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Obama: Never Mind Afghanistan, It's All About The Drones

By [Spencer Ackerman](#) [✉](#) December 16, 2010 | 9:42 am | Categories: [Af/Pak](#)



One year and 30,000 new troops later, Afghanistan is peripheral to the Afghanistan war. According to the Obama administration's review of its strategy, it's official: this a U.S. drone war in Pakistan with a big, big U.S. troop component next door.

Sure, the troop surge is working, according to a summary of the long-anticipated review that the administration released today. But that assessment, reminiscent of years of Bush administration statements about Iraq during that war's darkest days, is conditional and said to be fragile. Taliban "[momentum has been arrested in much of the country](#)" and "reversed in some key areas." The goal for 2010 was to [break](#) the Taliban's momentum.

But in any event, that's the goal for Afghanistan, which the review doesn't even address until the end. The aim of the wider campaign, reiterated in the summary, is to crush al-Qaeda across the border in Pakistan's tribal areas, defined as taking away their bases and the "elimination of the group's remaining leadership cadre." In other words: whacking moles, all through [massively](#) stepped-up [CIA drone strikes](#), despite years of warnings that [they won't lead to victory](#). "Significant progress" has been made in killing al-Qaeda leaders, the summary says, but there isn't any real attempt to connect any of that to what U.S. troops are doing in

Afghanistan.

And since the CIA drone program is technically secret, the review's public summary asserts nebulously that Pakistani forces and *some* U.S. effort contributed to that progress. What's that effort actually been? One hundred and ten drone strikes, supported by CIA's [teams of Pashtun spotters recruited in Afghanistan](#), double the number of strikes in 2009, which was a big increase from 2008. This is [basically an undeclared war](#), which is one of the reasons why the incoming chairman of the House Armed Services Committee wants to [update the congressional authorization](#) on taking military action against al-Qaeda.

In the summary, American officials hug Pakistan tightly, giving big praise to the Pakistani military and patting itself on the back for strengthening diplomatic ties to Islamabad. But recent U.S. intelligence reports give [dim prospects for Pakistani troops actually eliminating al-Qaeda's safe havens](#). Just this morning, Pakistan's defense minister brushed the U.S. back further on the save-haven question, saying, "[We can 'do more' only whenever we can. We have to see to our interests first.](#)" That comes the day after the U.S.' top military officer visited Islamabad to warn of America's "[strategic impatience](#)" with the Pakistanis.

Then there's another problem. Over the past year, al-Qaeda's Yemen-based affiliate has attempted repeatedly to strike the U.S., through near-misses at blowing up [passenger](#) and [cargo](#) aircraft, and to inspire U.S. Muslims to [pull off homegrown terrorist attacks](#). One of the tools of provocation, according to would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad: [The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan](#), including the drone strikes. The summary has to concede that killing al-Qaeda in Pakistan "will not completely eliminate the terrorist threat to U.S. interests."

Obama's summary doesn't address how to mitigate the provocative effects of the war. Its assessment of the war in Afghanistan is cautious and vague — although, to be sure, this is just the unclassified version of a longer, secret report, so perhaps there's more detail in the secret version. But the "frail and reversible" progress in Afghanistan — giving the Taliban a [bloody nose in Kandahar](#), training [Afghan soldiers and cops](#) — is said to set the stage for starting to draw down NATO combat forces from 2011 to 2014. And [that doesn't mean an end to the war](#). The summary explicitly points to "NATO's enduring commitment beyond 2014." What effect that will have on future Faisal Shahzads goes unaddressed.

But Afghanistan is the sideshow now. If anything, to show progress in time for the strategy review, the fight in Afghanistan has become more like the fight in Pakistan, with [air strikes tripled](#). What's more, [Special Operations raids](#) are at a new high, [surface-to-surface missiles](#) are in use in Kandahar, and Marine tanks are rolling through Helmand. "[The emphasis is shifting,](#)" General "Hoss" Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently remarked, away from counterinsurgency and toward counterterrorism.

It's ironic. Along with Vice President Biden, Cartwright was skeptical of a troop surge and counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, arguing for a Pakistan-based counterterrorism strategy. Judging from the summary today, they lost the internal debate — and won the argument.

Photo: Noah Shachtman

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Posted by: evab | 12/16/10 | 5:49 pm |

Military Question; Are "Killer Drone" Pilots and Techs considered privileged combatants?

Posted by: Fderfler | 12/16/10 | 9:33 pm |

This sounds like strategic bombing with tactical aircraft. Appropriate, I guess, when there are no real strategic targets except those covered by a turban or karakuli. But, it's sure as heck no way to win a war! Strategic bombing and tactical attack missions are dandy, but (speaking as a retired Air Force Officer) without boots on the ground they are nothing but the frustrated rage of a technology giant. This is no clean and low cost magic formula for success.

Posted by: steve_real | 12/16/10 | 11:57 pm |

These Afghan kill squads back up by tactical air strikes
are the only way to roll over the border.

We need to triple the Afghan hit squads crossing the border.

Whoever is running the Afghan hit squad operation blows!

You stink man!

I'd fire him effectively immediately
and get someone who can do the job.

Yeah dude sucks!

He needs to go home, retire and make some margaritas or something...
maybe take up wood carving

Posted by: Trollout | 12/17/10 | 7:34 am |

@shaJ

despite your hatred for Country Club Air Force officers, they are covered.

@steve Real

Damn I agree with you , SOCOM/Drone ops and Fortress Kabul. let ANA/ANP try to keep the rest under control.

Posted by: evab | 12/17/10 | 7:24 pm |

@Trollout, "Country Club Air Force officers" I love you man, in a platonic way and would go into Combat with you by my side any FOKing day of the Week, You Rock Dude. I am a lover, not a hater, life is too short for hate. Peace.
