Deciding the surge: Obama reinforces the war in Afghanistan
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Table 1: Timeline of Events

Table 2: US Troop levels in Afghanistan

Key Literature
"The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer – often, indeed, to the decider himself."

President John F. Kennedy, 1963

1. Introduction

Ironically, at time of writing, January 2013, US President Barack Obama is engaged in a new decision-making process concerning the level of US troops in Afghanistan. He is considering what the US strategy should be and what troop numbers might remain in Afghanistan after December 2014. Many of the issues and processes in this decision look to be similar to Obama’s 2009 decision-making experience. The main significant difference that will affect the nature - and possibly the outcome - of his decision this time, is the fact that, for good or ill, he has already been through the experience once before.

The election of Barack Obama to the US Presidency in November 2008 saw him inherit a wide spectrum of political, social, economic and international issues clamouring for his attention. Perhaps most prominent of which was the global security situation which saw the US locked in a long-term struggle with the Al Qaeda fundamentalist terrorist group and committed to two major, protracted and costly ground conflicts: in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By the time of Obama’s election, the most recent manifestation of the conflict in Afghanistan was starting its ninth year. Although confidence had been high and progress good after the US-led military coalition brought about the downfall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, operations there were widely seen to have become the “poor relation” of the conflict in Iraq, even as many military and civilian analysts were judging Afghanistan as the bigger, more complex, problem. Obama had made a commitment to address Afghanistan. But how might he get this underway? What steps to take?

Amidst the myriad of political, security and economic difficulties, the advice Obama was getting from his military commanders was that the key problem was the lack of “boots on the ground”. A new injection of forces – perhaps for a limited period of time – was being recommended as a means of tipping the balance in favour of the Afghan government and allowing the manpower-intensive counter-insurgency doctrine of “Clear, Hold, Build and Transition” to get a fair chance.
2. Proposal and methodology

I shall examine President Obama’s decision to reinforce the US war effort in Afghanistan. With reference to decision-making theory, I shall follow the process by which the decision was made and, crucially, the context in which his deliberations were shaped. I shall sketch out the timeline and the key actors involved, together with their interests, agendas and goals.

Obama’s decision was complex, flawed and long-drawn out. I will suggest an understanding of how the problem came to be formulated, how the decision was made and what obstacles were encountered.

My sense is that no single theory of decision-making is sufficient in the analysis of complex international relations and overseas military operations. I shall examine the problem initially against the benchmark of classic “rationality” (primarily using James March’s writing), but then move to show how this process rapidly requires the use of aspects of bounded, or limited, rationality theory in order to more realistically assess the issues and dilemmas involved (also using March). I will also make use of aspects of the “Governmental Politics” model employed by Allison and Zelikow as I attempt to drill down into the specifics of the process.

My main “core” reference document will be Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward’s 2010 book “Obama’s Wars: The Inside Story”, which pulls together a comprehensive timeline, together with in-depth access to most of the key decision-making processes and individuals at the time.¹

3. Limitations of analysis

There will be limitations to my analysis. Many of the issues regarding US strategy and military operations, when discussed within US government circles, are confidential. Open source information alone does not give the full picture. Although Woodward’s work will be important to my analysis, I recognise that he will not have had unlimited access. As a journalist, his very presence will have had an impact (his newspaper certainly did). A more accurate story may only emerge years later.

The decision to allow Woodward so much access also almost certainly implies that Obama and his administration considered him a “safe bet” in terms of producing a sympathetic

reading of this part of the Obama Presidency. I have attempted to keep in mind Woodward’s role as a source with biases and, in fact, as a minor actor in this process in his own right.

4. **Afghanistan: background**

Afghanistan has been undergoing continual conflict since the 1970s. A grim pattern of civil war, international military intervention, civil war and international military intervention looks likely to continue in the coming years. Over eleven years have passed since a US-led multinational Coalition attacked and removed the Taliban regime which was then controlling Afghanistan. At the Bonn Conference, in December 2001, Afghan religious, political and military figures approved the establishment of an interim Afghan government under Hamid Karzai and laid tentative plans for developing a constitution and a democratic electoral process.

The international community intensified a series of political, economic and development initiatives in support. Initial progress was encouraging, optimism was high in the 2004/05 period with the broadly successful completion of Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

5. **Identifying the problem**

However, from approximately 2006, the fighting capabilities of the Taliban began to grow significantly and international military casualties began to mount. International concern was growing. The UN Security Mission to Afghanistan, reported, in November 2008:

“…serious concern about the security situation in Afghanistan, in particular the increase in violent and terrorist activities by the Taliban, Al-Qaida and other extremist groups…the striking year-on-year increase in the numbers of security incidents since 2003.”

