>35</sup> Hence the Obama administration, in agreement with the Iraqi government, can speed up or slow down the rate at which US military forces are redeployed, and this adjustability can be tailored to the security conditions on the

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<sup>33</sup> See Alissa J. Rubin, 'Obama Victory Alters the Tenor of Iraqi Politics', *New York Times*, 7 November 2008. The reason for Iraqi concern is, first, that the Bush administration had intended the SOFA agreement to entrench the US military occupation of Iraq rather than set firm deadline for the US withdrawal, and, second, that the US military has continued to express a preference that the agreed timelines in the SOFA, seemingly including the termination date, should be tied to conditions on the ground. On the former point, see Spencer Ackerman, 'Ensuring Permanence: The Bush Administration Is Negotiating a Long-Term Iraq Occupation', *The Washington Independent*, 26 March 2008, at: <http://washingtonindependent.com/1878/ensuring-permanence>; on the latter point, see Tyson, 'Mullen: U.S. Would Need More Than 2 Years for Iraq Withdrawal'.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, see Nancy A. Youssef, 'Why the U.S. blinked on its troop agreement with Iraq', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 19 November 2008, at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/iraq/v-print/story/56182.html>

<sup>35</sup> Iraq SOFA, *op. cit.*, Art 24, Para 5 and 4 respectively.



ground. This is potentially highly significant, for as the US draws down its presence in Iraq, its ability to influence events there will equally fade. It offers the Obama administration the flexibility to back load as much as possible the reduction of the American presence in Iraq in order to sustain as much influence as possible to continue to shape events there. Finally, the US military has indicated that it is generally comfortable with the terms and conditions of the SOFA,<sup>36</sup> and has further suggested that it could plausibly meet the 36 month final deadline set in the SOFA.<sup>37</sup> To do so, however, will be far from easy. Obama in his campaign rhetoric argued he would withdraw US combat brigades within 16 months, yet the 14 combat brigades that currently remain in Iraq constitute only a portion of the some 146,000 US military personnel currently in Iraq. The total of US military forces, which includes logistical support personnel, trainers working with the Iraq Army, combat support units (such as US Air Force wings and even ground artillery units) and other units, is the equivalent of some 50 brigades. Moreover, the Iraq SOFA requires the US to pull out all of its equipment, supplies, and re-locatable infrastructure. The implication is that within six to twelve months of the SOFA coming into effect there will need to be the start of a steady outflow of US personnel and matériel and other material if the 2011 deadline is to be met.

In sum, adhering to the three year time line established in the Iraq SOFA offers President-elect Obama a degree of useful political wiggle room in extracting the US from Iraq even while on the 'glide path' to an American exit. It offers space to adjust the

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<sup>36</sup> Youssef, 'Why the U.S. blinked on its troop agreement with Iraq', *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Adm. Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has argued 'To remove the entire force would be...two to three years'. Quoted in Ann Scott Tyson, 'Mullen: U.S. Would Need More Than 2 Years for Iraq Withdrawal', *Washington Post*, 17 November 2008, at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/17/AR2008111702327\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/17/AR2008111702327_pf.html).

process of withdrawal to mitigate any setbacks which arise in the security situation on the ground, and even the possibility of a creative schedule of the mix of combat and combat support units to be redeployed, such that some combat brigades could remain in Iraq beyond the President-elect's 16 month as immediate insurance against a reversion to violent sectarian conflict. Moreover, impatient domestic anti-war supporters can be conciliated with a steady on-going withdrawal, with a definite end date for the war which has been negotiated with the sovereign government of Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

#### .....into the Hindu Kush

The path out of Iraq will be tricky, and the US needs to manage very carefully the winding down of its involvement there to avoid the many possible pitfalls that loom along the way. But the move to bolster efforts in Afghanistan will entail a long and concerted effort that will be fraught with difficult problems and real dangers with no certainty of success. Over the past two years, the same period that the US political and military efforts in the Iraq have created real gains, the situation in Afghanistan has substantially deteriorated. Taliban attacks have risen significantly through 2008, its fighters are better trained and their tactical approaches demonstrate more sophistication in planning than in the past, they have extended their influence beyond traditional areas to almost 70% of the country, including to provinces neighbouring Kabul, and incidents stemming

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<sup>38</sup> As Tom Hayden, a high profile anti-war personality, cogently pointed out: 'Here at home, the agreement will force the antiwar movement into careful consideration of a broader agenda. Unless the pact is violated, it is difficult to imagine hundreds of thousands demonstrating to bring the troops home in 2010 instead of 2011. There will be continued attention to implementing the pact and pressuring for human rights standards in Baghdad, but the steady return of thousands of American soldiers will send a powerful message to most Americans that the Iraq War is ending, perhaps not soon enough, but ending nonetheless.' Hayden, 'Iraq Pact Challenges Antiwar Movement', *The Nation*, 1 December 2008, at: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081215/hayden/print>

from cross border incursions from Pakistan have increased.<sup>39</sup> Adm. Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee in early October 2008 that 'I'm not convinced we are winning it in Afghanistan',<sup>40</sup> while a draft of a classified US National Intelligence Assessment on Afghanistan reportedly characterized the situation as being in a 'downward spiral'.<sup>41</sup> There is a evident sense in many quarters, in Europe as well as in the US,<sup>42</sup> that Afghanistan is reaching a crisis point, and if efforts are not made to turn things around quickly the war there could become untenable.

Afghanistan did not feature much in the presidential campaign the way Iraq did, even though the President-elect's position on the two wars was linked. Obama's position was that the key war the US needs to win is that against violent extremists, and he argued that to do so involved withdrawing the US from the unnecessary war in Iraq and re-focusing on the central front in the broader fight by committing more resources to Afghanistan. Obama laid out essentially a three part strategy to address the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. First, he argued that he would deploy two to three addition American brigades to support counter-terrorism efforts there and NATO's fight against the Taliban. In addition, he contended that America's NATO allies also needed to increase their troop deployments, and do so without the restrictive caveats on their

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Christina Lamb, 'Taliban revival sets fear swirling through Kabul', *The Sunday Times Online*, 28 September 2008, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article4837667.ece?print=yes&randnum=1222618156032> ; Pamela Constable, 'A Modernized Taliban Thrives in Afghanistan', *Washington Post*, 20 September p. A01; Laura King, 'Insurgents in Afghanistan Show Strength, Sophistication', *LA Times*, 18 September 2008, at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-insurgency18-2008sep18,0,7271269,print.story>

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Peter Goodspeed, 'Is Afghanistan in peril?' *National Post*, 3 October 2008, at <http://www.nationalpost.com/story-printer.html?id=859053>

<sup>41</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. Study Is Said to Warn of Crisis in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 8 October 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09afghan.html?hp=&pagewanted=all> .

