The main problem in Afghanistan

By Morton Abramowitz

The single biggest reason for the Soviets' failure in Afghanistan was Pakistan. And if Washington isn't careful, Pakistan could have the same effect today

BARACK Obama has said that the United States needs to send an extra 10,000 troops to Afghanistan. John McCain wants to send 15,000. But before ordering more soldiers into the fray, the next US president should think about Afghanistan's history — and how such surges there have essential conduit for US and Saudi aid to the Afghan mujahedin. The Pakistanis funneled massive amounts of weapons to the Afghan fighters; the flow reached $1 billion annually by the late 1980s, some of it new, advanced US arms.

At times the Soviets, knowing full well where the mujahedin's guns and Stinger missiles were coming from, must have considered invading Pakistan or conducting cross-border strikes. In the end they decided against it, fearing a wider conflict and thinking they had the military means to deal with the problem inside

Just as in the '80s, the main problem is Pakistan. Border areas nominally ruled by Islamabad have become Taliban safe havens, with weapons, drugs and Al Qaeda fighters being smuggled across with impunity. Despite Pakistani denials, the CIA has made well-grounded allegations that some government elements, including officers in Inter-Services Intelligence, are supporting the radicals.

So how should the next US president tackle this problem and avoid falling into the Soviets' trap? The Taliban insurgency is smaller than the anti-Soviet one was, although it's apparently better co-ordinated. And the Allies' technological advantage is greater than the Soviets' was. A surge of forces might help better control Afghanistan's borders and target insurgents. But simply throwing soldiers at the problem, especially at the levels the candidates have proposed, won't stop the infiltration of fighters from Pakistan or resolve Afghanistan's many domestic difficulties.

Periodically targeting Al Qaeda elements in Pakistan's lawless border regions — an option Obama has said he would consider under some circumstances — might be helpful, too, but it would do little to stop the influx of gunmen into Afghanistan. And such military strikes would infuriate Islamabad and throw Pakistani politics into turmoil. A full-fledged invasion would be immensely costly and likely have even worse consequences.

It would be far better to find some way to get the Pakistanis to help voluntarily. The United States has already tried this tack using diplomatic persuasion and large amounts of mostly military aid, but to no avail. Washington could increase pressure by threatening to shut off the tap unless Islamabad played ball. But such a confrontational approach would also be dangerous and likely not work either.

The harsh realities of the
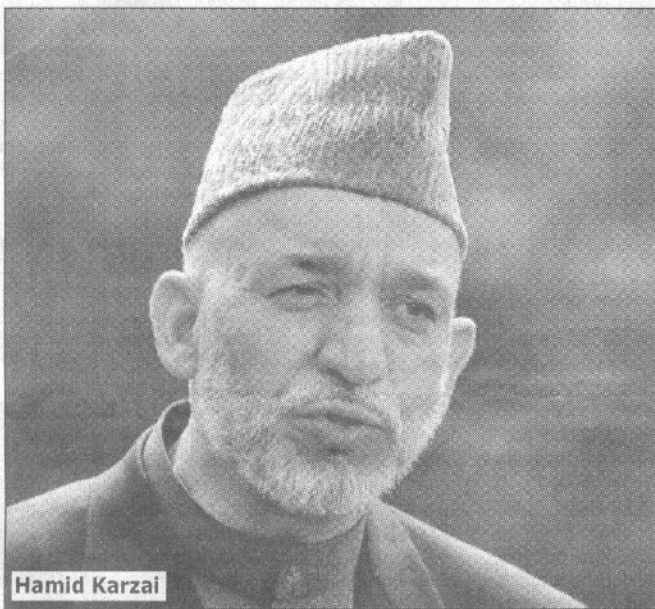
Hamid Karzai

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failed in the past.

Three decades ago, the Soviet Union tried to subdue a fundamentalist Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan by deploying 108,000 troops (at the conflict's height in 1985–86), including special forces and substantial air power. But in 1989 the Red Army withdrew in defeat, having lost 13,000 soldiers, killed and maimed more than a million Afghans and sent 5 million refugees fleeing into nearby countries.

The single biggest reason for the Soviets' failure was Pakistan. And if Washington isn't careful, Pakistan could have the same effect today.

To understand why, start *with the fact that Pakistan and* Afghanistan share a 2,250-kilometre-long, highly porous border. During the Soviet occupation, Pakistan served as the Afghanistan proper. Had the Soviet Union moved against Pakistan, it's impossible to know how things would have turned out. As it is, the Soviets' Afghan strategy failed, and the mighty Red Army, despite its sophisticated equipment, was ultimately beaten back by bands of local insurgents.

The similarities between then and now are striking. The US-led Coalition has been in Afghanistan for seven years. There are now 70,000 Coalition troops in the country, including approximately 36,000 Americans. To date, more than 800 service members have been killed, and the numbers and pace of casualties are rising. *Worse, despite the presence of* these forces and billions of dollars in Western reconstruction aid, the Taliban seem to be getting stronger.

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The harsh realities of the situation in Afghanistan — including Pakistan's meddlesome role — can no longer be ignored. The stakes for the United States and the region are enormous, and good options are in short supply. No quick fix will solve the problem — certainly not the infusion of a few more American brigades. The Soviet saga shows the danger of a focused, military-only approach. Talking tough, as the presidential candidates try to bolster their national-security credentials, is not likely to help, and the sooner we recognise that, the better. Building a stable Afghanistan will be a long-term, uncertain effort. Without a concerted bipartisan approach, no policy is likely to survive or succeed. Meanwhile, the political warfare is distracting us from the necessary fight. COURTESY NEWSWEEK