The United States dominated the leadership structures of the international military forces (ISAF – International Security Assistance Force), headquartered in Kabul. Many US military commanders, with increasing combat experience from Iraq and Afghanistan, were aligning themselves with the doctrine of counter-insurgency (COIN). This spoke of the importance of winning the “hearts and minds” of the population and the concepts were being revised and

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expanded – developed from writings of “classic” COIN campaigns in, for example, Malaya and Algeria – in the light of experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Implementing this very “population-centric” military approach – living amongst the people you were trying to protect – was, theoretically at least, very manpower intensive. A historic rule of thumb suggests that something like one counter-insurgent is required for every 40 – 50 members of the population. By way of comparison, although US troop totals inside Afghanistan have only ever hit the 100,000 mark at their peak, Afghanistan’s approximate (reliable data is not available) population of 30.5 million simplistically suggests that something in the region of half a million security personnel might be required.3

US military commanders were revising what force levels and equipment they thought they needed to confront the growing insurgency and were submitting requests piecemeal.4 George Bush’s administration began to respond to these requests, but also in a piecemeal fashion.5 Upon his inauguration, Barack Obama was told by advisors that Afghanistan was the poor relation of the Iraq conflict and that there were not enough troops to do the job. He knew that he would need to take some early and decisive action. Counter-insurgency doctrine had become a popular mantra at this stage. Rightly or wrongly, force levels were becoming the frame for the new President’s thinking. During his first year in office, he was asked to make two major decisions on troop commitments, one in early 2009 and a second in late 2009. Obama’s problem, therefore, amidst the context of growing uncertainty about the strategic direction of the US effort in Afghanistan, was to make a decision on troop level requests that were growing in intensity.

6. Key players, key groups, key problems

“Stop telling me what I already know”,

Barack Obama, October 2009

But before looking at the decision-process in detail, it is necessary to look at the key individuals and groups that were involved. This will help to give an indication of where

6 Woodward, p.233.
some of the advice and information “fault lines” might emerge. As I will attempt to demonstrate, this is critical to understanding the directions in which Obama’s decisions were pushed and where they it ended up.

Barack Obama had access to a wide range of political, military, economic and intelligence expertise to assist his deliberations. He made extensive use of them. Unsurprisingly, they did not always all align. The bulk of the debate was framed in and around the workings of the National Security Council, which the White House defines thus:

“…the President's principal forum for considering national security and foreign policy matters with his senior national security advisors and cabinet officials…the Council's function has been to advise and assist the President on national security and foreign policies. The Council also serves as the President's principal arm for coordinating these policies among various government agencies. The NSC is chaired by the President. Its regular attendees (both statutory and non-statutory) are the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Defense, and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the statutory military advisor to the Council, and the Director of National Intelligence is the intelligence advisor. The Chief of Staff to the President, Counsel to the President, and the Assistant to the President for Economic Policy…The Attorney General and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget…other senior officials…when appropriate.”

Often, the principles would assemble the day before a key NSC meeting, in order to “rehearse” key issues and presentations.

There were many powerful actors engaged for all or part of the process, many with strong or divergent views. Hilary Clinton, head of the State Department, had acrimoniously campaigned against Barack Obama to be the Democratic Party presidential candidate. Although the appointment of Clinton to the State Department was seen as a genuine reconciliation (and an intelligent use for her talents), there were question marks over her ultimate loyalty – might she still be looking for the Presidency in the years to come? Also at the State Department, Richard Holbrooke, the abrasive and forceful architect of peace in Bosnia in the 1990s, was now the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He had some very distinct views - often distractingly so – on the way forward for “Af/Pak”.

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7 White House Website, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc/)
8 Woodward, “Several note takers had learned to do the same thing when Holbrooke embarked on his discourses. They set down their pens and relaxed their tired fingers”, p. 227.
Vice President Joe Biden’s loyalty was perhaps not in doubt, but he also had some very strong and diverging views about the “solution” for Afghanistan. He frequently made use of his Vice Presidential position to ensure that his perspective was heard at some length.\textsuperscript{9}

The intelligence agencies were a critical part of the assessment process, but there were several different intelligence organisations involved – not just the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIA) but also the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and other, smaller, groups. There were quite intense rivalries on-going – in the “handover” to Obama, George Bush noted that: “The different agencies didn’t always play nicely with each other. It is not as easy as it might look…”\textsuperscript{10}