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Susanne Koebel, 'NATO Pessimism: The West is at a Loss in Afghanistan', *Speigel Online*, 17 October 2008, at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-584616,00.html> .

operations that currently exist in many cases, and that the US and its allies there needed increase and improve the training furnished to the Afghan Army and Afghan Police. In the course of the presidential-election campaign, Obama agreed that the US-led coalition will need to negotiate with the Taliban,<sup>43</sup> an idea that emerged as part of a very public debate about there being no purely military solution to the war in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> Second, arguing that the war there could not be won by military means alone, he said he would as President increase US non-military aid by US\$1 billion which would be aimed at improving the lot of the average Afghan and seek better performance from the Afghan government, including convincing it to deal with endemic corruption. Finally, he contended that he would engage diplomatically with Pakistan to enlist its direct help in rooting out al Qaeda and other violent extremists from their sanctuaries in that country's Federally Administered Treaty Areas (FATA) along its border with Afghanistan. Toward the end of the presidential election campaign there have been hints that the Obama administration might adopt a regional diplomatic approach,<sup>45</sup> including the possibility of mediating the India and Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.<sup>46</sup> Yet while his proposed plan involves an overarching regional framework that includes Pakistan, he repeatedly made clear that he would not hesitate to send American military forces after extremists operating out of the FATA regions of Pakistan if the US had actionable intelligence.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Klein, 'Swampland: The Full Obama Interview (transcript)', *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> What really sparked the debate on the need to negotiate with the Taliban were comments made by a British civilian and a military official reported in the press. See: Charles Bremner and Michael Evans, 'British envoy says mission in Afghanistan is doomed, according to leaked memo', *The Times*, 2 October 2008; and Jill Lawless, 'British Commander Calls Defeat of Taliban unlikely', *Washington Post*, 5 October 2008, p. A22.

<sup>45</sup> Karen DeYoung, 'Obama to Explore New Approach in Afghanistan War', *Washington Post*, 11 November, 2008, p. A01

<sup>46</sup> Klein, 'Swampland: The Full Obama Interview (transcript)', *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, 'Remarks by Senator Obama: The War we Need to Win', Washington, D.C.; 'Text of Barak Obama's Speech in Fayetteville', 19 March 2008, at <http://www.wral.com/news/local/politics/story/2603651/>; and Amanda Scott, 'A New Strategy

The urgency of the steeply declining situation in Afghanistan has been such that, as advisers to both presidential candidates were briefed by administration officials in October, the new President essentially should have a plan ready to implement when he arrives in the White House on 20<sup>th</sup> January lest the US act too late.<sup>48</sup> Since September the Pentagon has been engaged in a number of related strategy reviews to assess the situation in Afghanistan and to develop a sounder, more comprehensive approach,<sup>49</sup> while Gen. Petraeus instituted a review of US strategy in Afghanistan, as part of a broader reassessment of the Middle East and Central Asia, when he assumed command of US Central Command and hence overall responsibility for this region.<sup>50</sup> Central to these series of reviews is the understanding that the US/NATO approach in Afghanistan has failed and there is an urgent need to reconsider the strategy employed. Convinced by the experience in Iraq that changing the strategy can change the outcome in Afghanistan, the Pentagon's aim is to put together the elements of a new, winning strategy which can be implemented as soon as possible under the aegis of the incoming Obama administration.<sup>51</sup>

The result of this planning effort is not yet known, other than that there reportedly is so far no concurrence across the US military on what ought to be done and on whether the US has sufficient resources. The expectation is that the Obama administration will

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for a New World, Speech by Senator Barak Obama,' Washington, D.C., 15 July 2008, at <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/amandascott/gGxkFr>.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, 'McCain and Obama Advisers Briefed on Deteriorating Afghan War', *New York Times*, 31 October 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/31/washington/31policy.html?ref=world&pagewanted=print>

<sup>49</sup> Eric Schmitt and Thom Shankar, 'Bush Administration Reviews Its Afghanistan Policy, Exposing Points of Contention', *New York Times*, 23 September 2008, at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/washington/23policy.html?ref=world&pagewanted=print>.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Scott Tyson 'Petraeus Mounts Strategy Review', *Washington Post*, 16 October 2008, p. A12.

<sup>51</sup> Gordon Lubold, 'Military sees window to adjust Afghanistan plan', *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 October 2008.

conduct a review once in office, with the aim to have it complete for April,<sup>52</sup> probably in time for NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary summit. One point on which there is agreement, determined early in the process, is the need to deploy some 30,000 more US military personnel to Afghanistan by the end of 2009, including four combat brigades, to reinforce ongoing efforts there.<sup>53</sup> The sending of additional forces echoes the Iraq 'surge' strategy, suggesting that the US military may be looking to replicate this strategy in Afghanistan. Petraeus, however, has noted on many occasions that each conflict is very unique, and that Afghanistan is not Iraq.<sup>54</sup> Economically, Afghanistan is a largely rural, semi-pre-industrial society with high levels of illiteracy, only a rudimentary infrastructure in terms of roads, electricity, potable water and education, and an annual national income of less than US\$1 billion. Socially and culturally, the country consists of a patchwork of ethnic and religious groups, fragmented by the harsh and isolating terrain, a clan and tribal structure that is complex and characterized by cooperation and rivalries, and clan and tribal customs and loyalties that are unique to the region. Politically, the current central government is immature, rule of law is inconsistent, corruption is widespread, and the population has no experience of strong central governance and does not trust the current government headed by President Hamid

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<sup>52</sup> Karen DeYoung, 'Afghan Conflict Will Be Reviewed', *Washington Post*, 13 January 2009, p. A01

<sup>53</sup> 'Afghan Troop Build-up Eyed for Spring', *Associated Press*, 24 September 2008, at: <http://www.military.com/news/article/afghan-troop-buildup-eyed-for-spring.html?ESRC=eb.nl>. Pentagon officials say that force would be deploying, in addition to the four combat brigades, an aviation brigade equipped with attack and troop-carrying helicopters, reconnaissance units, support troops and trainers for the Afghan Army and the police.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Carlotta Gall, 'Insurgents in Afghanistan Are Gaining, Petraeus Says', *New York Times*, 1 October, 2008, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/world/asia/01petraeus.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/world/asia/01petraeus.html?_r=2&pagewanted=print); 'Transcript of Gen. David Petraeus' Special Presentation Oct. 7, 2008', *op. cit.*; and 'Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition: The FP Interview with Gen. David H. Petraeus', *Foreign Policy Journal*, January/February 2009, at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4587&page=3](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&page=3).

