he equivalent of an Army division has been requested to reinforce the NATO mission in Afghanistan, which will allow U.S. troops to launch an aggressive campaign to secure towns and villages and tamp down a morass of violent factions that threaten the country, including a resurgent Taliban and continued threats from terrorists with al Qaeda ties along with opium kingpins, bandits and run-of-the-mill tribal warlords. Meanwhile, soldiers must contend with near top-to-bottom corruption and paralyzing poverty in Afghanistan and overcome an ingrained Afghan virulence against outsiders on their soil. Beyond that are the ramifications of what appears to be the Great Game 2.0 being played in the region.
The mission for American soldiers and those of NATO allies fighting alongside them is straightforward: Pacify a land that has not been sufficiently pacified by royals, rogues or foreign armies since the dawn of Western written history, including efforts by the Persians, Macedonians, Mongols and nearly every other ancient heavy hitter on two continents—most recently by the British Empire at its zenith and the former Soviet Union entering the depth of decline.

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan is the main combat effort again after being eclipsed by the war in Iraq—some say hobbled by it—for six years. The United States plans to double its military commitment to Afghanistan by the end of this summer, ultimately providing nearly two-thirds of the troops for the NATO mission’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) if allies do not also increase their force levels.

The near-term American objectives in Afghanistan, which remain the same as when U.S. soldiers launched operations in 2001 in the wake of 9/11, entail defeating al Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors and denying Afghanistan as a planning, training or staging base for terrorist acts.

“It is imperative that Afghanistan does not become a sanctuary for transnational, violent extremists,” said Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), a few months ago. “It is for that reason that the United States took action in Afghanistan over seven years ago, and that basic objective remains valid today.”

Reenergized emphasis will be on short-term goals, not long-term, big-ticket moves to reshape Afghanistan as a semimodern economy—which, even if possible, would be prohibitively expensive.

Our goal needs to be to make sure Afghanistan does not become a base for terrorists to launch attacks,” Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates said in late January. “If our goal is to create some Central Asian Valhalla, we will lose. Nobody has the time, the patience or the money to do that. … We need to keep our objectives there realistic. Otherwise, it will be a failure.”

Secretary Gates expressed earlier that “the goals we [had] for Afghanistan [were] too broad and too far in the future; [they were] too future-oriented. … We need more concrete goals that can be achieved realistically within three to five years.”

Afghanistan is said to be enduring spiking violence...
throughout the country, including an increase in attacks against ISAF’s remote bases, a rising number of suicide bombers and propagation of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Last year, 3,276 IEDs were either detonated or discovered in Afghanistan, a 45 percent increase over 2007, and deaths of U.S.-led Coalition troops due to bombs doubled to more than 150.

The Taliban has reemerged openly in some areas, particularly in the west along the Iranian border; the southern horn of the country, including the country’s largest opium-poppy growing region; and some areas near Kabul. It is not as though Taliban fighters retook territory in head-to-head battles against ISAF, however, or that NATO forces retreated. The Taliban is grabbing rural expanses where ISAF has no control because it lacks forces to do so. The Taliban is employing a version of a colloquial American baseball strategy: “Hit it where they ain’t.”

“It is … clear that we have not had enough troops to provide a baseline level of security in some of the most dangerous areas—a vacuum that increasingly has been filled by the Taliban,” Secretary Gates noted.

Hostile activity generally has increased along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and there has been a significant increase in the number of foreign fighters coming into Afghanistan, including Chechens, Uzbeks, Saudis and Europeans.

In mid-February, the Taliban struck government ministry buildings in Kabul, killing more than 20 people and wounding many more. The attack came the day before U.S. special envoy Richard C. Holbrooke arrived for talks.

The supply line from Pakistan’s ports has been attacked several times, including a December 2008 attack against a truck stop on the Pakistan side of the border that destroyed 100 trucks. American military officials were quick to say that the supply line was not seriously affected by the attacks and very far from collapse. Nevertheless, American officials were equally quick to reach agreements with Russia and Central Asian states to establish a northern supply route to augment the southern route or replace it if necessary. On average, about 350 trucks per day carry goods and equipment into Afghanistan from Pakistani ports. ISAF forces currently receive 70 to 80 percent of their sustainment by road from Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the Kyrgyzstan government initiated action to end the lease agreement for American use of Manas Air Base, which is a strategic air hub and staging base for Afghanistan. U.S. officials believe the action resulted from a move by Russia to outbid the United States for the base and reassert its influence in Kyrgyzstan and regionally.