Woodward also highlights significant personality and policy tensions between individual US military commanders. Counter-insurgency was a genuinely divisive doctrine – many within the US military did not agree with the concept or its application in Afghanistan and Iraq, resented the prominence given to it (and the high profile accorded its advocates) and saw it as a distraction from the business of preparing for global conventional conflicts, such as China and North Korea.\textsuperscript{11}

This paper cannot undertake an in-depth discussion of all actors. But it is also necessary to mention briefly that Obama had a team of political advisors who frequently clashed with the military officials engaged in briefing the President. While the military felt the civilians did not understand what was necessary to fight a war, the civilians felt the military were trying to “bounce” Obama into committing troops without fully exploring options. As a representative example of these frictions, Woodward reflects upon the views of General James L. Jones, Obama’s National Security Advisor and a key part of the NSC process during this time:

“Jones thought that there was another group that President Obama was not tough enough on – his senior White House political advisors, whom he saw as major obstacles to developing and deciding on a coherent policy…[they] did not understand war or foreign relations, Jones felt.”

\textsuperscript{9} Woodward, “I want to say six things’, Biden said...he could still be verbose and some in the room seemed to tense up”, p.166.
\textsuperscript{10} Woodward, p.18.
\textsuperscript{11} US Army Colonel Harry Tunnell: “We are a chronic failure as a military force due to the COIN dogma...degraded our willingness to properly, effectively, and realistically train for combat...US Army units are employed in ways that are grossly inconsistent with sound military tactics”, http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2012/11/27/us-colonel-attacks-uk-general-coin-afghan-army-us-army/
7. **Presidential style**

> “Why do we keep having these meetings after we have all agreed?”\(^{12}\)

Although I will argue that there are many more factors affecting this decision, there is one key decision-maker at the centre. Obama’s style was based around consensus-building and examination of detail.\(^ {13}\) He would generally go around the table to seek the opinions of all and to see where disagreement might lie. He could often prevaricate and postpone, perhaps betraying a lack of familiarity with the military issues but equally aware of the significance of putting US soldiers in harm’s way. He expressed frustration on numerous occasions about the lack of “real” options; sensing that the military were subtly guiding him towards a decision that they wanted (Obama: “I want three real options to choose from” and “they are not going to give me a choice”).\(^ {14}\)

As Obama got closer to his final decision, in the final days of November 2009, stresses, strains and poor process became apparent: “Why are we having another meeting?”, “Maybe I’m getting too far down in the weeds”, “I’m done doing this”. Many decisions and debates seemed to re-emerge at the last minute and outside of the formal NSC processes.\(^ {15}\) March’s observation that “decision histories are often difficult to describe” seems highly appropriate here.\(^ {16}\) Bargaining and compromise was also apparent here. Woodward notes that in a revealing exchange on 25 November, Obama stated that he was “inclined” to go with the 30,000 number, but seemed either to be opening it up for further discussion or to be seeking approval from his team. At this very late stage (the formal decision orders were issued on 29 November), after a year of reviewing the problem, Obama still did not sound like he was really convinced about anything.\(^ {17}\)

8. **Tracking the process: following the course of events**

> “The more they looked at it, the more complex it was.”\(^ {18}\)

This was a complex and overlapping process (see Table 1). In essence, in 2008, the Bush administration was already starting to reinforce the US military presence in Afghanistan.

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\(^{12}\) Woodward, quoting Obama, p.312.

\(^{13}\) Woodward, p.315.

\(^{14}\) Woodward, p.258 and 280.

\(^{15}\) Woodward, p.311-315.


\(^{17}\) Woodward, p.301.

\(^{18}\) Woodward, p.357.
This was driven in part by the increasingly pessimistic analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, but also by the slightly more optimistic situation in Iraq, which was suggesting a new solution – the use of a time-limited but rapid reinforcement, or “surge”, of troops – and, more pragmatically, the likely availability of more troops from transfer to Afghanistan, as the security situation in Iraq gradually improved.