Karzai.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the Afghan insurgency is extremely vigorous and has the vital advantage of having a sanctuary across an international border with Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> Petraeus has observed that these and other characteristics unique to Afghanistan mean that simply applying the so-called Iraq 'surge' strategy there cookie-cutter style will not work.<sup>57</sup>

Petraeus is expected to present the results of the his team's reassessment of strategy for Afghanistan to the Obama administration sometime in February.<sup>58</sup> Petraeus noted in a recent interview, '[w]hile general concepts that proved important in Iraq may be applicable in Afghanistan—concepts such as the importance of securing and serving the population and the necessity of living among the people to secure them—the application of those 'big ideas' has to be adapted to Afghanistan.'<sup>59</sup> Any new proposed approach will be informed by the general counterinsurgency concepts, originally laid out in the US Army and Marine Corps manual *FM3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*,<sup>60</sup> which also informed the Iraq surge strategy. The effort to turn around Afghanistan certainly will encompass a comprehensive military, diplomatic, and political effort. Broadly speaking, however, a new approach to countering the insurgency will have

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<sup>55</sup> On Afghans lack of faith in the Afghan government, see Nathaniel C. Fick and Vikram J. Singh, 'Winning the Battle, Losing the Faith', *New York Times*, 5 October 2008, at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/opinion/05fick.html?ref=opinion&pagewanted=print>; and Mark Sappenfield, 'Afghans to Karzai: You failed us.' *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 October, 2008, at: <http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=Afghans+to+Karzai%3A+You+failed+us.+%7C+csmonitor.com&expire=&urlID=31879805&fb=Y&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.csmonitor.com%2F2008%2F1023%2Fp06s01-wogn.html&partnerID=309791>.

<sup>56</sup> On the US military's understanding of these factors, see, for example, Laura King, 'Afghan war to loom large for Obama' *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November, 2008, at: [http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghanelect5-2008nov05\\_0,7411541.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghanelect5-2008nov05_0,7411541.story).

<sup>57</sup> 'Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition: The FP Interview with Gen. David H. Petraeus', *Foreign Policy Journal*, January/February 2009, at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4587&page=3](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&page=3).

<sup>58</sup> Karen DeYoung, 'Afghan Conflict Will Be Reviewed', *Washington Post*, 13 January, 2009, p. A01, and also Anne Gearan, 'U.S. had unrealistic goals in Afghanistan: report', *Globe & Mail*, 8 January 2009, at: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20090108.wafghangoals0108/BNStory/Afghanistan/home>

<sup>59</sup> 'The FP Interview with Gen. David H. Petraeus', *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, December 2006.

three critical components. First, the coalition needs to secure the Afghan population. This entails isolating the insurgents from the population, and from human and resource support. A key part of securing the population is the need to provide basic services to the population, to induce them to side with the government. This particular objective is intimately tied to securing the population, for if Afghans are not secure from the violent depredations of the anti-coalition forces, improving their lives to win them over to the side of the central government will be difficult. Second, the coalition will seek to engage politically with the anti-coalition insurgents to turn them or to negotiate some form of overarching political settlement. And third, the coalition needs to address the issue of Pakistan, and the ungoverned areas within its territory that serve as safe havens for anti-coalition forces and al Qaeda. Some aspects of these three main concepts have already started to emerge, and early indications are that the overarching plan the US military is working towards is broadly consistent with Obama team's thinking.<sup>61</sup>

Securing the Afghan population in a meaningful way is a major undertaking with no assurance of success. The primary aim of any new approach, many in the US military believe, is to separate the insurgents from the population through 'clear, hold and build' operations. As Maj. Gen. Michael S. Tucker (US Army), director of operations for U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, noted, "[t]here is a primacy on securing the population....The approach is to reach out to the population, get into the villages, and separate them from the insurgency."<sup>62</sup> Yet accomplishing this objective will be highly

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Christian Lowe, 'An Afghan "Surge" No Sure Winner', *Military.com*, 14 November 2008, at: <http://www.military.com/news/article/an-afghan-surge-no-sure-winner.html?ESRC=eb.nl>

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Julian E. Barnes, 'Obama faces decision on how to deploy troops in Afghanistan', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 January 2009, at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-usafghan13-2009jan13,0,6153630.story>.



problematic in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a rural society, and the insurgency is rural. Only some 20% of Afghans live in major urban areas, with the rest diffused across the rest of the country in small villages and rural communities. The mountainous topography of the country means that these rural and village populations are often located in very remote, hard to reach areas and it further furnishes a vast expanse of extremely rugged territory for insurgents to hide and move about in. An inherent problem that coalition forces have confronted to date is that they are so thinly stretched across this large country that, though they can move into a village or a valley to clear it of insurgents, they are incapable of holding most such areas. Maj. Gen. Tucker made this point very clearly, saying '[w]e have had so few forces here....We can go out and defeat the enemy anywhere we want to. What we can't do is hold what we clear.'<sup>63</sup> Thus a not unusual pattern is for coalition units to visit villages and remote areas by day, only for the insurgents to melt away to return that night when coalition forces have moved on. This situation makes it exceedingly difficult to gain the trust and support of locals, who understand all too well that any cooperation with the coalition exposes them to retribution from insurgents because coalition forces cannot protect them.<sup>64</sup>

The first order of business for the new US forces being deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 will be to engage Taliban forces in clear and hold operations.<sup>65</sup> Gen. David McKiernan, the overall commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, has reportedly said, however, that he does not want to launch operations to clear an area unless he

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Barnes, 'Obama faces decision on how to deploy troops in Afghanistan', *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> For a poignant example of this problem in miniature, see: Vampire ETT, 'On Fence Sitting and Operating on the Fringe', *Afghanistan Shrugged* (blog), 22 November 2008, at: <http://afghanistanshrugged.com/2008/11/22/on-fence-sitting-and-operating-in-the-fringe.aspx>.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, David Ignatius, 'All Deliberate Speed', *Washington Post*, 6 November, 2008, p. A21; and Matthias Gebauer, Susanne Koebl and Cordula Meyer, 'Bomb, Negotiate, Repeat: The Long War in Afghanistan', *Spiegel Online*, 25 November 2008, at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-592636,00.html>.

has the forces to hold it.<sup>66</sup> An important element for success in Afghanistan is to develop national police and military forces capable of providing security. At present, the Afghan National Police, the most obvious force to use for holding operations, are troubled by corruption, too distrusted by the local population and too insufficiently trained to be able to provide real local security.<sup>67</sup> The Afghan National Army, while better than the Afghan National Police, for its part currently is still too underdeveloped, and needs to be grown if it is to be able to step up to fill the gap.<sup>68</sup> The US, in conjunction with its coalition allies, is working to beef up and improve the Afghan police and army, but the benefits of these efforts will not be seen for two to three years. The hard reality is that, even with the addition of 30,000 American reinforcements, the coalition will not have sufficient troops to emplace safely combat outposts in all or even many Afghan communities. Putting out even company sized units into many of the very scattered towns, villages and hamlets means it will be difficult to provide rapid reinforcement and/or support, exposing these troops to massing tactics by the Taliban.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Reuters, 'Extra U.S. Troops Aim For Afghan "Tipping Point"', *New York Times*, 21 December 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2008/12/21/world/international-us-afghan-usa.html?pagewanted=print>

