AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

Two Decades in Afghanistan

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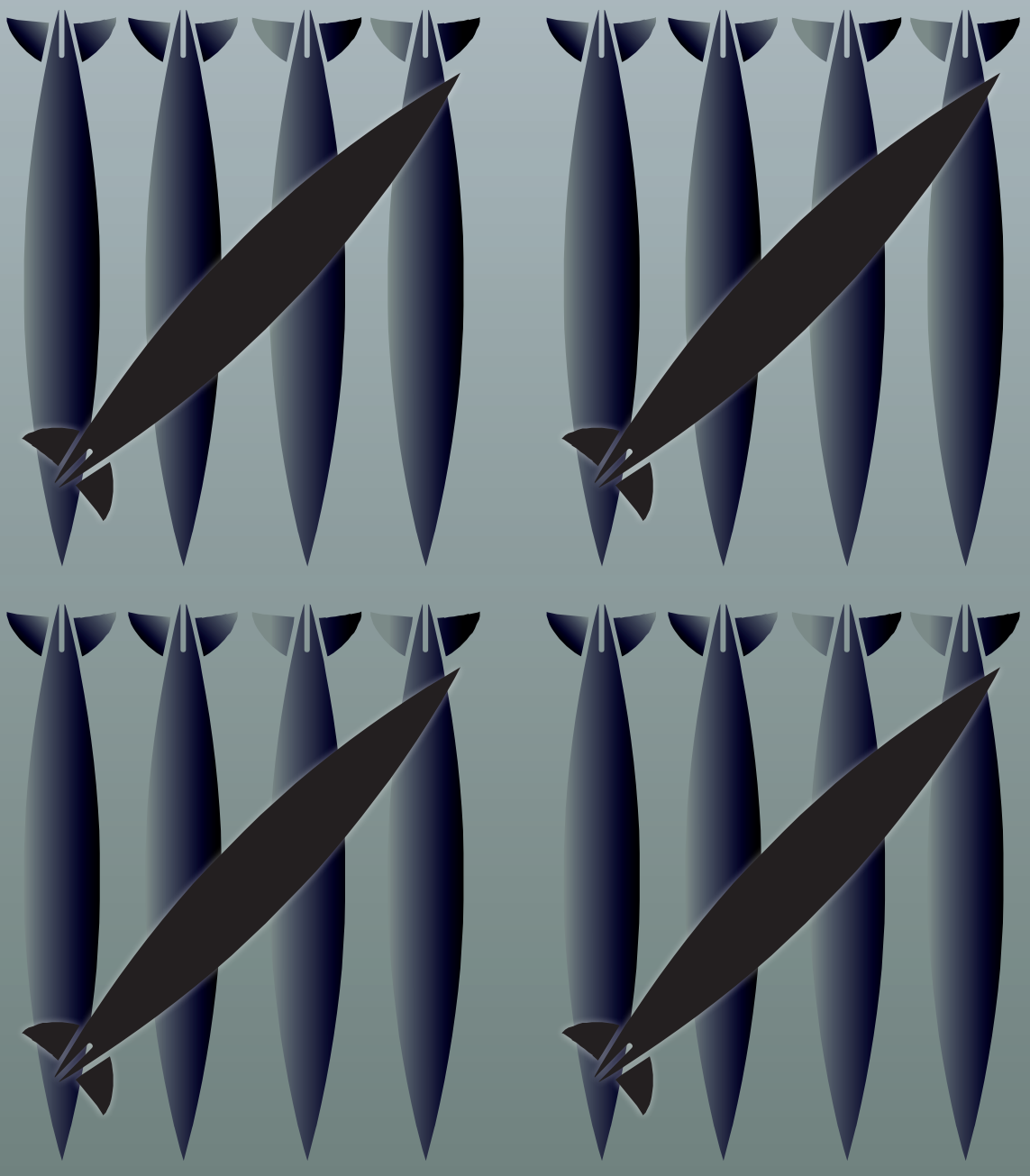

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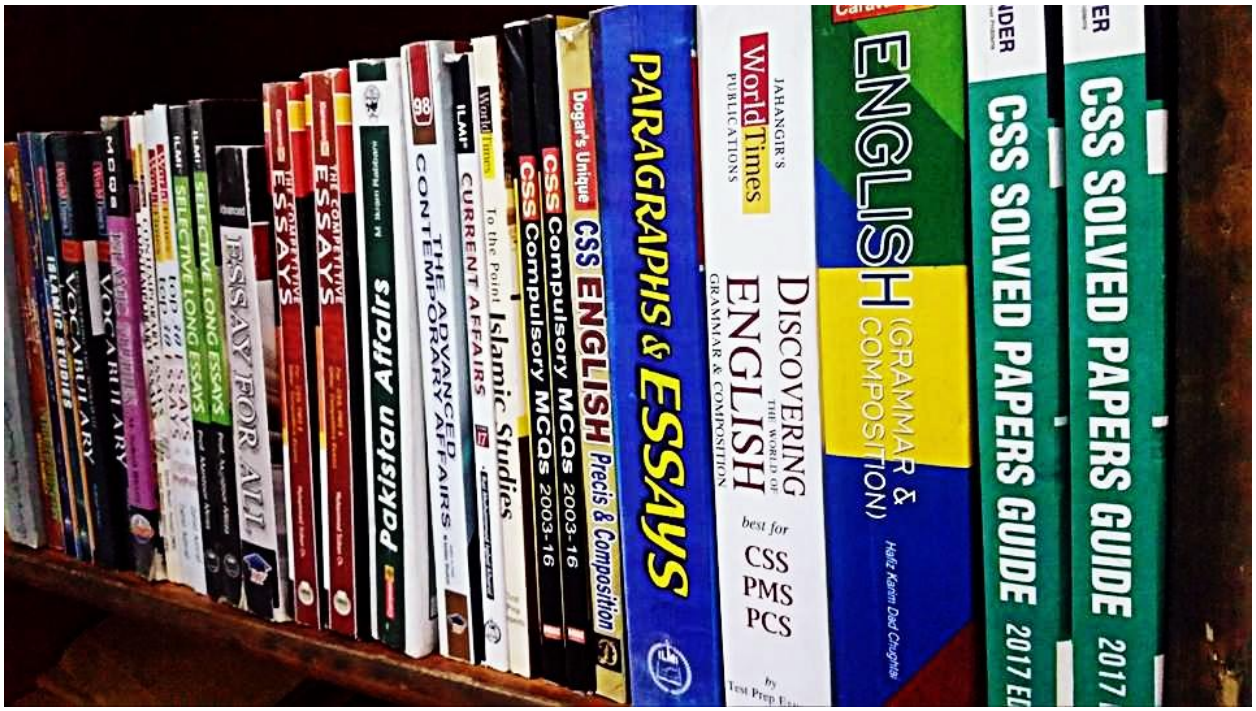

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

America's Longest War

Two Decades in Afghanistan

THE SURGE

A WAY OUT?

THE ENDGAME

Introduction

MAY 2021

When U.S. troops leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the American war will have lasted nearly two decades and spanned four presidencies. The longest war in U.S. history has come at the financial cost of close to $1 trillion. It has killed more than 2,000 American soldiers and, according to some estimates, hundreds of thousands of Afghans.

The United States invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. President George W. Bush authorized the war in response to 9/11—Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was providing refuge for al Qaeda, the terrorist organization that had orchestrated the attacks. Al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, evaded the U.S. military for a decade, but the Taliban regime fell within weeks. U.S. and allied forces stayed in Afghanistan to support a new government in Kabul. But the Taliban soon regrouped. For years, the fighting ebbed and surged as Washington tossed around versions of the same questions: With more time and resources, could the U.S. military finally rout the Taliban and the terrorists they had harbored? Was staying the course a better option than risking the collapse of the fledgling Afghan state? Or was it necessary to find a way out, whether by negotiation or unilateral withdrawal?

Over the past two decades, senior officials—including U.S. ambassadors, commanders of U.S. and NATO military forces, and the current president of Afghanistan—as well as leading scholars and journalists have assessed the progress of the war and the prospects of its resolution in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*. Their essays in this collection trace the conflict from the initial invasion to the 2009 surge, the bloody stalemate, and the decision to withdraw. And, as the war enters its final months, they consider its consequences for Afghanistan and its lessons for the United States.

How the Good War Went Bad

America's Slow-Motion Failure in Afghanistan

Carter Malkasian

MARCH/APRIL 2020

The United States has been fighting a war in Afghanistan for over 18 years. More than 2,300 U.S. military personnel have lost their lives there; more than 20,000 others have been wounded. At least half a million Afghans—government forces, Taliban fighters, and civilians—have been killed or wounded. Washington has spent close to $1 trillion on the war. Although the al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is dead and no major attack on the U.S. homeland has been carried out by a terrorist group based in Afghanistan since 9/11, the United States has been unable to end the violence or hand off the war to the Afghan authorities, and the Afghan government cannot survive without U.S. military backing.

At the end of 2019, *The Washington Post* published a series titled "The Afghanistan Papers," a collection of U.S. government documents that included notes of interviews conducted by the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction. In those interviews, numerous U.S. officials conceded that they had long seen the war as unwinnable. Polls have found that a majority of Americans now view the war as a failure. Every U.S. president since 2001 has sought to reach a point in

CARTER MALKASIAN is the author of *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier*. From 2015 to 2019, he was Senior Adviser to U.S. General Joseph Dunford, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Afghanistan when the violence would be sufficiently low or the Afghan government strong enough to allow U.S. military forces to withdraw without significantly increasing the risk of a resurgent terrorist threat. That day has not come. In that sense, whatever the future brings, for 18 years the United States has been unable to prevail.

The obstacles to success in Afghanistan were daunting: widespread corruption, intense grievances, Pakistani meddling, and deep-rooted resistance to foreign occupation. Yet there were also fleeting opportunities to find peace, or at least a more sustainable, less costly, and less violent stalemate. American leaders failed to grasp those chances, thanks to unjustified overconfidence following U.S. military victories and thanks to their fear of being held responsible if terrorists based in Afghanistan once again attacked the United States. Above all, officials in Washington clung too long to their preconceived notions of how the war would play out and neglected opportunities and options that did not fit their biases. Winning in Afghanistan was always going to be difficult. Avoidable errors made it impossible.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A LONG WAR

On October 7, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush launched an invasion of Afghanistan in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. In the months that followed, U.S. and allied forces and their partners in the Northern Alliance, an Afghan faction, chased out al Qaeda and upended the Taliban regime. Bin Laden fled to Pakistan; the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, went to the mountains. Taliban commanders and fighters returned to their homes or escaped to safe havens in Pakistan. Skillful diplomatic efforts spearheaded by a U.S. special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, established a process that created a new Afghan government led by the conciliatory Hamid Karzai.

For the next four years, Afghanistan was deceptively peaceful. The U.S. military deaths during that time represent just a tenth of the total that have occurred during the war. Bush maintained a light U.S. military footprint in the country (around 8,000 troops in 2002, increasing to about 20,000 by the end of 2005) aimed at completing the defeat of al Qaeda and the Taliban and helping set up a new democracy that could prevent terrorists from coming back. The idea was to withdraw eventually, but there was no clear plan for how to make that happen, other than killing or capturing al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. Still, political progress encouraged optimism. In January 2004, an Af-

ghan loya jirga, or grand council, approved a new constitution. Presidential and then parliamentary elections followed. All the while, Karzai strove to bring the country's many factions together.

But in Pakistan, the Taliban were rebuilding. In early 2003, Mullah Omar, still in hiding, sent a voice recording to his subordinates calling on them to reorganize the movement and prepare for a major offensive within a few years. Key Taliban figures founded a leadership council known as the Quetta Shura, after the Pakistani city where they assembled. Training and recruitment moved forward. Cadres infiltrated back into Afghanistan. In Washington, however, the narrative of success continued to hold sway, and Pakistan was still seen as a valuable partner.

Violence increased slowly; then, in February 2006, the Taliban pounced. Thousands of insurgents overran entire districts and surrounded provincial capitals. The Quetta Shura built what amounted to a rival regime. Over the course of the next three years, the Taliban captured most of the country's south and much of its east. U.S. forces and their NATO allies were sucked into heavy fighting. By the end of 2008, U.S. troop levels had risen to over 30,000 without stemming the tide. Yet the overall strategy did not change. Bush remained determined to defeat the Taliban and win what he deemed "a victory for the forces of liberty."

President Barack Obama came into office in January 2009 promising to turn around what many of his advisers and supporters saw as "the good war" in Afghanistan (as opposed to "the bad war" in Iraq, which they mostly saw as a lost cause). After a protracted debate, he opted to send reinforcements to Afghanistan: 21,000 troops in March and then, more reluctantly, another 30,000 or so in December, putting the total number of U.S. troops in the country at close to 100,000. Wary of overinvesting, he limited the goals of this "surge"—modeled on the one that had turned around the U.S. war in Iraq a few years earlier—to removing the terrorist threat to the American homeland. Gone was Bush's intent to defeat the Taliban no matter what, even though the group could not be trusted to stop terrorists from using Afghanistan as a refuge. Instead, the United States would deny al Qaeda a safe haven, reverse the Taliban's momentum, and strengthen the Afghan government and its security forces. The plan was to begin a drawdown of the surge forces in mid-2011 and eventually hand off full responsibility for the country's security to the Afghan government.

Over the next three years, the surge stabilized the most important cities and districts, vitalized the Afghan army and police, and rallied support for the government. The threat from al Qaeda fell after the 2011 death of bin Laden at the hands of U.S. special operations forces in Pakistan. Yet the costs of the surge outweighed the gains. Between 2009 and 2012, more than 1,500 U.S. military personnel were killed and over 15,000 were wounded—more American casualties than during the entire rest of the 18-year war. At the height of the surge, the United States was spending approximately $110 billion per year in Afghanistan, roughly 50 percent more than annual U.S. federal spending on education. Obama came to see the war effort as unsustainable. In a series of announcements between 2010 and 2014, he laid out a schedule to draw down U.S. military forces to zero (excluding a small embassy presence) by the end of 2016.

By 2013, more than 350,000 Afghan soldiers and police had been trained, armed, and deployed. Their performance was mixed, marred by corruption and by "insider attacks" carried out on American and allied advisers. Many units depended on U.S. advisers and air support to defeat the Taliban in battle.

By 2015, just 9,800 U.S. troops were left in Afghanistan. As the withdrawal continued, they focused on counterterrorism and on advising and training the Afghans. That fall, the Taliban mounted a series of well-planned offensives that became one of the most decisive events of the war. In the province of Kunduz, 500 Taliban fighters routed some 3,000 Afghan soldiers and police and captured a provincial capital for the first time. In Helmand Province, around 1,800 Taliban fighters defeated some 4,500 Afghan soldiers and police and recaptured almost all the ground the group had lost in the surge. "They ran!" cried an angry Omar Jan, the most talented Afghan frontline commander in Helmand, when I spoke to him in early 2016. "Two thousand men. They had everything they needed—numbers, arms, ammunition—and they gave up!" Only last-minute reinforcements from U.S. and Afghan special operations forces saved the provinces.

In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied soldiers and police in intact defensive positions made a collective decision to throw in the towel rather than go another round against the Taliban. Those who did stay to fight often paid dearly for their courage: some 14,000 Afghan soldiers and police were killed in 2015 and 2016. By 2016, the Afghan government, now headed by Ashraf Ghani, was

weaker than ever before. The Taliban held more ground than at any time since 2001. In July of that year, Obama suspended the drawdown.

When President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, the war raged on. He initially approved an increase of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to roughly 14,000. Trump disliked the war, however, and, looking for an exit, started negotiations with the Taliban in 2018. Those negotiations have yet to bear fruit, and the level of violence and Afghan casualties rates in 2019 were on par with those of recent years.

THE INSPIRATION GAP

Why did things go wrong? One crucial factor is that the Afghan government and its warlord allies were corrupt and treated Afghans poorly, fomenting grievances and inspiring an insurgency. They stole land, distributed government jobs as patronage, and often tricked U.S. special operations forces into targeting their political rivals. This mistreatment pushed certain tribes into the Taliban's arms, providing the movement with fighters, a support network, and territory from which to attack. The experience of Raees Baghrani, a respected Alizai tribal leader, is typical. In 2005, after a Karzai-backed warlord disarmed him and stole some of his land and that of his tribesmen, Baghrani surrendered the rest of his territory in Helmand to the Taliban. Many others like him felt forced into similar choices.

Washington could have done more to address the corruption and the grievances that Afghans felt under the new regime and the U.S. occupation, such as pushing Karzai to remove the worst-offending officials from their positions, making all forms of U.S. assistance contingent on reforms, and reducing special operations raids and the mistaken targeting of innocent Afghans. That said, the complexity of addressing corruption and grievances should not be underestimated. No comprehensive solution existed that could have denied the Taliban a support base.

Another major factor in the U.S. failure was Pakistan's influence. Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan has always been shaped in large part by the Indian-Pakistani rivalry. In 2001, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf officially cut off support for the Taliban at the behest of the Bush administration. But he soon feared that India was gaining influence in Afghanistan. In 2004, he reopened assistance to the Taliban, as he later admitted to *The Guardian* in 2015, because Karzai, he alleged, had "helped India stab Pakistan in the back" by allowing anti-Pakistan Tajiks to play a large role in his government and by fostering good

relations with India. The Pakistani military funded the Taliban, granted them a safe haven, ran training camps, and advised them on war planning. The critical mass of recruits for the 2006 offensive came from Afghan refugees in Pakistan. A long succession of U.S. leaders tried to change Pakistani policy, all to no avail: it is unlikely that there was anything Washington could have done to convince Pakistan's leaders to take steps that would have risked their influence in Afghanistan.

Underneath these factors, something more fundamental was at play. The Taliban exemplified an idea—an idea that runs deep in Afghan culture, that inspired their fighters, that made them powerful in battle, and that, in the eyes of many Afghans, defines an individual's worth. In simple terms, that idea is resistance to occupation. The very presence of Americans in Afghanistan was an assault on what it meant to be Afghan. It inspired Afghans to defend their honor, their religion, and their homeland. The importance of this cultural factor has been confirmed and reconfirmed by multiple surveys of Taliban fighters since 2007 conducted by a range of researchers.

The Afghan government, tainted by its alignment with foreign occupiers, could not inspire the same devotion. In 2015, a survey of 1,657 police officers in 11 provinces conducted by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies found that only 11 percent of respondents had joined the force specifically to fight the Taliban; most of them had joined to serve their country or to earn a salary, motivations that did not necessarily warrant fighting, much less dying. Many interviewees agreed with the claim that police "rank and file are not convinced that they are fighting for a just cause." There can be little doubt that a far larger percentage of Taliban fighters had joined the group specifically to confront the United States and the Afghans who were cooperating with the Americans.

This asymmetry in commitment explains why, at so many decisive moments, Afghan security forces retreated without putting up much of a fight despite their numerical superiority and their having at least an equal amount of ammunition and supplies. As a Taliban religious scholar from Kandahar told me in January 2019, "The Taliban fight for belief, for *jannat* [heaven] and *ghazi* [killing infidels]. . . . The army and police fight for money. . . . The Taliban are willing to lose their heads to fight. . . . How can the army and police compete with the Taliban?" The Taliban had an edge in inspiration. Many Afghans were willing to kill and be killed on behalf of the Taliban. That made all the difference.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

These powerful factors have kept the United States and the Afghan government from prevailing. But failure was not inevitable. The best opportunities to succeed appeared early on, between 2001 and 2005. The Taliban were in disarray. Popular support for the new Afghan government was relatively high, as was patience with the foreign presence. Unfortunately, U.S. decisions during that time foreclosed paths that might have avoided the years of war that followed.

The first mistake was the Bush administration's decision to exclude the Taliban from the postinvasion political settlement. Senior Taliban leaders tried to negotiate a peace deal with Karzai in December 2001. They were willing to lay down their arms and recognize Karzai as the country's legitimate leader. But U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld shot down the deal—in a press conference, no less. After that, between 2002 and 2004, Taliban leaders continued to reach out to Karzai to ask to be allowed to participate in the political process. Karzai brought up these overtures to U.S. officials only to have the Bush administration respond by banning negotiations with any top Taliban figures. In the end, the new government was established without the Taliban getting a seat at the table. Whether or not the entire group would have compromised, enough senior leaders were interested that future violence could have been lessened.

After pushing the Taliban back to war, Bush and his team then moved far too slowly in building up the Afghan security forces. After the initial invasion, a year passed before Washington committed to building and funding a small national army of 70,000. Recruitment and training then proceeded haltingly. By 2006, only 26,000 Afghan army soldiers had been trained. So when the Taliban struck back that year, there was little to stop them. In his memoir, Bush concedes the error. "In an attempt to keep the Afghan government from taking on an unsustainable expense," he writes, "we had kept the army too small."

The Bush administration thus missed the two best opportunities to find peace. An inclusive settlement could have won over key Taliban leaders, and capable armed forces could have held off the holdouts. Overconfidence prevented the Bush team from seeing this. The administration presumed that the Taliban had been defeated. Barely two years after the Taliban regime fell, U.S. Central Command labeled the group a "spent force." Rumsfeld announced at a news conference in early 2003: "We clearly have moved from major combat activity to a

period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities. . . . The bulk of the country today is permissive; it's secure." In other words, "Mission accomplished."

The ease of the initial invasion in 2001 distorted Washington's perceptions. The administration disregarded arguments by Karzai, Khalilzad, U.S. Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry (then the senior U.S. general in Afghanistan), Ronald Neumann (at the time the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan), and others that the insurgents were staging a comeback. Believing they had already won the war in Afghanistan, Bush and his team turned their attention to Iraq. And although the fiasco in Iraq was not a cause of the failure in Afghanistan, it compounded the errors in U.S. strategy by diverting the scarce time and attention of key decision-makers.

"I DO NOT NEED ADVISERS"

After 2006, the odds of a better outcome narrowed. The reemergence of the Taliban catalyzed further resistance to the occupation. U.S. airstrikes and night raids heightened a sense of oppression among Afghans and triggered in many an obligation to resist. After the Taliban offensive that year, it is hard to see how any strategy could have resulted in victory for the United States and the Afghan government. Nevertheless, a few points stand out when Washington might have cleared a way to a less bad outcome.

The surge was one of them. In retrospect, the United States would have been better off if it had never surged at all. If his campaign promises obligated some number of reinforcements, Obama still might have deployed fewer troops than he did—perhaps just the initial tranche of 21,000. But General Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and General David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. Central Command, did not present the president with that kind of option: all their proposals involved further increases in the number of U.S. military personnel deployed to Afghanistan. Both generals believed that escalation was warranted owing to the threat posed by the possible reestablishment of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists. Both had witnessed how a counterinsurgency strategy and unswerving resolve had turned things around in Iraq, and both thought the same could be done in Afghanistan. Their case that something had to be done and their overconfidence in counterinsurgency crowded out the practical alternative of forgo-

ing further reinforcements. Had Obama done less, U.S. casualties and expenses would likely have been far lower and still the conditions would have changed little.

It is worth noting that the much-criticized 18-month deadline that Obama attached to the surge, although unnecessary, was not itself a major missed opportunity. There is scant evidence to support the charge that if Obama had given no timeline, the Taliban would have been more exhausted by the surge and would have given up or negotiated a settlement.

But Obama did err when it came to placing restrictions on U.S. forces. Prior to 2014, U.S. airstrikes had been used when necessary to strike enemy targets, and commanders took steps to avoid civilian casualties. That year, however, as part of the drawdown process, it was decided that U.S. airstrikes in support of the Afghan army and police would be employed only "in extremis"—when a strategic location or major Afghan formation was in danger of imminent annihilation. The idea was to disentangle U.S. forces from combat and, to a lesser extent, to reduce civilian casualties. As a result of the change, there was a pronounced reduction in the number of U.S. strikes, even as the Taliban gained strength. Into 2016, U.S. forces carried out an average of 80 airstrikes per month, less than a quarter of the monthly average for 2012. Meanwhile, over 500 airstrikes per month were being conducted in Iraq and Syria against a comparable adversary. "If America just helps with airstrikes and . . . supplies, we can win," pleaded Omar Jan, the frontline commander in Helmand, in 2016. "My weapons are worn from shooting. My ammunition stocks are low. I do not need advisers. I just need someone to call when things are really bad." The decision to use airstrikes only in extremis virtually ensured defeat. Obama had purchased too little insurance on his withdrawal policy. When the unexpected happened, he was unprepared.

Bush had enjoyed the freedom to maneuver in Afghanistan for half his presidency and had still passed up significant opportunities. Facing far greater constraints, Obama had to play the cards he had been dealt. The Afghan government had been formed, violence had returned, and a spirit of resistance had arisen in the Afghan people. Obama's errors derived less from a willful refusal to take advantage of clear opportunities than from oversights and miscalculations made under pressure. They nevertheless had major consequences.

FEAR OF TERROR

Given the high costs and slim benefits of the war, why hasn't the United States simply left Afghanistan? The answer is the combination of terrorism and U.S. electoral politics. In the post-9/11 world, U.S. presidents have had to choose between spending resources in places of very low geostrategic value and accepting some unknown risk of a terrorist attack, worried that voters will never forgive them or their party if they underestimate the threat. Nowhere has that dynamic been more evident than in Afghanistan.

In the early years after the 9/11 attacks, the political atmosphere in the United States was charged with fears of another assault. Throughout 2002, various Gallup polls showed that a majority of Americans believed that another attack on the United States was likely. That is one reason why Bush, after having overseen the initial defeat of al Qaeda and the Taliban, never considered simply declaring victory and bringing the troops home. He has said that an option of "attack, destroy the Taliban, destroy al Qaeda as best we could, and leave" was never appealing because "that would have created a vacuum [in] which . . . radicalism could become even stronger."

The terrorist threat receded during the first half of Obama's presidency, yet he, too, could not ignore it, and its persistence took the prospect of a full withdrawal from Afghanistan off the table in the run-up to the surge. According to the available evidence, at no point during the debate over the surge did any high-level Obama administration official advocate such a move. One concern was that withdrawing completely would have opened up the administration to intense criticism, possibly disrupting Obama's domestic agenda, which was focused on reviving the U.S. economy after the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recession.

Only after the surge and the death of bin Laden did a "zero option" become conceivable. Days after bin Laden was captured and killed, in May 2011, a Gallup poll showed that 59 percent of Americans believed the U.S. mission in Afghanistan had been accomplished. "It is time to focus on nation building here at home," Obama announced in his June 2011 address on the drawdown. Even so, concerns about the ability of the Afghan government to contain the residual terrorist threat defeated proposals, backed by some members of the administration, to fully withdraw more quickly. Then, in 2014, the rise of the Islamic State (or ISIS) in Iraq and Syria and a subsequent string of

high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States made even the original, modest drawdown schedule less strategically and politically feasible. After the setbacks of 2015, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that if the drawdown went forward on schedule, security could deteriorate to the point where terrorist groups could once again establish safe havens in Afghanistan. Confronted with that finding, Obama essentially accepted the advice of his top generals to keep U.S. forces there, provide greater air support to the Afghan army and police, and continue counterterrorism operations in the country. The intention to get out had met reality and blinked.

