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The Afghan Rubik's Cube

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Afghanistan is a gatherer of metaphors: "crossroads of Asia," "graveyard of empires," and the "Great Game," to name a few. It might be more accurate, however, to think of it as a Rubik's Cube, that frustrating puzzle of intersecting blocks that only works when everything fits perfectly. The trick for the Obama administration is to figure out how to solve the puzzle in a timeframe rapidly squeezed by events both internal and external of that war-torn central Asian nation.

At first glance, the [decision](#) to send 21,000 more U.S. troops into a conflict that has dragged on for almost 30 years seems to combine equal parts illusion and amnesia: illusion that the soldiers could make a difference, amnesia in trying something that already failed disastrously in 2005. But then, Afghanistan seems to have a deranging effect on its occupiers.

Myth of the Surge

In the summer of 2006, British Lt. Gen. David Richards, then commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Southern Afghanistan, backed a surge in troops to end the insurgency in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. The Taliban, he said, would soon "start dancing to my tune," and the surge was creating an environment in "which most people, including many Taliban, have just had enough fighting." Three years later, though troop levels have more than quadrupled, Kandahar is under siege and Helmand is unarguably the most dangerous province in the country.

As former British Foreign Service officer Rory Stewart [argues](#), "when the decision to increase the number of troops in 2005 was made, there was no insurgency." Indeed, the surge — and the

civilian casualties that accompanied it — ignited the current resistance movement. Back then the Taliban controlled 54% of the country. Today [that figure](#) is 72% and rising.

The illusion is that adding 21,000 troops to the 38,000 U.S. soldiers and 50,000 NATO soldiers could possibly make a difference. The United States, with 500,000 soldiers, couldn't prevail in Vietnam, a country of 67,000 square miles and 19 million people. Afghanistan has half again that population and 250,000 square miles of some of the planet's most unforgiving terrain.

As Brigadier General Mark Carleton-Smith, Britain's top military officer in Afghanistan, bluntly [told](#) the *Sunday Times*, "We're not going to win this war."

So has the madness that seems to seize Afghanistan's invaders infected the White House? Maybe not.

[Obama's Gambit](#)

If Obama were serious about a military victory in Afghanistan he would have sent 40,000 troops, not 21,000. The former figure — which the administration initially discussed — [would fulfill](#) the Pentagon's formula of soldiers to population counterinsurgency strategy. Nevertheless, 21,000 troops is an escalation, and escalation is always a slippery slope.

Meanwhile, unlike the Bush administration, the White House has invited Iran to join a regional conference on the war, and the president [has hinted](#) that he is open to talking with the Taliban. Neither of these moves suggests that the administration is only thinking in terms of a military "victory" in Afghanistan.

In a sense the administration has little choice because increasingly, the United States is on its own. In recent NATO meetings in Poland, the Europeans made it clear that they would not join a "surge," [despite pleas](#) by British Defense Secretary John Hutton and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Polls [show](#) a substantial majority of Germans, British, French, and Italians are opposed to sending any more troops to Afghanistan.

The United States is also facing trouble among its regional allies.

The 2005 surge not only revitalized the Taliban, it spread the war to Pakistan and created the Pakistani Taliban that has driven the Pakistan Army out of the Swat Valley and most of the Northwest Territory and tribal regions. This border war [has killed](#) 1,500 Pakistani soldiers and innumerable civilians, and cost Islamabad at least \$34 billion. With the country's economic system collapsing, aiding the U.S. war on terrorism is deeply unpopular. According to polls, 89% of the Pakistani population [opposes it](#).

The war has also ratcheted up tensions between Pakistan and India. India has deployed its paramilitary Indo-Tibetan Border Patrol in Afghanistan to protect its road-building projects from Taliban attacks. For the Pakistanis, this means their traditional enemy now has troops on both borders. India and Pakistan have fought three wars since the 1947 partition of the two countries, and India is currently [in the middle](#) of a major expansion of its military.

The right-wing Hindu fundamentalist BJP, jockeying for position in the upcoming Indian elections, [has called](#) for a military retaliation, including a blockade of the port of Karachi, for the recent attack on Mumbai by Pakistan-based militants.

Inside Afghanistan

The political situation within Afghanistan is growing increasingly unstable. President Hamid Karzai, once the darling of Western powers, has come under intense criticism for his regime's widespread corruption, and there is open talk by the U.S. and NATO about not backing him in upcoming elections.

Karzai has [responded](#) by blaming the United States and NATO for a 40% increase in civilian casualties, and is [threatening](#) direct talks with the Taliban. In theory, elections will be held in August. But since Karzai's current term runs out in May, it is unclear who will be in charge for the runup to the vote.

And ominously for the allies, a poll of Afghans shows a significant rise in anti-occupation sentiment. A majority [now supports](#) a negotiated end to the war, even if that means a coalition government that includes the Taliban.

While Afghanistan looks increasingly unstable, the Taliban appear to be getting their act together. Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, [has forged](#) an alliance with the fractious Pakistan Taliban that will direct the power of both organizations toward fighting "the occupation forces inside of Afghanistan."

The pact declares a truce on attacks against "the Pakistan security forces" and "fellow Muslims in the tribal areas and elsewhere in Pakistan," which Omar says is "harming the war against the US and NATO forces."

According to retired Pakistani General Talat Masood, the pact is the reason for the recent truce in the Swat Valley and an end to the fighting in Bajaur Province in the tribal territories. In turn, the Pakistani army has made it clear it has no intention of invading Waziristan, generally thought of as ground zero for the Taliban.

With NATO falling away, regional allies at each other's throats, growing turmoil inside of Afghanistan, and the Taliban uniting, the Obama administration is facing what appears to be an unsolvable Rubik's cube.

Solving the Cube

While the Taliban have united to fight, Mullah Omar, through Saudi Arabian King Abdullah, also made a peace offering that no longer requires western forces to withdraw before opening talks. The plan [proposes](#) setting a timetable for withdrawal, forming a "consensus government," and consolidating the Taliban forces into a national army.

The inclusion of Iran in an upcoming conference on Afghanistan draws in a key regional player that the Bush administration deliberately kept out of the process.

To make all the cubes fit together, the Obama administration will have to recognize that the United States is only one player at the table and that the interests of other parties, both inside and outside of Afghanistan, must be given equal weight.

Above all, Washington must avoid both an aggressive military surge that would further destabilize Afghanistan and the dead-end tactic of refusing to talk with people we don't agree with.