When Obama took office, he understood that all was not as it should be with Afghanistan. He started to develop his understanding of strategy, progress and options. The US commander of ISAF, General McKiernan, had sent in requests for up to 30,000 extra troops which needed looking at. Vice President Biden was despatched to Afghanistan and Pakistan on 9 January to assess and report. A former CIA expert, Bruce Riedel, was commissioned in February to produce a report to inform strategy and options. In the same month, Obama dealt with some historic outstanding requests and approved an additional 17,000 troops, from a range of options from 13,000 – 30,000 troops. But this was more a quick holding measure to “stabilise” Afghanistan.\(^{19}\) In March, out of the “Riedel Review”, Obama signed up to a new Strategic Implementation Plan, attempting to pull together political and military goals. In May 2009, General David McKiernan was replaced by General Stanley McChrystal, who was judged a better bet for intelligent application of the new COIN doctrine. McChrystal’s own new assessment of the situation was not positive and led to a more significant debate over troop options – ranging in number from 20,000 to 85,000.\(^{20}\) In November 2009, Obama authorised 30,000 more troops. This increased to 33,000, with a 10% tolerance allowed for support troops such as medical, de-mining and intelligence assets (See Table 2).

9. **Analysis: Classical rational decision-making**

For the analysis in this and the following two sections, I am focusing primarily on Obama’s second consideration of troop numbers, in the latter half of 2009. In the most pure form of rational choice the decision makers have the same set of preferred outcomes in mind. The decision-maker examines what alternatives there are and what consequences might result in


the event that a given alternative was applied.\textsuperscript{21} The rational decision-making model helpfully acts as the “benchmark” against which to assess the theory against the variables generated by the real world. In October/November 2009, Obama’s options were as follows:

- **Option 1**: 85,000 troops – ideal counter-insurgency solution (but these numbers not available)
- **Option 2**: 40,000 troops: McCrystal’s solution to protect the population
- **Option 2a**: 30 – 35,000 troops: Secretary of Defense Gate’s solution – similar to McCrystal
- **Option 3**: 20,000 Special Forces and trainers: “Hybrid solution” – VP Biden’s counter-terrorist solution to focus on Al Qaeda and training of the Afghan army.

It is not my intention to judge these options against a purely rational decision-making process, as the options presented here have been created through imperfect (bounded) processes. However, with rational decision-making, we would certainly expect the NSC to be of one mind that the goal was the defeat of the Taliban and the way to do it would be through the application of military force - and military force primarily in the form of deployments of large numbers of infantry soldiers. Rational decision-making theory can assume choices are made on the basis of an imperfect knowledge of consequences. The numbers of troops debated would be primarily reflective of the level of risk that might accrue during the course of unpredictable military operations.

**10. Analysis: Bounded rationality**

\textit{“I didn’t come in with a blank slate.”}\textsuperscript{22}

Bounded rationality better suits the analysis of Obama’s real world dilemmas, although this in itself covers many issues. James March notes that: “not all alternatives are known…not all consequences are considered…not all preferences are evoked at the same time”.\textsuperscript{23} Afghanistan as an issue remains an extremely complex subject, in which the outcomes of various options cannot be known with much certainty. Second and third order implications of particular decision choices are rarely obvious.


\textsuperscript{22} Woodward, quoting Barack Obama, 28 Nov. 2009, p.322

March highlights information constraints: problems of attention, memory, comprehension and communication which all fit with the debating processes associated with Obama’s decision-making environment – the process lasts more than a year, meetings are intermittent but intense and the issue is complex and important. Woodward observed that: “The long hours in the strategy review were taking their toll on a number of participants”.  

But there are many more issues than this at play that serve to “bound” the President’s decision. The Afghanistan decision-making problem did not begin on 1 January 2009. Since 11 September 2001, a vast number of decisions and actions had already been taken in relation to US military operations in and around Afghanistan. Lack of familiarity with Afghanistan – commonplace in the early years, 2001 to 2004, was starting to give way to over-familiarity and to become stuck in thinking patterns, not all of them constructive. The simplest and most apparent manifestation of US power in Afghanistan was their military power. Although difficult to quantify, it is a plausible hypothesis to suggest that the American government was starting to see every problem as a “nail” for its military “hammer” to resolve. We cannot therefore be certain that Obama was even taking a decision on the “correct” problem.

More specifically, in relation to the increasingly domestically unpopular Afghanistan conflict, we continually (even very late in the day, after decisions have been taken) see Obama trying to come to terms with very fundamental questions: “What are we actually trying to do here?” and to square this with the more pragmatic demands: “What can we actually do?” and, “How will we know when we have done it?”:

“More troubling was that they were still wrestling with the basic questions: What is the mission? What are we trying to do?...Session after session, these questions remained at the heart of it ...[Obama] was very frustrated.”