So far, a similar fate has befallen Trump, the U.S. president with the least patience for the mission in Afghanistan. With Trump agitating for an exit, substantive talks between the Taliban and the United States commenced in 2018. An earlier effort between 2010 and 2013 had failed because the conditions were not ripe: the White House was occupied with other issues, negotiating teams were not in place, and Mullah Omar, the Taliban's leader, was in seclusion—and then died in 2013. By 2019, those obstacles no longer stood in the way, and Trump was uniquely determined to leave. The result was the closest the United States has come to ending the war.

Khalilzad, once again serving as a special envoy, made quick progress by offering a timeline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in return for the Taliban engaging in negotiations with the Afghan government, reducing violence as the two sides worked toward a comprehensive cease-fire, and not aiding al Qaeda or other terrorist groups. Over the course of nine rounds of talks, the two sides developed a draft agreement. The Taliban representatives in the talks and the group's senior leaders refused to meet all of Khalilzad's conditions. But the initial agreement was a real opportunity for Trump to get the United States out of Afghanistan and still have a chance at peace.

It fell apart. Although Trump toyed with the idea of holding a dramatic summit to announce a deal at Camp David in September 2019, he was torn between his campaign promise to end "endless wars" and the possibility of a resurgent terrorist threat, which could harm him politically. During an interview with Fox News in August, he was distinctly noncommittal about fully withdrawing. "We're going down to 8,600 [troops], and then we'll make a determination from there," he said, adding that a "high intelligence presence" would stay in the country. So when the Taliban drastically escalated their attacks in the run-

up to a possible announcement, killing one American soldier and wounding many more, Trump concluded that he was getting a bad deal and called off the negotiations, blasting the Taliban as untrustworthy. Trump, like Obama before him, would not risk a withdrawal that might someday make him vulnerable to the charge of willingly unlocking the terrorist threat. And so yet another chance to end the war slipped away.

The notion that the United States should have just left Afghanistan presumes that a U.S. president was free to pull the plug as he pleased. In reality, getting out was nearly as difficult as prevailing. It was one thing to boldly promise that the United States would leave in the near future. It was quite another to peer over the edge when the moment arrived, see the uncertainties, weigh the political fallout of a terrorist attack, and still take the leap.

EXPECT THE BAD, PREPARE FOR THE WORST

The United States failed in Afghanistan largely because of intractable grievances, Pakistan's meddling, and an intense Afghan commitment to resisting occupiers, and it stayed largely because of unrelenting terrorist threats and their effect on U.S. electoral politics. There were few chances to prevail and few chances to get out.

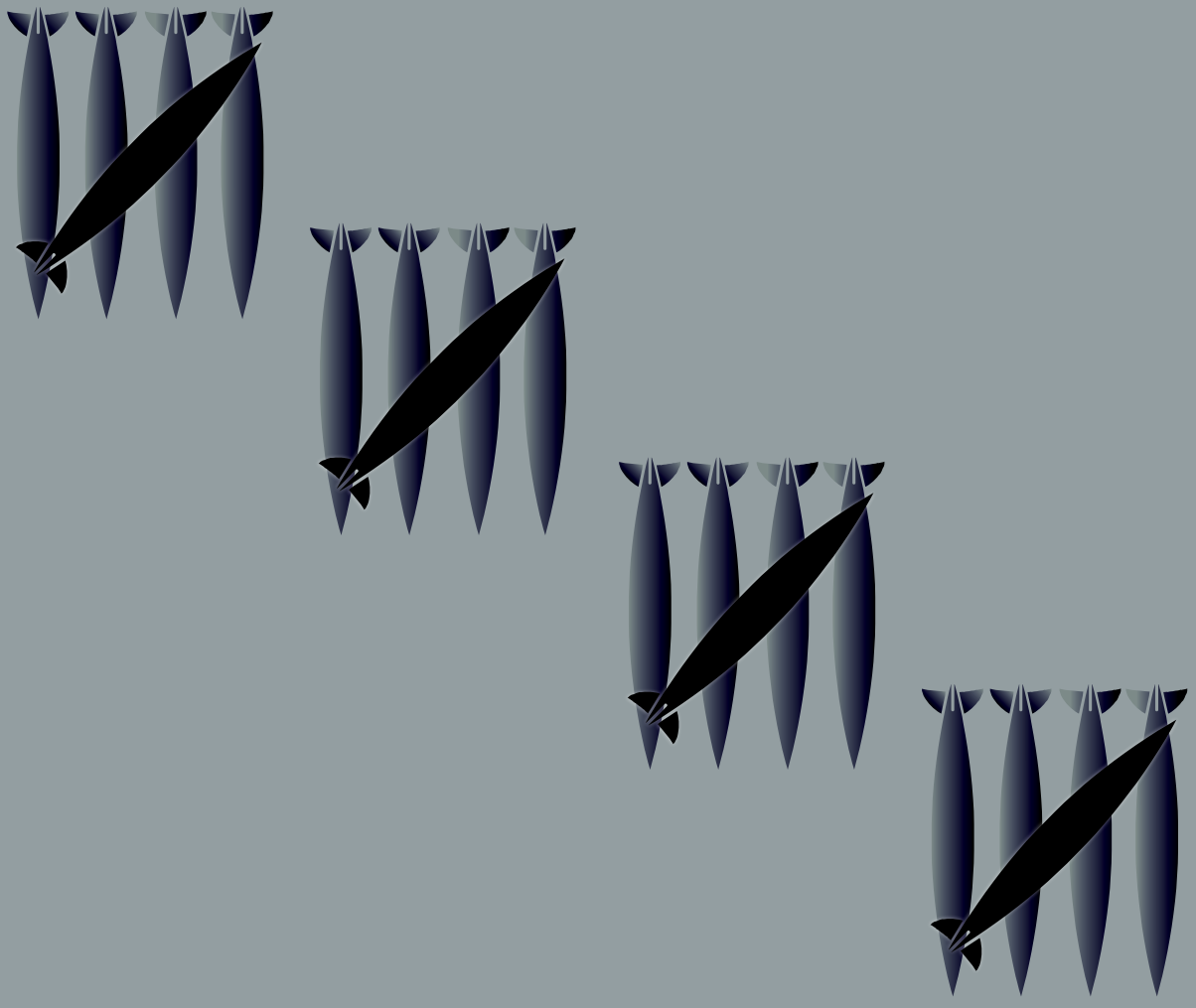
In this situation, a better outcome demanded an especially well-managed strategy. Perhaps the most important lesson is the value of forethought: considering a variety of outcomes rather than focusing on the preferred one. U.S. presidents and generals repeatedly saw their plans fall short when what they expected to happen did not: for Bush, when the Taliban turned out not to be defeated; for McChrystal and Petraeus, when the surge proved unsustainable; for Obama, when the terrorist threat returned; for Trump, when the political costs of leaving proved steeper than he had assumed. If U.S. leaders had thought more about the different ways that things could play out, the United States and Afghanistan might have experienced a less costly, less violent war, or even found peace.

This lack of forethought is not disconnected from the revelation in *The Washington Post*'s "Afghanistan Papers" that U.S. leaders misled the American people. A single-minded focus on preferred outcomes had the unhealthy side effect of sidelining inconvenient evidence. In most cases, determined U.S. leaders did this inadvertently, or because they truly believed things were going well. At times, however, evidence of failure was purposefully swept under the rug.

Afghanistan's past may not be its future. Just because the war has been difficult to end does not mean it will go on indefinitely. Last November, Trump reopened talks with the Taliban. A chance exists that Khalilzad will conjure a political settlement. If not, Trump may decide to get out anyway. Trump has committed to reducing force levels to roughly the same number that Obama had in place at the end of his term. Further reductions could be pending. Great-power competition is the rising concern in Washington. With the death last year of ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the shadow of 9/11 might at last recede, and the specter of terrorism might lose some of its influence on U.S. politics. At the same time, the roiling U.S. confrontation with Iran is a wild card that could alter the nature of the Afghan war, including by re-entrenching the American presence.

But none of that can change the past 18 years. Afghanistan will still be the United States' longest war. Americans can best learn its lessons by studying the missed opportunities that kept the United States from making progress. Ultimately, the war should be understood neither as an avoidable folly nor as an inevitable tragedy but rather as an unresolved dilemma.

THE INVASION



Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires

Milton Bearden

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2001

THE GREAT GAME

Michni Point, Pakistan's last outpost at the western end of the barren, winding Khyber Pass, stands sentinel over Torkham Gate, the deceptively orderly border crossing into Afghanistan. Frontier Scouts in gray *shalwar kameezes* (traditional tunics and loose pants) and black berets patrol the lonely station commanded by a major of the legendary Khyber Rifles, the militia force that has been guarding the border with Afghanistan since the nineteenth century, first for British India and then for Pakistan. This spot, perhaps more than any other, has witnessed the traverse of the world's great armies on campaigns of conquest to and from South and Central Asia. All eventually ran into trouble in their encounters with the unruly Afghan tribals.

Alexander the Great sent his supply trains through the Khyber, then skirted northward with his army to the Konar Valley on his campaign in 327 BC. There he ran into fierce resistance and, struck by an Afghan archer's arrow, barely made it to the Indus River with his life. Genghis Khan and the great Mughal emperors began passing through the Khyber a millennium later and ultimately established the greatest

MILTON BEARDEN served as CIA station chief in Pakistan from 1986 to 1989, where he was responsible for that agency's covert action program in support of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet-supported government.

of empires—but only after reaching painful accommodations with the Afghans. From Michni Point, a trained eye can still see the ruins of the Mughal signal towers used to relay complex torch-light messages 1,500 miles from Calcutta to Bukhara in less than an hour.

In the nineteenth century the Khyber became the fulcrum of the Great Game, the contest between the United Kingdom and Russia for control of Central Asia and India. The first Afghan War (1839–42) began when British commanders sent a huge army of British and Indian troops into Afghanistan to secure it against Russian incursions, replacing the ruling emir with a British protege. Facing Afghan opposition, by January 1842 the British were forced to withdraw from Kabul with a column of 16,500 soldiers and civilians, heading east to the garrison at Jalalabad, 110 miles away. Only a single survivor of that group ever made it to Jalalabad safely, though the British forces did recover some prisoners many months later.

According to the late Louis Dupree, the premier historian of Afghanistan, four factors contributed to the British disaster: the occupation of Afghan territory by foreign troops, the placing of an unpopular emir on the throne, the harsh acts of the British-supported Afghans against their local enemies, and the reduction of the subsidies paid to the tribal chiefs by British political agents. The British would repeat these mistakes in the second Afghan War (1878–81), as would the Soviets a century later; the United States would be wise to consider them today.

In the aftermath of the second British misadventure in Afghanistan, Rudyard Kipling penned his immortal lines on the role of the local women in tidying up the battlefields:

> When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains
> And the women come out to cut up what remains
> Jest roll to your rifle an' blow out your brains
> An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.

The British fought yet a third war with Afghanistan in 1917, an encounter that neither burnished British martial history nor subdued the Afghan people. But by the end of World War I, that phase of the Great Game was over. During World War II, Afghanistan flirted with Aryanism and the Third Reich, becoming, fleetingly, "the Switzerland" of Central Asia in a new game of intrigue as Allied and Axis coalitions jockeyed for position in the region. But after the war the

country settled back into its natural state of ethnic and factional squabbling. The Soviet Union joined in from the sidelines, but Afghanistan was so remote from the consciousness of the West that scant attention was paid to it until the last king, Zahir Shah, was deposed in 1973. Then began the cycle of conflict that continues to the present.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Afghanistan festered through the 1970s, but with the seizure of power in Kabul by Nur Mohammed Taraki in 1978, the country began a rapid spiral into anarchy. Washington's ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs, was kidnapped in February 1979 and later killed during a failed rescue attempt; the next month, Hafizullah Amin seized the prime ministership along with much of Taraki's power; and eight months later, on Christmas Eve, after watching the disintegration of order for much of a decade, the Kremlin decided to try its hand at military adventure.

The Soviets began with a modern repetition of the fatal British error of installing an unpopular "emir" on the Afghan "throne." The operation was marked by a brutal efficiency: Hafizullah Amin was killed under mysterious circumstances, Kabul was secured, and the Soviets put their man, Babrak Karmal, at the helm of the Afghan government. It looked initially as if the Soviets' optimistic prediction that they would be in and out of Afghanistan almost before anyone noticed might prove correct. Certainly, President Jimmy Carter was too preoccupied with the hostage crisis in Iran to give much thought to Afghanistan, or so the Kremlin believed.

To Moscow's surprise, however, Carter reacted quickly and decisively. He cancelled a number of pending agreements with the Soviet Union, ranging from wheat sales to consular exchanges; he set in motion the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics; and, much more quietly and decisively, he signed a presidential finding that tasked the CIA with the organization of aid, including arms and military support, to the Afghan people in their resistance to the Soviet occupation. In January 1980, Carter sent his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, for consultations with Pakistani leaders who were already supporting the Afghan resistance. On a side trip from Islamabad, Brzezinski traveled the length of the Khyber Pass to the outpost at Michni Point, where he was photographed squinting along the sights of a Soviet AK-47 assault rifle, its muzzle elevated and pointing into Afghanistan. In that moment, the president's national security ad-

viser became the symbol of the impending U.S. phase of involvement in Afghanistan's endless martial history.

The CIA had to scramble to comply with the president's order. But within weeks it had organized its first weapons delivery—a shipment of several thousand venerable Enfield .303 rifles, the standard weapon of the Afghan tribals—to the resistance fighters who were already beginning to snipe at the Soviet invaders. During the 1980s, the agency would deliver several hundred thousand tons of weapons and ordnance to Pakistan for distribution to the Afghan fighters known to the world as mujahideen, the soldiers of God. The coalition of countries supporting the resistance grew to an impressive collection that included the United States, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China. Lining up behind seven separate and fractious Afghan resistance leaders based in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, the mujahideen field commanders were allotted their supplies and sent off to face the Soviet forces.

For the first five years of its covert war, the CIA attempted to maintain plausible deniability. Its officers in Pakistan kept a low profile, and the weapons it supplied to the mujahideen, with the exception of the British Enfields, were models manufactured in Warsaw Pact countries. An additional advantage of using Soviet bloc weapons was that the mujahideen could use any ammunition they could capture from army garrisons of the puppet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan—or buy, with American dollars, from corrupt DRA quartermasters or even Red Army supply officers.

By 1985, the Soviet 40th Army had grown from its original, limited expeditionary force to an occupation force of around 120,000 troops, widely dispersed at garrisons around the country. But as the Soviet forces grew, so did the Afghan resistance. By the mid-1980s the mujahideen had more than 250,000 full- or part-time fighters in the field, and though they and the civilian population had suffered horrendous losses—a million dead and 1.5 million injured, plus 6 million more driven into internal and external exile—the Soviet forces were also beginning to suffer.

As the CIA became more deeply involved in its covert proxy war with the Soviet Union, it became clear to President Ronald Reagan's new CIA director, William Casey, that the conflict had stalemated. The United States was fighting the Soviets to the last Afghan in a confrontation that could run on indefinitely. By 1985 Soviet air tactics had

been refined, and the mujahideen suffered increasing casualties from the growing Soviet fleet of heavily armored MI-24D attack helicopters. The Afghans had nothing in their arsenal adequate to defend against this equipment and so, after a heated debate and heavy pressure from Congress, the White House decided to provide them with Stinger antiaircraft missiles. The Stingers entered the war a month after Mikhail Gorbachev's seminal August 1986 speech in Vladivostok, where he described the conflict, now in its seventh year, as a "bleeding wound." U.S. intelligence at the time, however, indicated that as he uttered those first words of disengagement, he also gave his generals one year to bring the Afghans under control, using whatever force necessary. Three months earlier the Soviets had replaced the failing Babrak Karmal with the brutal, sadistic secret-police chief Mohammed Najibullah, a move that only stiffened mujahideen resistance and set the scene for the endgame of the Soviets' Afghan adventure.

Two events in the late summer of 1986 changed the course of the war. On August 20 a lucky shot by the mujahideen sent a 107 mm rocket into a DRA supply dump on the outskirts of Kabul, setting off secondary explosions that destroyed tens of thousands of tons of ordnance, lighting up the skies of the Afghan capital by night and smoldering during the day. A month later, on September 26, a team led by a resistance commander with the unlikely name of Ghaffar ("the forgiver," one of the 99 names of Allah) brought down three MI-24 helicopters in the first Stinger ambush of the war. The effect of these events on the mujahideen was electric, and within days the setbacks for the Soviet forces were snowballing, with one or two aircraft per day falling from the skies at the end of the Stingers' telltale white plumes.

When the snows melted in the high passes for the new fighting season of 1987, diplomatic activity intensified, with the United States represented by the exceptionally able Michael Armacost, the undersecretary of state for political affairs. It had become clear not only to Gorbachev and his negotiators but also to his generals in the field that there would be no letup in Afghanistan, and that the time to consider disengagement had come. On April 14, 1988, after agonized negotiations over such tortured concepts as "negative symmetry" in drawing down supplies to the combatants, the Geneva Accords ending Soviet involvement in Afghanistan were signed. The date for the final withdrawal of all Soviet forces was set at February 15, 1989, a timetable that the commander of the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan, General

Boris Gromov, choreographed to the last moment of the last day. February 15 also marked the end of outside military support to both sides in the war, at least in theory.

Gromov wanted arrangements to be just right. The international press was shuttled from nearby Termez, Uzbekistan, to a special press center, complete with a new, covered pavilion. The body of a hapless minesweeper had been quietly carried across the Friendship Bridge before the press had time to reason that his blanket-wrapped form was the last Russian soldier killed in the ten-year war. The cameras of several dozen news services zoomed in on the center of the bridge, where a lone Soviet tank had pulled to a halt. The diminutive Soviet general jumped from the turret, pulled his battle-dress tunic into place, and strode purposely over the last hundred yards toward the Soviet side of the Amu Dar'ya. Just before he reached the end of the bridge, his son Maksim, a slim, awkward 14-year-old, greeted his father with a stiff embrace and presented him with a bouquet of red carnations. Son and father marched the last 50 yards out of Afghanistan together.

ARABIAN KNIGHTS

In ten years of war, the Soviet Union admitted to having had about 15,000 troops killed in action, several hundred thousand wounded, and tens of thousands dead from disease. The true numbers might be higher, but they are not worth debating. What followed Gromov's exit grew rapidly into a cataclysm for the Soviets and a national disaster for the Afghans.

The first signs came in May 1989, when an already emboldened Hungarian government correctly concluded it could open its border with Austria without fear of Soviet intervention. That signal act was followed a month later by the stunning election of a Solidarity majority in Poland's parliament, ending that country's nearly half-century of communist rule. Throughout the summer of 1989, the people of East Germany took to the streets, first in small numbers, then gaining strength and courage in the tens and hundreds of thousands until, on the night of November 9, 1989, in a comedy of errors and miscues, the Berlin Wall was breached and Germans surged from east to west. The world had hardly digested these events when Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel and his band of dissidents from the Magic Lantern theater carried out their own Velvet Revolution a month later.

With the world's eyes focused almost exclusively on the historic events in Eastern Europe, or on the vivid image of a young demonstrator staring down a Chinese tank in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the drama unfolding in Afghanistan received scant attention. Though there were heroic efforts by relief agencies to provide humanitarian aid, the senior officials of President George H. W. Bush's administration did not look back to that former war zone, their energies instead consumed by the stunning denouement of the Cold War.

In the turn away from Afghanistan, the United States would dismiss even its staunch ally, Pakistan. No longer able to stave off congressionally mandated sanctions triggered by its nuclear weapons development program, Pakistan fell out of Washington's favor. As the 1990s began with great hope elsewhere in the world, in Afghanistan a new post–Cold War construct started taking shape: the failed state. And as it failed and spun into anarchy, Afghanistan became the home of a new and little understood threat: the aggrieved Arab extremist.

The role of the so-called Afghan Arabs in the ten-year war against the Soviet occupation is the subject of much debate and misinformed commentary. By early 1980, the call to jihad (holy war) had reached all corners of the Islamic world, attracting Arabs young and old and with a variety of motivations to travel to Pakistan to take up arms and cross the border to fight against the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan. There were genuine volunteers on missions of humanitarian value, there were adventure seekers looking for paths to glory, and there were psychopaths. As the war dragged on, a number of Arab states discreetly emptied their prisons of homegrown troublemakers and sent them off to the jihad with the fervent hope that they might not return. Over the ten years of war as many as 25,000 Arabs may have passed through Pakistan and Afghanistan. At one time the CIA considered having volunteer Arab legions take part in the war, but the idea was scrapped as unwise and unworkable. Despite what has often been written, the CIA never recruited, trained, or otherwise used the Arab volunteers who arrived in Pakistan. The idea that the Afghans somehow needed fighters from outside their culture was deeply flawed and ignored basic historical and cultural facts. The Arabs who did travel to Afghanistan from Peshawar were generally considered nuisances by mujahideen commanders, some of whom viewed them as only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets. As fundraisers, however, the Arabs from the Persian Gulf played a positive, often critical role in the background of

the war. During some months in 1987 and 1988, Arab fundraisers in both Pakistan and their home countries raised as much as $25 million for their largely humanitarian and construction projects. Among the more prominent of these Arab fundraisers was one Osama bin Ladin, the son of a Saudi billionaire.

Active in Afghanistan since the early 1980s, having previously worked in the Persian Gulf to recruit Arabs for the jihad, bin Ladin focused his early energies on construction projects, building orphanages and homes for widows as well as roads and bunker systems in eastern Afghanistan. He and a few of his Saudi followers saw some combat in 1987, while associated with the Islamic Unity Party of Abdul Rasul Sayaf, an Egyptian-trained Afghan member of the Muslim Brotherhood who later in the jihad embraced Saudi Wahhabism. At the crucial battles of Jaji and Ali Khel, Sayaf and his Saudis acquitted themselves well by stopping a Soviet and DRA advance that could have resulted in large-scale destruction of mujahideen supply dumps and staging areas in the province of Paktia. More than two dozen Saudis died in those engagements, and the military legend of Osama bin Ladin was born.

But at this point in the war, few were concerned about the role of the Afghan Arabs, with the exception of growing criticism by Western humanitarian organizations of the harsh fundamentalism of the Saudi Wahhabis and Deobandis whose influence in the refugee camps in Pakistan, now bursting with about three million Afghans, was pervasive. It was in these squalid camps that a generation of young Afghan males would be born into and raised in the strictest fundamentalism of the Deobandi *madrassas* (Islamic schools). It was here that the seeds of the Taliban were sown.

COME, MR. TALIBAN

Though the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, it was not until April 1992 that the mujahideen finally took Kabul, killed Najibullah, and declared what passed for victory. Their triumph would be short-lived. Old hatreds and ethnic realities once again drove events, and without the unifying presence of foreign armies on Afghan soil, the state of Afghanistan simply fell apart. The civil war resumed with horrendous brutality until the population was ready for any path to peace, and soon one presented itself.

Rising almost mystically from the sheer chaos, the Taliban (derived from a Persian word meaning Islamic students or seekers) be-

gan to form under the leadership of a one-eyed cleric from Oruzgan province in central Afghanistan, who the world would come to know as Mullah Mohammad Omar. More as a result of timing than of military might, they swept through the Pashtun world of eastern Afghanistan, a welcome relief from the brigands controlling the valleys and mountain passes. By 1996 the Taliban had seized Kabul, and the Afghan people seemed to accept their deliverance. The West fleetingly saw the Taliban as the source of a new order and a possible tool in yet another replay of the Great Game—the race for the energy riches of Central Asia. U.S. and foreign oil firms were looking for ways to pipe the vast natural-gas reserves of Turkmenistan to energy-starved markets in Pakistan. By 1996, most of the route of the proposed pipeline was loosely under Taliban control, and the match of politics, power, and energy seemed attractive. But the optimism was short-lived. In 1997, plans for the Afghan pipeline were shelved and the country began an even sharper downward spiral, as the Taliban overreached in their quest to take control of the country. Their atrocious human rights record and treatment of women drew international scorn, and with the exception of diplomatic recognition from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan, Afghanistan was in total isolation. Its failure as a state of any recognizable form was now complete.

Against this backdrop, the Afghan Arab troublemakers began to drift back to Afghanistan. Many of them, including Osama bin Ladin, had left Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat, full of determination to bring about radical societal change in their home countries. All failed, and many began roaming among the few remaining states in the world that served as safe havens for their kind, mostly behind the Iron Curtain. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the would-be terrorists of the world fell on hard times. They lost their playgrounds in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and even the redoubtable Carlos pitched up in Khartoum—where, coincidentally, bin Ladin had also settled after a failed attempt to bring about change in his Saudi homeland. Bin Ladin engaged in a number of agricultural, construction, and business ventures, but most of his consciousness was consumed by a brooding hatred of the United States. This passion grew during the Gulf War, and five years later, with U.S. troops still stationed in Saudi Arabia, bin Ladin's rage found its final form. It would be the United States against which he would concentrate all of his energies.

By 1995, however, bin Ladin's presence in Sudan had become an issue both for the United States and for Saudi Arabia, which by this time had stripped bin Ladin of his Saudi citizenship. The Sudanese were quietly told that bin Ladin was a major obstacle to improved relations, and that Khartoum would be wise to ask him to leave. Sudan had already begun ridding itself of undesirables. In a dramatic setup, Carlos, stretched out on a Khartoum hospital operating table having a vasectomy reversed, was abruptly bundled up by French security officers and spirited off to Paris to stand trial for earlier crimes. According to a PBS *Frontline* television interview with Sudanese President Umar Hassan al-Bashir, the Sudanese government offered to keep bin Ladin on a tight leash, or even hand him over to the Saudis or the Americans. The Saudis reportedly declined the offer, for fear his presence would only cause more trouble in the royal kingdom, and the United States reportedly passed because it had no indictable complaints against bin Ladin at the time. In 1996, then, on U.S. and Saudi instructions, bin Ladin was expelled from Sudan, and he moved to the last stop on the terror line, Afghanistan.

