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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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The Nine Surges of Obama's War

By Tom Engelhardt

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In his Afghan "[surge](#)" [speech](#) at West Point last week, President Obama offered Americans some specifics to back up his new "way forward in Afghanistan." He spoke of the "additional 30,000 U.S. troops" he was sending into that country over the next six months. He brought up the "roughly \$30 billion" it would cost us to get them there and support them for a year. And finally, he spoke of beginning to bring them home by July 2011. Those were striking enough numbers, even if larger and, in terms of time, longer than many in the Democratic Party would have cared for. Nonetheless, they don't faintly cover just how fully the president has committed us to an expanding war and just how wide it is likely to become.

Despite the seeming specificity of the speech, it gave little sense of just how big and how expensive this surge will be. In fact, what is being portrayed in the media as the surge of November 2009 is but a modest part of an ongoing expansion of the U.S. war effort in many areas. Looked at another way, the media's focus on the president's speech as *the* crucial moment of decision, and on those 30,000 new troops as the crucial piece of information, has distorted what's actually underway.

In reality, the U.S. military, along with its civilian and intelligence counterparts, has been in an almost constant *state of surge* since the last days of the Bush administration. Unfortunately, while information on this is available, and often well reported, it's scattered in innumerable news stories on specific aspects of the war. You have to be a media jockey to catch it all, no less put it together.

What follows, then, is my own attempt to make sense of the nine fronts on which the U.S. has been surging, and continues to do so, as 2009 ends. Think of this as an effort to widen our view of Obama's widening war.

Obama's Nine Surges

1. The Troop Surge: Let's start with those "30,000" new troops the president announced. First of all, they represent Obama's surge, phase 2. As the president pointed out in his speech, there were "just over 32,000 Americans serving in Afghanistan" when he took office in January 2009. In March, Obama [announced](#) that he was ordering in 21,000 additional troops. Last week, when he spoke, there were already approximately 68,000 to 70,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. If you add the 32,000 already there in January and the 21,700 actually dispatched after the March announcement, however, you only get 53,700, leaving another 15,000 or so to be accounted for. [According to](#) Karen DeYoung of the *Washington Post*, 11,000 of those were "authorized in the waning days of the Bush administration and deployed this year," bringing the figure to between 64,000 and 65,000. In other words, the earliest stage of the present Afghan "surge" was already underway when Obama arrived.

It also looks like at least a few thousand more troops managed to slip through the door in recent months without notice or comment. Similarly, with the 30,000 figure announced a week ago, DeYoung reports that the president quietly granted Secretary of Defense Robert Gates the right to "increase the number by 10 percent, or 3,000 troops, without additional White House approval or announcement." That already potentially brings the most recent surge numbers to 33,000, and an unnamed "senior military official" told De Young "that the final number could go as high as 35,000 to allow for additional support personnel such as engineers, medevac units and route-clearance teams, which comb roads for bombs."

Now, add in the 7,500 troops and trainers that administration officials reportedly strong-armed various European countries into offering. More than [1,500](#) of these are already in Afghanistan and simply not being withdrawn as previously announced. The cost of sending some of the others, like the [900-plus troops](#) Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has promised, will undoubtedly be absorbed by Washington. Nonetheless, add most of them in and, miraculously, you've surged up to, or beyond, Afghan War commander General Stanley McChrystal's basic request for at least 40,000 troops to pursue a counterinsurgency war in that country.

2. The Contractor Surge: Given our heavily corporatized and [privatized](#) military, it makes no sense simply to talk about troop numbers in Afghanistan as if they were increasing in a void. You also need to know about the private contractors who have taken over so many former military duties, from KP and driving supply convoys to providing security on large bases. There's no way of even knowing who is responsible for the surge of (largely Pentagon-funded) private contractors in Afghanistan. Did their numbers play any part in the president's three months of deliberations? Does he have any control over how many contractors are put on the U.S. government payroll there? We don't know.