But I unsure whether anyone – certainly not Obama – convincingly challenged the assumption that more troops was the correct solution. Perhaps this is a case of “groupthink” or a default framing of the problem. To be sure, Biden favoured a counter-terrorist “hybrid” option (which the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen “detested”), with less reliance on conventional military force and Obama, out of frustration, once threatened to approve only a bare minimum of troops and “hope for the best”, but it does not appear clear

25 Woodward, p.269.
that an initial debate between “what are we trying to achieve here” and “why do we need so many troops to achieve it?” was ever had.

11. **Analysis: Governmental Politics**

“All… the illusion of choice”

Allison and Zelikow’s thoughts on governmental politics and the role of groups add additional flesh to the bounded rationality theories. “Outcomes are formed, and deformed, by the interaction of competing preferences”. They note the “Agency” problem: while having additional participants involved in the decision process can ensure the decision is much better informed, proliferating opinions and multiple interests are also brought in that can distract and distort. Representatives with strong personalities (Richard Holbrook) can overly dominate. Powerful interests (Clinton at the State Department and Vice President Biden), need to be heard – and be seen to be heard. Financial issues (the Treasury) ultimately underpin most decisions and the military was producing influential warrior/philosopher heroes (Petraues, McCrystal) with high media profiles and popularity levels that would be the envy of most politicians. State Department has to worry about the politics of the whole region – but particularly Pakistan - the Treasury must foot the bill in an uncertain economic situation, the military was still internally debating the merits of COIN (Allison and Zelikow’s “competing objectives”) and the intelligence organisations were struggling to join the dots of the intelligence picture and then to agree upon what that picture was (Allison and Zelikow’s “asymmetric information”).

The then US Ambassador to Afghanistan – Karl Eikenberry, (himself a former commander of US forces in Afghanistan), muscled in with his own last minute assessment of why McCrystal’s COIN plan would not work, causing fury amongst the military.

One unresolved issue for Obama, was the manner in which options were presented to him. He complained several times that he was not being given “real” options to decide upon. This seems partly an issue of process and part one of advisors being excessively wedded to their ideas. In the case of the Reidel Review, pertaining to Obama’s first decision on 17,000 troops, Woodward notes the following exchange:

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26 Woodward, p.104.
“‘Bruce has done the classic Henry Kissinger model’, [Secretary of Defense] Gates said, referring to the military options. ‘You have three options, two of which are ridiculous, so you accept the one in the middle…’Yes, that’s right’, Reidel said, ‘guilty as charged’.”

The same problem occurred with the assessment of McCrystal’s options, in November the same year:

“‘So let me get this straight, okay?’ Obama asked. ‘You guys just presented me four options, two of which are not realistic’…[and Option] Two and 2A are really the same, Obama said…’you have essentially given me one option.’”

In looking at Obama’s own personal explanation of his final decision (33,000 troops rather than the 40,000 recommended by the military), he cites economic problems, the reluctance to subscribe to a “full” counter-insurgency campaign and the importance of avoiding an open-ended military commitment. It is also hard to escape the conclusion that part of his thinking was simply to avoid capitulating to all the military’s demands.

12. Conclusions

“It’s not the number, it’s the strategy”

Space has not permitted consideration of many aspects of decision-making theory nor many relevant aspects concerning Afghanistan (for example the US problems with Pakistan and the complication of the flawed Afghan election process). I have not considered the mission of the new troops, implementation or how success would be measured. But what I suggest I have demonstrated here is a decision-making process greatly distorted and complicated by a real world that does not stay still (Obama’s “no blank slate”) and is influenced by many different actors, groups and considerations (Obama’s “no blank cheque”). Even the term employed by the US administration and the media, “the surge”, represents a very specific framing of both problem and solution. Goals, preferences, processes and assumptions have been fluid throughout this process.

Obama was struggling to master many things – the demands of the Presidency, domestic and international issues, the Iraq conflict, internal squabbles and personality clashes inside his

30 Woodward, pp.103-104.
31 Woodward, p.308-309.
32 Woodward, quoting Vice President Biden, p. 309.
national security team. The manner in which the issues were framed, assessments conducted, briefings given and options recommended was highly influential.

The decision process splintered into many decisions and multiple processes that sprawled over 2008 – 2010. At each step of the way, Obama was surrounded by a range of actors with a range of influence and agendas. He sought the views of some and others imposed their views upon him.