Still relatively unknown to the public, bin Ladin came into view through a CNN interview in 1997, when he claimed that his disciples had been behind the killing of 18 American soldiers in Somalia in 1993. The next year he issued a *fatwa*, an Islamic decree, of questionable authenticity, calling for all-out war against all Americans. But it was in August 1998 that he was indelibly etched into the world's consciousness, when terrorists thought to have links to his Al Qaeda organization struck simultaneously at American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 persons, including 12 Americans, and wounding 5,000. The U.S. response was quick but futile—75 cruise missiles were launched at bin Ladin's training camps in Afghanistan and at a pharmaceutical factory suspected of producing precursors for chemical weapons in Sudan. Bin Ladin escaped unharmed, and the attack on the Sudanese pharmaceutical factory remains a smoldering controversy to this day.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Since 1998, the hunt for bin Ladin has been the driving force behind U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. Though the Taliban have repeatedly claimed that the Saudi has been under their control and incapable of fomenting the various attacks with which he is charged—including

that against the U.S.S. *Cole* in Aden and those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—the U.S. government has little doubt that bin Ladin is the culprit. The confrontation with him and those who shelter him is at the point of no return.

It probably could not be otherwise, but how this first engagement in the new U.S. war on terrorism is conducted will be crucial to all that follows. The coalition being carefully constructed will function differently from that built for the Gulf War a decade ago. The bulk of the military tasks in that brief war against Iraq were intended from the outset to be carried out by the Americans, the British, and the French. The participation of the Arab states was not crucial to the fighting, though it was crucial to the U.S. ability to operate from bases near Iraq. In this new conflict, the roles will, in many ways, be reversed. The coalition partners from the Arab and Islamic states will have specific, front-line operational roles. They will serve as force multipliers for the usual alliance of American and European intelligence and security services and special operations forces. If the terror network is to be dismantled, it will be with help from the security services of Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, and a few others, not from the exclusive efforts of the United States or its European allies.

So the tale ends where it began, at Michni Point. As the Bush administration balances its military and political goals, plans to send U.S. troops into Afghanistan to seize bin Ladin should be weighed carefully for their practicality and political implications. Strident calls to add the overthrow of the Taliban regime to the list of American objectives may be attractive in terms of human rights, but that objective, too, must be weighed against the goal of making certain that the events of September 11 are not repeated.

Some have called for arming and forming an alliance with Afghanistan's now-leaderless Northern Alliance. This grouping of commanders, meticulously pulled together in shifting alliances by the late Ahmed Shah Masoud, now holds about ten percent of Afghan territory. Already the recipient of military and financial support from Russia and Iran, it seems a logical partner in the U.S. quest to locate and neutralize the bin Ladin network and replace the Taliban regime.

But that is not a wise course—not simply because of the cold irony of allying ourselves with the Russians in any fight in Afghanistan, but because it is not likely to achieve either goal. It is more than doubtful that the Northern Alliance forces could capture bin Ladin and his fol-

lowers, and there is no reasonable guarantee that they could dislodge the Taliban. On the contrary, the more likely consequences of a U.S. alliance with the late Masoud's fighters would be the coalescing of Afghanistan's majority Pashtun tribes around their Taliban leaders and the rekindling of a brutal, general civil war that would continue until the United States simply gave up. The dominant tribe in Afghanistan, which also happens to be the largest, will dominate; replacing the Pashtun Taliban with the largely Tajik and Uzbek Northern Alliance is close to impossible. The threat of providing covert assistance to the Northern Alliance might be a useful short-term strategy to pressure the Taliban, if it is handled delicately, but any real military alliance to Masoud's successors will backfire.

The administration would do better to try to draw off segments of the Pashtun population only loosely allied with the Taliban regime. Those Pashtuns who signed on with the Taliban over the last five years did so because the Taliban seemed at the time to offer a fair chance for peace after decades of indescribably brutal war. They did not sign on to fight the United States, whose military might many of them will recall from the struggle against the Soviet occupation. The administration seems to realize this, and it is now moving quietly, gathering resources in the land of the Pashtun.

If anyone is to replace an emir in Afghanistan, it will have to be the people of Afghanistan themselves. Any doubters should ask the British and the Russians.

A Flawed Masterpiece

Michael E. O'Hanlon

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ASSESSING THE AFGHAN CAMPAIGN

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the U.S. armed forces were seen as an overmuscled giant, able to win wars through brute strength but often lacking in daring and cleverness. This basic strategy worked during the two world wars, making the United States relatively tough to challenge. But it failed in Vietnam, produced mediocre results in Korea, and worked in the Persian Gulf War largely because the terrain was ideally suited to American strengths.

What a difference a new century makes. Operation Enduring Freedom has been, for the most part, a masterpiece of military creativity and finesse. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) head General Tommy Franks, and Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet devised a plan for using limited but well-chosen types of American power in conjunction with the Afghan opposition to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda. Secretary of State Colin Powell helped persuade Pakistan to sever its ties with the Taliban, work with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, provide the bases and overflight rights needed by U.S. forces, and contribute

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to the general war effort. Besides pushing his national security team to develop an innovative and decisive war-fighting strategy, President George W. Bush rallied the American people behind the war effort and established a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, making it far easier for the United States to work militarily in Central Asia. The U.S. effort to overthrow the Taliban deprived al Qaeda of its sanctuary within Afghanistan and left its surviving leaders running for their lives.

At their peak, the U.S. forces involved in the war effort numbered no more than 60,000 (about half of which were in the Persian Gulf), and Western allies added no more than 15,000. But the U.S.-led military campaign has hardly been small in scale. By the end of January, the United States had flown about 25,000 sorties in the air campaign and dropped 18,000 bombs, including 10,000 precision munitions. The number of U.S. sorties exceeded the number of U.S. sorties flown in the 1999 Kosovo war, and the United States dropped more smart bombs on Afghanistan than NATO dropped on Serbia in 1999. In fact, the total number of precision munitions expended in Afghanistan amounted to more than half the number used in Operation Desert Storm. (In addition, more than 3,000 U.S. and French bombs were dropped on surviving enemy forces in March during Operation Anaconda, in which some 1,500 Western forces and 2,000 Afghans launched a major offensive against about 1,000 enemy troops in the mountainous region of eastern Afghanistan.)

If the U.S. strategy has had many virtues, however, it has also had flaws. Most important, it has apparently failed to achieve a key war goal: capturing or killing Osama bin Laden and other top enemy leaders. Such hunts are inherently difficult, but the prospects for success in this case were reduced considerably by U.S. reliance on Pakistani forces and Afghan militias for sealing off enemy escape routes and conducting cave-to-cave searches during critical periods. If most al Qaeda leaders stay at large, the United States and other countries will remain more vulnerable to terrorism than they would be otherwise—perhaps significantly so.

But on balance, Operation Enduring Freedom has been very impressive. It may wind up being more notable in the annals of American military history than anything since Douglas MacArthur's invasion at Inchon in Korea half a century ago. Even Norman Schwarzkopf's famous "left hook" around Iraqi forces in Operation Desert Storm was

less bold; had it been detected, U.S. airpower still could have protected coalition flanks, and American forces could have outrun Iraqi troops toward most objectives on the ground. By contrast, Operation Enduring Freedom's impressive outcome was far from preordained. Too much American force (e.g., a protracted and punishing strategic air campaign or an outright ground invasion) risked uniting Afghan tribes and militias to fight the outside power, angering the Arab world, destabilizing Pakistan, and spawning more terrorists. Too little force, or the wrong kind of force, risked outright military failure and a worsening of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis—especially given the limited capabilities of the small militias that made up the anti-Taliban coalition.

ZEROING IN

Beginning on October 7, Afghans, Americans, and coalition partners cooperated to produce a remarkable military victory in Afghanistan. The winning elements included 15,000 Northern Alliance fighters (primarily from the Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups), 100 combat sorties a day by U.S. planes, 300–500 Western special operations forces and intelligence operatives, a few thousand Western ground forces, and thousands of Pashtun soldiers in southern Afghanistan who came over to the winning side in November. Together they defeated the Taliban forces, estimated at 50,000 to 60,000 strong, as well as a few thousand al Qaeda fighters.

Various Western countries, particularly several NATO allies and Australia, played important roles as well. A formal NATO role in the war was neither necessary nor desirable, given the location of the conflict and the need for a supple and secretive military strategy. Still, NATO allies stood squarely by America's side, invoking the alliance's Article V mutual-defense clause after September 11, and demonstrated that commitment by sending five AWACS aircraft to help patrol U.S. airspace. Forces from the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Canada appear to have frequently contributed to the effort in Afghanistan; forces from Denmark, Norway, and Germany also participated in Operation Anaconda in March. Allied aircraft flew a total of some 3,000 sorties on relief, reconnaissance, and other missions. As noted, France dropped bombs during Operation Anaconda, and the United Kingdom fired several cruise missiles on the first day of battle as well. Numerous countries, including the Netherlands, Italy, and Japan, deployed ships to the Arabian Sea. The

cooperation continues today, as major Western allies constitute the backbone of the UN-authorized stability force in Kabul.

The short war has had several phases. The first began on October 7 and lasted a month; the second ran through November and saw the Taliban lose control of the country; the third was characterized by intensive bombing of suspected al Qaeda strongholds in the Tora Bora mountain and cave complex in December; the fourth began with the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as interim prime minister and continues to date.

During the first part of the war, Taliban forces lost their large physical assets such as radar, aircraft, and command-and-control systems, but they hung on to power in most regions. Most al Qaeda training camps and headquarters were also destroyed. Although Taliban forces did not quickly collapse, they were increasingly isolated in pockets near the major cities. Cut off from each other physically, they were unable to resupply or reinforce very well and had problems communicating effectively.

In the first week of the war, U.S. aircraft averaged only 25 combat sorties a day, but they soon upped that total to around 100. (Some 70 Tomahawk cruise missiles were fired in the early going; a total of about 100 had been used by December.) The United States comparably increased the number of airlift, refueling, and other support missions. U.S. air strikes by B-52 and B-1 bombers operating out of Diego Garcia typically involved six sorties a day; other land-based aircraft, primarily F-15ES and AC-130 gunships from Oman, flew about as much. Planes from the three U.S. aircraft carriers based in the Arabian Sea provided the rest of the combat punch. Reconnaissance and refueling flights originated from the Persian Gulf region and Diego Garcia. Some air support and relief missions also came from, or flew over, Central Asia, where U.S. Army soldiers from the Tenth Mountain Division helped protect airfields.

Most air attacks occurred around Afghanistan's perimeter, because the rugged central highlands were not a major operating area for the Taliban or al Qaeda. By the middle of October, most fixed assets worth striking had already been hit, so combat sorties turned to targeting Taliban and al Qaeda forces in the field. Aircraft continued to fly at an altitude of at least 10,000 feet, because the Pentagon was fearful of antiaircraft artillery, Soviet SA-7 and SA-13 portable antiaircraft missiles, and some 200–300 Stinger antiaircraft missiles presumed to be

in Taliban or al Qaeda possession. But most precision-guided weapons are equally effective regardless of their altitude of origin, provided that good targeting information is available—as it was in this case, thanks to U.S. troops on the ground.

The first month of the war produced only limited results and had many defense and strategic analysts worried about the basic course of the campaign. Some of those critics began, rather intemperately and unrealistically, to call for a ground invasion; others opposed an invasion but thought that a substantial intensification of efforts would prove necessary.

In phase two, beginning in early November, that intensification occurred. But it was due not so much to an increased number of airplanes as to an increase in their effectiveness. By then, 80 percent of U.S. combat sorties could be devoted to directly supporting opposition forces in the field; by late November, the tally was 90 percent. In addition, the deployment of more unmanned aerial vehicles and Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft to the region helped the United States maintain continuous reconnaissance of enemy forces in many places. Most important, the number of U.S. special operations forces and CIA teams working with various opposition elements increased greatly. In mid-October, only three special operations "A teams," each consisting of a dozen personnel, were in Afghanistan; in mid-November, the tally was 10; by December 8, it was 17. This change meant the United States could increasingly call in supplies for the opposition, help it with tactics, and designate Taliban and al Qaeda targets for U.S. air strikes using global positioning system (GPS) technology and laser range finders. The Marine Corps also began to provide logistical support for these teams as the war advanced.

As a result, enemy forces collapsed in northern cities such as Mazar-i-Sharif and Taloqan over the weekend of November 9–11. Taliban fighters ran for their lives, provoking their leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, to broadcast a demand that his troops stop "behaving like chickens." Kabul fell soon afterward. By November 16, Pentagon officials were estimating that the Taliban controlled less than one-third of the country, in contrast to 85 percent just a week before. Reports also suggested that Muhammad Atef, a key al Qaeda operative, was killed by U.S. bombs in mid-November. Kunduz, the last northern stronghold of enemy forces where several thousand Taliban and al Qaeda troops apparently remained, fell on November 24–25.

In late November, more than 1,000 U.S. marines of the 15th and 26th Marine Expeditionary Units established a base about 60 miles southwest of Kandahar, which the Taliban continued to hold. They deployed there directly from ships in the Arabian Sea, leapfrogging over Pakistani territory at night (to minimize political difficulties for the government of President Pervez Musharraf) and flying 400 miles inland to what became known as Camp Rhino. Their subsequent resupply needs were largely met using Pakistani bases. Once deployed, they began to interdict some road traffic and carry out support missions for special operations forces.

Meanwhile, Pashtun tribes had begun to oppose the Taliban openly. By November, they were accepting the help of U.S. special forces, who had previously been active principally in the north of the country. Two groups in particular—one led by Hamid Karzai, the other by another tribal leader, Gul Agha Shirzai—closed in on Kandahar. Mullah Omar offered to surrender in early December but in the end fled with most of his fighters, leaving the city open by December 8–9. Pockets of Taliban and al Qaeda resistance, each with hundreds of fighters or more, remained in areas near Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Kandahar, and possibly elsewhere, but the Taliban no longer held cities or major transportation routes.

Why this part of the campaign achieved such a rapid and radical victory remains unclear. Taliban forces presumably could have held out longer if they had hunkered down in the cities and put weapons near mosques, hospitals, and homes, making their arsenal hard to attack from the air. Opposition fighters were too few to defeat them in street-to-street fighting in most places, and starving out the Taliban would have required the unthinkable tactic of starving local civilian populations as well.

Most likely, the Taliban got caught in positions outside major cities that they could neither easily escape nor defend. Once the Afghan opposition began to engage the enemy seriously in November and Taliban forces returned fire, they revealed their positions to American special operations personnel who could call in devastating air strikes. Sometimes they were tricked into revealing their locations over the radio. Even trench lines were poor defenses against 2-ton bombs delivered within 10 to 15 meters of their targets. Just what Taliban fighters could have done differently, once stranded in that open terrain, is unclear. They might have been better advised either to go on the of-

fensive or to try to escape back into urban settings under cover of night or poor weather, although many U.S. reconnaissance assets work well under such conditions. But both approaches would have been difficult and dangerous, especially for a relatively unsophisticated military force such as the Taliban.

The third main phase of the war began in early December. By this time, U.S. intelligence had finally pinpointed much of al Qaeda's strength near Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan. In particular, al Qaeda forces, including Osama bin Laden, were supposedly holed up in the mountain redoubts of Tora Bora. Traveling with perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 foreign fighters, most of them fellow Arabs, bin Laden could not easily evade detection from curious eyes even if he might elude U.S. overhead reconnaissance. Thus, once Afghan opposition fighters, together with CIA and special operations forces, were deployed in the vicinity, U.S. air strikes against the caves could become quite effective. By mid-December, the fight for Tora Bora was over. Most significant cave openings were destroyed and virtually all signs of live al Qaeda fighters disappeared. Sporadic bombing continued in the area, and it was not until mid-January that a major al Qaeda training base, Zawar Kili, was destroyed. But most bombing ended by late 2001.

So why did bin Laden and other top al Qaeda leaders apparently get away? The United States relied too much on Pakistan and its Afghan allies to close off possible escape routes from the Tora Bora region. It is not clear that these allies had the same incentives as the United States to conduct the effort with dogged persistence. Moreover, the mission was inherently difficult. By mid-December, the Pentagon felt considerably less sure than it had been of the likely whereabouts of bin Laden, even though it suspected that he and most of his top lieutenants were still alive.

Although estimates remain rough, Taliban losses in the war were considerable. According to *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas Kristof, as many as 8,000 to 12,000 were killed—roughly 20 percent of the Taliban's initial fighting capability. Assuming conservatively at least two wounded for every person killed, Taliban losses could have represented half their initial fighting strength, a point at which most armies have traditionally started to crumble. Another 7,000 or more were taken prisoner. Kristof's tally also suggests that Afghan civilian casualties totaled only about 1,000, a mercifully low number despite several wrongly targeted U.S. bombings and raids during the war.

Although a couple of those U.S. mistakes probably should have been prevented, they do not change the basic conclusion that the war caused relatively modest harm to innocents.

U.S. forces had lost about 30 personnel by the middle of March: about a dozen on the battlefield (8 during Operation Anaconda) and the rest in and around Afghanistan through accidents. Most were Marine Corps and Army troops, but other personnel were lost as well, including a CIA operative. The casualty total was 50 percent greater than those of the invasions of Grenada and Haiti in the 1980s but less than the number of troops killed in Somalia in 1992–93.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

On the whole, Operation Enduring Freedom has been masterful in both design and execution. Using specially equipped CIA teams and special operations forces in tandem with precision-strike aircraft allowed for accurate and effective bombing of Taliban and al Qaeda positions. U.S. personnel also contributed immensely to helping the Northern Alliance tactically and logistically. By early November, the strategy had produced mass Taliban retreats in the north of the country; it had probably caused many Taliban casualties as well.

More notably, the U.S. effort helped quickly galvanize Pashtun forces to organize and fight effectively against the Taliban in the south, which many analysts had considered a highly risky proposition and CENTCOM had itself considered far from certain. Had these Pashtun forces decided that they feared the Northern Alliance and the United States more than the Taliban, Afghanistan might have become effectively partitioned, with al Qaeda taking refuge exclusively in the south and the war effort rendered largely futile. Convincing these Pashtun to change sides and fight against the Taliban required just the right mix of diplomacy, military momentum and finesse, and battlefield assistance from CIA and special operations teams.

Yet despite the overall accomplishments, mistakes were made. The Pentagon's handling of the al Qaeda and Taliban detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was one of them. Whether these men should have been designated as prisoners of war can be debated. Neither group fought for a recognized government, and al Qaeda fighters satisfied virtually none of the standard criteria associated with soldiers. The Bush administration's decision not to designate the detainees as POWs is thus understandable, particularly since it did not want to be forced

to repatriate them once hostilities in Afghanistan ended. But it probably would have been wiser to accord the detainees POW rights initially, until a military tribunal could determine them ineligible for POW status, as the Geneva Conventions stipulate.

The POW issue aside, the administration's initial reluctance to guarantee the basic protections of the Geneva Conventions to Taliban soldiers and its continued refusal to apply them to al Qaeda were unwise. These decisions fostered the impression that the detainees were not being treated humanely. This perception was wrong, but it became prevalent. Rumsfeld had to go on the defensive after photos circulated around the world showing shackled prisoners kneeling before their open-air cells; Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Richard Myers talked somewhat hyperbolically about how the detainees might gnaw through hydraulic cables on airplanes if not forcibly restrained; and some Pentagon officials even suggested that the detainees did not necessarily deserve Geneva treatment, given the crimes of al Qaeda on September 11. But Rumsfeld's comments came too late, and America's image in the Arab world in particular took another hit.

The big U.S. mistake, however, concerned the hunt for top al Qaeda leaders. If Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Zubaydah, and other top al Qaeda officials are found to have survived, the war will have failed to achieve a top objective. Rather than relying on Afghan and Pakistani forces to do the job in December near Tora Bora, Rumsfeld and Franks should have tried to prevent al Qaeda fighters from fleeing into Pakistan by deploying American forces on or near the border. U.S. troops should also have been used in the pursuit of Mullah Omar and remnants of the Taliban, even though this mission was less important than the one against al Qaeda leaders.

Admittedly, there were good reasons not to put many Americans in Afghanistan. First, Washington feared a possible anti-American backlash, as Rumsfeld made clear in public comments. Complicating matters, the United States would have had a hard time getting many tens of thousands of troops into Afghanistan, since no neighboring country except Pakistan would have been a viable staging base—and Pakistan was not willing to play that role.

But even though Rumsfeld's reasoning was correct in general, it was wrong for Tora Bora. Putting several thousand U.S. forces in that mountainous, inland region would have been difficult and dangerous. Yet given the enormity of the stakes in this war, it would have been

appropriate. Indeed, CENTCOM made preparations for doing so. But in the end, partly because of logistical challenges but perhaps partly because of the Pentagon's aversion to casualties, the idea was dropped. It is supremely ironic that a tough-on-defense Republican administration fighting for vital national security interests appeared almost as reluctant to risk American lives in combat as the Clinton administration had been in humanitarian missions—at least until Operation Anaconda, when it may have been largely too late.

Furthermore, local U.S. allies were just not up to the job in Tora Bora. Pakistan deployed about 4,000 regular army forces along the border itself. But they were not always fully committed to the mission, and there were too few well-equipped troops to prevent al Qaeda and Taliban fighters from outflanking them, as many hundreds of enemy personnel appear to have done. Afghan opposition forces were also less than fully committed, and they were not very proficient in fighting at night.

What would have been needed for the United States to perform this mission? To close off the 100 to 150 escape routes along the 25-mile stretch of the Afghan-Pakistani border closest to Tora Bora would have required perhaps 1,000 to 3,000 American troops. Deploying such a force from the United States would have required several hundred airlift flights, followed by ferrying the troops and supplies to frontline positions via helicopter. According to CENTCOM, a new airfield might have had to be created, largely for delivering fuel. Such an operation would have taken a week or more. But two Marine Corps units with more than 1,000 personnel were already in the country in December and were somewhat idle at that time. If redeployed to Tora Bora, they could have helped prevent al Qaeda's escape themselves. They also could have been reinforced over subsequent days and weeks by Army light forces or more marines, who could have closed off possible escape routes into the interior of Afghanistan. Such an effort would not have assured success, but the odds would have favored the United States.

How much does it matter if bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and their cohorts go free? Even with its top leaders presumably alive, al Qaeda is weaker without its Afghan sanctuary. It has lost training bases, secure meeting sites, weapons production and storage facilities, and protection from the host-country government. But as terrorism expert Paul Pillar has pointed out, the history of violent organizations with charismatic

leaders, such as the Shining Path in Peru and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, suggests that they are far stronger with their leaders than without them. The imprisonment of Abimael Guzmán in 1992 and Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 did much to hurt those organizations, just as the 1995 assassination of Fathi Shikaki of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad weakened that group significantly. Some groups may survive the loss of an important leader or become more violent as a result—for example, Hamas flourished after the Israelis killed "the Engineer" Yahya Ayyash in 1996. But even they may have a hard time coming up with new tactics and concepts of operations after such a loss.

If bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and other top al Qaeda leaders continue to evade capture, they may have to spend the rest of their lives on the run. And their access to finances may be sharply curtailed. But they could still inspire followers and design future terrorist attacks. If successful, their escape would be a major setback.

EVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS

Even though advocates of the famous "revolution in military affairs" have generally felt frustrated over the past decade, a number of important military innovations appeared in Operation Enduring Freedom. They may not be as revolutionary as blitzkrieg, aircraft-carrier war, and nuclear weapons, but they are impressive nonetheless. Advocates of radical change have tended to underestimate the degree to which the U.S. military can and does innovate even without dramatic transformation.

Several developments were particularly notable. First, there was the widespread deployment of special operations forces with laser rangefinders and GPS devices to call in extremely precise air strikes. Ground spotters have appeared in the annals of warfare for as long as airplanes themselves, but this was the first time they were frequently able to provide targeting information accurate to within several meters and do so quickly.

Second, U.S. reconnaissance capabilities showed real improvement. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), together with imaging satellites and JSTARS, maintained frequent surveillance of much of the battlefield and continuous coverage of certain specific sites—providing a capability that General Myers described as "persistence."

Also notable were advances in battlefield communications. The networks established between UAVs, satellites, combat aircraft, and com-

mand centers were faster than in any previous war, making "persistence" even more valuable. The networks were not always fast enough, especially when the political leadership needed to intercede in specific targeting decisions. Nor were they available for all combat aircraft in the theater; for example, the Air Force's "Link 16" data links are not yet installed on many strike aircraft. But they did often reduce the time between detecting a target and destroying it to less than 20 minutes.

Perhaps most historic was the use of CIA-owned Predator UAVs to drop weapons on ground targets. Aside from cruise missiles, this was the first time in warfare that an unmanned aircraft had dropped bombs in combat, in the form of "Hellfire" air-to-ground missiles. There were also further milestones in the realm of precision weapons, which for the first time in major warfare constituted the majority of bombs dropped. They were dropped from a wide range of aircraft, including carrier-based jets, ground-based attack aircraft, and B-52 as well as B-1 bombers. The bombers were used effectively as close-air support platforms, loitering over the battlefield for hours until targets could be identified. They delivered about 70 percent of the war's total ordnance.

In addition to the laser-guided bomb, the weapon of choice for the United States quickly became the joint direct attack munition (JDAM). First used in Kosovo, it is a one-ton iron bomb furnished with a $20,000 kit that helps steer it to within 10 to 15 meters of its target using GPS and inertial guidance. It is not quite as accurate as a laser-guided bomb but is much more resistant to the effects of weather. In the Kosovo war, only the B-2 could deliver it, but now the JDAM can be dropped by most U.S. attack aircraft. By the end of January, the United States had dropped more than 4,000 laser-guided bombs and more than 4,000 JDAMs as well.

Other ordnance was also important. Up to 1,000 cluster bombs were used, with accuracy of about 30 meters once outfitted with a wind-correcting mechanism. Although controversial because of their dud rate, cluster bombs were devastating against Taliban and al Qaeda troops unlucky enough to be caught in the open. A number of special-purpose munitions were used in smaller numbers, including cave-busting munitions equipped with nickel-cobalt steel-alloy tips and special software; these could penetrate up to 10 feet of rock or 100 feet of soil.

The ability to deliver most U.S. combat punch from the air kept the costs of war relatively modest. Through January 8, the total had reached $3.8 billion, while the military costs of homeland security ef-

forts in the United States had reached $2.6 billion. The bills in Afghanistan included $1.9 billion for deploying troops, $400 million for munitions, $400 million for replacing damaged or destroyed equipment, and about $1 billion for fuel and other operating costs.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

What broad lessons emerge from this conflict? First, military progress does not always depend on highly expensive weapons platforms. Many important contemporary trends in military technology and tactics concern information networks and munitions more than aircraft, ships, and ground vehicles. To take an extreme example, B-52 bombers with JDAM were more useful in Operation Enduring Freedom than were the stealthy B-2s. Second, human skills remain important in war, as demonstrated best by the performance of special operations forces and CIA personnel. The basic infantry skills, foreign language abilities, competence and care in using and maintaining equipment, and physical and mental toughness of U.S. troops contributed to victory every bit as much as did high-tech weaponry.

