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Asia time online

Afghanistan by the numbers

By Tom Engelhardt

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Here may be the single strangest fact of our American world: that at least three administrations - Ronald Reagan's, George W Bush's and now Barack Obama's - drew the United States "defense" perimeter at the Hindu Kush; that is, in the rugged, mountainous lands of Afghanistan.

Put another way, while Americans argue feverishly and angrily over what kind of money, if any, to put into health care, or decaying infrastructure, or other key places of need, until recently just about no one in the mainstream raised a peep about the fact that, for nearly eight years (not to say much of the last three decades), we've been pouring billions of dollars, American military know-how, and American lives into a black hole in Afghanistan that is, at least in significant part, of our own creation.

Imagine for a moment, as you read this post, what might have happened if Americans had decided to sink the same sort of money - US\$228 billion and rising fast - the same "civilian surges", the same planning, thought and effort (but not the same staggering ineffectiveness) into reclaiming [New Orleans](#) or Detroit, or into planning an American future here at home. Imagine, for a moment, when you read about the multi-millions going into further construction at Bagram Air Base, or to the mercenary company that provides "[Lord of the Flies](#)" hire-a-gun guards for American diplomats in massive super-embassies, or about the half-a-billion dollars sunk into a corrupt and fraudulent Afghan election, what a similar investment in our own country might have meant.

Ask yourself: Wouldn't the US have been safer and more secure if all [the money](#), effort, and planning had gone towards "nation-building" in America? Or do you really think we're safer now, with an official [unemployment rate](#) of 9.7%, an underemployment rate of 16.8%, and a record 25.5% teen unemployment rate, with soaring health-care costs, with vast infrastructural weaknesses and failures, and [in debt](#) up to our eyeballs, while tens of thousands of troops and massive infusions of cash are mustered ostensibly to fight a terrorist

outfit that may number in the low hundreds or at most thousands, that, by all accounts, isn't now even based in Afghanistan, and that has shown itself perfectly capable of settling into broken states like Somalia or well functioning cities like Hamburg.

Measuring success

Sometime later this month, the Barack [Obama](#) administration will present Congress with "metrics" for ... well, since this isn't the George W Bush era, we can't say "victory". In the style of special envoy to the region [Richard Holbrooke](#), let's call it "success". Holbrooke recently offered this definition of that word, evidently based on the standards the Supreme Court used to define pornography: "We'll know it when we see it."

According to Karen DeYoung of [the Washington Post](#), the Obama administration is reportedly rushing to "pre-empt Congress with its own metrics". It's producing a document called a [Strategic Implementation](#) Plan, which, DeYoung writes, "will include separate 'indicators' of progress under nine broad 'objectives' to be measured quarterly ... Some of the about 50 indicators will apply to US performance, but most will measure Afghan and Pakistani efforts." These are to include supposedly measurable categories like numbers of newly trained Afghan army recruits and the timeliness of the delivery of promised US resources.

The administration is evidently now "tweaking" its metrics. But let's admit it: metrics in war almost invariably turn out to occupy treacherous terrain. Think of it as quagmire territory, in part because numbers, however accurate (and they often aren't), can lie - or rather, can tell the story you would like them to tell.

The Vietnam War was a classic metrics war. Sometimes it seemed that Americans in Vietnam did nothing but invent new ways of measuring success. There were, for instance, the 18 indices of the Hamlet Evaluation System, each meant to calibrate the "progress" of "pacification" in South Vietnam's 2,300 villages and almost 13,000 hamlets, focusing largely on "rural security" and "development".

Then there were the many indices of the Measurement of Progress system, its monthly reports, produced in slide form, including "strength trends of the opposing forces, efforts of friendly forces in sorties ... enemy base areas neutralized", and so on. For visiting congressional delegations, the commander of US forces, General William Westmoreland, had his "attrition charts", multicolored bar graphs illustrating various "trends" in death and destruction. Commanders in the field had their own sophisticated ways to codify "kill ratios", while on the ground, where the actual counting had to be done in dangerous circumstances, all of this translated far more crudely into the MGR, or, as the grunts sometimes said, the "Mere Gook Rule" - "If it's dead and it's [Vietnamese](#), it's VC [Vietcong]." In other words, when pressure came down for the "body count", any body would do.

