

Will Obama's Record War Budget Lead to a US Victory in Afghanistan? Don't Bet On it?

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

President Barack Obama has increased the Pentagon's perennially-bloated annual spending spree to its greatest magnitude since World War II \$708 billion. Congress eventually will overwhelmingly approve Obama's war budget request for fiscal year 2011, which takes effect in October.

The Obama administration's funding recommendation was announced Feb. 1. The next day Reuters reported that "Shares of major U.S. defense contractors rose on Monday after the Obama administration unveiled a defense budget... that seeks a 3.4 percent increase in the Pentagon's base budget and \$159 billion to fund missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Also released Feb. 1 was the Pentagon's Congressionally-mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which calls for a considerable expansion of U.S. military power, especially in bolstering counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns.

The QDR is a strategic guide for America's present and future wars, updated every four years. The new version remains based on an interventionist foreign/military policy that has not changed in essence since the early Cold War years.

As described by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the 2011 war budget reflects the QDR's call for "rebalancing America's defense posture by emphasizing capabilities needed to prevail in current conflicts, while enhancing capabilities that may be needed in the future."

In addition to the Pentagon request, President Obama also seeks a supplementary \$33 billion this year for "Overseas Contingency Operations," the bureaucratically bland title chosen to replace the Bush Administration's "War on Terrorism." The title is about all that has changed in the "terrorism" wars since Bush left office except for the new administration's grave expansion of the Afghan conflict.

The additional money is to pay for the 30,000 troops Obama most recently ordered to Afghanistan, bringing U.S. troop strength to over 100,000, joined by over 40,000 NATO troops, and scores of thousands of mercenaries and contractors. This war is said to cost about \$1 million per U.S. soldier per year.

The Obama Administration's \$708 billion for fiscal 2011 compares to the \$680 billion President Obama approved for this year, which itself was 4.1% higher than President George W. Bush's \$651 billion funding for fiscal 2009. A decade ago annual "defense" spending was \$280 billion.

At minimum not including the expensive Pentagon infrastructure that supports America's wars in the Middle East and Central Asia the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan adventures is over \$1 trillion so far. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz estimated two years ago that the final cost to the U.S. of both wars, when all aspects are included, will be over \$3 trillion.

The amount of money Washington is spending in Afghanistan alone this year, according to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Feb 1, is "more than any other country in the world spends on defense, with the exception of China," with four times more people and a defense budget less than one-fifth that of the United States.

Addressing Washington's war money, writer and global analyst Chalmers Johnson comments "It is virtually impossible to overstate the profligacy of what our government spends on the military."

Total U.S. annual "security" spending is over twice that acknowledged in the annual Pentagon budget. Omitted are many expenses from veteran's benefits, homeland security, and interest on past military debts, to nuclear weapons, the cost of America's intelligence agencies, and war-related spending absorbed by other government departments.

This means that the U.S., which contains 4.54% of the world's population, accounts for over 50% of global military expenditures, thus spending more on "security" than all the other countries combined. America's main and seemingly only enemy is al-Qaeda, with perhaps 2,000 decentralized adherents worldwide with varying degrees of commitment and ability.

In his State of the Union Address last month, President Obama specifically exempted "security" money from the "freeze" on many domestic expenses in the national budget, which amounts to some \$3.8 trillion, the highest annual amount on record. About a third of this total \$1.3 trillion, another record is in excess of tax receipts and will be paid with interest, along with many trillions more, by future generations of Americans.

In the interim, China and a few other countries are expected to continue lending money to a debt-ridden Uncle Sam who refuses to introduce a system of progressive taxation to absorb the intemperate accumulation of wealth by the richest 10% of Americans households (which in 2007 enjoyed a net worth of 71.4% of all the assets in the country), or to substantially cut military spending for aggressive wars of choice.

America's hugely disproportionate war funding is more the product of an economic construct known as military Keynesianism (excessive government spending for militarism in order to foster capitalist economic growth) than the official myth of being surrounded by a multitude of formidable enemies. Most of the war money Commander in Chief Obama requested will be directed to Iraq and Afghanistan. The budget includes:

\$25 billion for 10 new Navy ships; \$11 billion for 43 more F-35 fighter planes; \$10 billion for missile defense; \$56 billion for the Pentagon's "Black Budget" (classified programs known only by code names); \$7 billion (to the Department of Energy) for nuclear weapons; Funding to increase the size of the of the 56,000 Special Operations Command by 2,800 fighters, plus new equipment; \$10 billion to buy more Army and Marine helicopters for small-scale wars; Money for enough new advanced unmanned drones to increase seek-and-destroy missions by 75%, including doubling production of the advanced MQ-9 Reaper and 26 extended-range Predators (spending for these drones jumps from \$877.5 million in 2010

to \$1.4 billion in 2011); Many billions to train, equip and pay for the U.S.- controlled Afghan and Iraq armies; \$1.2 billion more to Pakistan for counterinsurgency; \$140 million to Yemen to fight al-Qaeda. Additional billions will be spent in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, buying off the armed opposition and bribing officials.

The industry portion of the military-industrial complex is delighted with Obama, according to Todd Harrison, a Senior Fellow for Defense Budget Studies, at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment. In an interview conducted Feb. 4 by the Council on Foreign Relations, he said of the new war budget:

"Given a bigger defense budget and few major program cuts, the defense establishment is elated.... The defense-industry base people read too much into a Democratic administration coming into office and there being real pressure on the federal budget overall because of soaring deficits. They... construed massive cuts in defense spending in the future, particularly in acquisitions. That hasn't proven to be true. This administration hasn't cut defense spending at all but increased it to record levels, and it looks like for the foreseeable future defense acquisitions are going to continue increasing.... People started to realize, 'Hey, this president isn't bad for the defense industry.'"

