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A bizarre declaration of war-and-withdrawal

In sending an invading force of 30,000 *and* admitting the war is unwinnable, Obama's Afghan policy is as dangerously unhinged as Bush's was

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In a much-anticipated speech at the West Point Military Academy on Tuesday, President Barack Obama announced a new US approach to Afghanistan. He committed 30,000 additional US troops to the cause, and, at the same time, declared that American forces would start to be withdrawn in July 2011. He cited a number of immediate objectives: rolling back Taliban gains, protecting the Afghan people, putting pressure on the Afghanistan government to reform and build its own military and civilian institutions, and increasing attacks on al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

As many commentators pointed out, the combination of a large troop increase and a short (18-month) deadline for withdrawal appeared contradictory and confusing. Writing in *Slate*, John Dickerson found the speech 'a bit blurry': 'Obama is escalating while retreating, adding more troops while setting a date for their departure. Obama said he was putting pressure on the Afghan government, but he didn't suggest how... He smudged the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, explaining that while he was sending troops to Afghanistan, the struggle was now more regional than it was when it started eight years ago.' (1)

Obama seemed to be trying to please everyone in US domestic politics: give more troops to those who want to escalate, and offer a withdrawal date to those who want to remove US forces from Afghanistan. But as the *New York Times* pointed out, this solution 'is one that may frustrate both sides more than it satisfies them' (2). Indeed, a substantial number of critics emerged after the speech from both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Obama's approach was contradictory and confusing, but this was not simply due to a poorly crafted speech, nor from an attempt to 'triangulate' different sides in domestic politics, as some writers imply. The approach contains a more fundamental contradiction: it is an expression of both US strength *and* weakness. Strength in terms of brute force: a message that we are the most powerful army in the world, we can deploy massive force, we have the capacity to take decisive action. But also weakness, in the talk of withdrawal and the naming of a potential date for winding operations down.

Most importantly, Obama's new initiative does not address the real problem for the US and the West: the lack of a clear political or moral purpose for military intervention in Afghanistan. The stated objective when the US invaded in 2001 was to respond to the 9/11 attacks and destroy al-Qaeda, even though Afghanistan's connection to 9/11 was dubious (the masterminds were Egyptians and Saudis trained in the West, and the Taliban had nothing to do with it). The shifting justifications for war given over time – liberate women, stop drug traffic, promote democracy, prevent terrorism – have attested to the mission's incoherence (3). It is not Taliban opposition or a lack of military resources, but this lack of a commonly shared purpose, this lack of knowing what soldiers were meant to be fighting for, which explains why the US and the West have been losing the war in Afghanistan up to now (4).

As many pointed out, Obama's West Point address signals that he now 'owns' the Afghanistan intervention (5). He is now pro-actively taking responsibility and cannot claim that he has simply inherited Bush's mess. However, it is not as if Obama's hands were clean of this intervention up until the speech: in fact, he had already deployed an extra 21,000 troops in March this year. And his ties to Afghanistan extend further back in time. When he publicly opposed war in Iraq (as he did in a now-famous speech in 2004), he – along with many other liberals – coupled his criticism with the argument that the real fight should be in Afghanistan. When he ran for president, he vowed to shift his approach and devote more resources to Afghanistan, taking a more hawkish line than his Republican opponent, John McCain. Some eight months after entering the White House, he stated that 'until I'm satisfied we've got the right strategy, I'm not going to be sending some young man or woman over there beyond what we already have'. But the 'right strategy' was missing when he sent the additional 21,000 troops in March (6).

Now Obama's speech appears to mark a new strategy, a supposed re-booting of the US intervention. But it is really not strategic, nor is it a true change of course. This latest initiative does not fill the hole at the heart of the US and the West's Afghanistan mission – the lack of a political and moral purpose. In his speech, Obama did not seem clear on the justification for the war. He cited 'the security of the United States and the safety of the American people', but he also said, echoing Bush, that the US has a long record of 'advancing frontiers of human liberty'. The war is also needed, he said, 'to put pressure on al-Qaeda', but he then went on to say that al-Qaeda is mainly operating in Pakistan, not Afghanistan (and could get its hands on Pakistan's nuclear weapons – a scare story that is even less credible than Bush and Cheney's imaginary WMDs in Iraq).

Heaping on more 'blood and treasure' is not a strategy, nor does it create a purpose. General Stanley McChrystal, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, has promised new combat measures, such as going on the offensive against the Taliban, working with Afghan militias in towns and villages, and training Afghan police and soldiers. But these are *tactics*, and are not a substitute for coherent objectives.

Most revealing was Obama's professed endgame – exiting Afghanistan. It is not just the setting of a withdrawal date *per se*: as an administration official pointed out after the speech, the key word is 'begin' to withdraw; the White House will assess the situation closer to the time, and it may be that substantial troop numbers will remain in the country long after mid-July 2011. But it is nonetheless telling that the emphasis is on exiting, not winning; indeed, Obama has effectively conceded that the war cannot really be won.

Yet, in upping the stakes with massive manpower and firepower without the prospect of real success, Obama has arguably created the conditions for a very dangerous and bloody situation on the ground, potentially worse than what exists today. Adding soldiers – and putting more of them further out in the rural countryside – will no doubt lead to more casualties on both sides. At the same time, Obama's stated desire for a 'handover' to the corruption-filled Karzai government and other local Afghan officials in such a short timeframe is an admission that the US is flippant about supporting 'liberty' and has no capacity for seeing through even modest 'nation-building' measures.

Furthermore, there is a good chance that the time-specific nature of the mission will act as an enticement to America's enemies. If the Taliban and others know that the US will wind down some time in 2011, then they have an incentive to hurry that development along, or simply to sustain their campaign until that time. Also, the fact that Obama has said this is about handing over to allies on the ground, preparing them for the takeover, will potentially increase civil conflict and clashes between the Taliban and the forces allegedly set to take over in 2011.

Obama's new approach may contain contradictions, but these contradictions accurately reflect the situation today. They reveal his reliance on militarism (and how Obama is not that different from Bush after all), but they also expose Washington's caginess about asserting its authority or mission overseas. It is an invasion and an admission of defeat at the same time, thus capturing America's reliance on military ventures to try to gain some sense of purpose, but also its inability to see such ventures through or even to define what they are for.

This latest move in Afghanistan will have dangerous, bloody consequences. It may ultimately prove to be a major mistake and setback for Obama's presidency, but the ones who will pay the highest price are the Afghan people.