Just as American troops currently receive most of their bulk materiel via the Pakistan route, so does the enemy. The uncontrolled northwestern region of Pakistan provides arms, fighters and safe haven on a scale that can be said to overshadow that of Cambodia’s role during the Vietnam War. There is no easy fix for the dual role that Pakistan plays—indispensable ally and enemy sanctuary. There are further complications in Pakistan, including whether it will escape becoming a fundamental Islamic state either by election or usurpation. If it becomes something approaching a rogue state, how long will it continue to be allowed to possess nuclear weapons?

As the Taliban has continued its push eastward into Afghanistan, there
are also disturbing recent signs that it is currently expanding control east into the heart of Pakistan. Gen. Petraeus, in an open letter to CENTCOM personnel in December, stated that Pakistan “faces substantial difficulties of its own but has shown new awareness of the need to deal with the extremists who have not only exported violence outside Pakistan’s borders but have also demonstrated the threat they pose to Pakistan’s very existence.”

Regardless of external problems that affect the situation in Afghanistan, the tactical situation there caused Gen. David D. McKiernan, ISAF commander and commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, to request additional forces several months ago. His request, subsequently endorsed by Gen. Petraeus and Secretary Gates, called for the additional deployment of some 30,000 American troops to Afghanistan. The first Army unit sent was the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) from the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), previously set for deployment to Iraq but “re-missioned” for Afghanistan. In late January, the 3rd BCT began taking up positions in the eastern provinces of Wardak and Logar, a rugged area south of Kabul previously covered by only a battalion-size element.

“Our first steps are to get forces out into [the] more populated areas and begin to interact with the people,” Col. David B. Haight, the 3rd BCT commander, said. Two more BCTs are scheduled to be in Afghanistan this spring and another by late summer, and they will be joined by the Army Reserve’s 143rd Expeditionary Support Command. A Marine battalion task force arrived in November and is tasked to train Afghan police. Counting additional support and combat enhancement personnel, such as unmanned air systems squadrons from the Air Force, the increase could put the U.S. contribution to ISAF at up to roughly 64,000, which is less than half the troop commitment to Iraq in January.

The increase, however, does not represent a “surge” in the same sense as it did in Iraq—an increase to be maintained for a specific period. It appears that the end number will be the sustained level of U.S. forces in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, and perhaps it is the foreseeable peak. Secretary Gates said he would not side with calls for additional forces above the stated level at this point, telling the Senate, “I would be very skeptical about [deploying] force levels beyond what Gen. McKiernan has asked for.”

“There will be a requirement for sustained commitment here for some protracted period of time. How many years that is, and how many troops that is … nobody knows at
this point,” Secretary Gates said during a visit to ISAF headquarters in December. A senior CIA officer during the Soviet invasion and occupation, he reminded the Senate during his testimony that “the Soviets couldn’t win that war with 120,000 troops and a ruthless approach,” adopting and adhering to “the wrong strategy.”

President Barack Obama, leaving his first meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, said, “We’re going to have some difficult decisions that we’re going to have to make surrounding Iraq and Afghanistan. Most immediately, and obviously, our efforts to go after extremist organizations that do harm to our homeland is uppermost on our minds.”

President Obama will need to approve the overall troop increase in Afghanistan.

Administration officials said a comprehensive strategy shift in Afghanistan would take into account recommendations from a study currently being done by Gen. Petraeus.

Afghanistan in many ways has been forgotten by the American public and shunned by policymakers since the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. With the endgame apparently being played in Iraq and the new Obama administration viewing Afghanistan with primacy, Operation Enduring Freedom is shedding its off-Broadway status in very pronounced terms. Secretary Gates, during his first congressional testimony as a member of the Obama administration, testified that Afghanistan is at the “absolute forefront” of strategy. During the past seven years, the strategic ground has shifted in Afghanistan. The stakes have skyrocketed, and tactical operations are welded to Pakistan’s internal strife along with that between Pakistan and India, which extends to other parts of the region.

“It is not possible to solve the problems internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges, especially in terms of security, with Afghanistan’s neighbors. A regional approach is required,” Gen. Petraeus said in a speech to the U.S. Institute of Peace. “We have to demonstrate commitment to sustain comprehensive, coordinated approaches and build and execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the Central Asian states and even the army in Russia along with … perhaps at some point Iran.”