The problem was that none of the official metrics managed to measure what mattered most in Vietnam. History may not simply repeat itself, but there's good reason to look askance at whatever set of metrics the Obama administration manages to devise. After all, as in the Vietnam years, Obama's people, too, will be mustering numbers in search of "success"; they, too, will be measuring "progress". And those numbers - like the Vietnam-era body counts - will have to come up from below (with all the attendant pressures). By the time they reach Washington, they are likely to have the best possible patina on them.

With the delivery of those new metrics to Congress seemingly imminent, I thought I might offer my own set of Afghan metrics for the worst year of the present war. Think of this as basic math for Americans.

Costs

Annual funding for US combat operations in Afghanistan, 2002: \$20.8 billion.

Annual funding for US combat operations in Afghanistan, 2009: \$60.2 billion.

Total funds for US combat operations in Afghanistan, 2002-2009: \$228.2 billion.

War-fighting funds requested by the Obama administration for 2010: \$68 billion (a figure which will, for the first time since 2003, exceed funds requested for Iraq).

Funds recently requested by US ambassador Karl Eikenberry for non-military spending in Afghanistan, 2010: \$2.5 billion.

Funds spent since 2001 on Afghan "reconstruction": \$38 billion ("more than half of it on training and equipping Afghan security forces").

Percentage of US funding in Afghanistan that has gone for military purposes: Nearly 90%.

Estimated US funds needed to support and upgrade Afghan forces for the next decade: \$4 billion a year ("with a like sum for development") according to former assistant secretary of defense Bing West. (According to the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, "It's a reasonable guess that for 20 years, we essentially will have to fund half the Afghan budget.")

Afghan gross national product: \$23 billion (the size of Boise, Idaho's, writes columnist George Will) - about \$3 billion of it from opium production.

Annual budget of the Afghan government: \$600 million.

Maintenance cost for the force of 450,000 Afghan soldiers and police US generals dream of creating: approximately 500% of the Afghan budget.

Amount spent on police "mentoring and training" since 2001: \$10 billion.

Percentage of the more than 400 Afghan National Police units "still incapable of running their operations independently": 75% (2008 figures).

Cost of the latest upgrade of Bagram Air Base (an old Soviet base that has become the largest American base in Afghanistan): \$220 million.

Cost of a single recent Pentagon contract to DynCorp International Inc and Fluor Corporation "to build and support US military bases throughout Afghanistan": up to \$15 billion.

War-fighting Number of American troops killed in Afghanistan, 2001: 12.

Number of American troops killed in Afghanistan, 2009 (through September 7): 186

Total number of coalition (NATO and American) deaths in 2009 thus far: 311, making this the deadliest year for those forces since the war began.

Number of Lithuanian troops killed in Afghanistan: 1

Two worst months of the Afghan War in terms of coalition deaths: July (71) and August (74) 2009.

US troop levels in Afghanistan, 2002: 5,200.

Expected US troop levels in Afghanistan, December 2009: 68,000.

Percentage rise in Taliban attacks on coalition forces using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in 2009 (compared to the same period in 2008): 114%.

Rise in coalition deaths from IED attacks in July 2009 (compared to July 2008): six-fold.

Percentage increase in overall Taliban attacks in the first five months of 2009 (compared to the same period in 2008): 59%.

Number of US regional command centers in Afghanistan: 4 (at Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Bagram).

Number of US prisons and holding centers: approximately 36 "overcrowded and often violent sites" with 15,000 detainees.

Number of US bases: at least 74 in northern Afghanistan alone, with more being built. (The total number of US bases in Afghanistan seems not to be available.)

