

Afghan Strategy Poses Stiff Challenge for Obama

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WASHINGTON — One of the most difficult challenges President-elect Barack Obama's national security team faces is Mr. Obama's vow to send thousands of American troops to help defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Military experts agree that more troops are required to carry out an effective counterinsurgency campaign, but they also caution that the reinforcements are unlikely to lead to the sort of rapid turnaround that the so-called troop surge in Iraq produced after its start in 2007.

After seven years of war, Afghanistan presents a unique set of problems: a rural-based insurgency, an enemy sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, the chronic weakness of the Afghan government, a thriving narcotics trade, poorly developed infrastructure, and forbidding terrain.

American intelligence reports underscore the seriousness of the threat. From August through October, the average number of daily attacks by insurgents exceeded those in Iraq, the first time the violence in Afghanistan had outpaced the fighting in Iraq since the start of the American occupation in May 2003. Almost half of the insurgents' attacks were directed against American and other foreign forces, while the remainder were focused on Afghan security forces and civilians.

"Afghanistan may be the 'good war,' but it is also the harder war," said David J. Kilcullen, a former officer in the Australian Army who recently left his job as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's senior adviser on counterinsurgency issues.

During the Bush administration, the Afghan conflict has taken a back seat to Iraq, where the American military struggled to combat a virulent insurgency and tamp down an explosion of sectarian violence. According to the latest data from the military command in Baghdad, violence in Iraq has been rolled back to the levels of early 2004.

But violence in Afghanistan has climbed. The 267 allied military deaths this year are the most ever. (The monthly total peaked at 46 in June and August but dropped to 12 in November, partly because of seasonal variations in the fighting, according to a count by icasualties.org.)

Declaring Afghanistan to be the central front in the struggle against terrorism, Mr. Obama talked during the campaign of sending at least two more combat brigades to Afghanistan — in effect staking the reputation of his new national security team on the outcome of that war, which appears to be stalemated, at best.

Mr. Obama and his aides have yet to outline a strategy for precisely how many reinforcements would be sent and how specifically they would be employed.

But the Pentagon is already planning to send more than 20,000 additional troops in response to a request from Gen. David D. McKiernan, the top commander in Afghanistan. Pentagon officials say that force would include four combat brigades, an aviation brigade equipped with attack and troop-carrying helicopters, reconnaissance units, support troops and trainers for the Afghan Army and the police.

The first of the combat brigades is to deploy in the eastern part of Afghanistan, while the rest of the brigades are expected to be sent to southern and southwestern Afghanistan. All told, it would increase the number of American troops in Afghanistan to about 58,000 from the current level of 34,000, and add to the approximately 30,000 other foreign troops who are operating there under a NATO-led command.

The Pentagon schedule for sending the troops bears little resemblance to the 2007 buildup in Iraq. Pentagon officials said it would take 12 to 18 months to deploy the reinforcements. (In contrast, more than five brigades were sent to Iraq for the surge within five months.)

Poor roads and limited military infrastructure in Afghanistan complicate the task of deploying the troops.

In addition, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has emphasized that Afghan troops, not American or NATO troops, should ultimately shoulder the burden of fighting the war.

Military officers say that some general lessons can be carried over from the counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, like the paramount importance of protecting the population.

But for all the difficulties the American military has confronted in Iraq, the conditions there were more conducive in some important ways to a successful surge than in Afghanistan.

“Afghanistan is not Iraq,” said Ali A. Jalali, a former Afghan interior minister, who projects that it will take 10 years to establish stability in the country. “It is the theme park of problems.”

One major difference is that Iraq is a heavily urbanized society. When President Bush announced the Iraq troop surge, the insurgent group Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia was focusing its attacks on Baghdad. By deploying five additional combat brigades in and around the city, the United States was able to concentrate its combat power in the area that its primary foe had chosen as the main arena.

In Afghanistan, while there are important cities like Kandahar that experts say need to be protected, much of the population lives in rural areas.

