

8. The Surge

The United States decided to surge in Afghanistan to reinforce its commitment with military and civilian assets as well as more resources, but it took nearly a year to bring it to fruition.¹ The foundation of the surge was laid by President George W. Bush in 2008, but the construction was completed under President Obama in 2009 and 2010. Studies on our strategy in Afghanistan began in the last year of the Bush administration. The most critical study of all was reportedly conducted under the auspices of the Bush NSC staff.² There was a preliminary decision to recommend an increase in forces to President Bush, but it was delayed to give the new team a chance to study the situation and make its own recommendations. Early on, President Obama and his team conducted studies that incorporated the work of the previous administration. Bruce Reidel of RAND, a former CIA executive, supervised the efforts, which were facilitated by the continued presence on the NSC staff of Lieutenant General Doug Lute, USA, who managed the war for the previous administration and has remained an essential element of continuity in the U.S. Afghanistan policy.

In March 2009, President Obama made his first set of changes.³ His March 27 white paper outlined a counterinsurgency program aimed at thwarting al Qaeda, “reversing the Taliban’s momentum in Afghanistan,” increasing aid to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and forging a more united strategic approach to both countries.⁴ Some 21,000 additional U.S. troops were sent to Afghanistan to reinforce the 38,000 American and nearly 30,000 allied forces already there. In 2009, ISAF created an intermediate warfighting headquarters, the ISAF Joint Command, and a new training command, the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM–A). In a parallel action, the President replaced the U.S. and ISAF commander, General

David McKiernan, with General Stanley McChrystal, then Director of the Joint Staff and a former commander of special operations elements in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Secretary of Defense directed McChrystal to conduct an assessment of our current efforts and report back to the White House. His August assessment was leaked to the press. Over the next 3 months, President Obama and his senior advisors conducted a detailed in-house assessment to determine how best to amend U.S. strategy.

President Obama's national security team examined three options. The first came from the field. General McChrystal recommended a beefed-up, population-centric counterinsurgency strategy.⁵ He identified two key threats: the vibrant insurgency and a "Crisis of Confidence" in the Karzai regime and the coalition. Among his key recommendations were greater partnering, increasing the size of the Afghan National Security Forces, improving governance, and gaining the initiative from the Taliban. McChrystal also recommended focusing resources on threatened populations, improving counternarcotics efforts, changing the culture of ISAF to make it more population friendly, and adapting restrictive rules of engagement to protect the population more effectively. This last measure quickly showed positive results. ISAF-related civilian casualties were 40 percent of the total in 2008, 25 percent in 2009, and 20 percent to midyear 2010.⁶ His initial assessment did not include a request for a troop increase, but he later identified a favored option of 40,000 additional U.S. troops.

Other administration players had different ideas, and they were debated with active participation from President Obama.⁷ Some saw a need to focus more directly on al Qaeda, others wanted more emphasis on Pakistan, others wanted a delay because of the weakness of our Afghan allies, and still others saw shifting the priority to building the Afghan National Security Forces (police and military) as the key to victory. Vice

President Joe Biden reportedly advocated a strategy focused on counterterrorism, with less emphasis on expensive COIN and nation-building. As previously noted, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, now on his third major assignment in Afghanistan, was concerned with the inefficiency and corruption of the Karzai regime. He famously told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama in November 2009 that Karzai “is not an adequate strategic partner.”⁸ He did not initially concur with U.S. combat troop reinforcements and recommended a shift of the U.S. top priorities to preparing the ANSF to take over security and working more closely with Pakistan.⁹

After 3 months of discussions, President Obama outlined U.S. objectives in a West Point speech. These included defeating al Qaeda, denying it safe haven, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and strengthening the Afghan government:

I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al-Qaeda. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger, no hypothetical threat. In the last few months alone, we have apprehended extremists within our borders who were sent here from the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan to commit new acts of terror. And this danger will only grow if the region slides backwards and al-Qaeda can operate with impunity.

We must keep the pressure on al-Qaeda. And to do that, we must increase the stability and capacity of our partners in the region. . . . 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.¹⁰

To accomplish this, the President directed the reinforcement of an additional 30,000 U.S. troops, with the NATO allies adding nearly 10,000 to that total. Nearly all of those forces were in place by the fall of 2010. To accompany the troop surge, the President ordered a surge of civilian officials, a great increase in foreign assistance, a decisive boost in funding for ANSF, increased aid to Pakistan, and support for Afghan reintegration and reconciliation efforts. By summer 2010, U.S. Government civilians in the country topped 1,050, more than doubling the January 2009 total. Nearly 370 of that number were deployed in the field with regional commands.¹¹

By early fall 2010, U.S. forces reached the 100,000 level, and allied forces totaled 41,400. At the same time, the ANA had 144,000 soldiers, formed into 7 corps, each with about 3 brigades per corps. There were also 6 commando battalions and an air force with 40 planes. The Afghan National Police topped 117,000, with over 5,000 of them in Afghan National Civil Order Police units, which receive special training and equipment to perform paramilitary functions. Afghan and ISAF forces were integrated in field operations.¹² In January 2011, a senior U.S.