Third, military mobility and deployability should continue to be improved. The Marine Corps did execute an impressive ship-to-objective maneuver, forgoing the usual ship-to-shore operation and moving 400 miles inland directly. But most parts of the Army still cannot move so quickly and smoothly. Part of the solution may be the Army's long-term plans for new and lighter combat equipment. (The Marine Corps' V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft may be useful, too, at least in modest numbers and once proven safe.) But the Army could also emulate the Marine Corps' organization, training, and logistics where possible—and soon. The task is hardly hopeless; Army forces were tactically quite mobile and impressive in Operation Anaconda.

Finally, the war showed that more joint-service experimentation and innovation are highly desirable, given that the synergies between special operations forces on the ground and Air Force and Navy aircraft in the skies were perhaps the most important keys to victory.

How do these lessons match up with the Bush administration's Quadrennial Defense Review of September 30, 2001, and its long-term budget plan of February 4, 2002? The administration has basically preserved the force structure and weapons modernization plan that it inherited from the Clinton administration, added missile defense and one or two other priorities—and thrown very large sums of money into the

budget. The Bush administration envisions a national security budget (Pentagon spending plus nuclear weapons budgets for the Department of Energy) that will grow to $396 billion in 2003 and $470 billion in 2007. (It was $300 billion when Bush took office and is $350 billion in 2002.) The war on terrorism cannot explain this growth; its annual costs are currently expected to be less than $10 billion after 2003. That $470 billion figure for 2007 is a whopping $100 billion more than the Clinton administration envisioned for the same year in its last budget plan.

For many critics who tend to focus on weapons procurement, the problem with Bush's plan is that it protects the traditional weapons priorities of the military services without seeking a radical enough transformation of the U.S. armed forces. But this common criticism is only half right. The Bush administration has an aggressive program for so-called defense transformation, principally in research, development, and experimentation, where it envisions spending an additional $100 billion between 2002 and 2007. If anything, these plans are slightly too generous and ambitious.

In fact, the problem is the traditional one: the unwillingness to set priorities and to challenge the military services to do so as well, especially in the procurement accounts. Despite the lack of a superpower rival, the administration proposes replacing most major combat systems with systems often costing twice as much, and doing so throughout the force structure. This plan would drive up the procurement budget to $99 billion by 2007 from its present level of $60 billion.

A more prudent modernization agenda would begin by canceling at least one or two major weapons, such as the Army's Crusader artillery system. But the more important change in philosophy would be to modernize more selectively in general. Only a modest fraction of the armed forces need to be equipped with the most sophisticated and expensive weaponry. That high-end or "silver bullet" force would be a hedge against possible developments such as a rapidly modernizing Chinese military. The rest of the force should be equipped primarily with relatively inexpensive, but highly capable, existing weaponry carrying better sensors, munitions, computers, and communications systems. For example, rather than purchase 3,000 joint-strike fighters, the military would buy only 1,000 of those and then add aircraft such as new F-16 Block 60 fighters to fill out its force structure.

Other parts of the proposed Bush plan deserve scrutiny, too. After several successive years of increases, military pay is now in fairly good

shape. In most cases, compensation is no longer poor by comparison with private-sector employment; as such, the administration's plans for further large increases go too far. The proposed research and development budgets, meanwhile, exceed the already hefty increases promised by Bush during his presidential campaign; given that research and development were not severely cut during the 1990s, such growth seems excessive now. Finally, the Pentagon needs to reform the way it provides basic services such as military health care, housing, and various base operations. Unfortunately, if budgets get too big, the Pentagon's incentives to look for efficiencies often weaken. On balance, the planned increases in defense spending are roughly twice as much as necessary for the years ahead.

A final assessment of Operation Enduring Freedom depends on whether bin Laden and his top lieutenants have escaped Afghanistan. It could be a while before anyone knows; indeed, Rumsfeld has speculated that U.S. troops could remain in Afghanistan into 2003. A verdict will also have to await a better sense of where Afghanistan is headed. Whatever the stability of the post-Taliban government, it is doubtful that the Taliban and al Qaeda will ever control large swaths of the country again. But if pockets of terrorists remain in the country, or if Afghanistan again descends into civil war, the victory will be incomplete. In the former case, Afghanistan could still be an important if diminished asset for al Qaeda; in the latter, the U.S. image throughout the Islamic world may take another blow as critics find more fuel for their claims that Americans care little about the fate of Muslim peoples.

To prevent such outcomes, Washington needs to work hard with other donors to make reconstruction and aid programs succeed in Afghanistan. The Bush administration also needs to rethink its policy on peacekeeping. Its current unwillingness to contribute to a stability force for Afghanistan is a major mistake that U.S. allies may not be able to redress entirely on their own. A force of 20,000 to 30,000 troops is clearly needed for the country as a whole; several thousand troops in Kabul will probably not suffice.

That said, the situation in Afghanistan has improved enormously since October 7—and so has U.S. security. The Afghan resistance, the Bush administration, its international coalition partners, the U.S. armed forces, and the CIA have accomplished what will likely be remembered as one of the greater military successes of the twenty-first century.

A New Model Afghan Army

Anja Manuel and P. W. Singer

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AN UNEASY PEACE

An unforeseen result of the U.S. military's stunning success in Afghanistan was the overnight suspension of that country's vicious, 23-year-old civil war. Afghanistan's future—including whether it again degenerates into a terrorist base—now largely depends on what is made of this precious opportunity.

In countries recovering from civil war, the most critical requirement for long-term peace is the demobilization of the formerly warring parties and their integration within a unified military. Angola and the former Yugoslavia provide cautionary tales about the difficulties of military reintegration; Mozambique and South Africa give more hopeful examples of how building a cohesive army can help solidify peace after a national conflict.

In Afghanistan, the process of military integration has barely begun, but it is already close to collapse. Not only are perennial ethnic, factional, and religious disputes hampering progress, but the political elements of postwar transition are moving ahead without the requi-

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site military corollary. Indeed, the interim administration inaugurated in December 2001 never answered basic questions about the size, composition, and tasks of a national army. Meanwhile, the international community remains ambivalent about how it will assist, and what little aid it has promised has been slow in coming.

The dangers of continued delay are growing by the day. The U.S. and allied forces entered Afghanistan to rout the Taliban and al Qaeda; demobilizing the country's many warring factions was not on the agenda. Thus, the operations may have abruptly suspended the civil war, but they have created only a tacit truce without dismantling the full war-fighting capabilities of the armed groups. Many of these groups may now be tempted to either reject the peace process or manipulate it to their advantage. If they do, Afghanistan could plunge straight back into war.

MOTLEY CREW

Civil wars can yield three types of disgruntled local parties, or "spoilers," who can derail peace processes. "Limited spoilers" are simply suspicious of promises made by the peace brokers and demand additional guarantees that they will be treated fairly; "greedy spoilers" seek to take all they can get from the postwar reconstruction, even beyond the point of diminishing returns; and "total spoilers," feeling they have no stake in the peace, will try to make it fail at all costs. Unfortunately, Afghanistan today contains archetypes of all three.

In addressing these spoilers, the new national government will need to exert its leadership over a nation in which mistrust of central authority runs deep. Afghanistan as a state was created by late-nineteenth-century British imperialists along borders that, like most colonial divisions, reflected little historical or ethnic logic. The government has usually been controlled by the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, who nevertheless make up fewer than half of Afghanistan's roughly 26 million people and are themselves riven by tribal fissures. Hobbled by the Pashtuns' own divisions and opposition from other minority groups—such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—the government's power outside of the capital, Kabul, has always been limited.

The long history of strained relations between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups makes many Afghans natural limited spoilers. Indeed, they have good reason to view promises of peace with skepticism. Most recently, ethnic relations deteriorated under the predominantly Pashtun Taliban, who came to power pledging to end the post-Soviet

chaos and warlordism but instead exhibited equally vicious behavior themselves. The U.S. military intervention last fall then tipped the scales of power in favor of the Taliban's main foe, the Northern Alliance, composed mainly of minority ethnic groups from the north. The interim government established at a UN-brokered peace conference was nominally led by the Pashtun noble Hamid Karzai, but the non-Pashtun leaders of the Northern Alliance wielded the real power in Kabul, with a subset of Tajiks controlling key ministries and the former secret police. Many ordinary Pashtuns thus suspected that the interim government was just a vehicle for minority ambition.

Years of warfare have also created a constellation of regional warlords, quintessential greedy spoilers, who stand to lose a great deal in the transition to a new government. These warlords' power comes from their personal forces of thousands of loyal armed troops, funded by their control of local trading and smuggling routes. Although many of the rival warlords made public statements supporting military integration after the interim government took over, none has made any significant effort to disarm. Several, despite their uneasy truce, have faced off against each other in minor struggles over territory and power. These greedy spoilers remain only nominally linked to the central government and may try to undermine it if they are not given a significant role.

Finally, neither the Taliban nor al Qaeda is a spent force. Few senior leaders of either group have been captured, and both groups still enjoy popular support among many Pashtun nationalists in southern Afghanistan and the tribally administered border regions of Pakistan. With no possibility of inclusion in a future government, these groups can be expected to act as total spoilers, seeking to attack the regime in Kabul whenever and wherever they can. One of the current major security concerns is the possibility of a Tet-like counteroffensive against the government, just when it begins to feel secure.

ROAD TO NOWHERE

Unfortunately, international help in building a new Afghan army has been limited—and the little offered has thus far been so disorganized that it may only make matters worse. The first effort, led by the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, recruited and trained an ethnically balanced unit of 600 soldiers drawn from most of Afghanistan's 33 provinces. But the program is only a stopgap measure. By the time the ISAF withdraws at the end of the

year, it will at best have trained a mere 4,000 troops (compared to the tens of thousands that will be needed to provide a minimum level of security). Moreover, the exact lines of authority remain unclear.

The United States, in turn, has said repeatedly that it views the building of a national Afghan army as a priority. Many U.S. officials believe such a force could substitute for a large international peacekeeping presence, which they oppose. Accordingly, the Bush administration submitted to Congress in March a $50 million proposal to train and equip 18,000 Afghan soldiers over 18 months, and U.S. forces began some of the basic training pending congressional approval. But it is unrealistic to expect to build an effective, complete force in such a short time. Even 18,000 troops with only basic training, moreover, will still be insufficient to meet the country's security needs.

An added snag is that U.S. special forces have also begun to train and fund separate "anti–al Qaeda" units, often associated with local warlords, to act as American proxies and seek out al Qaeda fugitives in the Pashtun regions of southern Afghanistan. The formation and operation of these units have not been coordinated with Kabul, and, so far, there are no formal plans to integrate them into the future national army. Yet the higher pay in the U.S. units will continue to attract potential recruits away from any force directed from Kabul—a fact that has understandably caused some concern among the Afghan leadership.

As a result, the motley Afghan force currently taking shape is wretchedly small, disorganized, and not clearly linked to an established command structure that represents Afghanistan's ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, no coherent plan has emerged to either integrate or demobilize the assorted warlord forces, nor are the various spoilers being dealt with decisively. If things continue in this way, the present dream of a self-reliant army serving the Afghan people seems almost certainly doomed to failure.

PLAN FOR SUCCESS

The ultimate success of Afghan military reintegration depends on the political will of the local parties. This will, however, cannot form in a vacuum. The UN, the United States, Europe, and other interested parties urgently need to move the process along. They can do this through four particular types of intervention: first, by pushing the parties to determine quickly, while a tacit truce exists, what type of national military they need; second, by providing critical financial backing;

third, by committing themselves to remain engaged and help create an atmosphere in which integration can succeed; and finally, by carefully coordinating the various military aid efforts so they do not end up working at cross-purposes.

Any civil war leaves unresolved grievances and mutual suspicions that linger long after the fighting has ended. During peace negotiations, therefore, both the warring parties and the international community are often tempted to defer the complex issues associated with military reintegration; they hope that the former adversaries will become more reasonable as tensions dissipate. But avoiding thorny questions in this way is generally a strategic mistake. In Bosnia, Angola, Cambodia, and Kosovo, peace negotiations produced only the general outlines of a new, unified military. In all these cases, the lack of detail has since led to frequent misunderstandings and heated arguments that have either stalled or completely stopped the process of military integration.

By contrast, during South Africa's transition from apartheid, military research groups from the forces that had been opposing and defending apartheid, respectively, spent several months working together to outline their views on a joint military. Political leaders on both sides then used these proposals to create a detailed, mutually satisfactory integration program. The process helped all parties adjust to the impending changes and taught the military leadership how to work together constructively, thus creating role models for the ordinary soldiers. Similarly, the peace agreement that ended Mozambique's civil war in 1992 laid out the size and command structure of a new professional army, as well as a detailed time-line for the demobilization of the former combatants. Although it may not be possible to replicate these processes exactly in Afghanistan, efforts must be made to settle the details of military reunification—now.

Regrettably, the international community and the Afghan leadership have not heeded history's lessons. As of this writing, only a single, one-day meeting had taken place among all the major parties to negotiate the future of the Afghan armed forces. Although the gathering of warlords on March 6 brought patriotic speeches proclaiming each faction's good intentions, it did not answer any of the fundamental questions.

These questions—the military's role, command structure, and force size, as well as the demobilization of the various standing forces—should be addressed immediately in formal negotiations involving all the Afghan parties. These all-important meetings could be mediated

by the UN as a continuation of the Bonn agreements that brought the interim government into being. Although the international community cannot ultimately control this process, it should use its lobbying power, including promises of aid, to shape opinions and induce the parties to reach agreement on fundamental issues.

Even after these meetings conclude, however, the job is far from complete. Outsiders can play an important role in generating trust among former enemies and strengthening their overall commitment to the peace process. Too often, outside powers squander these opportunities by promising too much and then failing to deliver, or by allowing their own disagreements to undermine compliance.

Financial assistance is a prime example. At a donors' conference in Tokyo in December, the assembled governments completely ignored the need to fund an integrated Afghan army. A follow-up conference in Geneva in April did yield pledges of $235 million for this cause, but few of the funds have materialized. Yet lack of security is the major source of instability and human rights violations in postconflict situations. Only "fixing" the security sector can generate the confidence necessary to complete the peace process. Adequate, timely funding, with its distribution monitored by the international community to minimize corruption and waste, is required.

As part of the Afghan aid package being debated in Congress, the United States should double its proposed military assistance with an initial, immediate grant of another $50 million (for a total of $100 million, the same amount spent by the United States on a similar program to train and equip the Bosnian army). At the same time, Washington needs to call on other countries to follow through on their pledges and seek to involve U.S. allies in the Islamic world in the process. All the international pledges should be centralized in a fund administered by a joint military commission composed of Afghan parties and members of the donor community, to ensure that the money is properly managed and that neighboring states do not use their gifts of aid to foment dissent.

The required amounts may be small in comparison to the $17 billion spent on Operation Enduring Freedom by mid-May, but they could determine its ultimate legacy. Outside assistance is not only needed to solidify the future of the Afghan army, and with it the Afghan state, but it also offers an excellent insurance policy against the country's ever harboring terrorists again. Furthermore, it provides a concrete

example to the Islamic world that the United States does not abandon moderate Muslim regimes that stand with it against terrorism.

Aid money will be ineffective, however, if the peace process does not win the support of the Afghans themselves. It will be much more difficult to sustain a peace agreement, no matter how well thought out or well funded, if no outside enforcement mechanism exists to check spoilers and arbitrate disputes. In Bosnia, for example, the presence of an international military force has been absolutely critical to keeping potential spoilers in line and monitoring compliance with the Dayton accord.

Yet the extended deployment in Bosnia has become political ammunition for those opposed to expanding the ISAF beyond Kabul. Several senior U.S. officials have been adamant on this point, arguing that Afghan security is best handled by a new, national Afghan army. Unfortunately, that arrangement leaves a dangerous gap in time: recruiting, training, and equipping an army capable of providing real security will take several years. In fact, expanding the peacekeeping force could even speed up the creation of an Afghan army. The peacekeeping forces in a number of countries, including Bosnia, have acted as valuable stabilizers and training partners for young local armies. On this evidence, many argue that a wider international force presence is exactly what is needed to convince local warlords to cooperate.

But with the expansion of the ISAF now seemingly ruled out, the United States must consider stopgap measures to bolster Afghanistan's security—beyond just hunting down the Taliban and al Qaeda. The Pentagon should continue posting advisers with local warlord forces and should sanction air strikes against any greedy spoilers who take up arms to disrupt the peace or challenge the government. In early May, for example, the CIA sent an unmanned spy plane to kill Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of a hard-line Islamic group and a former warlord who was reportedly planning attacks against the Karzai administration and U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The mission to kill him may have failed, but the right message was sent.

Finally, the international community must better coordinate its presently disparate military training programs. Foreign military educators can help former adversaries overcome their mutual distrust, teach responsible civil-military relations, and instill a professional ethic in Afghan soldiers, many of whom have received no formal training. The limited steps taken by the ISAF and the United States toward these goals are positive—but they also contain seeds of trouble. The

ISAF and the U.S. forces must coordinate their army training programs both with each other and, most important, with the formation of anti–al Qaeda strike forces in the south. To avoid these local units' adding to the rogue armed forces that pervade Afghanistan, the strike forces—like the U.S.- and ISAF-trained battalions—should be brought under the command of the Afghan government as soon as possible.

A novel option worth exploring is to contract the job out. Such a move would solve any concern over detracting from the peacekeeping or antiterrorism effort. Instead, it would bring all the international programs under the management of a private military consulting firm. A number of such consulting companies, staffed by retired military personnel, have experience in advising nascent militaries and useful expertise in running officer academies and training centers. The U.S.-based firm Military Professional Resources, Inc., for example, presently runs such an operation in Bosnia aimed at binding Bosnian Croat and Muslim units together into a capable national force. Local acceptance of the program has also been critical in weeding out the negative influence of military assistance from radical states such as Iran. If the privatized option is chosen for Afghanistan, however, it must be carefully monitored. The contract should include provisions for a gradual turnover of authority to local officers—otherwise, the firm could seek to profit from long-term local dependence on its services.

MISSION CONTROL

If a disciplined standing armed force is not built, Kabul will have to continue relying on the Northern Alliance's loose amalgamation of warlord-controlled forces. This outcome is hardly optimal. The Northern Alliance, a short-term coalition at best, does not represent the country as a whole. Rather, it reflects the agendas of its individual warlord components, which do not always intersect with that of the broad-based national government.

The government needs a new national army, instead, to come to terms with the spoiler problem—or otherwise risks scuttling the peace. The army must be able to reassure and incorporate limited and greedy spoilers, giving them incentives to cooperate and thus creating some breathing room for the nascent central government. At the same time, the force must also be strong enough to deal effectively with total spoilers, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban remnants, who may challenge the government in the future.

Given the warlords' deep-rooted hold over local power structures, the government probably could not crush them—indeed, it would be injudicious even to try. They must instead be convinced to play along. The government needs to show the warlords that they will have a role in the new government and military if they cooperate. Yet the country's leaders must also stand tough and enforce the current tacit cease-fire, calling on outside assistance as necessary, to forestall any jockeying for position among the warlords that could disrupt the peace. Running all political and military aid through Kabul will give it important leverage in this process.

In light of this situation, the mission of an integrated Afghan military should be limited. In the short term, it should focus on certain core sovereign tasks: defending Afghanistan's borders against foreign fighters and preventing terrorists from using the country as a base; heading off renewed fighting between political or tribal factions; and protecting the major lines of communication and commerce.

The new army should avoid the numerous other missions that some have proposed for it, from weeding out criminals and smugglers at border crossings to enforcing bans on poppy production. Not only is it unrealistic to expect a new force to take on so many tasks, but these additional duties would blur the traditional distinctions between military and police functions and could even harm the reintegration process. Targeting the major income sources of local power brokers may also create a showdown that the central government is not yet politically strong enough to win. Instead of compromising the national armed force's legitimacy with these explosive domestic issues, Kabul and the international community should focus on establishing effective local law enforcement to take care of such matters.

A better alternative might be to focus the new military's energies on other, more positive operations as a means to help solidify public support, while at the same time building force cohesion and experience. These auxiliary duties would include weapons disposal, demining, and support for disaster relief operations. Similar exercises were used successfully in El Salvador and South Africa.

DANGEROUS IDEAS

Ideas for the size and form of the new Afghan armed forces vary significantly. Some, such as Interim Defense Minister Muhammad Fahim Khan, have proposed creating a national military that combines

all the warlords' militias and other standing armed forces. This type of centralized force failed during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and remains unrealistic today. Undeterred, Fahim has publicly stated that he envisions an army of 200,000 troops, almost twice the size of the Soviet-era force. This proposal ignores the incredible financial burden that a large national army places on a nascent state, at the very time it is least able to afford it. In Mozambique, for example, officials decided to integrate all armed units into a large national force, and to demilitarize later. Political leaders overestimated the resources available to fund this force, however, and troops did not receive their promised pay. The resulting dissension within the force led some parts of the new military to revolt, provoking a renewed crisis that the new government barely withstood. Maintaining a centralized force of the magnitude Fahim has proposed, moreover, would eventually require some form of national conscription. In the past, this proved highly unpopular and undercut public support for both the communists and the Taliban, a mistake the new government would do well to avoid.

Even a somewhat smaller central army of roughly 60,000 troops, as force planners in the United States have proposed, is unrealistic and does not address the spoiler problem. Simply re-creating a national army strictly controlled from Kabul will do little to convince individual tribal or ethnic groups that the central government is not seeking to dominate them. In fact, if the interim government's composition offers any guide to Afghanistan's eventual leadership, a national army responsible solely to the central government would almost certainly be dominated by the Tajik-controlled Northern Alliance—and thus would pose a direct challenge to local power bases. This situation could provoke both Pashtuns and some warlords to revolt against the central government in the near future, as they would seek to strike while the government was still weak.

A third suggestion is that the new armed force should not be a military at all. Instead, it should fall somewhere between an army and a police force, akin to Costa Rica's small, paramilitary-style national guard. It would focus exclusively on domestic security and have no heavy weapons, so as not to threaten the authority and clout of regional power brokers. This solution, however, underestimates the strength and determination of the new government's potential opponents. Carrying only small arms, the paramilitary force would be outgunned by the full range of potential spoilers—holdout Taliban or

al Qaeda bands, warlord armies, and even individual criminal bands—and unable to integrate the warlords' standing forces.

A BALANCED SOLUTION

There is a different solution, however. A force that incorporates the best elements of the proposed models while mitigating their failures could resolve the problems presented by all the potential spoilers. Such a force would have two components: first, a small, ethnically integrated professional army answerable to national political authorities; and second, a "national guard" that incorporates tribal and warlord militias (and in the south, the U.S.-trained anti–al Qaeda troops) into formal units responsible to provincial governments. This solution avoids the pitfalls of the other options on the table by balancing Kabul's various needs: a professional army capable of guaranteeing the state's sovereignty and suppressing any total spoilers; integrating the various armed, greedy spoilers; and assuaging the concerns of potential limited spoilers.

In terms of size, the new army should be large enough to fulfill its duties but small enough to facilitate the army's rapid professionalization and help assure individual ethnic and tribal groups that the army will not be used as a means of conquest or control. A force structure of roughly 30,000 troops would fit these requirements: six maneuver brigades, four light and two mechanized, supported by artillery, engineering, and logistics assets. This force mix, essentially a smaller version of Afghanistan's pre–civil war military, would be mobile, able to operate across Afghanistan's varied terrain, and equipped with enough firepower to deal effectively with likely foes. It would not, however, be heavy enough to be used as an occupying force if hijacked by any one ethnic group.

Recruitment should occur through the mechanism that Karzai's interim administration established for the ISAF programs, drawing from each of Afghanistan's 33 provinces. All new recruits should then train together in ethnically integrated units. The officer corps should be built in a similar manner, with each governor delegating a small number of officers to train at a central academy that incorporates all the ethnic groups.

The ethnically integrated brigades should be based near the major urban areas (Charikar, Gardez, Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Mazar-i-Sharif), to help the government establish na-

tional authority without directly encroaching on the fiefdoms of rural leaders. The basing of units or individual commanders should be rotated on a regular basis to prevent the development of overly close ties between particular military units and local political authorities—a strategy used successfully in a number of African states.

For this army to be accepted and trusted by all Afghans, its command structure must be broad-based and unified. A senior leadership drawn from or structured along purely ethnic or partisan lines would make excluded groups suspicious of the army and the regime behind it—at the potential expense of future peace. If a political dispute arises while the new force is being put together, disgruntled groups will then be able to walk out of the entire process with their armed units behind them. The example of Angola, where a failed military integration led to another decade of warfare, stands as a clear warning.

The initial wave of generals appointed to lead a new Afghan army does not bode well in this regard. Of the 100 or so generals named by Defense Minister Fahim during the interim administration, about 90 are Tajiks hailing from the relatively small Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul. Yet this unfortunate beginning does not have to doom the whole project. Like all appointments made by the interim government, these selections should be reassessed under the 18-month transitional authority appointed by the Loya Jirga (the traditional Afghan assembly). A little finesse should be used in shifting slots and considering future appointments, aiming to restructure the senior military leadership so that it better reflects Afghan demographics. One possibility is to move a portion of these officers into other, potentially more lucrative government bureaucracies.

As is the practice in Western militaries, national political authorities should appoint the senior military staff, while the military bureaucracy should nominate individual unit commanders. The new army may initially have to be relatively top-heavy. This may not be the most militarily efficient structure, but the creation and disbursement of a greater number of senior slots will provide Kabul with valuable political chips to bring all parties, including the warlords, to the table. After the critical postwar period has passed—most likely at least three to five years down the road—the government can slim down the command structure to better reflect professional competence.

This smaller national army structure takes a significant step, but does not go all the way, toward dissipating any perceived threat posed

by a central government. Alone it will not convince the major power brokers to accept military integration. This goal, however, could be achieved fully if the force were complemented with regional "national guards," regularized units that bring the existing warlord-dominated militias into the fold. Structured at the province level, these guards would be modeled after the various contemporary and historical frontier militia forces in neighboring countries, such as the Rangers and Khyber Rifles in Pakistan and the Assam Rifles in India. The local political authority would recruit and command these guards, who would handle paramilitary duties such as protecting major public installations and lines of communication. Basic law and order should remain the task of civil police forces.

The formation of provincial militia units provides a further means to incorporate recalcitrant warlords into the political structure. If carefully coordinated with other demobilization efforts, the new militias would become one alternative means of peaceful, gainful employment for the masses of fighters currently employed by the warlords. The regional command structure would also formally delineate the lines of control that are presently a major source of contention. Finally, the presence of provincial guards loosely based around an ethnic identity would offer local communities a sense of assurance that their own kin are guaranteeing their security.

