

President Obama's speech on a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan – messages sent across

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President Obama unveiled a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan in his West Point speech. He underlined three main aspects of the war: the nature of America's commitment in Afghanistan; the scope of its interests; and the strategy that his administration would pursue to bring the war to a successful end.

However, America's overreaching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and its allies in future.

Message to Kabul

In his speech, Obama made it clear that America would assist Afghanistan, provided that certain proposed conditions are put into practice by the government in Kabul. These conditions broadly refer to fighting corruption and delivering for the people by working in areas directly related to public progress - such as agriculture, health and school construction.

In his message to Kabul, President Obama made it very clear that:

1. There would be 'no open-ended commitment' and 'no blank cheques';
2. America would end its operations in Afghanistan which would be handed back to its own people and government;
3. America demands greater effort from the Karzai government to prevent corruption; and
4. The Afghan government needs to operate more effectively so that it can take over governance and security.

Broadly referring to the situation in Afghanistan, President Obama emphasized four main American objectives:

1. Denying Al Qaeda a safe haven;
2. Reversing the Taliban's momentum;
3. Denying the Taliban/Al Qaeda the ability to overthrow the government; and

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4. Strengthening security forces and the government in Afghanistan so that they can take responsibility for the country's future.

To achieve these objectives, President Obama tabled a three-pronged strategy:

1. Pursuing a military strategy that would break the Taliban's momentum and increase Afghanistan's capacity over the next 18 months;
2. Working with the United Nations and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy so that the government can take advantage of improved security; and
3. Acting with full recognition that U.S. success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to its partnership with Pakistan

Clarifying America's intentions, he declared that America had no interest in occupying Afghanistan and that after troops are withdrawn, it would be interested in seeking a relationship based on mutual respect to create a long-lasting partnership. He said, "We will continue to advise and assist Afghanistan's security forces to ensure that they can succeed over the long haul. But it will be clear to the Afghan government – and more importantly to the Afghan people – that they will ultimately be responsible for their own security."

Reference to Pakistan

Obama's approach to Pakistan can be defined as *counter-terrorism heavy*. Recognizing Pakistan's position, President Obama emphasised that success in Afghanistan is 'inextricably linked to their partnership with Pakistan'. Referring to Pakistan, Obama stated, "...this is not just America's war".

President Obama could not be very specific about his Pakistan strategy. However, he stressed that U.S. victory in Afghanistan depends on the latter's good relations with Pakistan.

The U.S. President also referred to the expansion of war in Pakistan - if he can get a 'weak, divided, suspicious Pakistani government to agree to the terms'. Obama had previously signed off on a plan for more drone strikes against militants, increasing the number of CIA personnel inside Pakistan and extending operations which would possibly include drone attacks in the southern province of Balochistan.

Largely, Obama's speech with reference to Pakistan revolved around three main suspected threats the U.S. faces:

1. President Zardari's relationship with the Pakistan military: a weak and unpopular government may become an obstacle in America's 'exit strategy' from Afghanistan.
2. Safety of nuclear weapons: Obama's decision to raise the nuclear issue is prominent since many American officials including Hillary Clinton have publicly stated that the Pakistani arsenal is secure from extremists. Obama stated that "the people and governments of both Afghanistan and Pakistan are endangered. And the stakes are even higher within a nuclear-armed Pakistan, because we know that al Qaeda and other extremists seek nuclear weapons, and we have every reason to believe that they would use them."
3. Success of military operations in Swat, as well as in South Waziristan.

Even though President Obama assured Pakistan that America would not leave Afghanistan as it did in the past and would certainly finish the job, Pakistan worries that an abrupt U.S. departure would leave the country vulnerable to Taliban and al Qaeda attacks. The army's offensive being waged in the tribal areas would then effectively go waste as Pakistan would have to ultimately bear the brunt of the consequent backlash.

Pakistan faces two main challenges:

1. Troop deployment and surge near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border would result in Taliban spill-over into the already troubled province of Balochistan and also complicate the military offensive in South Waziristan
2. Another concern is the fulfilment Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan after the departure of the U.S: a government in Kabul that is pro-Pakistan and with reduced Indian influence.

Taliban/Al Qaeda

President Obama said that the Taliban are 'no idle danger, no hypothetical threat.' They are like a 'cancer', spreading over the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which America wants to cure and kill. Even though Al Qaeda is not as active in Afghanistan as it was before 9/11, he fears that they retain their safe havens along the Pak-Afghan border. And until and unless these extremists are captured, the threat of new terror attacks remains.

He stressed that American forces lack the support they need to effectively train and partner with Afghan security forces to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and at the same time secure the population. In order to overcome this vacuum, the U.S. is ready to welcome its partners in the region – India and China.

On U.S. troop build-up

President Obama said that 30,000 additional U.S. troops would be deployed to Afghanistan, bringing the U.S. total to 100,000, and asked NATO allies for several thousand more. The nature of troop build-up is also characterized as a short-term, high-intensity effort to regain the initiative against the Taliban.

President Obama stressed that ‘additional American and international troops will allow U.S. to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces and allow America to begin the transfer of its forces out of Afghanistan in July 2011 – America will execute this transition responsibly, taking into account conditions on the ground.’

Three to four brigades are being sent to Afghanistan. According to this plan, the first marines were to begin arriving as early as Christmas and all forces would be in place by May 2010. The forces would mainly focus on securing top population centres, including Kabul, Khost and Kandahar. Two brigades would be deployed in the south, while the third is to be deployed in eastern Afghanistan, in Paktia and Paktika.

The main strategy at a minimum would be to maintain pressure on insurgents in remote regions by using surveillance drones and utilising reports from people in the field to find pockets of the Taliban and to guide attacks.

NATO troop build-up

President Obama stressed that this war is an ‘international effort’ and the threat posed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda is not limited to the American soil. Subsequently, NATO has promised to send an additional 7,000 troops. On the other hand, some allies like France and Germany are reluctant to do so since the decision would be unpopular in these countries. Key features of NATO’s renewed strategy in Afghanistan are to pursue economic development and provide training to the Afghan army and police forces. Furthermore, the Alliance is seeking direct talks with Taliban leaders in Quetta, developing local government resources in

almost all accessible districts and provinces and concentrating on efforts to wipe out or minimize corruption.

Conclusion

President Barak Obama's new strategy is devoid of a political or diplomatic approach. It appears to be more of a military strategy to turn the tide in Afghanistan and one that is influenced largely by General McCrystal. President Obama needs to answer the lingering questions regarding Afghanistan and determine what America's second-best option would be if somehow the Karzai government fails to make the necessary and proposed changes.

President Obama mentioned Pakistan at least twenty-five times in his speech but failed to summarize a strategy or a plan regarding its involvement as a front-line State. Pakistan was also expecting guarantees over India's involvement in Afghanistan and has concerns over whether it can be reduced. Pakistan has, however, cautiously welcomed the new strategy.

The failure of the new Afghan strategy would definitely put Pakistan in a difficult position. The challenges would deepen the unstable security situation in Pakistan, placing further burdens on a weak civilian government and an ongoing military operation.