Applying first aid to Afghanistan to stop the bleeding also buys time for American special envoys and diplomats to gain traction with the greater challenges of regional stability. Under the severe, unforgiving and often volatile gaze of realpolitik, the Afghanistan situation—now unequivocally and permanently grafted to the hydra head of the Pakistan domestic situation/Pakistan-India hostility and repercus-
sions beyond—makes Iraq look like small potatoes.

Before the additional deployments began, the U.S. contribution to the NATO mission in Afghanistan represented about 34,000 of the roughly 70,000-troop NATO presence. Requests for more troops from other NATO countries have been made often and received little hope. Opposition to the war in Afghanistan is growing within European countries—a domestic hurdle that many NATO countries find they cannot leap.

President Obama will meet with NATO leaders in April, bringing renewed troop requests and requests that participation caveats against offensive combat employment by some contributing countries be removed or altered. He also will ask for increases in economic and construction contributions from NATO partners.

Reconstruction has not been abandoned in Afghanistan. Security has priority, given the circumstances, but Gen. McKiernan said the overall effort in Afghanistan will require more than additional troops. “It’s going to require governance, it’s going to require security for the people, and it’s going to require the continued support from the international community on reconstruction and development,” he said in September 2008.

Army officials believe that the remainder of the Afghanistan combat unit increase this year can be met without significant diversion from Iraq’s deployment flow. The problem is assembling the combat-support and combat-service-support units to meet additional needs in Afghanistan. At some point, however, there must be a decrease in U.S. troop strength in Iraq to sustain BCT rotations into Afghanistan at the new level while meeting plans for increased unit dwell time between deployments. Secretary Gates told legislators that by the end of September, soldiers deployed for 12 months should expect 15 months at home. By October 2010, the plan is to allow 24 months between deployments, and by late 2011, the dwell time is expected to reach 30 months.

The American troop increase also could require thousands of additional mine resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles to be delivered to Afghanistan to help protect U.S. soldiers from the elevated IED threat. (Requests have been made for a lighter MRAP version to better maneuver along Afghanistan’s primitive—at best—road system.)

Meanwhile, plans and funding are in place to increase the 80,000-soldier Afghan National Army by 50,000 soldiers, but Gen. McKiernan said it will be three or four years before the army can be trained and operate independently. The American troop increase will include additional trainers.

Secretary Gates said that it is important to put “an Afghan face” on the conflict and have Afghan—rather than American—soldiers kick down doors. He also said that it is imperative that NATO start winning the communications war, especially to stem angry reactions to civilian deaths resulting from NATO air attacks.
Meanwhile, a plan to create “public guards”—administered by Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry—by drawing volunteers from tribes to protect themselves from the Taliban and others along the lines of the Sons of Iraq has been met with disputes and controversies, and a pilot program has been delayed.

ISAF is divided into five regional commands. Regional Command (RC) South is in the most trouble, and American brigades that will arrive this spring and summer are expected to be assigned to RC South. Kandahar is the main ISAF base in the south, and the region currently is held by a 20,000-strong force of Canadian, British and Dutch troops. A force of that size is not sufficient for the task; vast areas have no ISAF presence.

Currently, RC South’s portion of the border with Pakistan cannot be sufficiently patrolled; villages cannot be protected. A hundred-mile stretch of opium-poppy fields cannot be watched. Afghanistan’s fields provide up to 90 percent of the world’s opium, which is later refined into heroin, and the United Nations estimates that the Taliban derives a $300 million income annually from that opium.

RC South is also the Taliban’s home field, encompassing the major Pashtun region of Afghanistan. The Pashtuns represent a collection of tribes and clans that share a common language, culture and strict adherence to an honor code handed down through the centuries. Among principal tenets of the code is the absolute requirement to seek vengeance for a wrong, regardless of whether it was done the day before or generations ago. Pashtuns, as mujahedeen, strongly resisted Soviet occupation. As the Taliban was, and remains, primarily a Pashtun movement, it is in the south that the Taliban has its greatest presence and influence—and the greatest connection to and support from Pashtun tribes in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North-West Frontier Province. These adjacent regions brace the border with Afghanistan and are considered virtually uncontrollable by Pakistan’s central government. British mapmakers divided the Pashtuns between Pakistan (then still part of India) and Afghanistan when the current border was drawn in 1893, a Western administrative measure largely disregarded by the Pashtuns, and which was made enforceable as a practical matter in 1919, when Afghanistan was allowed to conduct its own foreign affairs. Still, it remained no more than an ink squiggle to the Pashtuns.