<sup>67</sup> On the problems of with the Afghan police forces and the difficulties encountered to the efforts to redress them, through professionalization, see, for example, International Crisis Group, 'Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy', *ICG Asia Briefing N°85 Update Briefing*, (Kabul/Brussels), 18 December 2008; and Lewis G. Irwin, 'Irregular Warfare Lessons Learned: Reforming the Afghan National Police' *Joint Forces Quarterly*, issue 52, 1st quarter 2009, pp. 70-77.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Antonio Giustozzi, 'Afghan army far from fighting fit', *Asia Times Online*, 9 May 2008, at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JE09Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JE09Df01.html).; and Anthony H. Cordesman, David Kasten, and Adam Mausner, *Winning in Afghanistan: Creating Effective Afghan Security Forces*, Working Draft: Revised 6 January 2009, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 9 January 2009, at: [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/090106\\_ansf.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/090106_ansf.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> The British in the first months they deployed to Helmand Province in 2006 sought to establish 'platoon houses' in many small town and villages distant from the main bases but these were subjected to persistent attacks that ultimately meant these outposts were not sustainable. See Tom Coghlan and Sean Rayment, 'Commanders want to withdraw troops from Afghan outposts', *The Telegraph* (UK), 23 July 2006, at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/07/23/wafg23.xml&site=5&page=0>; and Audrey Gillan, "'We made two mistakes. They punished us'", *Guardian*, 18 November 2006, at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329636451-108920,00.html>. Another example of the perils of small units operating in isolated areas was the mid July 2008 attempt by Taliban to overrun a temporary combat post set up by a mobile company-sized American Army unit, in the course of which nine soldiers were killed. See: Carlotta Gall and Eric Schmitt, 'Taliban Breached NATO Base in Deadly Clash', *New York Times*, 15 July 2008, at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/world/asia/15afghan.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin&ref=world&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/world/asia/15afghan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&ref=world&pagewanted=print);

Presently, it appears that the first step to be taken will be secure the main Afghan urban areas. The first of the American combat brigades to be deployed in the first part of 2009 to reinforce efforts are to be situated in the areas adjacent to Kabul where the Taliban has made major inroads and from where they can threaten the capital city.<sup>70</sup> Securing the main urban areas when the country is mostly rural and the insurgency is equally mostly rural may be a necessary first step in a 'clear, hold, build' strategy in Afghanistan, but in the near term it also cedes much of the countryside to the Taliban and leaves much of the population beyond the protection of the coalition forces. The planned deployment of three to four more US combat brigades does not provide sufficient forces to allow the US to push forces out to live among the people without accepting significant risks to its personnel. At best, using these forces to secure the main cities and towns in Afghanistan buys the US some time to find the means to secure the Afghan population more widely.

A second approach to accomplishing the necessary thickening of available forces on the ground<sup>71</sup> is convince America's allies, particularly its NATO allies, to contribute more forces. Obama is expected to press America's NATO allies to increase their contribution to the fight in Afghanistan and to remove many of the national restrictions that impose significant limitations on what these states' military forces can do.<sup>72</sup> Hillary Clinton in her Senate confirmation hearing reconfirmed Obama's principle of 'more for more', that is, with 'more troops from the United States, there also needs to be more

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and Tom Coghlan, 'US forces abandon Wanat outpost in Afghanistan after fierce Taleban attack', *Times Online*, 16 July 2008, at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4344905.ece?print=yes&randnum=1216230966484>

<sup>70</sup> Kirk Semple, 'U.S. Plans a Shift to Focus Troops on Kabul Region', *New York Times*, 6 December 2008, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/asia/07troops.html?\\_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/asia/07troops.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=print).

<sup>71</sup> Gall, 'Insurgents in Afghanistan Are Gaining, Petraeus Says', *op cit*.

<sup>72</sup> Obama has stressed that, as part of his overarching strategic change, he wants to repair relations with America's allies and get them to contribute their share of the burden.

support for that mission from NATO.<sup>73</sup> This worries many of the European allies, for in the past when the Bush administration urged them to contribute more, they found it very easy to decline due to the unpopularity of President George Bush and his policies. With the US allocating more military forces and other capabilities, America's allies may find it harder to say 'no' when Obama comes knocking with the same request. Pressure from Obama to take on a greater share of the burden, however, will pose problems for many European leaders. First, is that the European militaries for the most part are not large and may be approaching the limit of what they can contribute in Afghanistan or elsewhere, such as the Balkans. This may mean that the best Obama can do is to shake loose some limited number of extra troops, and possibly only for a pre-set period of time, and to convince European governments to lift at least some of the more restrictive national caveats under which their forces operate in Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> And second is that though Obama himself is popular in Europe, there is no broad support within Europe for the war in Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup> Popular European enthusiasm for Obama may translate into at least temporary support for American calls for more European efforts in Afghanistan, but the Obama administration should not rely on this being the case. European governments thus are likely to find themselves politically between a rock and hard place – they may find it difficult to refuse Obama, as they do want to establish good relations with the new president and generally restore currently frayed

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<sup>73</sup> 'Transcript: Senate Confirmation Hearing: Hillary Clinton', *New York Times*, 13 January, 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/us/politics/13text-clinton.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Woodcock, 'Obama may ask UK for more troops', *The Independent*, 5 November 2008, at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/obama-may-ask-uk-for-more-troops-994134.html>.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Lizzie Davies, 'France's Afghan dilemma', *Guardian*, 20 August 2008, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/20/france.afghanistan/print>; Deutsche Welle Staff, 'As Afghanistan Attacks Continue, NATO Resolve Wavers', *Deutsche Welle*, 21 October 2008, at: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3728599,00.html>; and John Bingham, 'Two thirds want British troops out of Afghanistan: poll', *Telegraph*, 13 November 2008, at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/3450783/Two-thirds-want-British-troops-out-of-Afghanistan-poll.html>.

relations with the US, yet if they accede to his requests they may be faced with increased popular anger over the war. Obama likely will discover in negotiating this European political minefield that there are real limits to what he can expect from America's NATO allies, particularly if he is very serious about improving relations with them as he argued during his campaign run. And if as seems likely his administration cannot obtain greater contributions from America's NATO and other allies, the burden of carrying the fight will increasingly fall mostly on the US, resulting in the growing Americanization of the war.

Another approach to 'thicken' forces to secure the population that the US has obviously decided to pursue is to negotiate with local Afghan warlords, tribal leaders and village councils to set up local militias to furnish a counter to the anti-coalition forces and establish regional security.<sup>76</sup> Such an approach was an important element of the American success in Iraq, though it must be underscored that the Anbar Awakening in Iraq was a bottom-up approach, that is, initiated by local Sunni tribes,<sup>77</sup> whereas in Afghanistan the approach will be a top-down approach, that is, started by the coalition.<sup>78</sup> The merits and practicality of engaging local Afghan communities and councils as way

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<sup>76</sup> This idea slowly gained ground through the last third of 2008. See Mark Sappenfield, 'To Fight Taliban, US eyes Afghan tribes', *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 October 2008, at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/1016/p01s04-wosc.html?page=1>; Dexter Filkins, 'Afghans and U.S. Plan to Recruit Local Militias', *New York Times*, 23 December 2008, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/24/world/asia/24afghan.html?\\_r=2&hp=&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/24/world/asia/24afghan.html?_r=2&hp=&pagewanted=print); and Anne Mulrine, 'U.S. Military to Launch Pilot Program to Recruit New Local Afghan Militias', *US News & World Report*, 16 December 2008, at: [http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/iraq/2008/12/16/us-military-to-launch-pilot-program-to-recruit-new-local-afghan-militias\\_print.htm](http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/iraq/2008/12/16/us-military-to-launch-pilot-program-to-recruit-new-local-afghan-militias_print.htm).