With initial financial help from abroad, the central government would ideally provide the largest part—if not all—of the funding for these regional units. This financial leverage over the warlords would allow Kabul to lock them into an implicit bargain: the government keeps the money flowing and the warlords get a seat at the table, as long as their forces keep the peace and do not engage in predatory activities aimed at the local populace. The sides would gain even greater confidence in each other if the deal also included provisions for the cantonment of heavy weapons.

In the beginning, the Pentagon and the ISAF should be prepared to send military advisers (including perhaps the same special forces officers who have already built relationships with local warlords) to aid these regional units. Serving as executive officers (the second-in-command), these advisers would provide structure and professionalism as well as a neutral presence to guarantee that all sides meet their commitments. The anti–al Qaeda training program should also be expanded and amended to teach the regional troops basic profes-

sional skills. After the situation has normalized, the executive slots for the foreign military advisers could be replaced by a rotation of officers on temporary transfer from the Afghan national army, as is the practice in Pakistan and India.

CARPE DIEM

With the removal of the Taliban, the pause in internecine fighting, and the pledges of aid and engagement by the international community, the prospects for peace in Afghanistan appear more positive than they have for decades. Peace, however, is by no means certain.

Whether the challenges of military integration are resolved will determine the success or failure of the entire peace process. Getting this task right requires action from international parties in four critical areas: helping to specify what shape the military should take before a final peace agreement is signed, dedicating a portion of the international aid package toward army integration, creating an atmosphere in which integration can succeed, and coordinating the presently disjointed military training programs. The international aid funds must be used to establish a military structure that is integrated and effectively responds to the spoiler problem. If these relatively limited and entirely achievable steps are taken, the prospects for peace in Afghanistan may have a chance. If not, yet another opportunity to restore hope to the Afghan people will have been lost.

Afghanistan Unbound

Kathy Gannon

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RETURN TO KABUL

In 1994, bitter fighting between competing warlords raged throughout Kabul, Afghanistan's capital city. It was a time marked by endless attacks, many of them on civilians. I saw one young boy raise his hand to catch a ball, only to have it sliced off at the wrist by a rocket. A 13-year-old girl, running home to retrieve blankets and clothes left behind by her fleeing family, stepped on a land mine, which exploded and blew off the bottom of her leg. All told, 50,000 Afghans—most of them civilians—died in the four-year fight for Kabul, and even more were maimed.

In one particularly grisly attack, five women from the Hazara ethnic group were scalped. Their attackers were not Taliban; this was still two years before that radical Islamist militia took Kabul. The assailants were loyal instead to one of many warlords battling for control of the city: Abdul Rasul Sayyaf.

Sayyaf's men had been fighting for years, first against the Soviet Union, after it invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and then, once the Soviets fled, against other mujahideen groups. Even among Afghan fight-

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ers, Sayyaf's private army stood out. It included more militant Arabs than the other factions and boasted closer financial links to Saudi Arabia; it even had offices in the desert kingdom. There were also strong ideological ties: unlike most Afghans, Sayyaf was a member of the strict Saudi Wahhabi sect of Islam. He opposed the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and was a fierce opponent of women's rights, refusing to meet or even talk to women outside his family.

Two years after the attack on the Hazara women, Sayyaf, along with then Defense Minister Ahmed Shah Masoud and President Burhanuddin Rabbani, was swept out of town by the Taliban. Today, however, many of the warlords are back in Kabul—and more powerful than ever. In fact, just a few months ago, during the Loya Jirga (grand council) held to draft a new national constitution, Sayyaf met with Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and President George W. Bush's special envoy. Neither side would reveal what was discussed, but it is widely believed that Khalilzad was courting Sayyaf's support for several constitutional provisions: a strong presidency, guarantees for women's and human rights, and protections for religious minorities. Sayyaf subsequently agreed to these provisions; just what he asked for in return is unknown. The mere fact that the negotiations took place, however, is unsettling, for it exposes the weakness of Washington's current Afghan strategy. The United States is betting that the same men who caused Afghanistan so much misery in the past will somehow lead it to democracy and stability in the future. The evidence, however, suggests that the opposite is happening. Opportunities have been lost, goodwill squandered, and lessons of history ignored.

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL(S)

Besides Sayyaf, several other key warlords have returned to power in Afghanistan. They include Muhammad Fahim, the current defense minister; Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Afghan president's special envoy for northern Afghanistan; and Rabbani, the former president and a current power broker. All these men share responsibility for the ferocious killing of the mid-1990s. They still maintain private armies and private jails and are reaping vast amounts of money from Afghanistan's illegal opium trade—valued at close to $2.3 billion last year—as well as from extortion and other rackets.

Yet these men also now sit at the negotiating table with the United States, the UN, and other members of the Afghan government, barter-

ing for power. And Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's interim president, seems unable to do much about it. The sense of déjà vu is so strong that Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's special envoy to Afghanistan, recently warned that the situation "is reminiscent of what was witnessed after the establishment of the mujahideen government in 1992"—which led to the rise of the Taliban a few years later.

How exactly did things get so bad so quickly? How did the fall of the Taliban—a great victory for Washington, and one that seemed to herald a new dawn for this battered country—lead to the return of the old status quo? The answer dates back to September 2001. Soon after al Qaeda staged its attacks against New York City and Washington, D.C., from its Afghan bases, the Northern Alliance teamed up with the United States to rout the terrorists and their Taliban sponsors. America's new allies, however, included some of the same men who had wreaked havoc in Afghanistan before the Taliban came to power, and many of them were almost as radical in their ideology as the Taliban themselves (Rabbani, while president from 1992 to 1996, even granted more than 600 Arab militants Afghan passports). In addition, their alliance with Washington seems to have been a tactical one at best. According to Milton Bearden, who was the CIA's main liaison to the mujahideen during the 1980s, "they never thought they couldn't manage us."

Problems began even before the negotiation of the Bonn accord, signed in December 2001 under UN auspices. That agreement was supposed to serve as a road map for post-Taliban Afghanistan, leading to the development of a new, stable, democratic nation. The parties agreed that two Loya Jirgas would be held, one to elect an interim president and cabinet, and one to pass a constitution and set a timeline for national elections. But in the horse-trading for cabinet positions that accompanied the agreement, three top posts—the foreign, defense, and interior ministership—were given to members of Jamiat-e-Islami, an Islamist, ethnic-Tajik faction of the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani.

The leaders of the Northern Alliance agreed to the appointment of Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, as interim president, but only because he did not have a militia of his own. In practice, this has meant that Karzai can do little to impose his will on those who retain private armies. Karzai took office as a nationalist, a believer in an Afghanistan for all Afghans, regardless of ethnicity. But few of his colleagues share this view. The new government is composed of militarily strong Tajik, Uz-

bek, and Hazara factions, and a weak Pashtun majority, governed by exiles who have recently returned to Afghanistan after decades elsewhere—mostly in the United States.

The United States and the UN presumably thought that Karzai would get the strength he needed to rule Afghanistan from the ongoing presence of Western soldiers in the country, who sometimes serve to enforce his writ. Yet even as Washington claims to support Karzai, it has continued to rely on the independent warlords for help hunting down remnant units of the Taliban and al Qaeda. This dual strategy has served only to strengthen the former Northern Alliance, by giving it U.S.-supplied guns, money, and prestige, while eroding Karzai's already weak central authority.

Even in Kabul, the limits of Karzai's power and the perfidy of the warlords have become clear. The Bonn agreement set clear timetables for the decommissioning of private militias. Even before they disbanded, these armies were to withdraw from Kabul. The Bonn agreement was unequivocal on this point: the warlord's troops were supposed to be out of the city by the time the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed there in late December 2001.

The warlords never planned to honor these agreements, however. On November 11, two days before the Taliban fled town, when Sayyaf was asked by satellite telephone about U.S. requests that his militia remain outside Kabul, he laughed and said, "Our brothers will be [there]." Fahim, who would later become defense minister, took a similar position. Shortly after the Taliban were routed, I asked him whether he was going to remove his troops from Kabul before the peacekeepers entered the city. His answer was an unequivocal no. I replied that the Bonn agreement was very specific on this point, that all militia had to be housed outside the capital by the time the peacekeepers came to Kabul. Again, his answer was no. Fahim's troops remain in the city to this day; U.S. and UN envoys are still trying to get rid of them.

It is little wonder, then, that Karzai's attempts to assert himself and reassure his subjects have had little impact. Although Karzai has said that ordinary Taliban and the country's Pashtun majority have nothing to fear from the new regime, the disproportionate influence still wielded by the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance has spread fear throughout the country. This has been exacerbated by the small size of the international force stationed in Afghanistan: the total number of U.S. troops is currently only about 11,000, and they are

employed only to hunt al Qaeda and the Taliban. ISAF, which numbers 6,000, does not venture outside Kabul.

BAD COMPANY

Just who are the men Washington has turned to for help in its hunt for Osama bin Laden? President Karzai has praised the mujahideen as heroes for their part in the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. But that is not how ordinary Afghans view them. As many Afghans told me when I visited the country last December, the mujahideen forfeited the title of heroes and assumed the mantle of criminals when they took Kabul in 1992 and turned their guns on each other and the surrounding civilians. Today the killing is blamed almost entirely on Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who fled to Iran in 1996 and is now battling the central government, and who, between 1992 and 1996, rained rockets on Kabul in a bid for more power. However, the ordinary Afghans who lived through that period know that all the factions share blame. It was Sayyaf, not Hekmatyar, who once said that Kabul should be razed (since everyone who had stayed behind during the rule of the communists must be communist themselves). Sayyaf's men—as well as those of Ahmed Shah Masoud and his deputy, Fahim—carried out merciless attacks on civilians during the early 1990s, earning a reputation for brutality.

The Americans, for their part, seem to know who they are dealing with but do not seem bothered by their histories. "Some of them have had awful records. I don't deny that," Khalilzad told me in December when I interviewed him inside the heavily fortified U.S. embassy in Kabul. "The question [is] whether one should go toe-to-toe here and now or start an evolutionary strategy…One thing could lead to another if people don't behave."

It's not clear, however, what Khalilzad thinks qualifies as bad behavior. The warlords have now ruled the country for two years, and Afghanistan seems to be degenerating into a sort of narco-state, which could spin out of control. Not only are the warlords complicit in drug-running and corruption, but according to Afghanistan's Human Rights Committee, they are also guilty of abusing and harassing the population. The warlords have stolen peoples' homes, arbitrarily arrested their enemies, and tortured them in private jails.

Those who speak out against the mujahideen do so at their peril. Sima Samar, the head of the committee and a former minister of women's affairs, was threatened with death for daring to criticize

the warlords. So was a man who publicly chastised them during the first Loya Jirga; in fact, he was so frightened that he and his family subsequently sought political asylum. At the second Loya Jirga last December, one woman—Malalai Joya, a 25-year-old social worker from the deeply conservative southwest—went so far as to denounce the "mujahideen heroes" from the stage, lambasting them as criminals who had destroyed the country. "They should be brought to national and international justice," she told the assembly. In response, the chairman of the Loya Jirga, Sibghatullah Mojaddidi—himself a former mujahideen fighter—threatened to have her thrown out of the tent, demanded that she apologize (she refused, although others did on her behalf), and granted Sayyaf 15 minutes to respond, during which he called people like Joya criminals and communists. Amnesty International has claimed that she subsequently received death threats.

The mujahideen may have proved good at abusing their fellow citizens, but they have not done as well at accomplishing the goal Washington has set for them: capturing or killing al Qaeda and Taliban holdouts. Even as the factional militias have wreaked havoc among the general population, the Taliban have started to recover and regroup, especially in the south and east. For example, government officials and Afghan aid workers in southeastern Zabul Province report that 8 of Zabul's 11 districts are now run largely by the Taliban. Meanwhile, much of the intelligence that the warlords have supplied to Washington on the Taliban has proved faulty. Last December, for example, U.S. raids on supposed Taliban and al Qaeda facilities killed 16 civilians, 15 of them children. The problem, according to Bearden, is that the United States is "not clever enough to not be manipulated. The reality is that the West as a whole doesn't mean much to [the warlords]."

Bearden warns that the warlords and factional leaders may not be willing to cooperate with the United States for much longer, since they will soon have enough resources to strike out on their own. He explains, "With $2.6 billion plus in poppies and another couple of billion that come through in the regular smuggling world ... at what point do [the warlords] not need us anymore? At what point, with all of this money coming in, do they look at us ... and say, 'Thank you very much, we are quite happy with the way it is. I have my big house, my militia, so don't [mess] with me'?"

THE ABANDONED AFGHANS

The main victims of all this have been ordinary Afghans. The public has grown disappointed and disillusioned with the international community, which it increasingly blames for failing to deliver on the lofty promises that preceded the U.S. attack on the Taliban. The West has even empowered their former persecutors. According to a Human Rights Watch report, the "fears of many Afghans ... stem not only from ongoing abuses, but also from the memory of abuses committed by current rulers when they were previously in power in the early 1990s, before the Taliban seized power. As one woman in a rural area explained, 'We are afraid because we remember the past.'"

The international community also failed to make good on its aid commitments. CARE International, a global humanitarian organization, reports that Afghanistan received pledges of only $75 per person in foreign aid in 2002 and will get only $42 per person over the next five years. In contrast, an average of $250 per person was pledged to the citizens of Bosnia, East Timor, Kosovo, and Rwanda.

Moreover, there are increasing signs that the damage being done to Afghanistan will not be easily remedied. The chance to co-opt and pacify the country's majority Pashtun population has been squandered thanks to U.S. policies that treat them as the enemy and empower minority Tajiks and Uzbeks instead. Moreover, the general lawlessness of the country means that aid organizations no longer dare send their international workers outside the capital. They are particularly wary of the south and east, which have become the most dangerous regions. After the initial collapse of the Taliban, for example, 16 international aid organizations started operating in the southeastern province of Zabul. Today only 2 remain.

One new dilemma is that Washington has started using military forces to provide aid, which, many development officials complain, dangerously blurs the lines between soldiers and aid workers. The United States says this is the only way to get aid to the insecure southern and eastern regions. But Pierre Kraehenbuehl, director of operations for the International Committee of the Red Cross, explains the problem with the following example: "One day a [military] civil affairs officer goes into a village and talks to villagers about reconstruction, and the same week a humanitarian worker goes to the same village, talks to the villagers, [and] offers humanitarian aid. To the villagers they are the same. They are both Western, driving white

vehicles. Then a few days later there is a military operation and there are possibly victims among the civilians. How do the people of the village make the distinction between those who may have been used to collect intelligence for that intervention?"

Khalilzad says that the United States now recognizes that it made a mistake by not moving into the south and the east of Afghanistan sooner to mollify the Pashtun population. As a result, Washington has adopted an "accelerated" program aimed at providing big, highly visible reconstruction projects through provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), run by the Defense Department with cooperation from some civilian agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department. Nine of these PRTs are currently at work, and several more are planned or are already starting up. The British now run a PRT in northern Mazar-i-Sharif, the Germans (under NATO auspices) in northern Kunduz, and the New Zealanders in central Bamiyan; the Americans are working through the troubled Pashtun-dominated south and east.

The PRTs are composed of a "large number of military folk," according to Joseph Collins, deputy assistant secretary of defense for stability operations. Collins says that using the military to do aid work is "inevitable" in a dangerous environment like Afghanistan's. But although aid workers agree that Afghanistan is dangerous, they disagree with Washington about how soldiers should be used to address this. According to Kevin Henry, advocacy director for CARE International, Western forces should not provide aid directly but instead should create a more secure environment by arresting the Taliban and the warlords and helping to train the national police and the army. This would allow aid organizations to return to the afflicted regions and do the kind of work they are best at.

Despite the overarching insecurity and instability throughout Afghanistan, there have been a few limited successes. For example, a new Kabul-to-Kandahar highway opened in December 2003. (Originally slated for completion in 2005, the project was sped up, reportedly by order of the White House.) Such projects are hugely expensive, however. The highway cost $250 million, or roughly $625,000 per kilometer, since entire asphalt plants had to be airlifted into the region. Yet plans have been announced to build another 1,400 kilometers of highway and secondary roads, many of them in the neglected south and the east. International donors, led by the United States, have also

announced plans to build a large hydroelectric dam, as well as new schools, courthouses, and administrative buildings.

FICKLE FRIENDS

Given the sorry reality of Afghanistan today—with its flourishing drug trade, widespread insecurity, sluggish disarmament, and insufficient international aid—such projects will not be enough to stabilize the country. Afghanistan is scheduled to hold elections in June, but it does not have enough money to register voters. In fact, barely ten percent of Afghan voters have been registered to date.

If Washington really wants to help, it must abandon its policy of working with the warlords and factional leaders of the Northern Alliance. Sayyaf, Fahim, and their men have nothing to offer Afghanistan that would help the country move forward. Concessions made to the warlords will be met only with demands for more concessions. Instead, the United States should concentrate on training a police force, which, along with the national army that the United States and France are helping to build, could provide security at a local level.

Unfortunately, the United States shows no signs of abandoning its warlord allies. In fact, Khalilzad has suggested that the local militias —the same groups that the UN is currently trying to disarm and reintegrate into Afghan society—be used to provide security for the upcoming election. Khalilzad has said that these men could be vetted and paired with U.S. special forces. But this would be like using foxes to guard a henhouse. Moreover, the militias have worked with special forces for two years now and have shown no sign of improving their behavior. On the contrary, they have focused much of their efforts on drugs, extortion, and intimidation, using their relationships with U.S. soldiers to frighten local civilians and advance their own greed.

Washington's willingness to even contemplate using these men to safeguard the elections suggests that U.S. policymakers have learned little from the last two years. Either that, or Washington wants to make sure elections proceed at any cost. Vikram Parekh, senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, calls U.S. policy in Afghanistan "a very improvised political strategy essentially [designed] to give an appearance of stability in Afghanistan ahead of the November elections." He says that the United States and the UN are following a "checklist strategy," achieving minor benchmarks without doing much to make Afghanistan stable in the long run. The current plan is to oversee the

election of Afghanistan's first president, presumably Karzai, as soon as possible, followed by a reinvigorated reconstruction program. Karzai would use his five-year term and the significant powers he has been granted under the new constitution to build strong institutions, including a national army and a police force.

Although this approach might sound good on paper, it has several major inherent flaws and seems to ignore the current chaos. Karzai is likely to be elected president. Although the new constitution invests this office with strong powers, it remains unclear whether Karzai will have the strength to use them. Given current U.S. policies and flagging international assistance, moreover, it is unrealistic to expect any Afghan government to deal on its own with the rampant corruption, thriving drug trade (bigger today than at any time in Afghanistan's past), general lawlessness and insecurity, and dangerous private militias. The new army, which totals a mere 5,700 soldiers, is losing recruits almost as quickly as it can acquire them, and the police force has only begun to be developed.

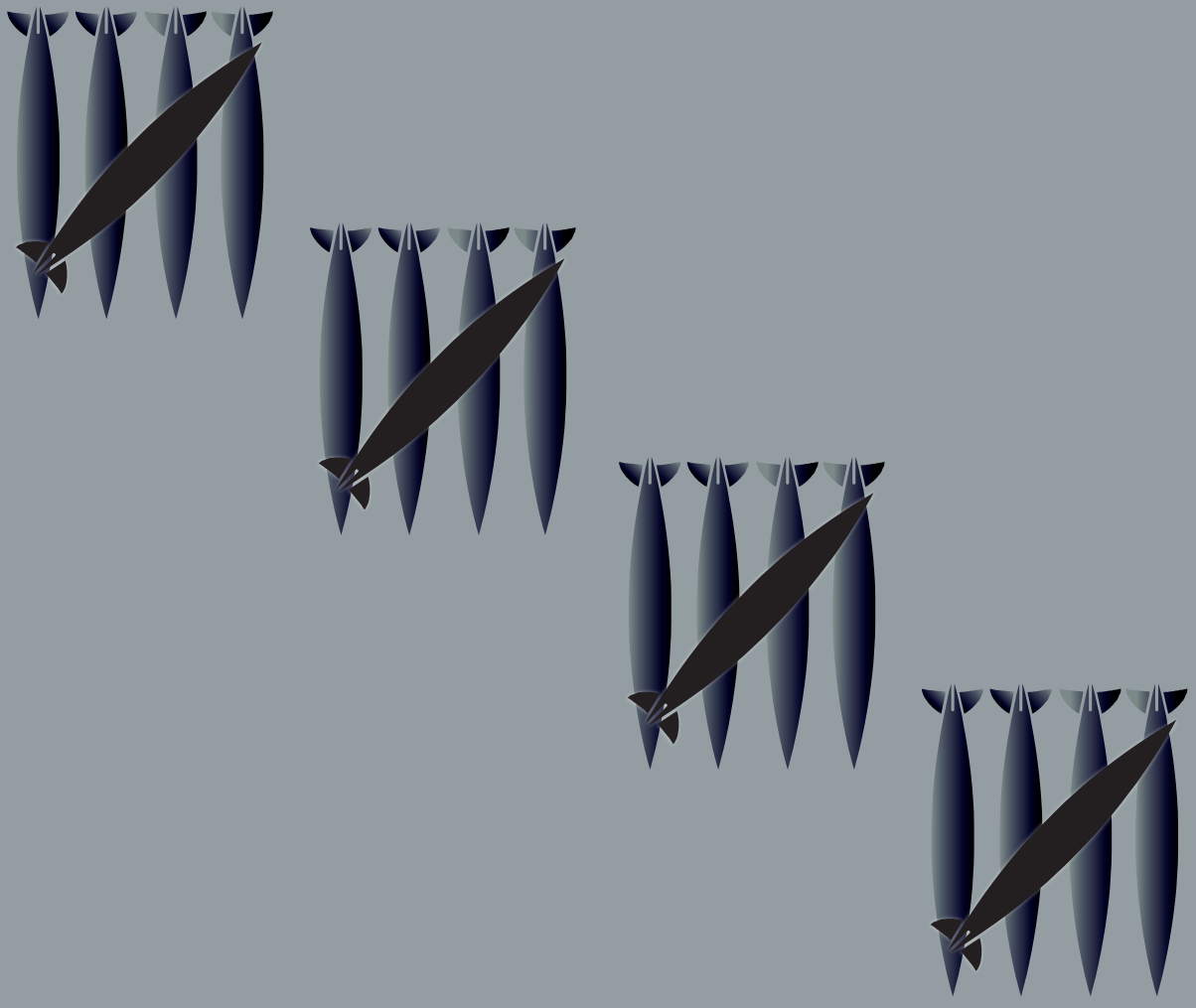
Yet much more international help seems unlikely. With resources stretched thin in Iraq, it seems improbable that the United States will offer to play a larger role in Afghanistan. Even without a huge new investment, however, Washington could help matters by making a few key changes. To begin with, it should improve coordination with its European allies to beef up the NATO contingent in Afghanistan. Here an American lead is key, since hardly any other NATO countries have been willing to send more than a few hundred troops to the country, and those they have remain in the big cities, avoiding the troubled areas in Afghanistan's east.

Within Afghanistan, the United States should recognize that it needs partners other than the Northern Alliance and former exiles. The warlords must be abandoned. Removing men such as Fahim, Sayyaf, and others—perhaps by granting them ambassadorial or other posts outside the country—will weaken their followers and make disarmament much easier. Washington should also reach out to the majority of the population, especially the Pashtuns. On the security front, the United States should focus its hunt for the Taliban on those leaders who collaborated with al Qaeda, such as the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, former Defense Minister Maulvi Obeidullah, former Interior Minister Abdul Razaq, ex-Governor Maulvi Abdul Hassan, and former Deputy Prime Minister Haji Abdul Kabir. Rank-and-file Taliban, however, should not be ostracized.

As for narcotics, which could well become Afghanistan's biggest problem, the United States and the Karzai government should consider how the Taliban managed to reduce this trade. The Taliban, which banned all drugs in their final years, used a simple but effective strategy that could be replicated today: holding village elders and mullahs responsible for poppies grown in their area. Offenders were jailed for a month and their crops were burned. As a result, village leaders made sure to inspect their territories every morning before dawn (the best time for planting poppies) to make sure no illicit crops were being grown.

If Washington decides to adopt these strategies, it has a chance of helping turn Afghanistan around—or at least of improving the current situation. If it turns its back on the country, however, it will break faith with the Afghan people, who took the West at its word when it said it would not abandon them again.

THE SURGE



Saving Afghanistan

Barnett R. Rubin

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TALIBAN RESURGENT

Afghanistan has stepped back from a tipping point. At the cost of taking and inflicting more casualties than in any year since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 (and four times as many as in 2005), NATO troops turned back a frontal offensive by the Taliban last summer. The insurgents aimed to capture a district west of Kandahar, hoping to take that key city and precipitate a crisis in Kabul, the capital. Despite this setback, however, the Taliban-led insurgency is still active on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, and the frontier region has once again become a refuge for what President George W. Bush once called the main threat to the United States—"terrorist groups of global reach." Insurgents in both Afghanistan and Pakistan have imported suicide bombing, improvised explosive technology, and global communications strategies from Iraq; in the south, attacks have closed 35 percent of the schools. Even with opium production at record levels, slowing economic growth is failing to satisfy the population's most basic needs, and many community leaders accuse the government

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itself of being the main source of abuse and insecurity. Unless the shaky Afghan government receives both the resources and the leadership required to deliver tangible benefits in areas cleared of insurgents, the international presence in Afghanistan will come to resemble a foreign occupation—an occupation that Afghans will ultimately reject.

For decades—not only since 2001—U.S. policymakers have underestimated the stakes in Afghanistan. They continue to do so today. A mere course correction will not be enough to prevent the country from sliding into chaos. Washington and its international partners must rethink their strategy and significantly increase both the resources they devote to Afghanistan and the effectiveness of those resources' use. Only dramatic action can reverse the perception, common among both Afghans and their neighbors, that Afghanistan is not a high priority for the United States—and that the Taliban are winning as a result. Washington's appeasement of Pakistan, diversion of resources to Iraq, and perpetual underinvestment in Afghanistan—which gets less aid per capita than any other state with a recent postconflict rebuilding effort—have fueled that suspicion.

Contrary to the claims of the Bush administration, whose attention after the September 11 attacks quickly wandered off to Iraq and grand visions of transforming the Middle East, the main center of terrorism "of global reach" is in Pakistan. Al Qaeda has succeeded in reestablishing its base by skillfully exploiting the weakness of the state in the Pashtun tribal belt, along the Afghan-Pakistani frontier. In the words of one Western military commander in Afghanistan, "Until we transform the tribal belt, the U.S. is at risk."

