Obama's War

Iraq was George W. Bush’s war, but the conflict that now embroils both Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to become Barack Obama’s — a war to which he may commit 30,000 more U.S. troops. Will the incoming soldiers be sucked into the “graveyard of empires,” as the British and Soviets were before them? Or could Obama’s war eventually bring peace and stability to the region? Here are some of the most important trends that will help determine the answer.

By Peter Bergen, author of “The Osama bin Laden I Know” and senior fellow at the New America Foundation, and Katherine Tiedemann, New America Foundation program associate.

A Losing Battle

Even since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has been in the words of Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an “economy of force” operation. We got what we paid for. Insecurity rose as troop strength remained inadequate.

But today, NATO and U.S. force levels are at their highest ever.

Helping Hands

U.S. war spending in Pakistan or India. (All fiscal years)

- Afghanistan (FY 2010)
- Pakistan (FY 2009)

The U.S. military is inking deals with the Afghans and Pakistanis in an effort to keep the Taliban out of their country.

Still, the country is less secure, as seen in the decreased numbers of suicide attacks and the steady rise in U.S. casualties.

A Bitter Harvest

Poppy-growing is the backbone of Afghanistan’s economy. The drug trade employs about 6 million people and generates 20% of the country’s GDP — but it also helps fund the Taliban and fuel Afghanistan’s pervasive corruption. The watchword is Transparency International’s most corrupt country.

The Peace Dividend

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The Pain of War

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As much as 90 percent of the supplies for NATO and U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan is trucked in from Pakistan, where the Taliban have started targeting key choke points along the supply routes. The U.S. military is dealing with Afghanistan’s enemies, including al-Qaeda’s planners, in Pakistan. Meanwhile, Afghan and U.S. forces are fighting Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

By early 2008, the Bush administration had given up on Pakistan’s unreliability or inability to take out the Taliban in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border. So it stepped up air strikes launching them from remotely piloted Predator drones.

Several of those strikes killed al-Qaeda leaders, such as Abu Khalid al-Maani, who had overseen al-Qaeda’s quest for chemical and biological agents, and Abu Laith al-Libi, the No. 3 man in al-Qaeda’s hierarchy.

But they’ve also triggered a backlash from ordinary Pakistanis angry over civilian casualties. The missions seem likely to continue. The Obama administration has already launched Predator strikes of its own.

Hearts and Minds

Afghan support for U.S. efforts in their country is declining, but disenchantment with the Taliban is increasing for the time being.

Pakistan remains one of the world’s most violent nations. Pakistanis have a more positive view of the U.S. than Afghans, while approving ratings for the United States are down in the mid-teens.

But despite much hysteria from the U.S. commentator, Pakistan is hardly poised for a Taliban takeover. Its alliance of Islamist parties won 11 percent of the vote in 2002 and was tossed in the 2008 election, dropping to just 2 percent.

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