Private contractors certainly went unmentioned in his speech and, amid the flurry of headlines about troops going to Afghanistan, they remain almost unmentioned in the mainstream media. In major pieces on the president's tortuous "deliberations" with his key military and civilian advisors at the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), and the [Los Angeles Times](#), all produced from copious [officially inspired](#) leaks, there wasn't a single mention of private contractors, and yet their numbers have been surging for months.

A [modest-sized article](#) by August Cole in the *Wall Street Journal* the day after the president's speech gave us the basics, but you had to be looking. Headlined "U.S. Adding Contractors at

Fast Pace," the piece barely peeked above the fold on page 7 of the paper. According to Cole: "The Defense Department's latest census shows that the number of contractors increased about 40% between the end of June and the end of September, for a total of 104,101. That compares with 113,731 in Iraq, down 5% in the same period... Most of the contractors in Afghanistan are locals, accounting for 78,430 of the total..." In other words, there are already more private contractors on the payroll in Afghanistan than there will be U.S. troops when the latest surge is complete.

Though many of these contractors are local Afghans hired by outfits like DynCorp International and Fluor Corp., TPM Muckracker [managed to get](#) a further breakdown of these figures from the Pentagon and found that there were 16,400 "third country nationals" among the contractors, and 9,300 Americans. This is a formidable crew, and its numbers are evidently still surging, as are the Pentagon contracts doled out to private outfits that go with them. Cole, for instance, writes of the contract that Dyncorp and Fluor share to support U.S. forces in Afghanistan "which could be worth as much as \$7.5 billion to each company in the coming years."

3. The Militia Surge: U.S. Special Forces are now carrying out [pilot programs](#) for a mini-surge in support of local Afghan militias that are, at least theoretically, anti-Taliban. The idea is evidently to create a movement along the lines of Iraq's Sunni Awakening Movement that, many believe, ensured the "success" of George W. Bush's 2007 surge in that country. For now, [as far as we know](#), U.S. support takes the form of offers of ammunition, food, and possibly some Kalashnikov rifles, but in the future we'll be ponying up more arms and, undoubtedly, significant amounts of money.

This is, after all, to be a national program, the Community Defense initiative, which, [according to](#) Jim Michaels of *USA Today*, will "funnel millions of dollars in foreign aid to villages that organize 'neighborhood watch'-like programs to help with security." Think of this as a "bribe" surge. Such programs are bound to turn out to be essentially money-based and designed to buy "friendship."

4. The Civilian Surge: Yes, Virginia, there is a "civilian surge" [underway](#) in Afghanistan, involving increases in the number of "diplomats and experts in agriculture, education, health and rule of law sent to Kabul and to provincial reconstruction teams across the country." The State Department now claims to be "on track" to triple the U.S. civilian component in Afghanistan from [320](#) officials in January 2009 to 974 by "the [early weeks](#) of next year." (Of course, that, in turn, means another mini-surge in private contractors: more security guards to protect civilian employees of the U.S. government.) A similar civilian surge is evidently underway in neighboring Pakistan, just the thing to go with a [surge of civilian aid](#) and a plan for a humongous new, [nearly billion-dollar](#) embassy compound to be built in Islamabad.

5. The CIA and Special Forces Surge: And speaking of Pakistan, Noah Shachtman of *Wired's* Danger Room blog [had it right](#) recently when, considering the CIA's "covert" (but openly discussed) drone war in the Pakistani tribal borderlands, he wrote: "The most important escalation of the war might be the one the President didn't mention at West Point." In fact, the CIA's drone attacks there have been escalating in numbers since the Obama administration came into office. Now, it seems, paralleling the civilian surge in the Af/Pak theater of operations, there is to be a CIA one as well. While little information on this is available, David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt of the *New York Times* [report](#) that in recent months the CIA has delivered a plan to the White House "for widening the campaign of

strikes against militants by drone aircraft in Pakistan, sending additional spies there and securing a White House commitment to bulk up the C.I.A.'s budget for operations inside the country."