The Taliban movement exists as a third level of effect from the Soviet occupation. Many Pashtuns crossed into Pakistan during the war against the Soviets, living in large refugee camps. Aid from other Islamic states supported the camps, including schools established in them. Most schools adhered to strict Islamic teaching because wealthy Wahhabists from Saudi Arabia paid for them. Wahhabists advocate a return to the Islamic culture and laws practiced by the first three generations of Islam. To say they are fundamentalists is not going far enough. The Soviet pullout left civil war and raging chaos in Afghanistan. The Taliban (which can be translated as “the students” or “the seekers”) was formed by students from those schools, and they returned to Af-
ghanistan to reestablish order under its interpretation of Islamic law.

The Pakistani government—primarily through its strong Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate, which assisted the mujahedeen and the CIA in its support for the mujahedeen during the Soviet occupation—encouraged and supported the Taliban for several reasons: first, as a way to stem the violence in Afghanistan without overtly committing Pakistani forces; second, accomplishing that would reopen important trade routes from Pakistan and bolster its own economy; third, it would keep Pashtuns dominant in the south, serving as a Sunni Islam buffer zone between Pakistan and Shia Islam Iran. And, by the way, Pashtuns are well represented in the ranks of the ISI; there are allegations that the ISI still supports the Taliban.

The Taliban/al Qaeda connection is an extension of their mujahedeen connection (al Qaeda initially was composed primarily of foreign mujahedeen veterans and supporters, including Osama bin Laden), linked by common Islamic fundamentalism and stands against Israel and the West in general. Afghan tribes usually fight each other and coalesce only when their blood rises to fight invaders, especially invaders who become occupiers. Many puppets and potentates have been seated by outsiders and failed.

There is little Afghan nationalism outside common defense and little taste for a central government. Tribes are fiercely independent and find they are quite capable of self-governance to the extent they need governing. They traditionally will accept a central paymaster, however, and a weak government that doesn’t threaten them or try to make them do things they don’t find agreeable.

Afghanistan’s current president, Hamid Karzai, re-elected in October 2004, extends little power beyond the government compounds in Kabul, and even there it is often contested. Several former ministers vehemently oppose him. Many Afghans see him as a willing player or a pit boss in the country’s staggering corruption, and he is experiencing a severe confidence recession in the West. He faces strong challengers in the new round of elections, currently scheduled for late August after a four-month delay to improve security.

Afghanistan’s economy is practically nonexistent; the country is among the poorest in the world. It remains a land of tinker workshops and donkey paths. Priority reconstruction programs have fixed some major roads and built new roads and bridges, but the work has brought Afghanistan only to within sight of a starting point. A good primary road system from border to border to facilitate trade, however, would put it in position to start earning some revenue if banditry can be held in check.

Afghanistan’s traditional value has been as a transit point and buffer zone. One historian said that it lost most of its value when “the world became round instead of flat”—that is to say, when global sea transit was established and there was no need to cross it.

Historically, Afghanistan has offered little value of its own; no treasure, products or natural resources that anybody wanted. Those things have always existed on the four sides of Afghanistan: China to the east, Persia and Europe to the west, Russia to the north and India to the south. Routes crossing Afghanistan, however, have been its main asset and greatest woe. For thousands of years, armies tromped across Afghanistan to get at bordering riches and greater glory, generally pausing in Afghanistan only to slaughter or be slaughtered.

The British Empire tried twice to tame Afghanistan in a struggle against Russia dating from the 1840s, often referred to as the “Great Game” and filled with intrigues and maneuvering. The British suffered bloodbath and disgrace in their first Afghanistan war. The second war primarily was initiated as punitive action for the indignities of the first. With Russian interest and capability in the region downgraded, the British basically found Afghanistan not worth the cost in casualties or fortune and headed south for the better comforts of its raj. They returned during World War I, but real purpose was lacking, and their hearts weren’t really in it other than to affirm the political boundary.

Secretary Gates, a historian, noted Afghanistan’s great claim to glory during his Senate testimony, using the contemporary phrase that has come to symbolize its morbid history as a reason for caution, reminding all that it is the “Graveyard of Empires.” Committed to Afghanistan, the Obama administration must now engineer a way to escape that fate.