<sup>77</sup> The Anbar Awakening was the result of local Sunni tribes in Anbar province recognizing that al Qaeda in Iraq was a serious threat to their safety and way of life, much more so than the US forces which they had been fighting against earlier. Hence, they turned on al Qaeda in Iraq and further turned to the US military forces for support. The US military exploited this opening and then slowly extended the concept to other areas of Iraq. See Petraeus, 'Transcript of Gen. David Petraeus' Special Presentation Oct. 7, 2008', *op. cit.*; Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends*, *op. cit.*; and West, *The Strongest Tribe*, *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> For an example of the coalition reaching out to village elders in Afghanistan as means to enhance local security, albeit in the northern and relatively more peaceful part of Afghanistan, see Reuters, 'Tribal Politics Key to Building Bridges In Afghanistan' *New York Times*, 1 December, 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-us-afghan-bridge.html?pagewanted=print>.

to empower them to furnish local security is controversial.<sup>79</sup> One evident obstacle to this approach is that many local Afghan communities likely may not be particularly sympathetic to the coalition and/or the central Afghan government. Another obstacle is that many local communities which might not be sympathetic to the anti-coalition insurgents are nonetheless vulnerable to retribution and may be not be willing to cooperate with coalition forces unless they are convinced the coalition will support them. The coalition currently lacks the numbers to embed units in villages for any length of time to provide the necessary security whilst a local militia is armed and trained, and the coalition may not be able to furnish longer term military over watch and possible back-up as US forces did in Iraq. Negotiating with village and tribal chiefs to generate local militias also carries risks. There is a danger that empowering local Afghan entities will serve to undermine the already weak central government. Further, Afghan society is a medley of fractious clans, sub-clans, tribes and sub-tribes governed by honour codes and other tribal and clan customs that are alien to the coalition, and they are further riven by disputes, blood feuds and rivalries. In order to assuage fears that local militias will not turn on their local and regional rivals, the international community will need to engage in sustained negotiations to reconcile the rivalries and disputes amongst various local and regional groups. Such a diplomatic strategy will not be easy, and is made harder as the traditional tribal and clan structures have been badly weakened by 30 years of war. So not only will such a diplomatic outreach likely prove difficult and slow,

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<sup>79</sup> For example, Gen. McKiernan, who now says the idea has merit, was initially very skeptical, while Canada has made clear that it is opposed to the idea. See, respectively, Spencer Ackerman, 'McKiernan Not Hot on 'Sons of Afghanistan' Idea' *Washington Independent*, 1 October 2008, at: <http://washingtonindependent.com/9683/mckiernan-not-hot-on-sons-of-afghanistan-idea> and Abubakar Siddique, 'Enlisting Tribes Against Militants in Afghanistan Carries Risk', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 November 2008, at: <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1352111.html>; and Murray Brewster 'Ottawa balks at U.S. plan to let tribes fight Taliban', *The Toronto Star*, 22 December 2008, at <http://www.thestar.com/printArticle/557206>.

with no assurance of achieving widespread tangible results, but there is a real risk that empowering and arming local militias might spur local in-fighting that could, in the worst case, escalate to civil war.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, in spite the possible risks, the effort to recruit local militias is a means the US has started to pursue to try to partially fill in the shortfalls in the numbers needed.

Another important component of any new approach to Afghanistan is the expressed willingness to negotiate with the insurgent forces, the Taliban. The aim will be to hive off whatever elements possible to weaken the insurgency and, in the longer term, possibly reach a negotiated settlement that effectively ends the insurgency. This approach, however, is easier said than done. Currently the Taliban have made clear their general disinterest in negotiating with the Afghan government and coalition,<sup>81</sup> as they see themselves on the ascendant against a weak central government and dispirited international coalition.<sup>82</sup> The Taliban will only be willing to contemplate talking with the Afghan government and international coalition if they are so militarily and politically pressed, both within Afghanistan and in Pakistan, that they see that they have little or no hope of prevailing. Simply put, the US will need to fight first, then negotiate.<sup>83</sup>

Opportunities certainly exist to engage with elements of the insurgency to entice them to come over the side of the Afghan government and the coalition or just to adopt

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<sup>80</sup> Siddique, 'Enlisting Tribes Against Militants in Afghanistan Carries Risk', *op. cit.*; Jon Boone, 'Afghans fear US plan to rearm villagers', *FT.com*, 12 January 2009, at: [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2a94d388-e0cf-11dd-b0e8-000077b07658.dwp\\_uuid=eeecac0e-384a-11db-ae2c-0000779e2340.print=yes.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2a94d388-e0cf-11dd-b0e8-000077b07658.dwp_uuid=eeecac0e-384a-11db-ae2c-0000779e2340.print=yes.html); and Filkins, 'Afghans and U.S. Plan to Recruit Local Militias', *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, 'Gulbadin Hekmatyar Rejects Offer Of Talks', *Middle East Media Research Group Urdu-Pashtu Media Blog*, 30 October 2008, [http://www.thememriblog.org/urdupashtu/blog\\_personal/en/11030.htm](http://www.thememriblog.org/urdupashtu/blog_personal/en/11030.htm); and 'Taliban "rejects" Hamid Karzai's offer to protect its leader', *The Telegraph*, 17 November 2008, at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/3473496/Taliban-rejects-Hamid-Karzais-offer-to-protect-its-leader.ht>.

<sup>82</sup> Bill Roggio. 'Taliban mock West for calling Afghanistan unwinnable', *The Long War Journal*, 14 October, 2008, at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/taliban\\_mock\\_west\\_fo.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/taliban_mock_west_fo.php).

<sup>83</sup> For a cogent argument on this point, see Joseph J. Collins, 'To Further Afghan Reconciliation: Fight Harder' *Small Wars Journal*, 31 October 2008, at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/123-collins.pdf>.

a neutral stance, particularly if these groups see the US as likely to prevail. The Taliban is anything but monolithic in character. On one level the Taliban can be seen to be a syndicate of three main Afghan insurgent groups that sometimes cooperate and coordinate.<sup>84</sup> Yet on a deeper level the makeup of the insurgent forces is very multifaceted; as Nouredine Jebnoun put it, 'there are within the nebula of the insurgents many components, which includes the following: those discontented with the new regime who cannot survive economically; autonomous Pashtu tribes; the Taliban themselves who, if they preach a radical version of Islam, are not less essentially Pashtu, which gives the conflict an ethnic dimension; and foreigners trained in the camps of al-Qaeda who are Arab fighters coming from different countries of the Middle East.'<sup>85</sup> Simply put, the character of the insurgency, and the anti-coalition insurgents, is extremely complex, driven by multiple causes for what must be understood to be a mosaic of insurgencies in Afghanistan that to one degree or another voluntarily support the Taliban for reasons which vary from clan to clan, tribe to tribe, village to village, individual to individual. There is a realistic possibility that the coalition can turn some, maybe even many of those directly engaged in the fighting, if it can address satisfactorily the grievances that have led them to side with the insurgent forces.

