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Preaching peace, flexing muscle

America's 'surge' may only expand, intensify and prolong the Afghan conflict

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There were no surprises in President Barack Obama's historic speech at West Point last Tuesday.

Obama faced the choice between guns (Afghanistan) or butter (his national health plan). The Nobel Peace Prize winner chose guns.

As expected, Obama will rush 30,000 new troops into the Afghan quagmire and arm-twist reluctant allies to contribute more token forces. Confusingly, Obama promised some of the 100,000 U.S. garrison will begin withdrawing in 2011.

The president insisted his objective remains destroying al-Qaida. But al-Qaida barely exists in Afghanistan. Only a handful remain in Pakistan. His real target may be Pakistan.

Obama's plan mirrors the Bush administration's Iraq "surge" that candidate Obama sharply criticized. The Soviets also tried the same surge tactic during their Afghan occupation.

Tragically, the "anti-war president" missed another major opportunity to end the Afghan War through negotiations.

Anyone who understands Afghanistan's deep complexities knows that Obama's surge won't win the eight-year war. Afghanistan's Pashtun tribal majority will continue to resist western occupation.

The additional U.S. troops will be used to protect the main cities and roads connecting them - again, mirroring Soviet strategy in the 1980s. U.S. Marines will crush rebellious Kandahar the way Iraq's Fallujah was laid waste.

At best, it will be an exercise in managing failure.

Americans are turning against the war. Congress is fretting over its mounting costs: \$300 billion US for 2009 in a \$1.4-trillion deficit year. This war is being waged on borrowed money. Democrats are rightly calling for a special war tax on all Americans rather than continuing to hide the war's huge expenses on the national credit card. Canada should do the same.

It costs \$1 million US to keep each American soldier in Afghanistan. Renting Pakistan's assistance will cost \$3 billion per year. Thousands of U.S. troops will remain stuck in Iraq. Obama vowed to fight al-Qaida in Africa and Asia. No wonder many angry Democrats are calling him "George Bush's third term."

The most positive interpretation of Obama's "surge" is that it is a face-saving exercise to cover America's retreat from the Afghan morass. An Afghan army will be cobbled together (the Soviets did the same), the Karzai government will be somehow sanitized and victory will be declared in 2011. This will hopefully allow substantial U.S. troop reductions before the next mid-term and presidential elections - if all goes well.

But things are not going well in Pakistan, without whose co-operation, bases and supply routes the U.S. cannot wage war in Afghanistan. The U.S.-backed Pakistani government of Asif Ali Zardari is awash with corruption charges, condemned as a puppet regime and may soon be ousted by Pakistan's military.

Most Pakistanis support the Taliban, see the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan as driven by lust for oil and increasingly fear the U.S. intends to tear their unstable nation apart in order to seize its nuclear arsenal.

Obama's advisers have convinced him an early U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will provoke chaos in Pakistan. They don't understand that it is the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan that is destabilizing Pakistan and creating ever more anti-western extremism.

What Obama should really have been concerned about was Osama bin Laden's vow to break America's domination of the Muslim world by luring it into a final battle in Pakistan, a nation of 175 million.

The longer U.S. forces wage war in Afghanistan, the more the conflict will spread into Pakistan, where 15% of its people and 25% of its military are Pashtuns who sympathize with their beleaguered fellow Taliban Pashtuns in Afghanistan.

A grimmer view is that Obama has become a captive of the military-industrial complex, Wall Street and Washington's rabid neocons who seek permanent war against the Muslim world. Obama's "surge" may only expand, intensify and prolong the Afghan conflict.

In the end, there will be a negotiated peace that includes Taliban. But how many Americans, allies and Afghans must die before it comes?