Estimated cost per troop of maintaining US forces in Afghanistan when compared to Iraq: 30% higher.

Number of gallons of fuel per day used by the US Marines in Afghanistan: 800,000.

Cost of a single gallon of gas delivered to the Afghan war zone on long, cumbersome, and dangerously embattled supply lines: Up to \$100.

Number of gallons of fuel used to keep marine tents cool in the Afghan summer and warm in winter: 448,000 gallons.

Number of troops from Georgia (not the US state, but the country) being prepared by US Marine trainers to be dispatched to Afghanistan to fight in spring 2010: 750.

Number of Colombian commandos to be sent to Afghanistan: Unknown, but Colombian commandos, trained by US Special Forces and financed by the US government, are reportedly to be dispatched there to fight alongside US troops. (Note that both Georgia and Colombia are dependent on US aid and support. Note also that neither the Georgians nor the Colombians would assumedly be bound by the sort of restrictive fighting rules that limit the actions of some NATO forces in Afghanistan.)

Percentage of American spy planes and unmanned aerial vehicles now devoted to Afghanistan: 66% (33% are in Iraq).

Number of American bombs dropped in Afghanistan in the first six months of 2009: 2,011 (a fall of 24% from the previous year, thanks evidently to a directive from US commanding general in Afghanistan, Stanley A McChrystal, limiting air attacks when civilians might be present).

Number of Afghan civilian deaths recorded by the UN January-July 2009: 1,013, a rise of 24% from the same period in 2008. (Unfortunately, Afghan deaths are generally covered sparingly, on an incident by incident basis, as in the deaths of an Afghan family traveling to a wedding party in August, assumedly due to a Taliban-planted IED, or the recent controversial US bombing of two stolen oil tankers in Kunduz province in which many civilians seem to have died. Anything like the total number of Afghans killed in these years remains unknown, but what numbers we have are undoubtedly undercounts.)

Escalation

Number of additional troops McChrystal is expected to recommend that Obama send to Afghanistan in the coming months: 21,000 to 45,000, according to the McClatchy Newspapers; 10,000 to 15,000 ("described as a high-risk option"), 25,000 ("a medium-risk option"), 45,000 ("a low-risk option"), according to the New York Times; fewer than 10,000, according to the Associated Press.

Number of support troops Defense Department officials are planning to replace with "trigger-pullers" (combat troops) in the coming months, effectively an escalation in place: 6,000-14,000. ("The changes will not offset the potential need for additional troops in the future, but could reduce the size of any request ... officials said.")

Number of additional NATO forces General McChrystal will reportedly ask for: 20,000.

Optimal number of additional Afghan National Army (ANA) troops to be trained by 2012, according to reports on General McChrystal's draft plan: 162,000. (According to Naval Postgraduate School professor Thomas H Johnson and retired Foreign Service officer M. Chris Mason, "[T]he US military touts 91,000 ANA soldiers as 'trained and equipped', knowing full well that barely 39,000 are still in the ranks and present for duty.")

Public opinion

Percentage of Americans opposed to the war in Afghanistan: 57%, according to the latest CNN poll, an 11% rise since April. Only 42% now support the war.

Percentage of Republicans who support the war: 70%, according to the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll.

Percentage of Americans who approve of Obama's handling of the war: 48%, according to the latest CBS poll, a drop of 8 points since April. (Support for increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan is now at just 25%, down 14% from April.)

Percentage of British who feel their forces should be withdrawn Percentage of Germans opposed to that country's 4,000 troop commitment to Afghanistan: More than 70%.

The presidential election

Estimated cost of staging the 2009 Afghan presidential election: \$500 million.

Number of complaints of voting irregularities: More than 2,500 and still climbing, 691 of them described as "serious charges."

Number of members of the "Independent Election Commission" not appointed by Afghan president (and [presidential candidate](#)) Hamid Karzai: 0.