In addition, Scott Shane of the *Times* [reports](#):

"The White House has authorized an expansion of the C.I.A.'s drone program in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas, officials said..., to parallel the president's decision... to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan. American officials are talking with Pakistan about the possibility of striking in Baluchistan for the first time — a controversial move since it is outside the tribal areas — because that is where Afghan Taliban leaders are believed to hide."

The Pakistani southern border province of Baluchistan is a [hornet's nest](#) with its own sets of separatists and religious extremists, as well as a ([possibly U.S.-funded](#)) rebel movement aimed at the Baluchi minority areas of Iran. The Pakistani government is powerfully opposed to drone strikes in the area of the heavily populated provincial capital of Quetta where, Washington insists, the Afghan Taliban leadership largely resides. If such strikes do begin, they could prove the most destabilizing aspect of the widening of the war that the present surge represents.

In addition, [thanks to](#) the *Nation* magazine's Jeremy Scahill, we now know that, from a secret base in Karachi, Pakistan, the U.S. Army's Joint Special Operations Command, in conjunction with the private security contractor Xe (formerly Blackwater), operates "a secret program in which they plan targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, 'snatch and grabs' of high-value targets and other sensitive action inside and outside Pakistan." Since so many U.S. activities in Pakistan involve secretive, undoubtedly black-budget operations, we may only have the faintest outlines of what the "surge" there means.

6. The Base-Building Surge: Like the surge in contractors and in drone attacks, the surge in base-building in Afghanistan significantly preceded Obama's latest troop-surge announcement. A [recent NBC Nightly News report](#) on the ever-expanding U.S. base at Kandahar Airfield, which it aptly termed a "boom town," shows just how ongoing this part of the overall surge is, and at what a staggering level. As [in Iraq from 2003 on](#), billions of dollars are being sunk into bases, the largest of which — especially the old Soviet site, Bagram Air Base, with more than \$200 million in construction projects and upgrades underway at the moment — are beginning to look like ever more permanent fixtures on the landscape.

In addition, as Nick Turse of TomDispatch.com has [reported](#), forward observation bases and smaller combat outposts have been sprouting all over southern Afghanistan. "Forget for a moment the 'debates' in Washington over Afghan War policy," he wrote in early November, "and, if you just focus on the construction activity and the flow of money into Afghanistan, what you see is a war that, from the point of view of the Pentagon, isn't going to end any time soon. In fact, the U.S. military's building boom in that country suggests that, in the ninth year of the Afghan War, the Pentagon has plans for a far longer-term, if not near-permanent, garrisoning of the country, no matter what course Washington may decide upon."

7. The Training Surge: In some ways, the greatest prospective surge may prove to be in the training of the Afghan national army and police. Despite years of American and NATO

"mentoring," both are in [notoriously poor shape](#). The Afghan army is riddled with desertions — [25% of those trained](#) in the last year are now gone — and the Afghan police are reportedly a hapless, ill-paid, corrupt, drug-addicted lot. Nonetheless, Washington (with the help of NATO reinforcements) is planning to bring an army whose numbers officially stand at approximately [94,000](#) (but may actually be as low as [40-odd thousand](#)) to 134,000 reasonably well-trained troops by next fall and 240,000 a year later. Similarly, the Obama administration hopes to [take the police numbers](#) from an official 93,000 to 160,000.

8. The Cost Surge: This is a difficult subject to pin down in part because the Pentagon is, in cost-accounting terms, one of the least transparent organizations around. What can be said for certain is that Obama's \$30 billion figure won't faintly hold when it comes to the real surge. There is no way that figure will cover anything like all the troops, bases, contractors, and the rest. Just take the plan to train an Afghan security force of approximately 400,000 in the coming years. We've already spent more than [\\$15 billion](#) on the training of the Afghan Army and more than [\\$10 billion](#) has gone into police training — staggering figures for a far smaller combined force with poor results. Imagine, then, what a massive bulking up of the country's security forces will actually cost. In congressional testimony, Centcom commander General David Petraeus [suggested](#) a possible price tag of \$10 billion a year. And if such a program works (which seems unlikely), try to imagine how one of the poorest countries on the planet will support a 400,000-man force. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has [just suggested](#) that it will take at least 15-20 years before the country can actually pay for such a force itself. In translation, what we have here is undoubtedly a version of Colin Powell's [Pottery Barn rule](#) ("You break it, you own it"); in this case, you build it, you own it. If we create such security forces, they will be, financially speaking, ours into the foreseeable future. (And this is even without adding in those local militias we're planning to invest "millions" in.)

