



## Obama's Speech On Afghanistan Measured, Expected



"We did not ask for this fight," said President Barack Obama **during his speech on policy and strategy relating to Afghanistan** last night. However, it's clear that he intends to come to some kind of resolution by 2011.

Obama outlined the history of the conflict, and reminded Americans why we were involved in the first place. He then outlined his main policy items:

Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.

To meet that goal, we will pursue the following objectives within Afghanistan. We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.

We will meet these objectives in three ways. First, we will pursue a military strategy that will break the Taliban's momentum and increase Afghanistan's capacity over the next 18 months. [...]

Second, we will work with our partners, the United Nations, and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security. [...]

Third, we will act with the full recognition that our success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan.

He also directly addressed concerns and criticisms of our efforts thus far:

First, there are those who suggest that Afghanistan is another Vietnam. They argue that it cannot be stabilized, and we're better off cutting our losses and rapidly withdrawing. I believe this argument depends on a false reading of history. Unlike Vietnam, we are joined by a broad coalition of 43 nations that recognizes the legitimacy of our action. Unlike Vietnam, we are not facing a broad-based popular insurgency. And most importantly, unlike Vietnam, the American people were viciously attacked from Afghanistan, and remain a target for those same extremists who are plotting along its border. To abandon this area now — and to rely only on efforts against al Qaeda from a distance — would significantly hamper our ability to keep the pressure on al Qaeda, and create an unacceptable risk of additional attacks on our homeland and our allies.

Second, there are those who acknowledge that we can't leave Afghanistan in its current state, but suggest that we go forward with the troops that we already have. But this would simply maintain a status quo in which we muddle through, and permit a slow deterioration of conditions there. It would ultimately prove more costly and prolong our stay in Afghanistan, because we would never be able to generate the conditions needed to train Afghan security forces and give them the space to take over.

Finally, there are those who oppose identifying a time frame for our transition to Afghan responsibility. Indeed, some call for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort — one that would commit us to a nation-building project of up to a decade. I reject this course because it sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests. Furthermore, the absence of a time frame for transition would deny us any sense of urgency in working with the Afghan government. It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan.

After this point in the speech, it flips over to a rehash of all the things we heard during the Bush-Cheney years. Watching reactions to the speech on Twitter, I think my friend Nisha Chittal, blogging for Care2, came closest to **summarizing** the general feel of disappointment:

Obama is a master of words and rhetoric, but rhetoric cannot obscure the ugly truth here: we cannot afford the cost of this war, both in money and in human lives. And despite delivering a powerful speech, as Obama so often does, there are too many questions that still remain unanswered:

Will we really phase out troops by 2011? Will Afghani security forces really be secure enough by then? Or will this withdrawal timeline turn into another empty promise?

Where will we get the projected \$30 billion needed for this troop surge when we are already in an economic crisis with no end in sight?

What will happen to Afghani women and girls? Their plight is terrible, but was barely even mentioned in tonight's speech. Are we going to continue to turn the other cheek to the human rights crisis faced by Afghani women on a daily basis?

Tonight, the President faced what will go down as one of the deciding moments of his administration. There is no longer any question: this has become Obama's war. He had the misfortune of inheriting two wars when he came into office. But instead of ending them, he has chosen to extend them. He rehashed the same explanations thrown at us by prior administrations over the past eight years.

Ben Smith, over at *Politico*, also noticed the **lack of discussion about Afghan women and children**:

"For the Afghan people, a return to Taliban rule would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people - especially women and girls," Obama said in March.

Tonight's speech includes a passing, abstract reference to "human rights" — but not a single reference to Afghanistan's women and girls.

That, presumably, falls into the category of "nation building."

Also missing from the much of the post-speech analysis were the voices of people in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and those working on the ground. **Al Jazeera reports**:

The goal, Obama said in a televised address on Tuesday, is to escalate the battle against Taliban fighters, secure key population centres and train Afghan security forces and so clear the way for a US exit in 18 months time.

But Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, a former prime minister of Afghanistan, expressed disappointment with Obama's speech and his strategy.

"Sending more troops is not the solution to the Afghan crisis," he said.

"I was expecting Obama to announce the withdrawal of 30,000 troops within two months but unfortunately, he did the opposite which will increase killings of both Americans and Afghans." [...]

Al Jazeera's James Bays, reporting from the Afghan capital, Kabul, said: "This wasn't a counter-insurgency speech; it was a counter-terrorism speech, a very different mission from the one General Stanley McChrystal has been preparing himself for.

"He only mentions the Taliban twice in the whole speech. He started talking about 9/11, he ended with talking about 9/11 and all the references in between were to al-Qaeda."

Bays added: "I think there will be some in the military here in the command centre of Kabul who will be having to rethink things rather urgently."

However, after Tuesday's speech, McChrystal said that Obama's decision "has provided me with a clear military mission and the resources to accomplish our task".

In a **statement** released after the speech, General Stanely McChrystal also said:

In the meantime, our Afghan partners need the support of Coalition forces while we grow and develop the capacity of the Afghan army and police. That will be the main focus of our campaign in the months ahead.

"The 42 other nations of the Coalition will benefit from a strengthened U.S. commitment, as success in Afghanistan must be an international, integrated civil-military effort – from our security and training capacity to the governance and economic development assistance that sustains long-term stability. The concerted commitment of the international community will prevail in bringing real change to Afghanistan - a secure and stable environment that allows for effective governance, improved economic opportunity and the freedom of every Afghan to choose how they live.