Far from achieving that objective in the 2001 Afghan war, the U.S.-led coalition merely pushed the core leadership of al Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan, with no strategy for consolidating this apparent tactical advance. The Bush administration failed to provide those Taliban fighters who did not want to defend al Qaeda with a way to return to Afghanistan peacefully, and its policy of illegal detention at Guantánamo Bay and Bagram Air Base, in Afghanistan, made refuge in Pakistan, often with al Qaeda, a more attractive option.

The Taliban, meanwhile, have drawn on fugitives from Afghanistan, newly minted recruits from undisrupted training camps and militant madrasahs, and tribesmen alienated by civilian casualties and government and coalition abuse to reconstitute their command structure, recruitment and funding networks, and logistical bases in Paki-

stan. On September 19, 2001, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf told his nation that he had to cooperate with Washington in order to "save Afghanistan and Taliban from being harmed"; accordingly, he has been all too happy to follow the Bush administration's instructions to focus on al Qaeda's top leadership while ignoring the Taliban. Intelligence collected during Western military offensives in mid-2006 confirmed that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was continuing to actively support the Taliban leadership, which is now working out of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan Province, in western Pakistan. As a result, a cross-border insurgency has effectively exploited Afghanistan's impoverished society and feeble government.

In May of 2006, Amrullah Saleh, the director of Afghanistan's national intelligence agency, completed an assessment of the threat posed by the insurgency. Saleh, who acted as the Northern Alliance's liaison with the CIA during Operation Enduring Freedom, concluded that political progress in Afghanistan had not been matched by an effective strategy of consolidation. "The pyramid of Afghanistan government's legitimacy," he wrote, "should not be brought down due to our inefficiency in knowing the enemy, knowing ourselves and applying resources effectively." U.S. commanders and intelligence officials circulated Saleh's warning to their field commanders and agents in Afghanistan and their superiors in Washington. Sustaining the achievements of the past five years depends on how well they heed that warning.

"STILL OURS TO LOSE"

In the past year, a number of events have raised the stakes in Afghanistan and highlighted the threat to the international effort there. The future of NATO depends on its success in this first deployment outside of Europe. Although it suffered a setback in the south, the Pakistan-based, Taliban-led insurgency has become ever more daring and deadly in the southern and eastern parts of the country, while extending its presence all the way to the outskirts of Kabul. NATO deployed to areas neglected by the coalition, most notably to the southern province of Helmand—and the Taliban responded with increased strength and maneuverability. On September 8, a particularly bold attack on a coalition convoy in the city killed 16 people, including two U.S. soldiers, near the U.S. embassy—the most heavily fortified section of Kabul. Even as NATO has deployed its forces across the country—par-

ticularly in the province of Helmand, a Taliban stronghold that produces some 40 percent of the world's opium—the Taliban have shown increasing power and agility.

Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the Taliban's limited institutions and the ruthlessness of their retribution against "collaborators" neutralized much of the Afghan population; only the successful political consolidation of NATO and coalition military victories can start to build confidence that it is safe to support the government. In some areas, there is now a parallel Taliban state, and locals are increasingly turning to Taliban-run courts, which are seen as more effective and fair than the corrupt official system. Suicide bombings, unknown in Afghanistan before their successful use by insurgents in Iraq, have recently sown terror in Kabul and other areas. They have also spread to Pakistan.

On the four trips I made to Afghanistan in 2006 (in January, March–April, July–August, and November), the growing frustration was palpable. In July, one Western diplomat who had been in Afghanistan for three years opened our meeting with an outburst. "I have never been so depressed," he said. "The insurgency is triumphant." An elder from Kunar Province, in eastern Afghanistan, said that government efforts against the insurgency were weak because "the people don't trust any of the people in government offices." An elder from the northern province of Baghlan echoed that sentiment: "The people have no hope for this government now." A UN official added, "So many people have left the country recently that the government has run out of passports."

"The conditions in Afghanistan are ripe for fundamentalism," a former minister who is now a prominent member of parliament told me. "Our situation was not resolved before Iraq started. Iraq has not been resolved, and now there is fighting in Palestine and Lebanon. Then maybe Iran…We pay the price for all of it." An elder who sheltered President Hamid Karzai when Karzai was working underground against the Taliban described to me how he was arrested by U.S. soldiers: they placed a hood on his head, whisked him away, and then released him with no explanation. "What we have realized," he concluded, "is that the foreigners are not really helping us. We think that the foreigners do not want Afghanistan to be rebuilt."

Yet no one I spoke to advocated giving up. One of the same elders who expressed frustration with the corruption of the government and its distance from the people also said, "We have been with the Taliban and have seen their cruelty. People don't want them back." A fruit

trader from Kandahar complained: "The Taliban beat us and ask for food, and then the government beats us for helping the Taliban." But he and his colleagues still called Karzai the country's best leader in 30 years—a modest endorsement, given the competition, but significant nonetheless. "My working assumption," said one Western military leader, "is that the international community needs to double its resources. We can't do it on the margins. We have no hedge against domestic and regional counterforces." After all, he noted, the battle for Afghanistan "is still ours to lose."

THE 30-YEAR WAR

The recent upsurge in violence is only the latest chapter in Afghanistan's 30-year war. That war started as a Cold War ideological battle, morphed into a regional clash of ethnic factionalism, and then became the center of the broader conflict between the West and a transnational Islamist terrorist network.

It is no surprise that a terrorist network found a base in Afghanistan: just as Lenin might have predicted, it picked the weakest link in the modern state system's rusty chain. Today's Afghanistan formed as a buffer state within the sphere of influence of British India. Because the government, then as now, was unable to extract enough revenue from this barren territory to rule it, its function had more to do with enabling an elite subsidized by aid to control the territory as part of the defense of foreign empires than with providing security and governance to the people of Afghanistan. Hence, the oft-noted paradox of modern Afghanistan: a country that needs decentralized governance to provide services to its scattered and ethnically diverse population has one of the world's most centralized governments. That paradox has left the basic needs of Afghanistan's citizens largely unfulfilled—and thus left them vulnerable to the foreign forces that have long brought their own struggles to the Afghan battleground.

In the eighteenth century, as neighboring empires collapsed, Afghan tribal leaders seized opportunities to build states by conquering richer areas in the region. In 1715, Mirwais Khan Hotak (of the same Kandahari Pashtun tribe as the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar), overthrew the Shiite governor of Kandahar, then a province of the Iranian Safavid empire; seven years later, his son sacked Isfahan, the Iranian capital at the time. Subsequently, a Turkmen leader, Nader Shah, captured Isfahan and went on to conquer Kabul and

Delhi. When Nader Shah was assassinated in 1747, the commander of his bodyguard, Ahmad Khan Abdali (a member of the same Kandahari Pashtun tribe as President Karzai), retreated back to Kandahar, where, according to official histories, he was made king of the Afghans at a tribal jirga. He led the tribes who constituted his army on raids and in the conquest of Kashmir and Punjab.

The expansion of the British and Russian empires cut off the opportunity for conquest and external predation—undermining the fiscal base of the ruler's power and throwing Afghanistan into turmoil for much of the nineteenth century. As the British Empire expanded northwest from the Indian subcontinent toward Central Asia, it first tried to conquer Afghanistan and then, after two Anglo-Afghan wars, settled for making it a buffer against the Russian empire to the north.

The British established a three-tiered border to separate their empire from Russia through a series of treaties with Kabul and Moscow. The first frontier separated the areas of the Indian subcontinent under direct British administration from those areas under Pashtun tribal control (today this line divides those areas administered by the Pakistani state from the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies). The second frontier, the Durand Line, divided the Pashtun tribal areas from the territories under the administration of the emir of Afghanistan (Pakistan and the rest of the international community consider this line to be the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, although Afghanistan has never accepted it). The outer frontier, the borders of Afghanistan with Russia, Iran, and China, demarcated the British sphere of influence; the British enabled the emir to subdue and control Afghanistan with subsidies of money and weapons.

In the twentieth century, however, the dissolution of these empires eroded this security arrangement. The Third Anglo-Afghan War, in 1919, concluded with the recognition of Afghanistan's full sovereignty. The country's first sovereign, King Amanullah, tried to build a strong nationalist state. His use of scarce resources for development rather than an army left him vulnerable to revolt, and his effort collapsed after a decade. The British helped another contender, Nader Shah, consolidate a weaker form of rule. Then, in the late 1940s, came the independence and partition of India, which even more dramatically altered the strategic stakes in the region.

Immediately tensions flared between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan claimed that Pakistan was a new state, not a successor to Brit-

ish India, and that all past border treaties had lapsed. A loya jirga in Kabul denied that the Durand Line was an international border and called for self-determination of the tribal territories as Pashtunistan. Skirmishes across the Durand Line began with the covert support of both governments. At the same time, Islamabad was aligning itself with the United States in order to balance India—which led Afghanistan, in turn, to rely on aid from Moscow to train and supply its army. Pakistan, as a result, came to regard Afghanistan as part of a New Delhi-Kabul-Moscow axis that fundamentally challenged its security. With U.S. assistance, Pakistan developed a capacity for covert asymmetric jihadi warfare, which it eventually used in both Afghanistan and Kashmir.

For the first decades of the Cold War, Afghanistan pursued a policy of nonalignment. The two superpowers developed informal rules of coexistence, each supporting different institutions and parts of the country; one Afghan leader famously claimed to light his American cigarettes with Soviet matches. But this arrangement ultimately proved hazardous to Afghanistan's health. An April 1978 coup by communist military officers brought to power a radical faction whose harsh policies provoked an insurgency. In December 1979, the Soviet Union sent in its military to bring an alternative communist faction to power, turning an insurgency into a jihad against the invaders. The United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others began spending billions of dollars to back the anticommunist Afghan mujahideen and their Arab auxiliaries—laying the foundations for an infrastructure of regional and global jihad.

The civil war seemed to come to an end with the 1988 Geneva accords, which provided for the withdrawal of Soviet troops (while allowing continued Soviet aid to the communist government in Kabul) and the end of foreign military assistance to the mujahideen. But the United States and Pakistan, intent on wiping out Soviet influence in Afghanistan entirely, ignored the stipulation that they stop arming the resistance. The result was a continuation of the conflict and, eventually, state failure.

In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union dissolved and the United States disengaged, ethnic militias went to war. Drug trafficking boomed, and Arab and other non-Afghan Islamist radicals strengthened their bases. Pakistan, still heavily involved in Afghanistan's internal battles, backed the Taliban, a radical group of mostly Pashtun clerics (the name means "students"). With Islamabad's help, the Taliban established control over most of Afghanistan by 1998, and the anti-Taliban resistance—

organized in a "Northern Alliance" of feuding former mujahideen and Soviet-backed militias, most of them from non-Pashtun ethnic groups—was pushed back to a few pockets of territory in the northeast. As their grip over Afghanistan tightened, the Taliban instituted harsh Islamic law and increasingly allied themselves with Osama bin Laden, who came to Afghanistan after being expelled from Sudan in 1996.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Washington assumed that the collapse of Afghanistan into warring chiefdoms—many of them allied with neighboring states or other external forces—was not worth worrying much about. The Clinton administration began to recognize the growing threat in Afghanistan after the al Qaeda bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998. But it never took decisive action, and when the Bush administration took office, it gave priority to other concerns. It took 9/11 to force Washington to recognize that a global terrorist opposition was gathering strength—using human and physical capital that the United States and its allies (especially Saudi Arabia) had supplied, through Pakistan's intelligence services, in pursuit of a Cold War strategic agenda.

OPPORTUNITIES LOST

When the Bush administration overthrew the Taliban after 9/11, it did so with a "light footprint": using CIA operatives and the Special Forces to coordinate Northern Alliance and other Afghan commanders on the ground and supporting them with U.S. airpower. After a quick military campaign, it backed the UN effort to form a new government and manage the political transition. It also reluctantly agreed to the formation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help the new Afghan government provide security and build new military and police forces. In 2003, the ISAF came under NATO command—the first-ever NATO military operation outside of Europe—and gradually expanded its operations from just Kabul to most of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. About 32,000 U.S. and allied forces are currently engaged in security assistance and counterinsurgency under NATO command, while another 8,000 coalition troops are involved in counterterrorist operations. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan coordinates the international community's support for political and economic reconstruction.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's overthrow, the presence of coalition troops served as a deterrent against both overt external subversion and open warfare among the various forces that had

been rearmed by Washington. This deterrent created an opportunity to build a functioning state; that state, however, now at the center, rather than the margins, of global and regional conflict, would have had to connect rather than separate its neighboring regions, a much more demanding goal. Accomplishing that goal would have required forming a government with sufficient resources and legitimacy to secure and develop its own territory and with a geopolitical identity unthreatening to its neighbors—especially Pakistan, whose deep penetration of Afghan society and politics enables it to play the role of spoiler whenever it chooses. Such a project would have meant additional troop deployments by the United States and its partners, especially in the border region, and rapid investment in reconstruction. It also would have required political reform and economic development in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Too little of this happened, and both Afghanistan and its international partners are paying the consequences. Rearming warlords empowered leaders the Afghan people had rejected; enabling the Northern Alliance to seize Kabul put those Pakistan most mistrusted in charge of the security forces. And the White House's opposition to "nation building" led to major delays in Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Effective economic aid is vital to addressing the pervasive poverty that debilitates the government and facilitates the recruitment of unemployed youths into militias or the insurgency. Economically and socially, Afghanistan remains far behind its neighbors. It is the poorest country in the world outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and its government remains weak and ineffective. Last year, it raised domestic revenue of about $13 per capita—hardly enough to buy each of its citizens one case of Coca-Cola from the recently opened bottling plant near Kabul, let alone take on all of the important tasks at hand.

Because Afghanistan has been so poor for so long, real nondrug growth averaged more than 15 percent from 2002 until this year, thanks in large part to the expenditures of foreign forces and aid organizations and the end of a drought. But growth fell to nine percent last year, and the UN and the Afghan government reported in November that growth "is still not sufficient to generate in a relatively short time the large numbers of new jobs necessary to substantially reduce poverty or overcome widespread popular disaffection. The reality is that only limited progress has been achieved in increasing availability of energy, revitalizing agriculture and the rural economy, and attracting new investment."

High unemployment is fueling conflict. As a fruit trader in Kandahar put it to me, "Those Afghans who are fighting, it is all because of unemployment." This will only get worse now that the postwar economic bubble has been punctured. Real estate prices and rents are dropping in Kabul, and occupancy rates are down. Fruit and vegetable sellers report a decline in demand of about 20 percent, and construction companies in Kabul report significant falls in employment and wages. A drought in some parts of the country has also led to displacement and a decline in agricultural employment, for which the record opium poppy crop has only partially compensated.

Moreover, the lack of electricity continues to be a major problem. No major new power projects have been completed, and Kabulis today have less electricity than they did five years ago. While foreigners and wealthy Afghans power air conditioners, hot-water heaters, computers, and satellite televisions with private generators, average Kabulis suffered a summer without fans and face a winter without heaters. Kabul got through the past two winters with generators powered by diesel fuel purchased by the United States; this year the United States made no such allocation.

Rising crime, especially the kidnapping of businessmen for ransom, is also leading to capital flight. Although no reliable statistics are available, people throughout the country, including in Kabul, report that crime is increasing—and complain that the police are the main criminals. Many report that kidnappers and robbers wear police uniforms. On August 24, men driving a new vehicle with tinted windows and police license plates robbed a bank van of $360,000 just blocks away from the Ministry of the Interior.

The corruption and incompetence of the police force (which lacks real training and basic equipment) were highlighted after riots last May, set off by the crash of a U.S. military vehicle. Rioters chanted slogans against the United States and President Karzai and attacked the parliament building, the offices of media outlets and nongovernmental organizations, diplomatic residences, brothels, and hotels and restaurants that purportedly served alcohol. The police, many of whom disappeared, proved incompetent, and the vulnerability of the government to mass violence became clear. Meanwhile, in a sign of growing ethno-factional tensions within the governing elite, Karzai, a Pashtun (the Pashtun are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan), suspected opposition leaders of fomenting violence by demonstrators,

who were largely from Panjshir, the home base of the main Northern Alliance group. (Panjshiri leaders deny the charge.) Karzai responded not by strengthening support for police reform but by appointing commanders of a rival Northern Alliance group to positions in the police force. Karzai argued that he was forced into such an unpalatable balancing act because of the international community's long-standing failure to respond to his requests for adequate resources for the police.

The formation of the Afghan National Army, which now has more than 30,000 troops, has been one of the relative success stories of the past five years, but one reason for its success is that it uses mostly fresh recruits; the 60,000 experienced fighters demobilized from militias have, instead of joining the army, joined the police, private security firms, or organized crime networks—and sometimes all three. One former mujahideen commander, Din Muhammad Jurat, became a general in the Ministry of the Interior and is widely believed—including by his former mujahideen colleagues—to be a major figure in organized crime and responsible for the murder of a cabinet minister in February 2002. (He also works with U.S. Protection and Investigations, a Texas-based firm that provides international agencies and construction projects with security guards, many of whom are former fighters from Jurat's militia and current employees at the Ministry of the Interior.)

Meanwhile, the drug economy is booming. The weakness of the state and the lack of security for licit economic activity has encouraged this boom, and according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, opium poppy production in the country reached a record 6,100 metric tons last year, surpassing the 2005 total by 49 percent. This increase belies past claims of progress, made on the basis of a five percent cultivation decrease in 2005. Although the decrease was due almost entirely to the political persuasion of farmers by the government, the United States failed to deliver the alternative livelihoods the farmers expected and continued to pressure the Afghan government to engage in counterproductive crop eradication. The Taliban exploited the eradication policy to gain the support of poppy growers.

Counternarcotics efforts provide leverage for corrupt officials to extract enormous bribes from traffickers. Such corruption has attracted former militia commanders who joined the Ministry of the Interior after being demobilized. Police chief posts in poppy-growing districts are sold to the highest bidder: as much as $100,000 is paid for a six-month appointment to a position with a monthly salary of $60.

And while the Taliban have protected small farmers against eradication efforts, not a single high-ranking government official has been prosecuted for drug-related corruption.

Drugs are only part of a massive cross-border smuggling network that has long provided a significant part of the livelihoods of the major ethnic groups on the border, the Pashtun and the Baluch. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, warlords, and corrupt officials of all ethnic groups profit by protecting and preying on this network. The massive illicit economy, which constitutes the tax base for insecurity, is booming, while the licit economy slows.

SANCTUARY IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan's military establishment has always approached the various wars in and around Afghanistan as a function of its main institutional and national security interests: first and foremost, balancing India, a country with vastly more people and resources, whose elites, at least in Pakistani eyes, do not fully accept the legitimacy of Pakistan's existence. To defend Pakistan from ethnic fragmentation, Pakistan's governments have tried to neutralize Pashtun and Baluch nationalism, in part by supporting Islamist militias among the Pashtun. Such militias wage asymmetrical warfare on Afghanistan and Kashmir and counter the electoral majorities of opponents of military rule with their street power and violence.

The rushed negotiations between the United States and Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 changed Pakistan's behavior but not its interests. Supporting the Taliban was so important to Pakistan that Musharraf even considered going to war with the United States rather than abandon his allies in Afghanistan. Instead, he tried to persuade Washington to allow him to install a "moderate Taliban" government or, failing that, at least to prevent the Northern Alliance, which Pakistanis see as allied with India, from entering Kabul and forming a government. The agreement by Washington to dilute Northern Alliance control with remnants of Afghanistan's royal regime did little to mollify the generals in Islamabad, to say nothing of the majors and colonels who had spent years supporting the Taliban in the border areas. Nonetheless, in order to prevent the United States from allying with India, Islamabad acquiesced in reining in its use of asymmetrical warfare, in return for the safe evacuation of hundreds of Pakistani officers and intelligence agents from Afghanistan, where they had overseen the Taliban's military operations.

The United States tolerated the quiet reconstitution of the Taliban in Pakistan as long as Islamabad granted basing rights to U.S. troops, pursued the hunt for al Qaeda leaders, and shut down A. Q. Khan's nuclear-technology proliferation network. But five years later, the safe haven Pakistan has provided, along with continued support from donors in the Persian Gulf, has allowed the Taliban to broaden and deepen their presence both in the Pakistani border regions and in Afghanistan. Even as Afghan and international forces have defeated insurgents in engagement after engagement, the weakness of the government and the reconstruction effort—and the continued sanctuary provided to Taliban leaders in Pakistan—has prevented real victory.

In his September 21, 2006, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James Jones, a Marine Corps general and the supreme allied commander, Europe, for NATO, confirmed that the main Taliban headquarters remains in Quetta. According to Western military officials in Afghanistan, intelligence provides strong circumstantial evidence that Pakistan's ISI is providing aid to the Taliban leadership *shura* (council) there.

Another commanders' *shura*, directing operations in eastern Afghanistan, is based in the Pakistani tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan. It has consolidated its alliance with Pakistani Taliban fighters, as well as with foreign jihadi fighters. In September, Pakistani authorities signed a peace deal with "tribal elders of North Waziristan and local mujahideen, Taliban, and *ulama* [Islamic clergy]," an implicit endorsement of the notion that the fight against the U.S. and NATO presence in Kabul is a jihad. (During his visit to the United States in September, Musharraf mischaracterized this agreement as only with "an assembly of tribal elders.") According to the agreement, the Taliban agreed not to cross over into Afghanistan and to refrain from the "target killing" of tribal leaders who oppose the group, and the foreign militants are expected to either live peacefully or leave the region. But only two days after the agreement was signed, two anti-Taliban tribal elders were assassinated; U.S. military spokespeople claim that cross-border attacks increased threefold after the deal.

Further north, the veteran Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a favorite of the ISI since 1973, operates from the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar and from the Bajaur and Mohmand tribal agencies, on the border with northeast Afghanistan. This is where a U.S. Predator missile strike killed between 70 and 80 people in a militant ma-

drasah on October 30, and where bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's number two leader, are most likely to be found.

The strength and persistence of the insurgency cannot be explained solely by the sanctuary the Taliban enjoy in Pakistan. But few insurgencies with safe havens abroad have ever been defeated. The argument that poverty and underdevelopment, rather than Pakistani support, are responsible for the insurgency does not stand up to scrutiny: northern and western Afghanistan are also plagued by crime and insecurity, and yet there is no coordinated antigovernment violence in those regions.

THE CENTER CAN HOLD

For several years, Washington has responded to the repeated warnings from Karzai about the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan by assuring him that Islamabad is cooperating, that public protests are counterproductive, and that the United States will take care of the problem. But assurances that U.S. forces would soon mop up the "remnants" of the Taliban and al Qaeda have proved false. Nor did the United States offer adequate resources to Karzai to allow him to strengthen the Afghan state and thereby bolster resistance to the Taliban. Karzai's short-term strategy of allying himself with corrupt and abusive power holders at home—a necessary response, he says, to inadequate resources—has further undermined the state-building effort.

Western and Afghan officials differ over the extent to which Pakistan's aid to the Taliban is ordered by or tolerated at the highest levels of the Pakistani military, but they have reached a consensus, in the words of one senior Western military leader, that Pakistani leaders "could disrupt the senior levels of [Taliban] command and control" but have chosen not to. Disrupting command and control—not preventing "infiltration," a tactical challenge to which Pakistan often tries to divert discussion—is the key to an overall victory. That will require serious pressure on Pakistan.

So far, the United States and its allies have failed even to convey a consistent message to Islamabad. U.S. officials should at least stop issuing denials on behalf of Islamabad, as General John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, did in Kabul on August 27 when he claimed that he "absolutely does not believe" that Pakistan is helping the Taliban. NATO and the coalition members have similarly failed to devise a common course of action, in part out of the fear that doing so could cause Pakistan to reduce its cooperation on counterter-

rorism. But failing to address Pakistan's support of the Taliban amounts to an acceptance of NATO's failure. The allies must send a strong message to Pakistan: that a lack of forceful action against the Taliban command in Baluchistan constitutes a threat to international peace and security as defined in the UN Charter. Pakistan's leaders, who are eager to show that their government is a full participant in the international community (partly in order to establish parity with India), will seek to avoid such a designation. Washington must also take a stand. Pakistan should not continue to benefit from U.S. military assistance and international aid as long as it fails even to try to dismantle the Taliban's command structure.

On this issue, as on others, Washington should reverse the Bush administration's policy of linking as many local conflicts as possible to the global "war on terror" and instead address each on its own terms. A realistic assessment of Pakistan's role requires not moving Pakistan from the "with us" to the "against us" column in the "war on terror" account books but recognizing that Pakistan's policy derives from the perceptions, interests, and capabilities of its leaders, not from those of the U.S. government. The haven and support the Taliban receive in Pakistan are partly a response to claims Afghanistan has made against Pakistan and are also due to Islamabad's concern about both Indian influence in Afghanistan and Afghan backing for Pashtun and Baluch nationalists operating across the Durand Line.

Accordingly, unified pressure on Pakistan should be accompanied by efforts to address Islamabad's core concerns. The United States and its allies should encourage the Afghan government to open a domestic debate on the sensitive issue of recognition of the Durand Line in return for guarantees of stability and access to secure trade and transport corridors to Pakistani ports. Transforming the border region into an area of cooperation rather than conflict will require reform and development in the tribal territories. And Washington should ask India and Afghanistan to take measures to reassure Pakistan that their bilateral relations will not threaten Islamabad. If, as some sources claim, the Taliban are preparing to drop their maximalist demands and give guarantees against the reestablishment of al Qaeda bases, the Afghan government could discuss their entry into the political system.

Such a shift in U.S. policy toward Pakistan requires a change from supporting President Musharraf to supporting democracy. Pakistan's people have shown in all national elections that support for extremist

parties is marginal. The reassertion of the civilian political center, as well as of Pakistan's business class, which is profiting from the reconstruction of Afghanistan, has provided an opportunity to move beyond the United States' history of relying on military rulers. Washington must forge a more stable relationship with a Pakistan that is at peace with its neighbors and with itself.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

Creating a reasonably effective state in Afghanistan is a long-term project that will require an end to major armed conflict, the promotion of economic development, and the gradual replacement of opium production by other economic activities. Recent crises, however, have exposed internal weaknesses that underscore the need for not only long-term endeavors but short-term transitional measures as well.

The two fatal weak points in Afghanistan's government today are the Ministry of the Interior and the judiciary. Both are deeply corrupt and plagued by a lack of basic skills, equipment, and resources. Without effective and honest administrators, police, and judges, the state can do little to provide internal security—and if the government does not provide security, people will not recognize it as a government.

