

## US to outline new Afghan strategy

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The White House will this week unveil a new Afghanistan strategy that will stress the need for tackling extremists operating inside Pakistan, reconciliation efforts with some Taliban, and a lowering of expectations for what can be achieved in the war-torn country.

President Barack Obama at the weekend stressed that his focus was ensuring that al-Qaeda could not attack the US. He said Washington needed a "comprehensive" approach that included building the Afghan economy, improving diplomatic efforts with Pakistan, and employing a regional approach.

"What we can't do is think that just a military approach in Afghanistan is going to be able to solve our problems. So what we're looking for is a comprehensive strategy. And there's got to be an exit strategy. There's got to be a sense that this is not perpetual drift," said Mr Obama.

During the presidential campaign Mr Obama pledged to put more focus on Afghanistan, which has seen a significant rise in violence over the past two years, particularly as militants increasingly operate from safe havens inside Pakistan. His new strategy is partly the product of a series of military reviews started during the Bush administration.

James Shinn, a former top Bush administration defence official who co-authored one of the reviews, said Mr Obama had several big decisions to make, including how to "fit the Afghan and Pakistan pieces together".

### Australian troops to be discussed

Australia's commitment of troops to Afghanistan will be one of the main discussion points when Kevin Rudd, Australia's prime minister, holds his first face-to-face meeting with Barack Obama, US president, on Tuesday, writes Peter Smith in Sydney.

On the eve of his departure for the US, Mr Rudd said Mr Obama had admitted the military and broader political strategy in Afghanistan was "not working".

"They may put to me a request for further Australian [troop] commitment and I will, together with my colleagues, consider all those things on their merits.

"It doesn't mean you say yes or say no. It may mean some change in the current configuration of what we do," Mr Rudd said. "But this all has to be taken one step at a time." Australia has deployed 1,090 troops to Afghanistan.

The Australian leader said the Nato-led mission must stop al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as its operating and training base.

"If we are to take the mission seriously in partnership with the Americans and others to continue to deny al-Qaeda these sorts of free range

"Reconciliation of some Taliban is good tactics – but the terms set by Kabul have to be symmetrical with those set by Islamabad on the other side of the Durand Line," said Mr Shinn, referring to the tribal belt along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.

Joe Biden, US vice-president, recently said 70 per cent of Taliban insurgents were just guns for hire, suggesting that the US could have success peeling them away from the insurgency. Lisa Curtis, a South Asia expert at the Heritage Foundation, said that, while the US would attempt to co-opt some Taliban, US officials had concluded that a "grand bargain" was not feasible.

One western diplomat added that another complicated question was whether the US would agree to deals if, for example, that meant tough Islamist laws and the possible closure of girls' schools, as has occurred with peace deals in Pakistan. But he added: "This is a national security issue first."

Mr Shinn said another key issue for Mr Obama was how to maintain multilateral support, by working out "who does what, for how long, and – crucially – who fights and who pays?"

Some officials have pushed to double the size of the Afghan army and police to about 400,000. But Washington has had difficulty persuading allies to fund even the current planned expansion of the Afghan army to 134,000 at a cost of roughly \$17bn (€13bn, £12bn) over five years. The willingness of Nato to provide additional funds – instead of additional troops – may be tested when Mr Obama visits Europe next month.

James Steinberg, deputy secretary of state, on Monday revealed another part of the strategy, by urging India to support Pakistani efforts to combat militants. The Pentagon has been concerned that higher tensions between India and Pakistan following the Mumbai bombings could prompt Islamabad to divert soldiers from fighting militants to the border area with India.

Mr Shinn said the most difficult issue resolved around the four variables – objectives, resources, methods and time – in the Afghan strategy. "My guess is that they [the Obama administration] will be reluctant to dial down the objectives much, if at all, and they will probably commit a few more combat brigades, but not a whole lot – which means they will have to rely on superior methods to achieve the objectives without slipping things way out in time."

operating bases, then it's a mission we must support."

The meeting between the two leaders comes less than a week after a 10th Australian soldier was killed in Afghanistan.

While Mr Obama is close to revealing his new strategy, some observers say his administration has been split over whether to pursue a "minimalist" approach to Afghanistan.

"The minimalists [say] get in, send some more troops, try and calm things down so we can get out. That was sort of the pre-surge strategy in Iraq," John McCain, the Arizona senator who lost the presidency to Mr Obama, told the Financial Times.

"[Then] there is the group that realises that there has to be an overall comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy, not a counter-terrorism strategy."

Robert Gates, the Pentagon chief who also served in the Bush administration, in January made clear where he stood when he said "our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorists and extremists to attack the US and our allies". Then, last week, he warned that an "open-ended" troop commitment might make Afghanistan think the US was "part of their problem".

Mr Obama recently stressed that he would reject the idea of pushing for a "Jeffersonian democracy". But beyond that, diplomats say the administration has been split. Mr Biden has been championing a minimalist approach to avoid the US being sucked into an interminable conflict, while Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, has pushed for more expansive goals.

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