“Fifty percent of Afghans continue to live in villages of 300 persons or less, and 75 to 80 percent live in a rural environment,” said J. Alexander Thier, an expert on Afghanistan at the United States Institute of Peace, a government-financed research center. “The insurgency is rural-based.”

Another critical difference pertains to the local army and the police who fight alongside the Americans.

When the buildup began there were more than 300,000 Iraqi soldiers and police officers. The quality of the Iraqi troops was uneven, and they depended on the Americans for airstrikes, artillery and some logistical support. But the Iraqi security forces demonstrated with their March offensive in Basra that they were able to deploy over long distances; and they have now expanded to more than 500,000.

In contrast, Afghanistan has a minuscule military for a nation with a population of 32 million — several million more than Iraq — and a territory that is a quarter larger than Iraq. The Afghan Army is nearly 70,000 strong, and the Afghan police number about 80,000, though many police officers are regarded as corrupt or ineffectual.

According to current plans, the Afghan Army is to be expanded to 134,000 troops over the next four or five years, at a cost to the United States and other foreign nations of some \$17 billion. American officials have been looking at ways to accelerate that growth and perhaps expand it even further. To improve the Afghan forces, American brigades are expected to partner with them and conduct joint operations.

The conflict in Afghanistan is also complicated by a haven for militants just across the border in Pakistan, where a sympathetic Pashtun population is in control and has been able practically to ignore the Pakistani central government.

For the military effort in Afghanistan to succeed, the Pakistani military would have to establish control of much of that lawless territory: a formidable task that would require a new emphasis on counterinsurgency by the Pakistani military and a greater willingness on the part of Pakistani leaders, who may be distracted by the flare-up of tensions with India after the attacks in Mumbai last week.

For all that, the political weakness of the Afghan government may be American officials’ biggest worry.

While Iraq is rife with sectarian tension and political rivalries, Iraqis have a tradition of a strong centralized state. In Afghanistan, power has long been decentralized and distributed, and there is broad dissatisfaction with President Hamid Karzai, who is expected to campaign for re-election next year.

“In Afghanistan, there is no memory of a centralized state,” said Marvin G. Weinbaum, a former analyst in the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research and a scholar at the Middle East Institute. “What they do have is a memory of a central

government of limited scope and limited reach. Their expectations were driven up by our rhetoric and our proposals, and now somehow we have to find a way to meet those expectations.”

Another reason sectarian violence declined so drastically in Iraq was the alignment of Sunni tribes with American forces. The Sunni Awakening in Anbar Province was under way before the surge, but the arrival of additional troops reinforced the effort there and encouraged the growth of Awakening movements in other parts of Iraq.

In Afghanistan, the tribal network is far more fragmented, and commanders are wary of building up the strength of one tribe for fear of alienating a rival tribe.

General McKiernan said in a recent address to the Atlantic Council that he was trying to develop a “bottom up” approach in which tribal elders, religious figures and other community leaders would form local councils that would be given the authority and resources to help with security. American officials have been trying to win Mr. Karzai’s support for the effort, which would establish community national guard units in local districts to supplement the efforts of the Afghan Army and the police.

There has been much debate in recent weeks about the usefulness of talking with Taliban insurgents and encouraging them to put down their arms. But the prevailing view among senior American military officers is that such efforts are unlikely to be fruitful until the United States and its allies have more military leverage. Many insurgents, intelligence analysts say, have little motivation to reconcile with the Afghan government now, because they believe that the government is weak and that they are on the winning side.

Surveying the battlefield, even advocates of troop increases are forecasting a long struggle. The directors of the multinational Counterinsurgency Training Center in Kabul, Col. John Agoglia of the United States Army and Lt. Col. Trent Scott of the Australian Army, say that more American and international troops are needed to protect the Afghan population and hold ground that can eventually be handed off to expanded and better trained Afghan forces. But they have some sobering advice for the commanders of newly deploying units.

“They must deploy prepared for a long fight,” Colonels Agoglia and Scott said in an e-mail message. “They must think long term and realize that victory is unlikely on their watch. They must build a solid foundation on which their successors build on gains made.”