Cost of blank voting-registration cards in Ghazni province in May 2009: \$200 for 200 blank registration cards.

Cost of such a card purchased by "an undercover Afghan journalist working for the BBC" this autumn: \$8.

Number of [voter registration](#) cards (not including fakes) reportedly distributed countrywide: 17 million or almost twice the estimated number of eligible voters.

Number of ballots cast at the Hajji Janat Gul High School polling place, half an hour from the center of Kabul: 600.

Number of votes recorded for Karzai at that polling station: 996. (Number of votes for other candidates: 5.)

Number of ballots marked for Karzai and shipped to Kabul from 45 polling sites in Shorabak district in southern Afghanistan that were shut down by local officials connected to Karzai before voting could begin: 23,900.

Number of fake polling sites set up by backers of Karzai where no one voted but hundreds of thousands of votes were recorded: as many as 800, according to [the New York Times](#). (Another 800 actual polling sites were taken over by Karzai supporters "to fraudulently report tens of thousands of additional ballots for Mr Karzai".)

Number of ballots in Karzai's home province, Kandahar, where an estimated 25,000 Afghans actually voted, submitted to be counted: approximately 350,000.

Private contractors

Number of military contractors hired by the Pentagon in Afghanistan by the end of June 2009: Almost 74,000, nearly two-thirds of them local hires, a 9% rise over the previous three months.

Percentage of the Pentagon's force in Afghanistan made up of contractors in March 2009: 57%.

Ranking for the percentage of contractors used by the Pentagon in Afghanistan: highest in any conflict in US history.

Diplomats and the civilian surge

Cost of new "crash" program to expand the US "diplomatic presence" in Afghanistan and Pakistan: \$1 billion. (\$736 million of which is slated for [the construction](#) of a massive new embassy/regional headquarters in Islamabad, Pakistan.)

Number of additional US government personnel reportedly slated to be sent to Pakistan to augment the 750 civilians already there: almost 1,000.

Expected number of US government civilians to be posted at the US Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan by the end of 2009: 976. (There were 562 at the end of 2008 and there are now reportedly more than 1,000 diplomats, staff, and Afghan nationals already working there.)

Estimated total number of civilians to be assigned to the US Embassy in Kabul as part of a proposed ongoing "civilian surge" by 2011: 1,350 (800 to be posted in Kabul, 550 outside the [capital](#)).

Cost of the State Department's five-year contract with Xe Services (formerly Blackwater) to provide security for US diplomats in Afghanistan: \$210 million.

Cost of the State Department's contract with ArmorGroup North America, a subsidiary of US-based Wackenhutt Services Inc, to guard the US Embassy in Kabul: \$189 million.

Number of private guards provided by ArmorGroup [North America](#): 450, based at Camp Sullivan, several miles from the embassy compound where they reportedly engaged in Lord of the Flies-style behavior.

The metrics of success

Defense Secretary Robert Gates on success in Afghanistan: It will take "a few years" to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Admiral "Mike" Mullen, chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) on Meet the Press: "I believe we've got to start to turn this thing around from a security standpoint in the next 12 to 18 months." (He would not directly answer the "how long" question.)

Senate Foreign Relations Committee report on the Afghan War: "None of the civilian officials or [military](#) officers interviewed in Afghanistan and elsewhere expected substantial progress in the short term. They talked in terms of years two, five and 10 ... Military officials believe the Afghanistan mission can only succeed if troops are there far longer - anywhere from five years to 12 years."

Military experts cited by Walter Pincus of [the Washington Post](#) warn: "[T]he United States is taking on security and political commitments that will last at least a decade and a cost that will probably eclipse that of the Iraq war."

Anthony H Cordesman, a member of a "team" put together by US commanding general in Afghanistan Stanley A McChrystal to assess war strategy, and a national security expert for the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "told reporters recently that even with military gains in the next 12 to 18 months, it would take years to reduce sharply the threat from the Taliban and other insurgent forces."