The U.S. government's extraordinary war expenditures are intended to secure America's position as the world's unipolar hegemon far more than "fighting terrorism" in small, weak countries all the more so as Washington's domination over global affairs is being challenged by rising nations in the developing world and breakaways by once obedient countries, as in Latin America.

Anatol Lieven, author of "America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism," put it this way: "U.S. global power, as presently conceived by the overwhelming majority of the U.S. establishment, is unsustainable.... The empire can no longer raise enough taxes or soldiers, it is increasingly indebted, and key vassal states are no longer reliable.... The result is that the empire can no longer pay for enough of the professional troops it needs to fulfill its self-assumed imperial tasks."

The main reason the new Quadrennial Defense Review is greatly expanding the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism aspects of the war machine is because the U.S., for all its devastating military power, has been fought to a stalemate in both Iraq and Afghanistan by much smaller, poorly armed guerrilla forces for nearly seven and over eight years respectively.

The main emphasis in the fiscal 2011 war budget is on prevailing in Afghanistan, or at least in conveying the impression that U.S. has not been defeated by a force of fewer than 20,000 scattered irregulars belonging to the Taliban and other groups fighting against the U.S. invaders.

It is worthwhile to note that by Washington's own assessment, there are less than 100 members of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and a vague "several hundred" possibly in Pakistan. Both the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban groups are independent of each other and are only interested in fighting against the U.S. within their own countries, not in attacking America.

Former Indian ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar, writing in his country's English-language daily newspaper The Hindu Feb. 4, commented thusly on Washington's multi-billion dollar

effort to control Afghanistan:

"The spectre that is haunting Washington today cannot be overstated: a prolonged war in Afghanistan is unsustainable financially, materially and politically; the NATO allies lack faith in the U.S.'s war strategy; domestic public opposition to the war is cascading in the Western countries; the war has become an Albatross' cross hindering the optimal pursuit of U.S. global strategies in a highly volatile international situation posing multiple challenges; the war radicalizes the Muslim opinion worldwide and pits America against Islam....

"What lies ahead? Make no mistake that the Taliban are returning to Afghanistan's power structure < quite plausibly under Mullah Omar's leadership. The U.S. expectation to 'split' the Taliban will likely prove misplaced. As months ebb away, fighting intensifies and Omar is in no particular hurry, Washington's pleas to Islamabad will become more and more insistent to bring the so-called Quetta Shura to the negotiating table."

Quetta is across the border in Pakistan. The Shura is the leadership organization of the Afghan Taliban which has been domiciled in Quetta with Islamabad's approval since a month after President Bush invaded their country in October 2001. What Bhadrakumar is suggesting is that the only way Washington can end its long and dreadfully expensive impasse in Afghanistan is to make a deal with the Quetta Shura providing the Taliban with a substantial coalition role in the Afghan provincial and national government.

This is hardly what President Bush had in mind a month after 9/11 when he launched a foolish, macho invasion of Afghanistan rather than depend on worldwide police work and other means to disrupt al-Qaeda. The Pentagon juggernaut "defeated" the Taliban in a matter of weeks, but it couldn't conquer the Afghan resistance after all these years. The same was true of the illegal and unjust invasion of Iraq, of course.

Victory was President Obama's goal as well when he greatly expanded the Afghan war in order to break the stalemate, but negotiations and a return of the Taliban in a coalition government may well be the best outcome he can bring about.

All Obama has gained politically at home for his "Bush Lite" war maneuvers is the near-unanimous support the pro-war Republicans, who otherwise view him with contempt. Most of the Democratic electorate, which constitutes the broad base of the peace movement, seems to oppose the Afghan war and its expansion, but has stayed away antiwar protests because of reluctance to take an open public stand against Obama. This is changing as the disillusionment sinks in, as least among the party's liberal and progressive sector.

The test to see if Democrats come back to the antiwar movement will be the mass march and rally in Washington March 20 being organized by a large coalition of national and local peace groups. The White House will be watching carefully. If it is a highly successful event, it will give pause to an administration sensitive to insistent political currents; if it is relatively small, it could mean full speed ahead for the war machine.

In a Feb. 3 AlterNet article titled, "The Defense Industry is Pleased with Obama," writer Laura Flanders expressed the liberal dilemma in these words: "Who says the president is failing to show leadership? In one area at least, there's no sign of flag or falter. If anything, the administration's only becoming more forthright. Sad to say, that area is military build-

up.”

The Pentagon has learned some lessons since it stormed into Afghanistan and then Iraq, and wound up with unanticipated black eyes. In this sense, President Obama’s 2011 war budget and QDR are less aimed at Afghanistan and more at future “Overseas Contingency Operations” against alleged “rogue,” “failed,” “undemocratic,” “leftist,” or “terrorist” states. It’s Bush all over again, but next time it’s supposed to be done right.

Washington, with its “rebalanced defense posture” and unlimited military checkbook, even as the country sinks in debt, will in time attack another small country when one more “contingency” inevitably develops. The White House no doubt expects to win big when it does, given full spectrum dominance, drones and helicopters, the enhanced Special Operations Command, and soldiers, marines, NATO troops, mercenaries, and contractors. But at this stage, with America’s track record, it wouldn’t be smart to place any bets.

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