9. The Anti-Withdrawal Surge: Think of this as a surge in time. By all accounts, the president tried to put some kind of limit on his most recent Afghan surge, [not wanting](#) "an open-ended commitment." With that in mind, he evidently insisted on a plan, emphasized in his speech, in which some of the surge troops would start to come home in July 2011, about 18 months from now. This was presented in the media as a case of giving something to everyone (the Republican opposition, his field commanders, and his own antiwar Democratic Party base). In fact, he gave his commanders and the Republican opposition a very real surge in numbers. In this regard, a *Washington Post* headline [says it all](#): "McChrystal's Afghanistan Plan Stays Mainly Intact." On the other hand, what he gave his base was only the vaguest of promises ("...and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011"). Moreover, within hours of the speech, even that commitment was being watered down by the first top officials to speak on the subject. Soon enough, as the right-wing began to blaze away on the mistake of announcing a withdrawal date "to the enemy," there was little short of a stampede of high officials eager to make that promise ever less meaningful.

In what Mark Mazzetti of the *Times* [called](#) a "flurry of coordinated television interviews," the top civilian and military officials of the administration marched onto the Sunday morning talk shows "in lockstep" to reassure the right (and they [were reassured](#)) by playing "down the significance of the July 2011 target date." The United States was, Secretary of Defense Gates and others indicated, going to be in the region in strength for [years to come](#). ("...July 2011 was just the beginning, not the end, of a lengthy process. That date, [National Security Advisor] General [James] Jones said, is a 'ramp' rather than a 'cliff.'")

How Wide the Widening War?

When it came to the [spreading Taliban insurgency](#) in Afghanistan, the president in his speech spoke of his surge goal this way: "We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government." This seems a modest enough target, even if the means of reaching it are proving immodest indeed. After all, we're talking about a minority Pashtun insurgency — Pashtuns make up only about 42% of Afghanistan's population — and the insurgents are a relatively lightly armed, rag-tag force. Against them and a [miniscule number](#) of al-Qaeda operatives, the Pentagon has launched a remarkable, unbelievably costly build-up of forces over vast distances, along fragile, extended supply lines, and in a country poorer than almost any other on the planet. The State Department has, to the best of its abilities, followed suit, as has the CIA across the border in Pakistan.

All of this has been underway for close to a year, with at least another six months to go. This is the reality that the president and his top officials didn't bother to explain to the American people in that speech last week, or on those Sunday talk shows, or in congressional testimony, and yet it's a reality we should grasp as we consider our future and the Afghan War we, after all, are paying for.

And yet, confoundingly, as the U.S. has bulked up in Afghanistan, the war has only grown fiercer both within the country and in parts of Pakistan. Sometimes bulking-up can mean not reversing but increasing the other side's momentum. We face what looks to be a widening war in the region. Already, the Obama administration has been issuing [ever stronger warnings](#) to the Pakistani government and military to shape up in the fight against the Taliban, otherwise threatening not only drone strikes in Baluchistan, but cross-border raids by Special Operations types, and even possibly "hot pursuit" by U.S. forces into Pakistan. This is a dangerous game indeed.

As Andrew Bacevich, author of *[The Limits of Power](#)*, wrote [recently](#), "Sending U.S. troops to fight interminable wars in distant countries does more to inflame than to extinguish the resentments giving rise to violent anti-Western jihadism." Whatever the Obama administration does in Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, the American ability to mount a sustained operation of this size in one of the most difficult places on the planet, when it can't even mount a reasonable jobs program at home, remains a strange wonder of the world.