

## A perilous mission

*Barack Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan.*



AP/AFP

Unveiling America's new strategy for Afghanistan on Friday March 27th, Barack Obama conceded that the situation in the country is "increasingly perilous" and announced a narrower strategy for his soldiers to pursue. After an exhaustive series of reviews, and ahead of a "big tent" conference on Afghanistan in The Hague on March 31st, Mr Obama suggested that the strategy of the war is first to defeat al-Qaeda militants who operate on the border with Pakistan.

The American president noted that the situation in Afghanistan, seven years since the American-led invasion, is parlous, with the Taliban launching more attacks and making use of safe havens in Pakistan. His response has been to dedicate more resources to Afghanistan, just as he begins the process of winding down America's involvement in Iraq. He has already ordered 17,000 more soldiers to Afghanistan and announced on Friday that 4,000 more "trainers" would be sent to the country later this year. His vice-president, Joe Biden, has told NATO representatives to prepare to redouble their effort to defeat the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Rather than talk about building a functioning, democratic state in Afghanistan, Mr Obama now says that one "clear and focused goal" exists: to destroy al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants who operate in the country and in Pakistan. Although he also talks of a "comprehensive strategy"—which would include the economy, government institutions and diplomatic efforts in Pakistan—he has also raised the idea of planning for the eventual exit from Afghanistan. For voters at home he wants to stress the notion that tackling terrorists in the "most dangerous place in the world" is essential, but does not involve permanent occupation of a distant land. The risk with this, however, is that the Taliban may be encouraged to think he is in a hurry to get out.

At the heart of the strategy is the idea of treating both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as a "single theatre". For all the extra military effort that is likely to be devoted to Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, America's special envoy to the "Af-Pak" region, thinks the real source of the problem lies in Pakistan. The Taliban, he told NATO ambassadors, were only the "outer rim" of the global jihadist movement. But America's ability to influence events in Pakistan directly is limited. Mr Holbrooke said American troops would not cross the border as that was a "red line" (though American drones periodically shoot at targets in Pakistan).

Central to the review is the idea of increasing the size of Afghan security forces. The additional 4,000 soldiers will come from the 82nd Airborne Division to southern Afghanistan, in part to support the Afghan army and in part to offer more training. The local army is due to grow from

80,000 to 134,000 by 2011, and some of the proposals speak of expanding it to 250,000. The police, too, would be boosted. The cost will certainly run into billions of dollars. But this is probably cheaper than continuing to fight the Taliban with Western troops.

Commanders had asked for several thousand more soldiers yet. These may come eventually, if Mr Obama can secure additional contributions from allies. But America is likely to get little more than penny-packets from allies. Poland, for instance, recently announced an extra 400 troops. The Obama administration has decided pragmatically not to demand big new troop contributions to avoid an early failure. Instead it is pushing Europeans and others to help pay some of the extra costs and to step up civilian efforts. France has suggested sending European gendarmes to help train the Afghan police but the European Union has struggled to find the 400 trainers it had promised.

How to handle President Hamid Karzai (pictured with Mr Obama, above) remains a conundrum. Many American officials now regard him as ineffective but worry about creating a vacuum if they seek to remove him. Mr Karzai, who is running for re-election in August, seems happy to stoke a degree of anti-Americanism. The latest reinforcements, he said recently, were "seven years too late".

**The Economist, New York, 27 mar. 2009, Asia, online. Disponível em <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 30 mar. 2009.**

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