But will this kind of effort work with the current resources available to the United States? The Administration has created a timeline in which to hand control over to Afghan patrols and troops, but this investigation by Al Jazeera shows that we may be overestimating key aspects of the strategy - including the actual number of troops on the ground:

After the speech aired, I asked some national security people to give their take on what this means for the United States and its foreign policy. [Patricia DeGennaro](#), expert on U.S. Foreign Policy, National Security, and former consultant to the Office of the President in Afghanistan, writes:

So overall, Obama gave a moving speech. He reminded the country about the reason for going to Afghanistan in the first place or "why we are fighting" – the September 11 attacks. He spoke directly to the people who will be shouldering the burden while address the Afghan people themselves informing them that there is no intent to occupy.

In my mind however there are major shortcomings in the speech. First and foremost, he still failed to identify a clear objective for US forces. "Disrupt, destroy and dismantle Al Qaeda" is not a mission that solely rests on Afghanistan. It is a far reaching hope. One that will entail a worldwide initiative by intelligence and Interpol agencies, not a military. The international forces need a "job" in order to finish one and unfortunately none of us really knows what that is, which makes it very hard when you are trying to plan.

The President outlined the same objectives. First, a military strategy to combat Al Qaeda and the Taliban who are growing ever closer while training and arming an Afghan national army, police force, and a few random militias. The militia part we tried and are still combating. Many of the militia members trained are now leaders of the insurgency and Taliban. It seems Obama missed the most recent Mullah Omar (head of the Taliban) memo that stated, "Afghans will shoot the invaders before their own brothers." Perhaps it is not a good idea to give them M-16s.

Second, Obama promised a civilian surge. One that will assist in security, development and agricultural production. It is not clear however, where these people will come from since the US has all but succeeded in destroying its international civilian capacity. Of the civilians promised to the Embassy, the Administration has sent about one-third of the promised civil officers – they are short 300 people to date.

Third, what does it mean that we are acting with Pakistan? The [Kerry-Lugar act](#) is providing Pakistan with \$1.5 billion a year for five years in non-military development aid. Will the Administration be providing more military funding or armaments as well? That seemed to be hinted in this statement. Although unclear, it is worrisome.

Finally, setting a timetable is dangerous. This is not Iraq. Allies would like to leave sooner and this gives them no incentive to stay, but it gives adversaries all they incentive they need to stand pat. The reality is Obama made a strong speech for why there is a war, the shortcoming was in the direction and management of the effort. They have a saying in Afghanistan, it looks like the same donkey with a different saddle. This saddle is a bit more compromising, but the devil is still missing the lifesaving details threatening any hopes for something I've never heard of – a speedy war.

I would say that all the above things [I wrote] are understood. However, the larger picture is that the US has not defined a more applicable post cold-war strategy. This country is still in the mindset that all that matters are our 'vital' interests and how we perceive things to be without considering or learning about who we are dealing with the the consequences they will face by our one-sided interventions. I heard nothing about how the Afghans would suffer, be protected or partnered with during the next 18 months. I think Obama [in his speech] was struggling with the way that US policy is always formulated and they way he would like to change the formulation of US foreign policy. Washington is like a trillion pound barge, it takes all the energy you have to move it a centimeter.

**Malou Innocent**, of the Cato Institute, had this to say:

Last night, President Barack Obama declared "our security is at stake" in Afghanistan. As I mention here, President George W. Bush was also adept at keeping the American public in an elevated state of panic. That tactic may be useful for advancing controversial policies, especially in Afghanistan, but it also forces us to overlook how our policies intensify the region's powerful jihadist insurgency and entangles us deeper into a costly and protracted guerrilla war.

As the president's national security adviser, General James Jones, noted in October, "the al Qaeda presence [in Afghanistan] is very diminished. The maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in the country, no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies." We don't need 130,000 soldiers to chase down 100 al Qaeda fighters. But yet another disturbing aspect of the current debate over Afghanistan is an inadequate examination of the war's core assumption: the safe haven myth. As Paul Pillar, the National Intelligence Office for the Middle East between 2000 and 2005 notes, the preparations most important to the September 11, 2001 attacks "took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States."

Our security is not at stake in Afghanistan. Not only is remaining in that country neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for keeping America safe, but prolonging our occupation is likely to tarnish America's reputation, undermine its security, and erode its economic well-being more than would a cost-effective policy limited to targeting al Qaeda.

In the coming days, Americans will know more about how the new strategy will be implemented. Today, Secretary of State Clinton, Defense Secretary Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen are appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee. **C-Span** notes that this will be followed later by a "House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing regarding Pres. Obama's new Afghanistan war strategy." Stay tuned.

**Obama's Address on the War in Afghanistan** [New York Times]

**Afghanistan: We Cannot Afford More War** [Care2]

**Missing from the speech: Afghan women** [Politico]

**Afghans react to Obama troop plan** [Al Jazeera]

**Statement: McChrystal on Afghan Policy** [Time]

**Patricia DeGennaro** [SheSource]

**How a U.S. Aid Package to Pakistan Could Threaten Zardari** [Time]

**Malou Innocent** [SheSource]

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