military officer noted that partnering in the field nationwide was at the one Afghan to one U.S. or allied unit.¹³

At the same time as the increase in personnel and programs, President Obama also made it clear that the United States would not tolerate an “endless war,” in his words. He directed that in July 2011 “our troops will begin to come home.” He pointed out that the United States must balance all of its commitments and rejected the notion that Afghanistan was another Vietnam. His message attempted to portray a firm national commitment, but not an indeterminate military presence:

*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. . . . 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 nationbuilding 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. . . . 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.*¹⁴

While this declaration had positive political effects at home, it did create ambiguity and uncertainty among friends and adversaries alike. The administration worked hard to convince all concerned that “7/11” would not signal a rapid withdrawal but rather the beginning of a conditions-based,

phased turnover of security to the Afghans. NATO's Lisbon Conference extended this "transition" process until 2014, which is also when President Karzai stated that the ANSF would be able to take over security in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. That year also marks the end of his second (and constitutionally final) term.

Improving and deepening relations with Pakistan is an important part of the surge, complementing the increased attention Pakistan received in the final years of the Bush administration. Greater congressional interest resulted in the 5-year, \$7.5 billion Kerry-Lugar-Berman economic assistance package in the fall of 2009. Pakistan is larger and richer than Afghanistan and possesses nuclear weapons. It also has a longstanding dispute with India, with whom the United States has begun to forge a strategic relationship. Pakistan's own Taliban—loosely allied with the Afghan Taliban—has increased the inherent instability of that fragile nation, and success in COIN operations in either Pakistan or Afghanistan affects security in the other country. Pakistan's long-term relationship with the Afghan Taliban also makes it a key player in future reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

By the summer of 2010, the new U.S. strategy was well under way. Major operations in Helmand and Kandahar did well in the "clear" phase, but struggled in the "hold" and "build" phases. Afghan and coalition governance and police efforts have lagged the military effort. Superb operations by 2^d Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Helmand deserve special credit, as do Army efforts in RC-E and allied Special Operations Forces' efforts in taking out Taliban leadership. Village auxiliaries—Afghan Local Police—have also begun to fight under local shura and Ministry of the Interior supervision. With U.S. Special Operations Forces doing the training, coalition authorities plan to expand the local police effort to over 30,000 officers in 100 key districts.¹⁵ Without proper train-

ing and supervision, the police effort could backfire, create disorder, or favor the development of warlords.

The greatest and most lasting progress of all was made by the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan in 2010. With 33 nations participating, the command under U.S. Lieutenant General William Caldwell, USA, which is now funded at over \$10 billion per annum, drastically increased and improved training for the Afghan National Army and Police, bringing their combined strength to over 300,000. The command also improved the quality of training and branched out into literacy training for all soldiers and police officers, as well as supporting indigenous industries. The command is still short hundreds of NATO trainers, but it has brought its manning up to 79 percent of the total authorized. The acid test for NTM–A and its partners at ISAF Joint Command who supervise unit partnering in the field will come in the transition period from 2011 to 2014.¹⁶ Thereafter, sustaining a multibillion-dollar-per-year financial commitment for security forces will be a significant challenge.

The civilian surge has helped progress on nonmilitary lines of operation—governance, rule of law, and development—but these areas generally lag behind military-related operations. The Afghan government’s ability to receive the transfer of responsibility in cleared areas has been similarly problematic.¹⁷ All criticism aside, however, the rapid build-up of U.S. Government civilians has been remarkable. Their efforts have been guided by the groundbreaking *Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, signed by General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry in August 2009.¹⁸ Today, in addition to Provincial Reconstruction Teams, U.S. Government civilian managers serve at the brigade level and man District Support Teams that give diplomatic, development, and agricultural advice to deployed units and Afghan government officials.

National Guard Agribusiness Development Teams—State civil-military partnerships—give advice to farmers across the country.

One prominent effect of the surge and related activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been increased pressure on the enemy.¹⁹ An October 2010 news release by ISAF Joint Command–Afghanistan included the following information:

Afghan and coalition security forces spent the month of September continuing to capture and kill key Taliban and Haqqani insurgent leaders, clearing traditional insurgent strong holds and ensuring civilians were able to cast their vote in the Parliamentary election. September marked a total of more than 438 suspected insurgents detained and 114 insurgents killed in security force operations. More importantly, the security force captured or killed more than 105 Haqqani Network and Taliban leaders. These leadership figures include shadow governors, leaders, sub-leaders and weapons facilitators. Afghan and coalition forces completed 194 missions, 88 percent of them without shots fired. The month of September ended on a high note when a precision air strike in Kunar province September 25 killed Abdallah Umar al-Qurayshi, an Al Qaeda senior leader who coordinated the attacks of a group of Arab fighters in Kunar and Nuristan province.²⁰

A subsequent summary of September through November 2010 listed “368 insurgent leaders either killed or captured, 968 lower level fighters killed and 2,477 insurgents captured by coalition forces.”²¹ Despite these coalition successes, the Taliban has been able to replace its fallen leadership. It remains as of this writing (March 2011) a dangerous, motivated, and adaptive foe.