There are some observers, however, who doubt that the core of the Taliban will ever be willing to negotiate a deal to end the fighting even if they are being defeated militarily.<sup>86</sup> Those components of the Taliban which are committed to the fight are

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<sup>84</sup> See Greg Miller, 'Trio of warlords blamed for surge in Afghanistan violence', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 September 2008, at: [http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-warlords1-2008oct01\\_0,7634578.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-warlords1-2008oct01_0,7634578.story).

<sup>85</sup> Nouredine Jebnoun, 'The Denial of Failure in Afghanistan', *Small Wars Journal*, 29 October 2008, at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/120-jebnoun.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, George Packer, 'Kilcullen on Afghanistan: "It's Still Winnable, But Only Just"', *Interesting Times: The New Yorker*, 14 November, 2008, at: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2008/11/kilcullen-on-af.html>; and Matthias



sustained by their economic prosperity gained through the cultivation and trade in opium and the existence of a safe-haven in border regions of Pakistan, and are united by their vehement rejection of the current Afghan central government and presence of the international coalition. One key problem is whether it would be possible to find common ground and issues on which the Afghan government, backed by the international coalition, and the hard core of the Taliban could agree to negotiate.<sup>87</sup> More telling is that the patchy nature of the insurgents means it also will very likely prove difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate an overarching settlement with the Taliban. The idea that Mullah Omar, the ostensible leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan, can sit down and negotiate an end to the fighting on behalf of the insurgent forces is, as Joanna Nathan of the International Crisis Group put it, 'a fantasy'.<sup>88</sup> The coalition does need to endeavor to co-opt the Taliban as a part of its new effort to reverse the adverse trends in Afghanistan, but negotiating with the Taliban forces offers no short-term solution and possibly not even a long term solution if the core of these forces remain irreconcilable.

American efforts to roll back the Taliban and secure the population within Afghanistan will not be enough to stabilize the country unless the critical issue of Pakistan and the sanctuary spaces within its borders is not dealt with. The centrality of this issue has reached the point where it is widely evident that Afghanistan and Pakistan are inseparable issues and must be addressed holistically. As Petraeus has pointedly stated, 'Afghanistan and Pakistan have, in many ways, merged into a single problem set, and the way forward in Afghanistan is incomplete without a strategy that includes

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Gebauer, Susanne Koebl and Cordula Meyer, 'Bomb, Negotiate, Repeat: The Long War in Afghanistan', *Spiegel Online*, 25 November 2008, at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-592636,00.html>.

<sup>87</sup> On this point, see Graeme Smith, 'Why it's so hard to negotiate with the Taliban', *Globe and Mail*, 8 October 2008, at: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20081008.wtalibananalysis08/BNSStory/International/>.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Gebauer, Koebl and Meyer, 'Bomb, Negotiate, Repeat', *Op. cit.*

and assists Pakistan'.<sup>89</sup> The hard reality which the Obama administration faces is that the insurgencies in Afghanistan and the Pakistan tribal areas have coalesced into a single insurgency that straddles the border, with the governments on both sides of the international line at risk. It is therefore no surprise that the view which has emerged is that the way to help Pakistan is not to continue the largely bilateral efforts pursued by the Bush administration, which had limited success; rather it is that the best way to get Pakistan wholeheartedly on board is through a regional diplomatic effort. On this the US military and Obama seem to be of one mind.

The Obama Administration will certainly adopt a regional approach that encompasses not only Afghanistan and Pakistan but also India and possibly Russia and Iran along with other neighbouring states. Engaging each of these various regional actors in order to reach some form agreement to contribute to stabilizing Afghanistan in the long haul, if common footing for such a multilateral accord can be found, will be complex. The core regional relationship that Obama appears to believe has to be addressed is that between Pakistan and India. Obama has raised the possibility of committing American diplomatic resources to 'try to resolve the Kashmir crisis so that [Pakistan] can stay focused – not on India, but on the situation with those militants'.<sup>90</sup> The underlying rationale is that Pakistan has long sponsored networks of militants as proxies in Kashmir and Afghanistan in its strategic rivalry with India. The key support for these networks continues to run through the Pakistan military and the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which have fostered and supported militants over the

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Anne Gearan, 'Petraeus: Afghan, Pakistan problems are really one', *Yahoo! News*, 8 January 2009, at: [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090108/ap\\_on\\_go\\_ca\\_st\\_pe/us\\_afghanistan](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090108/ap_on_go_ca_st_pe/us_afghanistan).

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Mark Sappenfield and Shahan Mufti, 'Is Kashmir key to Afghan peace?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 November, 2008.

past several decades to keep pressure on India in the Kashmir region and to counter the possibility of Afghanistan, which it sees as its backyard that provides it with strategic depth, becoming pro-Indian in its political and strategic outlook and behaviour. The concern is that the Pakistan security establishment will not seriously focus on the internal threat posed by the militants as long as it remains deeply concerned about the perceived threat posed by India. Very telling is that, as the dispute between Pakistan and India over the recent Mumbai terrorist attack have moved towards international brinkmanship, the Pakistan military has withdrawn some forces from the tribal areas where they have been fighting militants in order to reinforce its border with India.<sup>91</sup> The presidential transition rumour mill has it that Secretary of State nominee Hillary Clinton intends to appoint Richard Holbrooke, who played a central role in negotiating the end of the Bosnian conflict in 1995 and is a former US Ambassador to the UN, to serve as special envoy to Pakistan and India.<sup>92</sup> The appointment of a special envoy such as Holbrooke, if this rumour is confirmed to be true, sends a powerful signal of the importance the Obama Administration places on alleviating Pakistan-Indian tensions as part of a diplomatic package of engaging the Pakistan government.

Yet the US concern about the extremist militant groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan is about more than just the safe haven and support it offers al Qaeda and the insurgent forces fighting against the American-led coalition and Afghan government. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the escalating attacks within Pakistan by extremists operating in these tribal areas has increased American worry

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<sup>91</sup> Bill Roggio, 'Pakistani military continues to withdraw from the tribal area', *The Long War Journal*, 29 December, 2008, at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/12/pakistani\\_military\\_c\\_1-print.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/12/pakistani_military_c_1-print.php).

