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EDITORIAL

Mr. Obama's Task

There is no doubt that the prospects for success in Afghanistan are so bleak right now because former President George W. Bush failed for seven long years to invest the necessary troops, resources or attention to the war. But it is now President Obama's war, and the American people are waiting for him to explain his goals and his strategy.

Mr. Obama was right to conduct a sober, systematic review of his options. We all know what happens when a president sends tens of thousands of Americans to war based on flawed information, gut reactions and gauzy notions of success. But the political reality is that the longer Mr. Obama waits, the more indecisive he seems and the more constrained his options appear.

It has been more than eight months since Mr. Obama first announced his strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, warning Americans that, for them, the border between the two — where Taliban and Qaeda forces have found safe haven — is “the most dangerous place in the world.” And it has been more than a month since his top general in Afghanistan asked for 40,000 more troops, warning that “failure to gain the initiative” over the next year could make it impossible to defeat the Taliban.

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Americans are deeply anxious about the war. As the debate among his advisers has dragged on, and became increasingly public, many are asking whether the conflict is necessary or already a lost cause. Democratic leaders are among the loudest questioners.

It has become a cliché in Washington that there are only bad choices in Afghanistan. But it seems clear that this is not the time for a precipitous withdrawal, nor can the United States cling to the status quo while the Taliban gains ever more territory and more power. To move forward, Mr. Obama needs to explain the stakes for this country, the extent of the military commitment, the likely cost in lives and treasure and his definition of success. Mr. Bush failed to do all of that in Afghanistan and Iraq.

America's allies, many of whom are looking for a way out, also need to hear why their troops should continue to risk their lives. There is no chance in Afghanistan unless President Hamid Karzai separates himself from his corrupt associates and Pakistan's leaders step up their fight against the Taliban and other extremists.

Mr. Obama said on Wednesday that he would soon provide “a lot of clarity” on his Afghanistan strategy. These are some of the things the world needs to hear.

WHAT ARE THE STAKES? We agreed with the president in August when he described Afghanistan as a war of necessity. In a speech, he warned that if the Taliban insurgency were left unchecked it “will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth

fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people.”

Since then, some of his top advisers have raised doubts about the urgency and even the necessity of the war. The national security adviser, Gen. James Jones, said in October that there were “less than 100” Qaeda members operating in Afghanistan without bases or the “ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies.” He said he didn’t “foresee the return of the Taliban” and that the “next step in this is the sanctuaries” in Pakistan.

Vice President Joseph Biden has been even more insistent that the real front is across the border and that attacking extremists on both sides could be better accomplished with a lighter footprint in Afghanistan and Predator strikes and special operations raids. Other officials argue that the Taliban may have learned a lesson and might be open to a deal that barred Al Qaeda from its territory.

Mr. Obama needs to address these arguments — to say whether he still considers fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan to be central to American security and why. Does he still believe a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would mean a “larger safe haven” for Al Qaeda? And how does he see the relationship between the war in Afghanistan and efforts to hold off extremists in a nuclear-armed Pakistan? If the Taliban were to win in Afghanistan, would they be less or more likely to threaten Pakistan?

In March, Mr. Obama warned that, for Afghans, a “return to Taliban rule would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy and the denial of basic human rights,” especially to women and girls. We need to hear whether he still believes Americans have a duty to stop that.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE WAR? In March, President Obama said his goal was to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” He also argued that bullets and bombs would not be enough to drive the Taliban back. In Afghanistan, American forces and a surge of civilian advisers must “advance security, opportunity and justice” for the Afghan people, “not just in Kabul, but from the bottom up in the provinces.”

Given that, no one in the White House should have been surprised when Mr. Obama’s chosen commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, came back with an ambitious counterinsurgency plan, although his request for 40,000 more troops was clearly higher than Mr. Obama and his aides had wanted to hear.

If Mr. Obama no longer believes that a counterinsurgency is necessary or feasible, or if he wants to set less-ambitious goals (there has been talk of securing a smaller number of cities while speeding up training of the Afghan Army), then the American people need to hear why he changed his mind and how he intends to move forward.

Mr. Obama will also have to address his vice president’s proposal. We share Mr. Biden’s anxiety that a larger American military presence might alienate more Afghans than it wins over. But we are also skeptical that a war against Al Qaeda can be fought from a distance. Drones and commandos still need bases, and Pakistan is not likely to provide them. They need “actionable” intelligence, which could dry up with fewer American troops on the Afghan side of the border.

ARE THERE CREDIBLE PARTNERS? There is almost no chance of holding off the Taliban (or plotting an eventual American withdrawal) without a minimally credible Afghan government and security forces.

The Taliban's medieval ideas and brutality are anathema to most Afghans. We see that in the courage of the Afghan families who defy the Taliban by sending their daughters to school. But the corruption of the Karzai government, and its failure to provide the most basic services and security, have caused many of its citizens to decide that they have no choice but to submit to the Taliban.

Even after his supporters were caught trying to steal the election, Mr. Karzai remains shamelessly, insultingly undaunted. Mr. Obama must make clear to both Mr. Karzai and the American people the sweeping changes required to build a credible Afghan government. If there are other, better partners, competent cabinet members or provincial officials, then Americans need to hear how Mr. Obama plans to empower them.

Mr. Obama should be candid about his administration's halting progress. In March, he pledged to send "agricultural specialists and educators, engineers and lawyers" across Afghanistan to relieve the burden on American troops and help the government "serve its people." There are disturbing reports that the situation on the ground is so dangerous that many of these advisers cannot leave Kabul. It was chilling [to read in The Times last week](#) that when the ambassador in Kabul asked for additional civilian staff, the State Department turned down some of his requests because of budget constraints and a decision to cap the number at 1,000.

There will never be enough American troops on the ground to defeat the Taliban or provide security for Afghans. Mr. Obama must explain his plans for building a minimally functional Afghan Army and police force. More trainers are needed, but as The Times reported earlier this month, even that is no guarantee of success. According to reviews by American officials, the effort has been hobbled by a high dropout rate for recruits, "a lack of competent and professional" Afghan leadership "at all levels," widespread illiteracy and corruption.

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WHAT WILL IT COST? Mr. Bush cynically tried to cover up the heavy costs of the Iraq and Afghan wars and cooked the financial books with repeated "supplemental" financing requests. Mr. Obama has done far better and needs to continue to tell the truth.

The human cost will continue to rise if the number of forces rises. Mr. Obama should also acknowledge the cost in military readiness and the stress of repeated deployments on troops and their families. On the financial side, the Pentagon has already spent more than \$150 billion on the war. While estimates are difficult, analysts say that for every 10,000 additional troops deployed, the annual cost will rise by at least another \$10 billion. Americans need to hear how those costs will be met, even though the choices — raising taxes, cutting spending or more borrowing — are unappealing in a time of recession and high deficits.

IS THERE A WAY OUT? Finally, Mr. Obama promised on Wednesday to outline an "endgame." Given Afghanistan's desperate state, we are skeptical that he can lay out a firm timetable for withdrawal. But there are certainly benchmarks that he can offer. (Mr. Obama promised that in March, but the nation has yet to hear an accounting.)

There must be a way to measure progress or failure. Americans need to know the war will not go on forever.

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