The impression, over this period, is one of the troop number issue forcing the debate, but with Obama (and others) periodically trying to establish the more fundamental question of what the US should be doing in the country. Woodward notes, in November 2009:

…they were still wrestling with the basic questions: What was the mission? What are we trying to do?…Session after session, these questions remained at the heart of it, yet they had not been answered…”

It is perhaps natural to think that, three years after this process, it would be possible to make a tentative stab at judging the success or failure of Obama’s decision. It is not so easy. At time of writing, the “surge” troops committed have only just departed. But there was no “decisive” moment in which the Taliban crumbled – they are still a potent force – and the international community is still intent on leaving. The debate regarding the Afghanistan “surge” is still on-going. The future of Afghanistan is uncertain, but neither NATO, ISAF or the US are planning to admit failure – or even doubt - any time soon.

In the meantime, in 2013, Barack Obama is facing another significant decision on US troop levels – with perhaps a few hard won lessons under his belt.

13. Recommendations for further study

Other than selecting from amongst the many other theories of decision-making and applying them to this particular situation, there are several directions in which this initial (and brief) study might usefully be developed. This paper has focused primarily upon the decision-making, but a wider analysis could usefully spend more time considering how the actual implementation progressed and assessing the relative success (and the politics behind this term) of the process of the “surge”. It would also be relevant to compare the Obama troop levels

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Woodward, p.269.
level debate from 2009 with that of the current 2013 debate over residual force levels inside Afghanistan.

Using this paper as the core of a more extensive thesis would allow a more in-depth analysis of the key actors – or permit an even more detailed focus on one or two groups or individuals.

The relationship between the civilian and military components of Obama’s advisory teams might also be worthy of further study. Extending the scope somewhat, it would be interesting to examine the similarities and differences in the decision-making styles of the Bush and Obama administrations when dealing with the conduct of the war in Afghanistan, perhaps over the 2005 to 2010 period. Stretching back even further, aligning Obama’s decision-making resources and processes for the conduct of US military operations with those of US Presidents during the Vietnam War and the Second World War might also prove fruitful.

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**Table 1: Decision timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Nov 08</td>
<td>Barack Obama elected President</td>
<td>Begins receiving briefings/handover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Jan 09</td>
<td>VP Joe Biden to Afg and Pak</td>
<td>Fact-finding mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Jan 09</td>
<td>NSC: brief Obama on Iraq</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Jan 09</td>
<td>Obama meeting with Gen Petraeus</td>
<td>Conclusion: not enough resources for Afg – figure of 30,000 troops raised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Feb 09</td>
<td>Ex-CIA expert Riedel commissioned to report on strategy/options for Afg</td>
<td>Holbrook (and others) critical of the report (essentially written by one person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Feb 09</td>
<td>NSC: 4 troop number options presented, 17,000 decided</td>
<td>Including other extant troop requests, 22,000 troops were authorised in total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Mar 09</td>
<td>“Reidel Review” briefed to Obama</td>
<td>Forms the basis of the Strategic Implementation Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 May 09</td>
<td>US commander on Afg, Gen McKiernan, replaced by McCrystal</td>
<td>Re-awakens debate over need for troops on top of the 17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July – August 09</td>
<td>McCrystal prepares and delivers new classified assessment on Afghanistan.</td>
<td>Media speculation over content - figure of 40,000 more troops starting to emerge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep 09</td>
<td>NSC: discuss McCrystal report</td>
<td>Obama: “We have no good options here”³⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Sep 09</td>
<td>Media leaks figure of 40,000 troops the day before the NSC debates it</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Oct 09</td>
<td>NSC: debates goals and troop options</td>
<td>Obama: “People have to stop telling me what I already know”³⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Oct 09</td>
<td>NSC: debates goals and troop options</td>
<td>Obama: “Now we have a pretty good idea of what the reality is”³⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Oct 09</td>
<td>NSC: debates goals and troop options</td>
<td>Obama unhappy: “I want three real options to choose from”³⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Nov 09</td>
<td>“Decision day” for Obama</td>
<td>Pentagon addition request for 4,500 support troops. Obama angry: “I’m done doing this”³⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Nov 09</td>
<td>Final orders for Afg/Pak Strategy released</td>
<td>The decision is made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³⁷ Woodward, p.243
³⁸ Woodward, p.258
³⁹ Woodward, p.303.
Table 2: US troop levels and casualties in Afghanistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. TROOP LEVELS</th>
<th>100,000 troops</th>
<th>President Obama approved a surge of 33,000 troops.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>President George W. Bush ordered a 14,000-troop increase before leaving office in January 2009, and Obama approved 22,000 more in March.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>Troop size will shrink by about 30,000 by the end of summer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20,000</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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October 2011 98,000

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Key Literature