<sup>92</sup> See Mark Landler, 'Clinton Is Moving to Fill Senior Posts at State Dept.', *New York Times*, 7 January 2009, at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/08/us/politics/08diplo.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/08/us/politics/08diplo.html?_r=1).

about the stability of Pakistan itself. As Gen. James Conway, Commandant of the US Marine Corps, has argued, '[al Qaeda have] changed their strategic focus not to Afghanistan but to Pakistan, because Pakistan is the closest place where you have the nexus of terrorism and nuclear weapons.'<sup>93</sup> The Taliban in Pakistan have made clear their desire to replace the central government in Islamabad and, as well as a campaign of terrorist attacks, there has been a growing diffusion of militant networks beyond the FATA into Pakistan's cities where their presence is increasingly becoming apparent.<sup>94</sup> The possibility of Pakistani scientists, military or intelligence officers, or government administrators with ties to the militants infiltrating the Pakistani nuclear complex and gaining access to nuclear information or material, and then passing such on to the extremists or another country is a very somber prospective threat in the eyes of the Americans. Even more worrisome is the future stability of Pakistan itself and the possibility that a destabilizing or destabilized Pakistan would create opportunities for militants to get their hands on a nuclear weapon.<sup>95</sup> Simply put, the biggest concern for the US today is not so much the support the Afghan Taliban draw from the FATA regions and the implications this has for Afghanistan, serious though this problem is, rather it is the question of what happens if Pakistan crumbles as a state under the pressure of the growing insurgency in its tribal areas and one or more weapons in its nuclear arsenal fall into the wrong hands.

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Yochi J. Dreazen, 'Al Qaeda's Focus Is Pakistan, U.S. Senior Commander Says', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 November 2008, at: [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122766140111858667.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122766140111858667.html?mod=googlenews_wsj).

<sup>94</sup> Huma Yusuf, 'Launch point for Mumbai attacks, Karachi faces rising militancy', *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 January 2008, at: <http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=Launch+point+for+Mumbai+attacks%2C+Karachi+faces+rising+militancy+csmonitor.com&expire=&urlID=33616825&fb=Y&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.csmonitor.com%2F2009%2F0114%2Fp01s01-wosc.html&partnerID=309791>.

<sup>95</sup> On US concerns about the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, see, for example, Dreazen, 'Al Qaeda's Focus Is Pakistan, U.S. Senior Commander Says', *op cit.*, and David E. Sanger, 'The Worst Pakistan Nightmare for Obama', *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 8 January 2009, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11pakistan-t.html?ref=world&pagewanted=print>.

Convincing Pakistan to recognize that the threat posed by the militants operating in the tribal areas is far graver than that posed by India and to act accordingly will be herculean task. President Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of the assassinated Bhutto, and his prime minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, are committed to taking on the militants and terrorism in Pakistan, and at their direction the Pakistan military has been conducting military operations against the Pakistan Taliban in Bajaur, where the fierce fighting has left hundreds dead and over 300,000 displaced.<sup>96</sup> Zardari and Gilani may be committed to quashing the militants but they head a weak civilian coalition in government which does not appear willing to confront the militant threat.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, they do not exercise firm control over the Pakistan military.<sup>98</sup> The Pakistan military is an extremely strong political force within Pakistan, having governed the country alternately with civilian governments throughout the country's existence, and brokering agreements through the current civilian government does not guarantee that the military will go along. The Pakistan military, including the ISI which is a force unto itself, is divided amongst itself. The differing loyalties and agendas of various institutional elements, some with links to the broader government apparatus, and the existence of amorphous networks of retired regular army and intelligence officers with their particular loyalties and agendas, means that even the Pakistani military leadership cannot be said to exercise absolute control

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<sup>96</sup> Saeed Shah, 'Thousands stuck in camps of no return', *The Observer*, 26 October 2008, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/26/pakistan-afghanistan/print>

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Saeed Shah, 'Pakistani politicians divided over action on terror', *Guardian*, 17 October 2008, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/17/pakistan-nato/print>; and Reuters, 'Pakistan Parliament Stresses Talks to End Militancy', *New York Times*, 23 October, 2008, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-us-pakistan-security1.html?pagewanted=print>.

<sup>98</sup> Gary Thomas 'US Pressure Deepens Divide Between Pakistan's Military and Civilian Leadership', *Voice of America*, 1 October 2008, at: <http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-10-01-voa52.cfm?renderforprint=1>.

over the organization which they ostensibly command.<sup>99</sup> The consequence of the very fractured nature of the governing system in Pakistan is that the US may find it nigh on impossible to negotiate in any reasonable time frame an effective agreement to stop support to the militants and bring the tribal areas under control.

Yet no matter what the new US counterinsurgency policy is for Afghanistan, when all is said and done, what the Obama administration must address forthrightly is the *a priori* question of what strategic interests does America want – need -- to achieve there. An important critique of the operations in Afghanistan to date is that there has been a lack of cohesiveness to pull together the many efforts to effect the achievement of a defined strategic goal.<sup>100</sup> In part this problem is a function of the lack of unity of command stemming from the US/NATO command structure that must account for some 40 some different national military contingents, multiple lines of command, diverse range of national restrictions, fragmented communication and transportation systems, and a lack of common operating concepts.<sup>101</sup> The US military recognizes this particular problem, and the expectation is that it will assume direct overall command at least of forces operating in the south and east of the country where the fighting is the heaviest.<sup>102</sup> But this is a lesser issue, for the vital question is what are the fundamental

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<sup>99</sup> See Juan Cole, 'Does Obama understand his biggest foreign-policy challenge?', *Salon*, 12 December, 2008, at: <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2008/12/12/pakistan/print.html>.

<sup>100</sup> As one former US commander anonymously put it, 'We have no strategic plan. We never had one'. Quoted in DeYoung, 'Afghan Conflict Will Be Reviewed', *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> For a detailed examination of this problem, see Col. Ian Hope, (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry), *Unity of Command in Afghanistan: A Forsaken Principle of War*, Strategic Studies Institute 'Carlisle Papers in Security Strategy', November 2008.

<sup>102</sup> Kim Sengupta, 'US seeking sole command of Nato's war against the Taliban', *The Independent*, 18 September 2008, at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/us-seeking-sole-command-of-natos-war-against-the-taliban-934256.html>; and Michael Smith and Sarah Baxter, 'US will grab power from British in Afghanistan', *Sunday Times Online*, 11 January 2009, at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5489583.ece?print=yes&randnum=1231695575806>

