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Obama is ignoring crucial questions about his Afghan policy.

Despite his second review of Afghan strategy – supposedly one the most exhaustive examinations in the annals of foreign policy – there are unsurprisingly still plenty of loose ends. As with any president, Obama has fudged his public defense of this politically contentious policy to limit domestic political opposition. Consequently, it is unclear that the public knows what America is getting into in Afghanistan. Here are a number of things that have mostly eluded public attention.

– It is still uncertain how much money, how many soldiers and how much time President Obama is willing to expend on Afghanistan. President Bush initiated the first force surge in 2008. In March, Obama bet that another surge of twenty thousand more troops and significantly increasing funds for AfPak would have a short-term payoff against the Taliban and al-Qaeda—assuaging public opinion and allowing the war to continue, and convincing Congress to supply the effort with significant amounts of money for another period of uncertain duration. The main stated objective was to destroy al-Qaeda, repeatedly characterized as a continuing existential threat to the United States, and later as a “war of necessity.”

In November, after his review, Mr. Obama again announced a policy of betting on the come. The stated overriding goal remained getting rid of al-Qaeda, and to achieve it he had another surge, an additional thirty thousand troops and ostensibly a change of strategy. He also added a few new wrinkles. He voiced a determination to change the behavior of our Afghan ally, but avoided characterizing the recent presidential election as flawed. And he imposed something of a time limit by setting a date for the start of an American withdrawal. The latter was intended to energize our Afghan allies and convey to the American people that we would not be in Afghanistan indefinitely. Almost immediately, however, Obama’s senior officials moved to reassure both the Afghan and Pakistani governments, making it clear that there was no definite time limit for the continued presence of American forces and withdrawals would be “conditions based.”

The word “surge” is a sort of magic elixir in today’s public dialogue, based on its apparent effectiveness in Iraq. It has taken on new life in Afghanistan. Obama’s decision to commit more soldiers is in fact the third surge in Afghanistan since 2008, when the much-reviled Bush administration started increasing troop levels after six years of military and governmental ineffectiveness. Obama announced the second surge in March. And now we have a third surge.

The first surge clearly did not do the trick – things got worse. The second is too recent to evaluate, but the president clearly accepted the judgment of the top military brass that it would also not do the trick. The third – with ostensibly a different strategy—won’t be in full place until sometime later this year. The total of one hundred thousand American troops is, of course, vastly understated: another fifty thousand contractors perform services previously carried out by the military, including numerous security and intelligence responsibilities. When combined with NATO forces, there will be more Allied forces in Afghanistan than the Soviets had at the height of their presence – with far greater firepower, intelligence and no fear of the surface-to-air missiles that worried the USSR.

– The major premises underlying our Afghan war effort – that al-Qaeda is such a threat to the United States that we should maintain sizeable forces and spend hundreds of billion dollars indefinitely, and that there is a unique and indispensable relationship between the Afghan war and the situation in Pakistan – are debatable. But it is hard to discuss these topics in today’s climate, especially given the recent events in Yemen. Many assert the terrorist threat is vastly overstated and might be handled differently, while Pakistan’s problems of stability, though certainly complicated by the Pakistan Taliban, are enormous and will take years to correct. Is Afghanistan the right war at the right time, given, for example, the apparent greater number of al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen? Nevertheless, the argument that Afghanistan’s security is vital to America’s is being used to rally the nation and secure the necessary funding from Congress, and there has been no sustained challenge to this premise.

– Can the war be shortened by negotiations with the Taliban? Clearly there is a growing interest in this approach within the administration. Senior officials talk about it, but understandably say little. It apparently does not mean negotiating a settlement with Taliban leaders and giving them a share in ruling Afghanistan. That would be certainly questioned here. Instead, it seems to mean that somehow we will buy off the Taliban rank and file and a variety of many local leaders, thereby reducing the group’s military resistance. It is hard to know the feasibility of this approach and how much the government is depending on it to shorten our time in Afghanistan.

– The basic approach to ending American military involvement is that we will pass the task of fighting onto the Afghans over some unspecified time period, but presumably beginning in 2011.

Training is an indispensable requirement, although there are differences within the government over how many Afghan forces will be trained. Whatever the merits of training the Afghans, there is little to show for it over the past eight years. It is difficult to see how a national army can be built without building a national state. Without a reasonably functioning state, we will have a military-dominated entity or a group of regional militias under dubious control—or a state and military that crumbles. Governing institutions will likely take a decade or more of large-scale involvement to build. Understandably, the Obama administration has underplayed this issue because of the potential for domestic political fallout from such a long-term commitment to Afghanistan. But this institution building is essential part of the strategy, and it cannot be done overnight with a so-called civilian surge.

An intimate part of this nation-building effort is what to do about the current Karzai government. The administration seriously considered dumping Karzai, but then decided that would not work and quickly changed its rhetoric. Obama himself, rather straightfaced in light of previous statements, glided over the fraudulence of Karzai's election in his West Point speech. The administration now says it will work with him and assume they can successfully turn his government into a more effective and honest one with a real capacity to deliver services throughout most of the country. Hopefully that will happen, but given recent history, a belief in the efficacy of our approach somewhat defies the imagination. Indeed, senior administration officials speak with different voices on nation building. More often they downplay it as politically harmful, while others admit that it is precisely what we are doing and that it is essential and morally unavoidable in a situation like Afghanistan.

– Another loose end is the effort to get the Pakistan military to go after not only their own Taliban, but also the Afghan Taliban in North Waziristan and Baluchistan. That is certainly understandable from our perspective, and from the perspective of many Pakistanis. Nevertheless, if Islamabad acts against the insurgents – and that is questionable – it will likely, as we are seeing, lead to the expansion of Pakistan's civil war to its heartland areas with uncertain consequences, good or bad, for the country's internal stability.

A word about Obama's description of Afghanistan as a "just war." America always fights just wars, until we tire of them and they become too costly and are increasingly viewed as a war we should not have entered. One may want to argue whether Afghanistan is classically a just war, but its justness does not make it a good war. The calculations are difficult and arguable. But a good war does not end up costing Americans far more in almost every way other than what might be ultimate success in Afghanistan itself. Nor does characterizing it as just tell you how to fight the war and for how long. That is a tough calculation for any American president to make where short-term politics are difficult to avoid. There is no certainty in entering a war and the ultimate costs. Being a just war makes Afghanistan more defensible – not necessarily more popular or successful.

Loose Ends

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Hoping that something good turns up from our surges may be a reasonable gamble, but it has one very difficult aspect. Whether you are making progress or not, the inevitable ethos of our military (and some concerned civilian agencies) will be to persist and even increase the effort – an enormous danger to any administration wanting to change course. The costs of change are usually portrayed in public argument as catastrophic and destructive of America’s position in the world. Greater domestic polarization will inevitably follow, particularly if things don’t seem to get much better. Setting a date eighteen months down the pike to begin withdrawals is not a commitment to much, since the situation will change in ways we cannot now predict.