In 2005, coalition military forces devised a plan for thoroughgoing reform of the Ministry of the Interior. The president and the minister of the interior appoint administrative and police officials throughout the country. Reform cannot succeed unless President Karzai overhauls the ministry's ineffective and corrupt leadership and fully backs the reform. In any case, this plan, already three years behind that of the Ministry of Defense, will show Afghans no results until mid-2007. In September, the government established a mechanism to vet appointees for competence and integrity. Finding competent people willing to risk their lives in a rural district for $60–$70 a month will remain difficult, but if implemented well, this vetting process could help avoid appointments such as those hastily made after the riots last spring.

Government officials have identified the biggest problems in civil administration at the district level. In interviews, elders from more than ten provinces agreed, complaining that the government never consults them. Some ministers have proposed paying elders and *ulama* in each district to act as the eyes and ears of the government, meet with governors and the president, administer small projects, and influence what is preached in the mosques. They estimate the cost of

such a program at about $5 million per year. These leaders could also help recruit the 200 young men from each district who are supposed to serve as auxiliary police. They are to receive basic police training and equipment and serve under a trained police commander. Unlike militias, the auxiliary police are to be paid individually, with professional commanders from outside the district. Elders could be answerable for the auxiliary forces' behavior.

Courts, too, may require some temporary supplementary measures. Community leaders complain forcefully about judicial corruption, which has led many to demand the implementation of Islamic law, or sharia—which they contrast not to secular law but to corruption. One elder from the province of Paktia said, "Islam says that if you find a thief, he has to be punished. If a murderer is arrested, he has to be tried and executed. In our country, if a murderer is put in prison, after six months he bribes the judge and escapes. If a member of parliament is killed ... his murderer is released after three to four months in prison because of bribery." Enforcement by the government of the decisions of Islamic courts has always constituted a basic pillar of the state's legitimacy in Afghanistan, and the failure to do so is turning religious leaders, who still wield great influence over public opinion, against the government.

The August 5 swearing-in of a new Supreme Court, which administers the judicial system, makes judicial reform possible, but training prosecutors, judges, and defense lawyers will take years. In the meantime, the only capacities for dispute resolution and law enforcement in much of the country consist of village or tribal councils and mullahs who administer a crude interpretation of sharia. During the years required for reform, the only actual alternatives before Afghan society are enforcement of such customary or Islamic law or no law at all. The Afghan government and its international supporters should find ways to incorporate such procedures into the legal system and subject them to judicial or administrative review. Such a program would also put more Islamic leaders—more than 1,200 of whom have been dropped from the government payroll this year—back under government supervision.

Attempts to inject aid into the government have hit a major bottleneck: in 2005 and 2006, the government spent only 44 percent of the money it received for development projects. Meanwhile, according to the Ministry of Finance, donor countries spent about $500 million on poorly designed and uncoordinated technical assistance. The World

Bank is devising a program that will enable the government to hire the technical advisers it needs, rather than trying to coordinate advisers sent by donors in accord with their own priorities and domestic constituencies. The United States should support this initiative, along with a major crash program to increase the implementation capacity of the ministries.

As numerous studies have documented over the years, Afghanistan has not received the resources needed to stabilize it. International military commanders, who confront the results of this poverty every day, estimate that Washington must double the resources it devotes to Afghanistan. Major needs include accelerated road building, the purchase of diesel for immediate power production, the expansion of cross-border electricity purchases, investment in water projects to improve the productivity of agriculture, the development of infrastructure for mineral exploitation, and a massive program of skill building for the public and private sectors.

Afghanistan also needs to confront the threat from its drug economy in a way that does not undermine its overall struggle for security and stability. At first, U.S. policy after the fall of the Taliban consisted of aiding all commanders who had fought on the U.S. side, regardless of their involvement in drug trafficking. Then, when the "war on drugs" lobby raised the issue, Washington began pressuring the Afghan government to engage in crop eradication. To Afghans, this policy has looked like a way of rewarding rich drug dealers while punishing poor farmers.

The international drug-control regime does not reduce drug use, but it does, by criminalizing narcotics, produce huge profits for criminals and the armed groups and corrupt officials who protect them. In Afghanistan, this drug policy provides, in effect, huge subsidies to the United States' enemies. As long as the ideological commitment to such a counterproductive policy continues—as it will for the foreseeable future—the second-best option in Afghanistan is to treat narcotics as a security and development issue. The total export value of Afghan opium has been estimated to be 30–50 percent of the legal economy. Such an industry cannot be abolished by law enforcement. But certain measures would help: rural development in both poppy-growing and non-poppy-growing areas, including the construction of roads and cold-storage facilities to make other products marketable; employment creation through the development of new rural industries; and reform of the Ministry of the Interior and other gov-

ernment bodies to root out major figures involved with narcotics, regardless of political or family connections.

This year's record opium poppy crop has increased the pressure from the United States for crop eradication, including through aerial spraying. Crop eradication puts more money in the hands of traffickers and corrupt officials by raising prices and drives farmers toward insurgents and warlords. If Washington wants to succeed in Afghanistan, it must invest in creating livelihoods for the rural poor—the vast majority of Afghans—while attacking the main drug traffickers and the corrupt officials who protect them.

KNOW THY ENEMY, KNOW THYSELF

Contemptuous of nation building and wary of mission creep, the Bush administration entered Afghanistan determined to strike al Qaeda, unseat the Taliban, and then move on, providing only basic humanitarian aid and support for a new Afghan army. Just as it had in the 1980s, the United States picked Afghan allies based exclusively on their willingness to get rid of U.S. enemies, rather than on their capacity to bring stability and security to the state. The UN-mediated political transition and underfunded reconstruction effort have only partially mitigated the negative consequences of such a shortsighted U.S. policy.

Some in Washington have accused critics of the effort in Afghanistan of expecting too much too soon and focusing on setbacks while ignoring achievements. The glass, they say, is half full, not half empty. But the glass is much less than half full—and it is resting on a wobbly table that growing threats, if unaddressed, may soon overturn.

U.S. policymakers have misjudged Afghanistan, misjudged Pakistan, and, most of all, misjudged their own capacity to carry out major strategic change on the cheap. The Bush administration has sown disorder and strengthened Iran while claiming to create a "new Middle East," but it has failed to transform the region where the global terrorist threat began—and where the global terrorist threat persists. If the United States wants to succeed in the war on terrorism, it must focus its resources and its attention on securing and stabilizing Afghanistan.

It Takes the Villages

Bringing Change From Below in Afghanistan

Seth G. Jones

Empires of Mud BY ANTONIO GIUSTOZZI.
Columbia University Press, 2010, 320 pp.

My Life With the Taliban BY ABDUL SALAM ZAEEF.
Columbia University Press, 2010, 360 pp.

Decoding the New Taliban: Insights From the Afghan Field
EDITED BY ANTONIO GIUSTOZZI.
Columbia University Press, 2009, 420 pp.

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I met Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, twice in 2009 and was quickly drawn to his unassuming demeanor and erudition. His jet-black beard and round spectacles gave him the aura of a soft-spoken professor, not a battle-hardened guerrilla fighter who had first tasted war at the age of 15. Zaeef told me about his childhood in southern Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion, his life with the Taliban, and the three years he spent in prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. What was particularly striking was his contempt for the United States and what he regarded as its myopic understanding of Afghanistan. "How long has America been in Afghani-

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stan?" Zaeef asked rhetorically. "And how much do Americans know about Afghanistan and its people? Do they understand its culture, its tribes, and its population? I am afraid they know very little."

Zaeef is largely correct. In fact, U.S. Major General Michael Flynn, deputy chief of staff for intelligence in Afghanistan, echoed this point in early 2010: "Eight years into the war in Afghanistan," Flynn wrote in a poignant unclassified paper, "the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade."

Three new books provide important insights into that environment. The first is Zaeef's own *My Life With the Taliban*, which serves as a counternarrative to much of what has been written about Afghanistan since 1979. It offers a rare glimpse into the mind of a senior Taliban leader who remains sympathetic to the movement. "I pray to almighty *Allah*," he writes, "that I will be buried beside my heroes, brothers and friends in the *Taliban* cemetery."

The other two books are edited and written, respectively, by Antonio Giustozzi, a research fellow at the London School of Economics who has spent several decades working in Afghanistan. In *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights From the Afghan Field*, Giustozzi compiles essays from journalists, former government officials, aid workers, and academics to examine the nature of the insurgency. Some chapters offer refreshing new insights, especially those that deal with Helmand Province, in the country's south; Uruzgan, in the center; and the problems of eastern Afghanistan. Others, such as the chapter on Kandahar, contribute little to what has already been published. In *Empires of Mud*, Giustozzi assesses the dynamics of warlordism. The book focuses on Abdul Rashid Dostum in the north, Ismail Khan in the west, and Ahmad Shah Massoud in the Panjshir Valley.

All three books provide a nuanced micro-level view of the country. More important, they offer a chilling prognosis for those who believe that the solution to stabilizing Afghanistan will come only from the top down—by building strong central government institutions. Although creating a strong centralized state, assuming it ever happens, may help ensure long-term stability, it is not sufficient in Afghanistan. The current top-down state-building and counterinsurgency efforts must take place alongside bottom-up programs, such as reaching out to legitimate local leaders to enlist them in providing security and services at the village and district levels. Otherwise, the Afghan government will lose the war.

THE CENTER WILL NOT HOLD

Experts on state building and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan fall into two competing camps. The first believes that Afghanistan will never be stable and secure without a powerful central government capable of providing services to Afghans in all corners of the country. The other insists that Afghanistan is, and always has been, a quintessentially decentralized society, making it necessary to build local institutions to create security and stability.

Since the Bonn agreement of December 2001—which established an interim government and a commission to draft a new constitution—international efforts in Afghanistan have unfortunately focused on initiatives directed by the central government to establish security and stability. On the political front, the focus has been supporting the government of Hamid Karzai and strengthening institutions in Kabul. On the security front, the international community has built up the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army as bulwarks against the Taliban and other insurgent groups. Yet this effort has been unsuccessful: there are too few national security forces to protect the population, the police are legendary for their corruption and incompetence, and many rural communities do not want a strong central government presence. On the development front, the focus has been improving the central government's ability to deliver services to the population, including through such institutions as the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. These top-down strategies reflect the conventional wisdom among many policymakers and academics, but this consensus view is misinformed.

Current international efforts to establish security and stability from the center are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Afghanistan's culture and social structure. After all, few non-Afghan civilians ever spend time in the violent areas of eastern, southern, and western Afghanistan. And security concerns prevent far too many U.S. and NATO officials from traveling outside their bases or urban areas. Likewise, most academics cannot access rural areas central to the insurgency because these areas are deadly for Westerners. Yet the insurgency is primarily a rural one. The growing size of the international bases in Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar, and other areas is a testament to this risk aversion, which prevents foreigners from understanding rural Afghanistan and its inhabitants. This is harmful, because state building and counterinsurgency tend to be context-specific; history, culture, and social structure matter.

As Giustozzi convincingly argues, the well-intentioned proponents of the top-down model have survived for too long solely on an idealist's diet of John Locke and Immanuel Kant. "My purpose with this book," he writes in *Empires of Mud*, "is to inject a fair dose of Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Ibn Khaldun in the mix"—the latter a reference to the fourteenth-century North African historian and social commentator who developed theories of tribalism and social conflict.

Western officials seeking to stabilize Afghanistan would do well to heed his advice. They must begin by accepting that there is no optimal form of state organization and that there are not always clear-cut "best practices" for solving public-administration problems. Although some tasks, such as central banking reform, are suited to technocratic tinkering by outsiders, others, such as legal reform, can be more difficult. The challenge for Washington, then, is to combine its knowledge of administrative practices with a deeper understanding of local conditions.

BEYOND THE STATE

Many Western countries are characterized by strong state institutions, in which power emanates from a central authority. But in a range of countries—including many in South Asia and Africa—the central government has historically been weak. Top-down reconstruction strategies may have been appropriate for countries such as Japan after World War II and Iraq after 2003, both of which had historically been characterized by strong centralized state institutions. But they do not work as well in countries such as Afghanistan, where power is diffuse.

David Kilcullen, who served as a senior counterinsurgency adviser to General David Petraeus in Iraq, notes in *Decoding the New Taliban* that the social structure in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan is based on what anthropologists call a "segmentary kinship system": people are divided into tribes, subtribes, clans, and other subsections based on their lineage from common male ancestors. As Zaeef argues, the identity of Afghans "lies with their tribe, their clan, their family, and their relatives." It is a patently local sense of identification. Tom Coghlan, a correspondent for *The Times* in London and *The Economist*, repeats this theme in his chapter of Giustozzi's book, noting that the structure of social relations in Helmand Province is premised on the *qawm*—a form of kinship-based solidarity that can distinguish almost any social group, from a large tribe to a small isolated village, and is used to differentiate between "us" and "them."

A tribe or subtribe in one area may be very different in its structure and political inclinations than the same tribe or subtribe in another area. In working with leaders of the Noorzai tribe in 2009 to establish local security and basic services, for example, I found significant differences in the social and cultural practices between communities in western Herat and those in southern Kandahar Province. Despite these regional variations, power tends to remain local in Pashtun areas, which is where the insurgency is largely being fought. Pashtuns may identify with their tribe, subtribe, clan, qawm, family, or village based on where they are at the time, who they are interacting with, and the specific event. *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun code of behavior, shapes daily life through obligations of honor, hospitality, revenge, and providing sanctuary. *Jirgas* and *shuras*—which are decision-making councils—remain instrumental at the local level, where state legal institutions are virtually nonexistent.

Martine van Bijlert, who served as a political adviser to the European Union's special representative in Afghanistan, writes that among the Pashtuns in Uruzgan, the subtribe—which can vary in size from a few hundred to thousands of people—"remains the main solidarity group, defining patterns of loyalty, conflict and obligations of patronage." She goes on to argue that subtribal affiliations have become more important since 2001 due to the absence of central government institutions. Opinion polls conducted by the Asia Foundation indicate that Afghans continue to turn to community leaders—not officials in Kabul—to solve their problems.

In the absence of strong government institutions, groups formed based on descent from a common ancestor help the Pashtuns organize economic production, preserve political order, and defend themselves against outside threats. These bonds tend to be weaker in urban areas, where central government control is stronger and where individuals may identify themselves with their city rather than their tribe. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the growing number of people who identify themselves as "Kabulis" because they live in Afghanistan's heterogeneous capital. (And unlike among the Pashtuns, tribal identity tends to be weaker or nonexistent among many other Afghan ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and the Hazaras.)

In Pashtun areas where tribal and subtribal relationships remain strong, they are not the only force governing local politics. Additional social structures have evolved over the past several decades because of

war, drought, migration, sedentarization, and other factors. As a result, a range of other identities can transcend tribal structures, such as identities based on reputations earned during the anti-Soviet jihad, land ownership, or wealth acquired through licit or illicit activity (such as road taxes or the drug trade). In such an environment, outsiders—especially foreign soldiers—have a limited ability to shape local politics.

The insurgency takes advantage of this situation. It is composed of a loose amalgam of groups, such as the Taliban, allied tribes and subtribes, drug traffickers and other criminals, local powerbrokers, and state sponsors such as Iran and Pakistan. How these groups come together varies considerably from village to village. In parts of Khost Province, for example, the insurgency includes members of the Haqqani network, Zadran subtribes, timber traders, and al Qaeda operatives. In some areas of Helmand, the insurgency includes Taliban fighters, Ishaqzai tribal leaders, and poppy traffickers. A failure to understand these nuances can be fatal to counterinsurgency efforts, especially because the Taliban and other insurgent groups have developed their own local strategies for co-opting or coercing existing tribal and other local networks.

THE PRINCE OF KABUL

One of the most significant contributions of all three books is their insights into the modus operandi of the insurgency. Zaeef offers a particularly interesting discussion of the Taliban's origins and the group's effectiveness in working with locals. In 1994, state authority had collapsed, and governance was fractured among a range of warlords and local commanders. A network of mullahs in southern Afghanistan decided to take action. "The founding meeting of what became known as 'the *Taliban*,'" Zaeef writes, "was held in the late autumn of 1994." Zaeef was present with a number of religious leaders and local commanders, including Mullah Muhammad Omar, who became the Taliban's leader. "Each man swore on the *Qur'an* to stand by [Mullah Omar], and to fight against corruption and the criminals."

The Taliban moved quickly, beginning in Kandahar Province. They co-opted some groups through bribery and promises of power sharing, such as Mullah Naqib's Alikozai tribe, which agreed to ally with the Taliban and hand over the city of Kandahar. When the Taliban failed to co-opt others, such as fighters loyal to Commander Saleh, who operates along the Kandahar-Kabul highway, Taliban forces defeated them on the battlefield. These negotiations and battlefield suc-

cesses had a domino effect, and before long, a growing number of local groups had allied themselves with the Taliban. After establishing control in an area, Taliban leaders would set up sharia courts in which their handpicked judges adjudicated local disputes.

As Giustozzi explains in *Empires of Mud*, the Taliban continued to use this bottom-up strategy when they expanded beyond the south beginning in 1995. In western Afghanistan, for instance, the Taliban allied with the warlord Dostum in order to defeat Ismail Khan's militia in Herat Province. In eastern Afghanistan, the Taliban co-opted a range of local Pashtun tribes, subtribes, and powerbrokers. The large Suleiman Khel tribe in Paktika asked the Taliban to take over the province's capital, Sharan, after hearing they had conquered nearby Ghazni.

Today, Taliban leaders have adopted a similar approach in fighting the Karzai government and U.S. and NATO forces. As in the 1990s, they aim to co-opt or coerce local leaders and their networks by capitalizing on grievances against the government or international forces, offering money, and conducting targeted assassinations of those they regard as anti-Taliban collaborators. To more effectively reach out to the population, the Taliban often appoint commanders who come from local subtribes or clans. They frequently reach out to tribes and other local communities that have been marginalized by those favored by the government, such as the Popalzais and the Barakzais.

Decoding the New Taliban describes this micro-level strategy in detail. Coghlan argues that in Helmand Province, Taliban officials secured the loyalty of a range of Ishaqzai leaders marginalized by Kabul, as well as that of some Kakars and Hotaks. The government's appointment of Alizai leaders to many of the district governor positions, Noorzais to police chief posts, and Alikozais and others to key intelligence positions appears to have angered their Ishaqzai rivals, exacerbated the tribal fissures in the area, and facilitated the co-optation of marginalized tribes by the Taliban.

The Taliban is not the only insurgent group that effectively uses local networks to its advantage. One of the most significant is the Haqqani network, which was established by the legendary mujahideen commander and former CIA ally Jalaluddin Haqqani and now operates in eastern Afghanistan. As Thomas Ruttig explains in *Decoding the New Taliban*, one of the Haqqani network's strongest support bases is the Mezi subtribe of the Zadrans, who live along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The Haqqani network also co-opted a range of Kuchis, who

are nomadic herdsmen, in Paktia and Khost and developed a close relationship with Ahmadzai subtribes across the border in Pakistan.

There is a common thread in many of these accounts: the Taliban and other insurgent groups have recognized the local nature of politics in Afghanistan and have developed a local strategy—combining ruthlessness with cunning diplomacy. The Afghan government and U.S. and NATO forces, meanwhile, have largely been missing at the local level.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

There is an urgent need to refine the international community's state-building and counterinsurgency efforts in response to the Taliban's bottom-up strategy.

One key area is security. During Afghanistan's most recent stable period, that of the Musahiban dynasty (1929–78), the Afghan rulers Nadir Shah, Zahir Shah, and Daoud Khan—who established a republic in 1973—used a combination of centralized and decentralized strategies that are worth emulating today. National forces established security in urban areas and along key roads, and local communities established security in rural areas with Kabul's blessing and aid. In Pashtun areas, locals used traditional police forces, such as *arbakai*, and other small village-level police forces under the control of recognized local institutions, such as *jirgas* or *shuras*.

These were not militias, in the sense of large offensive forces under the command of warlords, which tend to be used today in the Tajik and Uzbek areas of northern and western Afghanistan. "In the King's time it was an honor to be a member of an *arbakai*," a tribal leader in eastern Afghanistan proudly told Ruttig. Then, the central government did not establish a permanent security presence in many rural areas, especially Pashtun ones, nor did locals generally want the government to play that role. While traveling through rural Pashtun areas over the past year, I discovered that many of these traditional policing institutions still exist, although some have been co-opted by the Taliban. If leveraged by the Afghan government, they could help trigger a revolt against the Taliban in rural areas. This would require identifying those local communities already resisting the Taliban; providing training, monitoring, and equipment to facilitate their resistance; and then trying to turn others against the Taliban.

U.S. and NATO forces must do a better job of capitalizing on popular grievances against the Taliban, who are much weaker than is generally

recognized: most Afghans do not subscribe to their religious zealotry. Although Taliban leaders are influenced by the Deobandi movement—an Islamic school of thought that originated in India in 1866—their brand of Islam would not be recognizable to the Deobandi movement's founders. And despite popular misconceptions, Taliban commanders tend to be even more corrupt than Afghan government officials. As the former ABC News reporter Gretchen Peters describes in a chapter of *Decoding the New Taliban*, a significant portion of the Taliban's funding comes from taxes collected from poppy farmers, levies imposed on drug shipments, and kidnapping ransoms. Public opinion polls continue to show low levels of support for the Taliban, even compared to the Afghan government. In a January 2010 poll conducted by ABC News and other organizations, 90 percent of the Afghans polled said they supported the government, whereas only six percent claimed to support the Taliban.

The growing number of local tribes and communities resisting the insurgency is evidence of the Taliban's waning popularity. They range from the Noorzais, the Achakzais, and the Alikozais in the west and south to the Shinwaris, the Kharotis, and the Zadrans in the east. Afghan, U.S., and NATO forces have taken advantage of some of these opportunities through the Local Defense Initiative, a new program that supports village-level community police by providing training, radios, and uniforms.

U.S. forces have opted not to pay these local police, based on the belief that individuals should be motivated to work for their communities and not outsiders. Instead, the Afghan government and international organizations have provided development projects to participating communities. They have also established a quick-reaction force to assist local communities that come under attack from the Taliban and other insurgents. In southern Afghanistan, the program has been particularly successful in helping local leaders protect their populations and draw them away from the Taliban.

These local efforts can also have a positive impact on the defection of mid- and lower-level insurgents, which is more commonly called "reintegration." As Coghlan explains, most insurgents are not ideologically committed. Rather, they are motivated by tribal or subtribal friction, grievances against the Afghan government or U.S. and NATO forces, money, or coercion by insurgent leaders. Battlefield successes against the insurgency, sustainable development, and effective cooperation with local communities can significantly improve the chances

of defection. As van Bijlert points out in *Decoding the New Taliban*, the local nature of power in Afghanistan makes the Taliban highly vulnerable to defection and double-dealing. I witnessed this firsthand in southern and western Afghanistan in 2009: villages that decided to resist the Taliban gave insurgent sympathizers in their communities a stark choice—leave the area or give up. In a country where loyalty and group solidarity are fundamental to daily life, community pressure can be a powerful weapon.

LONG LIVE THE KING

When I last spoke with Zaeef, he remained bewildered by the international community's lack of understanding of rural Afghanistan. Kabul, with its restaurants that cater to Western guests and its modern indoor shopping mall equipped with escalators and glass elevators, is vastly different from the rural areas where the insurgency is being waged. He politely reminded me that a better understanding of Afghanistan would help establish peace. Rural communities have been protecting their villages for centuries and can do it better than the Afghan government or international forces.

In his conclusion to *Empires of Mud*, Giustozzi writes that a durable peace will likely require a careful combination of top-down institutionalization and bottom-up co-optation of local leaders. Focusing only on the former has failed to help the Afghan population, which continues to feel deeply insecure because of insurgent and criminal activity. Moreover, there has been—and will likely continue to be—an insufficient number of U.S., NATO, and Afghan national forces to protect the local population in rural areas. But that is all right, since many rural Afghans do not want a permanent central government presence in their villages; they want to police their own communities.

Some worry that empowering local leaders may help the Afghan government and the international community achieve short-term goals but will undermine stability in the long run by fragmenting authority. This is an academic debate. Afghan social and cultural realities make it impossible to neglect local leaders, since they hold much of the power today.

The old monarchy's model is useful for today's Afghanistan. It combined top-down efforts from the central government in urban areas with bottom-up efforts to engage tribes and other communities in rural areas. The central government has an important role to play.

National army and police forces can be critical in crushing revolts, conducting offensive actions against militants, and helping adjudicate tribal disputes when they occur. But the local nature of power in the country makes it virtually impossible to build a strong central government capable of establishing security and delivering services in much of rural Afghanistan—at least over the next several decades. Afghans have successfully adopted this model in the past, and they can do so again today.

Defining Success in Afghanistan

What Can the United States Accept?

Stephen Biddle, Fotini Christia, and J Alexander Thier

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The original plan for a post-Taliban Afghanistan called for rapid, transformational nation building. But such a vision no longer appears feasible, if it ever was. Many Americans are now skeptical that even a stable and acceptable outcome in Afghanistan is possible. They believe that Afghanistan has never been administered effectively and is simply ungovernable. Much of today's public opposition to the war centers on the widespread fear that whatever the military outcome, there is no Afghan political end state that is both acceptable and achievable at a reasonable cost.

The Obama administration appears to share the public's skepticism about the viability of a strong, centralized, Western-style government in Kabul. But it does not think such an ambitious outcome is necessary. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed in 2009, Afghanistan does not need to become "a Central Asian Valhalla." Yet a Central Asian Somalia would presumably not suffice. Success in

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Afghanistan will thus mean arriving at an intermediate end state, somewhere between ideal and intolerable. The Obama administration must identify and describe what this end state might look like. Without clear limits on acceptable outcomes, the U.S. and NATO military campaign will be rudderless, as will any negotiation strategy for a settlement with the Taliban.

In fact, there is a range of acceptable and achievable outcomes for Afghanistan. None is perfect, and all would require sacrifice. But it is a mistake to assume that Afghanistan is somehow ungovernable or that any sacrifice would be wasted in the pursuit of an unachievable goal. Afghanistan's own history offers ample evidence of the kind of stable, decentralized governance that could meet today's demands without abandoning the country's current constitution. By learning from this history and from recent experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the United States can frame a workable definition of success in Afghanistan.

CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED

From the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880 to the coup of Mohammad Daud Khan in 1973, Afghanistan underwent a relatively stable and gradual period of state building. Although the country was an absolute monarchy until 1964, Afghanistan's emirs, on the whole, needed the acquiescence of the population in order to govern. The central government lacked the strength and resources to exercise local control or provide public goods in many parts of the country. Instead, it ruled according to a series of bargains between the state and individual communities, exchanging relative autonomy for fealty and a modicum of order. Over time, as Kabul improved its capacity to offer services and to punish transgressors, this balance shifted, and local autonomy gradually eroded. But whenever this process went too quickly—most notably in the 1920s under Amanullah Khan and in the 1970s under the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party—conflict in the periphery erupted and local power brokers challenged the central authority. The Soviet invasion in 1979 led to a fundamental breakdown of centralized authority and legitimacy, which resulted in the diffusion of political, economic, and military power across a number of ethnic and geographic groups. The era of dynastic control of the state by Pashtun elites is thus now over.