Robert Dreyfuss of the Nation summarizing the opinions of a panel of experts on the Afghan War, including Bruce Riedel, a 30-year CIA veteran and adviser to four presidents, who chaired Obama's Afghan task force, two McChrystal task force members, Kim Kagan and Cordesman, and the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon: "(1) A significant escalation of

the war will be necessary to avoid utter defeat. (2) Even if tens of thousands of troops are added to the US occupation, it won't be possible to determine if the US/NATO effort is succeeding until 18 months later. (3) Even if the United States turns the tide in Afghanistan, no significant drawdown of US forces will take place until five years have passed." (Riedel commented: "Anyone who thinks that in 12 to 18 months we're going to be anywhere close to victory is living in a fantasy.")

New chief of staff of the British Army, General Sir David Richards: "The army's role will evolve, but the whole process might take as long as 30 to 40 years." (After much criticism, he retracted the statement.)

New NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen: NATO's mission in Afghanistan will last "as long as it takes" to ensure that the country is secure.

Afghanistan by the numbers

Cost of a Kalashnikov rifle in Afghanistan today: \$400-600.

Cost of a Kalakov (the Afghan name for a new model of Kalashnikov): \$1,100. (For a \$150 surcharge, you can have it delivered to southern Afghanistan.)

Cost of a kilo of heroin in Afghanistan: \$2,500. (Cost of that same kilo in Moscow: an estimated \$100,000.)

Cost in police bribes of getting contraband into or out of Afghanistan: "\$20 on each weapon, \$100 for a kilo of heroin and \$1,000 for each thousand kilos of hashish."

Afghanistan's ranking among the globe's "weakest states", according to the Brookings Institution: second weakest. (It is also regularly referred to as the world's fourth poorest country.)

Unemployment rate in Afghanistan, according to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook: 40% (2008 figures).

Monthly wage for Afghan National Police: \$110 (less than \$4 per day).

Daily wage Taliban reputedly pays its fighters: \$4-8. (Often the only "job" available.)

How long it may take to get a case through a government court (with bribes): 4-5 years.

How long it may take to get a case through a Taliban court (without bribes): 1 day.

Number of registered Afghan refugees still in Iran and Pakistan: 3 million.

Number of al-Qaeda base camps estimated to be in Afghanistan today: 0. (All reputable experts seem agreed on this.)

The next war

The price tag the Obama administration's budget team reportedly put on US future wars almost every year through 2019: More than \$100 billion a year.

The cost of equipping seven army brigades with a Boeing advanced coordinated system of hand-held drones, robots, sensors, and other battlefield surveillance equipment over the next two years: \$2 billion.

Date when all 73 army active and reserve brigades will be equipped with the system: 2025.

What can't be measured

Here's a conundrum to be considered and filed away under the rubric "impossible to measure" as you leave the world of Afghan war metrics: The US continues to struggle to train Afghan police and soldiers who will actually turn out and fight with discipline (see above).

In the meantime, as a recent Washington Post piece by Karen DeYoung indicated, the Taliban regularly turn out fighters who are reportedly using ever more sophisticated and tenacious fire-and-maneuver techniques against the overwhelming firepower of US and NATO forces. ("To many of the Americans, it appeared as if the insurgents had attended something akin to the US Army's Ranger school, which teaches soldiers how to fight in small groups in austere environments.")

Both groups are, of course, Afghans. It might be worth considering why "their" Afghans are the fierce fighters of history books and legend and ours, despite billions of dollars and massive training efforts, are not. This puzzling situation had its parallel in Vietnam decades ago when American military advisors regularly claimed they would give up a division of US-trained South Vietnamese forces for a single battalion of "VC".

Here's something to carry away with you: Life is invariably hard when you set up your massive embassies, your regional command centers, your election advisors, your private security guards, your military trainers and advisors, your diplomats and civilian enablers and then try to come up with a formula for motivating the locals to do your bidding.