

TheNational

The third Afghan option is a US pull-out

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Last Updated: September 16, 2009 12:03AM UAE / September 15, 2009 8:03PM GMT

WASHINGTON // The emerging debate over whether President Barack Obama should maintain current troop levels in Afghanistan or deploy even more soldiers to the war zone has taken centre stage on Capitol Hill.

But a growing number of military analysts and even some politicians point out that a third option, albeit one that is rarely mentioned in the national political discourse, is also available to Mr Obama: bringing the troops home.

Mr Obama approved the deployment of 21,000 troops in February, bringing the total number of US troops in the country to 68,000 by the end of the year. Many believe that number will rise when Gen Stanley McChrystal, the top US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, submits an expected request for additional troops in the coming weeks.

Still, there are some who contend that the US objective of disrupting al Qa'eda may best be carried out by a smaller fighting force, one comprising elite soldiers and CIA operatives, rather than large-scale operations against the resurgent Taliban, whose toppled government was accused of providing a safe haven for the terrorist organisation. Advocates of such a plan urge a policy shift that could allow the president to withdraw most rank-and-file troops over the course of the next several months.

Russ Feingold, a Wisconsin Democratic senator and one of the most prominent advocates of a reduced US presence, has called on the military to confine its efforts to "targeted military operations". Meanwhile, the country's preeminent conservative columnist, George Will, wrote last month that the United States "should do only what can be done from offshore, using intelligence, drones, cruise missiles, air strikes and small, potent special forces units".

Many legislators, especially Democrats, have worried publicly about the size of the US "footprint" in Afghanistan and apparent lack of clear strategic benchmarks, and they have called with increasing volume on Mr Obama to specify an exit strategy. But few other than Mr Feingold have pushed for an immediate troop reduction, a policy easily portrayed by critics as a sign of weakness or as an admission of defeat.

Mr Feingold, who has called for a continued civilian presence in Afghanistan, including efforts to fight government corruption and improve the economy, appeared anxious to head off such criticism in an opinion article he wrote for The Wall Street Journal last month. He stipulated that he did not believe the United States should "walk away" from Afghanistan.

Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington that hosted a panel discussion on Monday on withdrawing from Afghanistan, said the rationale for adding additional troops is badly "misplaced".

"We must keep in mind that the regular military is wonderful for killing bad guys with disproportionate firepower, destroying enemy troop formations or bombing their command centres, but not for finding hidden killers like terrorists," said Ms Innocent, co-author of a recent report called *Escaping the Graveyard of Empires: A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan*.

Some key US successes against al Qa'eda, she noted, have been won through comparatively small intelligence operations, such as the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the self-proclaimed mastermind of the September 11 attacks, who was captured in a 2003 raid on a hideout in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The raid was carried out by Pakistani intelligence officials believed to be working with US officials.

"The scalpel of intelligence sharing, and forming close co-operation with foreign law enforcement officials and agencies, has done more to round up suspected terrorists than the sledgehammer of military forces," she said.

Some worry that a hasty US withdrawal will be perceived as a victory for al Qa'eda, bolstering the cause of Osama bin Laden. Others, such as Patrick Cronin, the director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, have urged critics to give Mr Obama's plan time to work.

"We have been at this for eight years, but we haven't been at this very seriously," said Mr Cronin, also a panellist in Monday's discussion, referring to the war strategy under George W Bush. "I believe if we put our shoulder to the wheel in the next couple of years, we can do better."

But Barack Obama's policies, including his initial troop increase and renewed emphasis on nation-building exercises such as undermining the Afghan drug trade, have left some questioning whether success can ever be achieved at a cost acceptable to the



Some analysts argue that conventional US forces like these should be replaced by a small, elite fighting force acting alongside the CIA. **Tim Wimborne / Reuters**

US public.

"We seem to have drifted into an amorphous, open-ended nation-building mission," said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defence and foreign policy studies at Cato and another panellist in the discussion. "Afghanistan is never going to become a central Asian version of Arizona. We should stop operating under the delusion that it will."

Mr Carpenter said it is "not possible" to declare a decisive victory against "a shadowy, non-state, terrorist adversary" such as al Qa'eda. He also criticised the Obama and Bush administrations for conflating al Qa'eda, a direct threat to the United States, with the Taliban, an indigenous political movement. A better strategy would be to focus simply on making it difficult for al Qa'eda to function.

"We don't need a large military footprint to achieve such modest, realistic goals," he said, noting that most US soldiers could be pulled out of the country within 18 months. "Small numbers of CIA and special forces ... should be sufficient for that."

US legislators seem increasingly willing to lower expectations of what can be achieved in Afghanistan. In a recent appearance on CNN's State of the Union, Dianne Feinstein, chairwoman of the Senate select committee on intelligence, said she believes Afghanistan would "remain a tribal entity", rather than the centralised democracy US policy has long envisioned.

But legislators, at least for now, have not coalesced around the idea of a troop withdrawal similar to the one currently being carried out in Iraq. US forces pulled out of major Iraqi cities over the summer and Mr Obama has said most troops will leave the country by next year.

In a series of hearings this week, the Senate foreign relations committee is expected to discuss the prospect of withdrawal in Afghanistan among a variety of other strategic options.

Withdrawal can be a difficult concept for US legislators to swallow, according to Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations and history at Boston University and a critic of escalating the US presence in Afghanistan.

"It's a problem that all great powers have," he said. "One of the really difficult challenges that great powers face is to acknowledge error and change course."

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