US strategic interests in Afghanistan? <sup>103</sup> What are America's goals? Neither Obama nor any of his campaign team have really provided a clear statement on this core point, beyond Obama's argument that Afghanistan is the central front in America's struggle with violent Islamic extremists such as al Qaeda and that Afghanistan should not serve as base from which militant extremists are able to launch terrorist attacks against the West. The US aim in entering Afghanistan in 2001 was to destroy al Qaeda as an operational force and eliminate its training bases, and thereafter to stabilize the country and build-up a unified country under a central, democratically-elected government. The result has been that al Qaeda and the Taliban were driven into the border regions of Pakistan, where these groups contributed to the growth of local militant extremists who are now openly challenging Islamabad. A demanding issue the Obama administration must face up to is that the expected amplification of efforts to stabilize Afghanistan will almost certainly contribute to the continued growth of instability in Pakistan. The war on terror in Afghanistan and the war on terror in Pakistan are not the same, and the stakes involved in each are not the same. The requirement for a regional diplomatic approach to Afghanistan which has emerged indicates that the Obama team and the US military understand this dilemma, but as yet there is no suggestion of how they weight the relative American interests involved in the region that encompasses not only Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also India, an emerging international economic power with which the US has been working to develop a closer working relationship. The Obama administration needs to develop a clear and dispassionate understanding of what US strategic interests are, not only in Afghanistan but also in the region, if it is to

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<sup>103</sup> On the need for a clear vision of US strategic interests in Afghanistan, see TX Hammes, 'The Good War?', *Small Wars Journal*, 15 December 2008, at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/09/the-good-war/>; and Andrew J. Bacevich, 'Afghanistan: What's Our Definition of Victory?', *Newsweek*, 8 December 2008, at: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/171254/output/print>.

develop and pursue the appropriate, mutually reinforcing political, economic and military policy that is required.<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusions

President-elect Obama has made clear that as one of his first acts in office he will, in consultation with the Pentagon, start the implementation of a plan to withdraw American forces from Iraq. There can be no doubt that the new President will want to remove US combat units as quickly as is feasible. Yet the US pull out from Iraq will be fraught with problems and real potential dangers, and needs to be managed very carefully lest the situation break down into widespread violence and impact on Obama's effectiveness in governing. Moreover, the Obama administration in meeting the new President's campaign promises must find a way to avoid a policy dispute with the Pentagon while at the same time reassuring his domestic supporters that he will fulfill his campaign promise to end the war in Iraq. There is a real possibility that his navigating these two domestic political shoals will probably lead to the pull out of American forces being based more on doing so as safely as practically possible than on the basis of doing so on his promised 16 month timeline. The Iraq SOFA provides a framework, determined by the Iraqi leadership, which will permit Obama and the Pentagon to craft a plan that will serve to meet the concerns of the American public about the Iraq war as he has pledged, while leaving room to maneuver that can reassure the abiding concerns of the US military. The terms of the agreement allow the US, with the negotiated concurrence of the Iraqi government, to fine-tune American

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<sup>104</sup> Reportedly a major review of Afghanistan conducted in December 2008 by the Bush administration 'acknowledged that a modern Afghan democracy -- stable and free of extremists -- may be both unattainable and unaffordable, and said that the United States may have to accept trade-offs among priorities.' DeYoung, 'Afghan Conflict Will Be Reviewed', *op. cit.*



withdrawal plans mid-process should the drawdown foster a rise in violence on the ground or should rapid progress in Iraq prove favourable for a more rapid pullout. At best, it is probable that Obama's 16 month timeline will exist only as a policy aspiration. Moving with 'judicious haste' within the framework of the Iraq SOFA is a pragmatic approach to ending a war the American public no longer supports, while embedding sufficient flexibility to manage any worsening of the security situation caused by the American withdrawal in a manner to forestall a potential implosion of Iraq which would have ruinous consequences. But even this cautious approach does not guarantee that things will not go wrong, that the outcome will be what he wants. What remains to be seen is how the dynamics internal to Iraq unfold as the US withdraws and whether any serious complications arise sufficient to impede or even derail the American pull out by the end of 2011.<sup>105</sup>

President-elect Obama has also promised that the US under his leadership will take the appropriate steps needed to stabilize Afghanistan and deal with terrorist groups located in the region. The Obama administration can be expected to pursue a multilayered, integrated military, diplomatic and economic approach tailored to the unique characteristics of Afghanistan and the Taliban insurgency. The US military's hard learned lessons in conducting counterinsurgency campaigns offer the promise of success on the ground in Afghanistan itself. An inherent limitation America faces in its counterinsurgency effort is that it currently lacks the capacity to address forcefully the insurgency in the region. The US itself has limited forces and means available, a

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<sup>105</sup> Gen. Odierno, saying that '[t]hree years is a long time', has noted that the SOFA can be renegotiated to allow US troops to stay longer, while Secretary of Defense Gates has made the same observation about the possibility of the agreement being renegotiated. See, respectively, Barnes, 'Troop Withdrawal Plan Diverges with Obama's', *op.cit.*; and Bumiller and Shanker, 'Generals Propose a Timetable for Iraq', *op.cit.*

circumstance that will persist for several years due the American commitments in Iraq and its current economic situation. The prospect of generating local national capacity, whether by building up Afghan national police and military forces or by fostering local defence militias, is a mid-to-long term prospect, and the likelihood of its allies contributing significant combat and other capabilities is slight. The morphing of the Afghan insurgency into a two state insurgency greatly complicates the situation, A regional diplomatic approach is surely necessary, but will entail a multi-year effort with no assurance of success. There are real obstacles, some internal to Pakistan and hence probably beyond America's ability to affect substantially, to bringing Pakistan round as a fully committed partner in dealing with the threat posed by the militant extremist insurgency emanating from its FATA regions. In the short-to-midterm the Obama administration will need to manage carefully the balance of success in Afghanistan against the probability that such success will result in the strengthening of the threat on the other side of the border. Obama as President can expect to find, in a year or two, that the road to success still stretches indefinitely into the future along with an abiding requirement to make a greater commitment of people and resources if the end of the road is to be reached. Will the US have the economic and military resources to be able to make such a commitment, will the American public be willing to support such a commitment over the mid-to-long term? Another difficult question it may well face is what to do about the dire threat posed by militant extremists in Pakistan, and indeed what to do about should Pakistan increasingly reach a point where it is teetering on the brink of state failure due to its internal weaknesses and the pressure of its insurgency? The US unquestionably needs to address the growing transnational

insurgency and its nexus with international militant extremists along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, but the regional complexities involved and variegated American interests at stake suggest that the deepening American engagement in the Hindu Kush will be a fraught exercise.

The war in Iraq has been the 'bad war' and the war in Afghanistan has been the 'good war' in American perceptions. Both wars - one President-elect Obama wants to get the US out of and one he wants to re-dedicate the US to winning - are complex, with no easy answers. The US may be, as he said, on the 'glide path' out of Iraq, but the path out will be more a maze than a runway. The Obama administration will need to exercise great care in navigating out of the political and sectarian maze which is Iraq if it is to ensure that the US is indeed out of Iraq with the country stable and American interests in the region not harmed. The re-invigoration of the US commitment to Afghanistan will be a long term effort entailing a substantial commitment of human and material resources. The multifaceted character of the intertwined Afghan-Pakistan insurgency, international terrorism and regional affairs is a maze of a different kind which the Obama administration must plot a careful course through to an exit which as yet cannot be seen. The two wars that President-elect Obama inherits, and the success of his administration in managing them, very likely will define his national security policy for the next four years, and might define his national security legacy.