Although war, migration, and the emergence of regional strongmen have destabilized the Afghan countryside, local communities re-

main a fundamental source of Afghan identity and a critical base of governance and accountability. This is especially clear in the case of the local *jirga* or *shura* (community council). Traditionally, the community council was a place to solve problems and negotiate over common goods and burdens, with its more prominent members serving as liaisons to the central government. These bodies may differ in their power and representation, but they are still found today in virtually every community. This traditional and local base of legitimacy offers a potential foundation for stable governance in the future.

Washington, of course, would prefer to see Afghanistan—much as it would like to see any country—ruled in accordance with the will of the governed, its people prosperous, and the rights of its minorities and women respected. But the United States' two main security interests in Afghanistan that justify waging a war are much narrower: one, that terrorists who wish to strike the United States and its allies not use Afghanistan as their base, and two, that insurgent groups not use Afghanistan's territory to destabilize its neighbors, especially Pakistan.

There are many possible end states for Afghanistan, but only a few are compatible with these national security interests. Afghanistan could become a centralized democracy, a decentralized democracy, a regulated mix of democratic and nondemocratic territories, a partitioned collection of ministates, an anarchy, or a centralized dictatorship. The first and the last are unlikely; partition and anarchy are unacceptable. But decentralized democracy and internal mixed sovereignty are both feasible and acceptable.

THE FAILURE OF CENTRALIZATION

Since 2001, Hamid Karzai's government, with international support, has pursued the model of centralized democracy. As first envisaged in the 2001 Bonn agreement and then codified in the 2004 Afghan constitution, this approach places virtually all executive, legislative, and judicial authority in the national government. It has created one of the most centralized states in the world, at least on paper. The president appoints every significant official in the executive branch, from provincial governors down to midlevel functionaries serving at the subprovincial level. All security forces are national forces. Although there are provisions to elect provincial, district, municipal, and village councils, only provincial council elections have been held thus far. Kabul holds all policy, budgetary, and revenue-generating authority.

In March 2010, Karzai approved a new governance policy that devolves some local administrative and fiscal authority to appointed officials and provides modest auditing and budgetary powers to elected subnational bodies. Still, the Afghan state retains a remarkably centralized blueprint.

Political figures close to Karzai pushed for such a highly centralized government against the wishes of many non-Pashtun minorities—and despite Afghanistan's prior experience with failed, albeit nondemocratic, centralization efforts. From 1919 to 1929, for example, Amanullah Khan aspired to be Afghanistan's Kemal Atatürk, but his strategy ultimately led to serious rural upheaval, which ended his rule. The radical attempts at centralization under the Soviet-backed regimes that followed the 1978 coup helped spark the mujahideen resistance and led to years of civil war.

After the Taliban were removed from power, in 2001, strong Pashtun support, combined with fears of a return to the civil war of the 1990s, created a majority in favor of a centralizing constitution. But Afghan central governments have never enjoyed the legitimacy required by such an organizing principle. The last 30 years of upheaval and radical devolution of political, economic, and military authority have only made this problem worse. Put simply, the current model of Afghan governance is too radical a departure in a place where the central state has such limited legitimacy and capacity. To create a lasting peace that includes the country's main ethnic and sectarian groups —as well as elements of the insurgency—Afghanistan will require a more inclusive, flexible, and decentralized political arrangement.

STABLE DEVOLUTION

Power sharing would be easier under a decentralized democracy, in which many responsibilities now held by Kabul would be delegated to the periphery. Some of these powers would surely include the authority to draft and enact budgets, to use traditional alternatives to centralized justice systems for some offenses, to elect or approve important officials who are now appointed by Kabul, and perhaps to collect local revenue and enforce local regulation.

Increasing local autonomy would make it easier to win over Afghans who distrust distant Kabul and would take advantage of a preexisting base of legitimacy and identity at the local level. The responsibility for foreign policy and internal security, however, would

remain with the central government, which would prevent even the more autonomous territories from hosting international terrorist groups or supporting insurrection against the state.

A decentralized democracy along these lines should be an acceptable option for the United States. Its reliance on democracy and transparency is consistent with American values. Individual territories with the freedom to reflect local preferences may adopt social policies that many in the United States would see as regressive. But the opposite could also occur, with some places implementing more moderate laws than those favored by a conservative center. By promoting local acceptance of the central government, this option would remove much of the casus belli for the insurgency. And it would preserve a central state with the power and incentive to deny the use of Afghan soil for destabilizing Pakistan or planning attacks against the United States.

A decentralized democracy would comport with much of the post–Cold War experience with state building elsewhere. A range of post-conflict states in Africa (Ethiopia and Sierra Leone), Europe, (Bosnia and Macedonia), the Middle East (Iraq and Lebanon), and Asia (East Timor and, tentatively, Nepal) have used some combination of consociationalism, federalism, and other forms of decentralized democratic power sharing. Although it is too early to make definitive claims of success, to date not one of these states has collapsed, relapsed into civil war, or hosted terrorists. And some, such as Bosnia and Ethiopia, have remained tolerably stable for over a decade. This is, of course, no guarantee that decentralized democracy would work in Afghanistan. But its track record elsewhere and its better fit with the country's natural distribution of power suggests that it offers a reasonable chance of balancing interests and adjudicating disputes in Afghanistan, too.

A decentralized democracy in Afghanistan would face three critical challenges. The first, of course, is the Taliban, who oppose democracy on principle and are likely to resist this approach as aggressively as they now resist centralized democracy. The second challenge is the limited administrative capacity of the Afghan state. Decentralization would distribute power among a larger number of officials; for a state such as Afghanistan, which has a limited pool of competent bureaucrats, this could exceed the country's current human capital and require a major expansion of training efforts. Third, the country's malign power brokers would likely resist such an option. A transparent electoral democracy would threaten their status, authority, and ability to profit from corruption and abuse.

Yet decentralized democracy could actually offer some important counterbalances in each of these areas. Hard fighting will be required to marginalize the Taliban under any democratic system, decentralized or not. The odds of success are much higher, however, when the population supports the government. Counterinsurgency can be described as a form of violent competition in governance; it is much easier to win when the form of government offered is closer to the natural preference of the governed. And if the Taliban come to see their military prospects as limited, a decentralized system might entice some of their members to reconcile with the government in the hope of securing a meaningful local role in areas where their support is strongest.

It will not be easy to combat high-level corruption or to improve administrative capacity. But a transparent system in which locals make most decisions would allow Afghanistan's traditional community leaders to police the use of power and public funds. A faraway national ministry in Kabul is beyond the oversight of a village or district *shura*. In contrast, local councils can see how officials are spending money and can take issue with uses they find objectionable. Decentralization may also improve the Afghan government's basic competence by allowing local officials to focus on smaller, more local issues. For example, the most widely hailed development program in Afghanistan in the last eight years has been the National Solidarity Program, under which the central government provides grants to democratically elected community councils for local development projects. The NSP was designed at the national level but is administered locally. To date, it has been fiscally efficient and effective, reaching more than 20,000 villages.

Although decentralized democracy offers no easy guarantee of success, it has much better odds of success than a centralized model. But it would not come cheaply: the United States would have to wage a sustained counterinsurgency campaign, provide major administrative assistance to the Afghan government, and conduct vigorous anticorruption measures.

A MIXED BAG

Mixed sovereignty is an even more decentralized model. Much like decentralized democracy, this approach would take many powers that are now held in Kabul and delegate them to the provincial or district level. But mixed sovereignty would go one step further,

granting local authorities the additional power to rule without transparency or elections if they so chose—as long as they did not cross three "redlines" imposed by the center.

The first redline would forbid local authorities from allowing their territories to be used in ways that violated the foreign policy of the state—namely, by hosting terrorist or insurgent camps. The second would bar local administrations from infringing on the rights of neighboring provinces or districts by, for example, seizing assets or diverting water resources. The third would prevent officials from engaging in large-scale theft, narcotics trafficking, or the exploitation of state-owned natural resources.

Beyond these limited restrictions, local authorities could run their localities as they saw fit, with the freedom to ignore the will of the governed or engage in moderate-scale corruption. The central government in Kabul would retain total control over foreign policy and the ability to make war and enforce narcotics, customs, and mining laws and limited authority over interprovincial commerce. Under such an arrangement, sovereignty is mixed to a much greater degree than in the other possible systems, with many—but not all—of the ordinary powers of sovereign government delegated to the provincial or district level.

The mixed-sovereignty model would signal a more serious break with the direction of Afghan state building as it was conceived in 2001 than would decentralized democracy. But it would also be a partial acknowledgment of the de facto arrangements that have taken shape since 2001. Many of the governors and other local officials appointed by Karzai have ruled not by virtue of a legal mandate from Kabul but rather through their own local security and economic power bases, which operate outside the law but with the tacit acceptance of Kabul. In provinces such as Balkh (under Governor Atta Mohammad Noor) and Nangarhar (under Governor Gul Agha Sherzai), this has led to relative peace and a drastic reduction of poppy cultivation. Such warlords have settled into a stable equilibrium in which they profit from the theft of customs duties and state property but maintain order and keep their predation within limits so as to avert a mutually costly crackdown by Kabul.

In other areas, however, strongmen have caused instability. In Helmand, for example, several years of corrupt rule by Sher Mohammad Akhundzada alienated significant groups in the province and sent poppy cultivation soaring, fueling the insurgency. Even in Afghanistan's relatively stable north, the rule of warlords has led to ethnic vio-

lence and criminal excess. To ensure stability, mixed sovereignty cannot amount to partition under local strongmen who rule with impunity in private fiefdoms. Redline restrictions that forbid the sort of excesses that fuel insurgency are thus essential.

Mixed sovereignty has some important advantages: it is less dependent on the rapid development of state institutions and offers a closer fit with the realities of Afghanistan. Restricting the central government's involvement in local issues to a limited—but aggressively enforced—set of redlines could encourage the country's power brokers to moderate their excesses, which now drive many toward the Taliban. At the same time, a mixed-sovereignty system would depend less on transparency and efficiency, thus requiring less international mentoring, oversight, and assistance. Local autonomy would create incentives for Taliban members to participate in reconciliation negotiations, since a more purely democratic option would subject them to electoral sanction.

However, mixed sovereignty also carries risks and disadvantages that make it less consistent with U.S. interests than either centralized or decentralized democracy. First, governors would be free to adopt regressive social policies and abuse human rights. This would represent a retreat from nearly nine years of U.S. promises of democracy, the rule of law, and basic rights for women and minorities, with costs to innocent Afghans and the prestige of the United States.

Corruption would also be prevalent—indeed, for prospective governors, the opportunity for graft would be an essential part of the system's appeal. The Afghan government would have to contain the scale and scope of this corruption, lest official acceptance of abuse renewed support for the insurgency. To prevent this, Kabul would have to rein in the worst of today's excesses—if mixed sovereignty is merely a gloss for the status quo, it will fail. At the same time, the Afghan state would have to crack down on the narcotics trade, which if left unchecked could dwarf the revenues provided by foreign aid and make such aid a less convincing incentive for compliance with the center. The central government would have to strike a bargain with the country's power brokers, requiring them to refrain from large-scale abuses in exchange for tolerance of moderate local corruption and a share of foreign assistance. Even this kind of bargain, however, would probably be resisted by the country's strongmen, who have grown used to operating without restraint. Thus, mixed sovereignty

would not free Kabul from the need to confront local power centers, and even this limited confrontation could be costly and difficult.

Under this style of governance, there would be a potential threat of instability as powerful governors periodically tested the waters to see what they could get away with. The central government would presumably need to carry out periodic enforcement actions, including violent ones.

Mixed sovereignty is thus not ideal, but it could be viable and meet U.S. security requirements if Washington and Kabul were willing to fulfill their roles as limited but important enforcers. The model offers the central government two means of imposing the essential redlines. The first is the threat of punitive military action ordered by Kabul. This would require security forces that have the capability to inflict serious costs on violators. (They need not have a monopoly on violence, but a meaningful national military of some sort is necessary.) The other enforcement mechanism is Kabul's control over foreign aid and its ability to direct aid to some provinces but not others.

Washington would not be powerless, either—it would retain its influence through the disbursement of foreign aid and its deep engagement with the Afghan National Security Forces. In order to maintain Afghanistan's internal balance of power, the United States and its NATO allies would need to pay constant attention. Otherwise, the country could slip into unrestrained warlordism and civil war. A workable mixed-sovereignty model is not a recipe for Western disengagement: it would require not only continued aid flows but also sustained political and military engagement. Regional diplomacy would be particularly important. To keep Afghanistan from becoming a magnet for foreign interference and a source of regional instability, the United States would have to ensure that the country was embedded in a regional security framework. Such a framework would facilitate aid flows and discourage intervention by Afghanistan's neighbors.

As with decentralized democracy, internal mixed sovereignty has produced tolerable outcomes in the developing world. Afghanistan itself was governed under a similar model for much of the twentieth century: Muhammad Nadir Shah and his son Muhammad Zahir Shah ruled for five decades as nominally absolute monarchs, but with limited state bureaucracy and a certain degree of autonomy for the periphery. The rule of law was generally administered locally, and some Pashtun tribes in the south and the east were exempted from military

service. Nevertheless, a national army and a national police force remained ready to enforce a few key royal prerogatives. The government earned revenue not from internal taxation but from foreign trade, foreign aid (starting in the late 1950s), and the sale of natural gas to the Soviet Union (beginning in the late 1960s). Over time, as the government's capacity and resources increased, it was able to extend its writ, trying criminals in state courts, regulating the price of staple goods, and bringing community land under its authority.

There are also external parallels. After the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, Nigeria had a weak federal government and a strong regional system, in which individual governors were free to organize local administration as they wished. Even today, the country retains some traits of internal mixed sovereignty. States in the Muslim north have sharia law, whereas others use secular judicial systems. The central government intervenes selectively to suppress unrest, such as in the Delta region. Although there are signs that Nigeria may now be deteriorating, for most of the last 40 years it has functioned tolerably.

THE UNACCEPTABLE OTHERS

Many other outcomes for Afghanistan are possible—but would fail to meet core U.S. security requirements. The country could, for example, split up in a form of either de facto or de jure partition. The most likely such split would divide the Pashtun south from the largely Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara north and west. Such a result could come about if a reconciliation deal with the Taliban granted the group too much leeway in the country's south, its historical power base. Any outcome that leaves the Taliban relatively free to operate in the south could create safe havens for cross-border terrorism and insurgency, similar to the use of Iraqi Kurdistan by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, or the use of Congolese border havens by Hutu guerillas. Partition would also set the stage for regional proxy battles and internal competition for control of Kabul and key border areas.

If the Karzai government collapses, Afghanistan could break down into the kind of anarchy and atomized civil warfare of the 1990s. Such a state would resemble the one that was taken over by the Taliban in the 1990s, or present-day Somalia, where lawlessness has created an opening for al Shabab, a violent, al Qaeda–supported Islamist movement—with obvious consequences for U.S. interests.

Lastly, Afghanistan could become a centralized dictatorship, although this is hard to imagine. A single strongman is unlikely to be able to consolidate power in post-Taliban Afghanistan, where political, military, and economic might is dispersed among numerous power brokers. In this environment, any prospective dictator—whether pro- or anti-Western—would find it very difficult to prevent the country from descending into civil war. A coup d'état or other antidemocratic power grab (amending the constitution, for example, to allow for a president for life) is entirely possible but unlikely to yield stability in its wake.

SALVAGING THE GOOD

Afghanistan has been a failing experiment in centralized democracy, heading toward de facto partition, with Taliban control in some areas and unstable, ill-regulated strongman governance in many others. This trend can be reversed. But clinging to the original, centralized model will not help. Centralized governance matches neither the real internal distribution of power in Afghanistan nor local notions of legitimacy. There can be no effective military solution if the intended political goal is so badly misaligned with the country's underlying social and political framework.

To its credit, the Obama administration appears to have recognized that centralized democracy is a bridge too far for Afghanistan. Current policy is moving toward decentralization—the question is how far this should go and whether Afghan and U.S. officials can manage the transition successfully.

This shift toward decentralization can work, although it is no panacea. A system of either decentralized democracy or internal mixed sovereignty would have its drawbacks, and each would involve sacrifice and risk. In Afghanistan—as in most places—the more optimal a system of governance, the longer and harder the fight to get it. The question of whether to strive for the preferable outcome of decentralized democracy or to accept the less appealing alternative of internal mixed sovereignty will largely be determined by the efforts and sacrifices the United States and its partners are willing to undertake. Yet for all their drawbacks, either approach would meet core U.S. national security requirements if properly implemented. And either model is more achievable than today's goal of centralized democracy.

Moreover, a decentralized democracy would not require the Afghan government to abandon or amend the existing constitution. The

2004 constitution is flexible enough to allow many powers to be devolved through legislation, as demonstrated somewhat by the new subnational governance policy, which provides limited administrative and budgetary authority to local officials. A mixed-sovereignty model would clash with the spirit and letter of the 2004 constitution, but such a system would likely evolve on a de facto basis, averting the need for a new constitution in the near term.

Afghanistan is not ungovernable. There are feasible options for acceptable end states that would meet core U.S. security interests and place the country on a path toward tolerable stability. The United States will have to step back from its ambitious but unrealistic project to create a strong, centralized Afghan state. If it does, then a range of power-sharing models could balance the needs of Afghanistan's internal factions and constituencies in ways that today's design cannot, while ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a base for terrorists. In war, as in so many other things, the perfect can be the enemy of the good. The perfect is probably not achievable in Afghanistan—but the acceptable can still be salvaged.

Finish the Job

How the War in Afghanistan Can Be Won

Paul D. Miller

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Pessimism abounds in Afghanistan. Violence, NATO casualties, corruption, drug production, and public disapproval in the United States are at record levels. Ahmed Rashid, a prominent Pakistani journalist and an expert on the region, declared the U.S. mission in Afghanistan a failure in his scathing 2008 book, *Descent Into Chaos*. Seth Jones, the leading U.S. scholar on the Taliban insurgency, has argued that the United States had an opening to make a difference in Afghanistan after 2001, but that it "squandered this extraordinary opportunity." U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates attempted to manage expectations when he testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in January 2009. "If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose," he argued, "because nobody in the world has that kind of time, patience, and money." U.S. policymakers and the public increasingly doubt that the war can be won. These assessments are based on real and credible concerns about the rising insurgency, the drug trade, endemic corruption, and perennial government weakness.

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Yet the stabilization and reconstruction effort in Afghanistan has gone better than is widely believed. The pessimists fail to understand how badly the Afghan state had failed in 2001 and thus are blind to how much it has improved in many areas—particularly in economic and political reconstruction. The pessimists are right to be worried about the rise of the Taliban insurgency and the weak rule of law, but they also tend to overstate the competence and scale of the insurgency.

Many analysts critical of the war effort have drawn misguided lessons from cartoonish and caricatured versions of Afghan history—comparing ISAF to the armies of Alexander the Great, William Elphinstone, or Boris Gromov—to conclude that the laws of history bar foreign militaries from accomplishing anything in the land of the Hindu Kush. They sound dire warnings about U.S. and NATO staying power after a nine-year-old war. But they are wrong on all counts. The insurgency did not pick up steam until late 2005, and ISAF, which started changing its posture and strategy in late 2006, arguably did not implement a coherent counterinsurgency campaign until 2009. It would be myopic and irresponsible to conclude that the international community should walk away from the mission due to a lack of adequate progress.

The greatest threat to long-term success in Afghanistan is not the Taliban, who are fairly weak compared to other insurgent movements around the world. It is the Afghan government's endemic weakness and the international community's failure to address it. Although the international community helped rebuild economic institutions and infrastructure and facilitated elections, it did not invest significantly in government ministries, the justice system, the army and the police, or local governance for the first five years of the intervention, which permitted the Taliban to regroup and challenge the nascent Afghan government.

If additional U.S. and NATO soldiers are matched by a comparable civilian surge, a continuing donor commitment, and a heightened focus on capacity development—increasing the capabilities and performance of civilian institutions of governance, including the ministries in Kabul, their provincial counterparts, and the legal system—the international community is likely to achieve its core goals and Afghanistan will have a genuine chance of becoming stable for the first time in a generation. Although serious challenges remain, victory is attainable—if the troops and their civilian counterparts are given time to complete their mission.

THE WORLD'S WORST COUNTRY

In 2001, Afghanistan was the world's most failed state. The security environment was anarchic, large-scale fighting against the Taliban and al Qaeda continued until March 2002, and following the fall of the Taliban, 50,000–70,000 Northern Alliance militiamen became a poorly managed, largely unaccountable force deployed across the country. There was no professional army or police force, leaving warlords to wage mini wars against one another. The United Nations judged in early 2002 that "banditry continues as a lingering manifestation of the war economy." The drug trade, suppressed during the Taliban's last year in power, sprang back into existence as the poppy crop expanded almost tenfold—from 20,000 acres to 183,000 acres—between 2001 and 2002. The resurgence of opium production enriched a new set of elites and created a wealthy criminal class that was neither loyal to Kabul nor cooperative with international forces.

The security environment in 2001 and 2002 was chaotic largely because the Afghan state had ceased to function. The World Bank estimates that in 2000 the Afghan state was in the lowest percentile in all six areas of governance that the bank tracks: voice and accountability, the rule of law, control of corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and political stability. At that time, the Taliban government collected less than one percent of GDP in revenue, compared to an average of 11 percent across South Asia and 26 percent worldwide. Consequently, the state had an annual budget of merely $27 million—roughly $1 per person. The Afghan government could not hire skilled workers to run public institutions; in 2001, there were only 1,417 government employees who had graduated from an institution of higher education. And most ministries and the justice sector had effectively ceased to function because they lacked the basic levels of staff, money, and equipment required to do anything. For most practical purposes, such as education, access to clean water, or the protection of property, there was no government.

With an anarchic security situation and a nonfunctional state, the Afghan economy had collapsed by the end of the Taliban's misrule. Afghans were the world's seventh-poorest people in 2001. The International Monetary Fund estimates that in 2002, GDP per capita was about $176 in current U.S. dollars: Afghans lived on about 48 cents per day, comparable to the poorest people in sub-Saharan Africa. Lacking a national currency, different factions issued their own bills

for use within their fiefdoms. What little infrastructure the country once had was in ruins: little more than a tenth of the roads were paved, less than one-third of Afghans had access to sanitation, and only a fifth had clean water. Economic collapse led to a generation of lost human capital. A third or less of Afghans could read and write, and only roughly a quarter of school-aged children were enrolled in the country's nearly defunct educational system. In a country of approximately 25 million people, there was just one TV station, eight airplanes, 60 trained pilots, and fewer than 50,000 passenger cars.

The humanitarian situation, in short, was catastrophic. Larry Goodson, professor of Middle East studies at the U.S. Army War College, has estimated that even before the civil war of the 1990s, 50 percent of all Afghans had been killed, wounded, or displaced by the Soviet invasion. There were at least 3.8 million Afghan refugees in neighboring countries and another 1.2 million internally displaced persons in Afghanistan in 2001. Within a year, almost two million refugees and more than 750,000 internally displaced persons had returned to their homes, overwhelming urban areas and creating massive, overcrowded slums. The devastation and neglect took its toll on the Afghan population. Only a third of Afghans survived to age 65. Afghans had the absolute shortest life expectancy and highest infant mortality in the world, according to the World Bank, at 42 years and 165 dead infants per 1,000 live births.

Somalia is often cited as the archetype of a failed state. It is not. Despite Somalia's infamous anarchy, Somalis are still relatively free from government oppression and have not experienced ethnic cleansing or genocide. The Afghans, by contrast, had the worst of all worlds under the Taliban. They had Somalian anarchy, Haitian poverty, Congolese institutions, Balkan fractiousness, and a North Korean–style government. In January 2001, *The Economist* awarded Afghanistan the title of the world's "worst country." Any judgments about the international community's success or failure in Afghanistan need to begin with this benchmark.

A DELICATE CONSTITUTION

The United Nations set about rebuilding the Afghan state immediately after the fall of the Taliban. Just one day after the liberation of Kabul in November, the Security Council outlined its vision for the next Afghan government. It should be "broad-based, multi-ethnic and

fully representative," and "respect the human rights of all Afghan people." The UN, with U.S. help, convened a conference in Bonn, Germany, to select an interim administration and outline a process for reconstruction. The resulting Bonn agreement became a road map for establishing and legitimizing a new Afghan government. The UN endorsed the Bonn agreement, formed and authorized the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help provide security in the capital, and, in March 2002, created the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to coordinate international civilian assistance to Afghanistan.

A principal step in the Bonn process was the drafting and ratification of a new constitution, which UN advisers helped a commission of Afghans draft in 2003. The resulting document protects equal rights for men and women, individual liberty, freedom of expression and association, the right to vote and stand for office, property, and religious freedom. But the document also acknowledges Afghanistan's traditional sources of legitimacy. Article 1 establishes Afghanistan as an "Islamic Republic," Article 2 enshrines Islam as the state religion, Article 3 states that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan," and Article 62 requires that the president and the two vice presidents of Afghanistan be Muslims. Although the Afghan government's efforts to balance modern law with traditional customs have not always satisfied human rights activists, this constitution is nonetheless an unmitigated improvement over Taliban lawlessness and one of the most progressive constitutions in Central Asia or the Middle East.

The Afghan people's reaction to the constitution was overwhelmingly positive. One member of the *loya jirga* (grand council of elders) convened to ratify the document said after voting for its approval that it was "99 percent based on the will of the people." A group calling itself the National Democratic Front and claiming to represent 47 interest groups endorsed the new constitution, as did a tribal gathering in the borderlands of Paktia Province, illustrating the document's broad base of support among both urban politicos and rural dwellers. Qala-e Naw, a major radio station, rejoiced that Afghans would now enjoy the same rights as the rest of the world.

After the constitution was ratified, the international community funded and administered a voter registration drive and two elections: over eight million Afghans voted in the nation's first-ever presidential

contest in October 2004, and 6.4 million voted for the nation's legislature in September 2005—Afghanistan's first freely elected legislature since 1973. In 2006, Freedom House upgraded the country to "partly free," and 76 percent of those Afghans surveyed said they were satisfied with democracy, according to the Asia Foundation. Afghans' enthusiastic embrace of voting, representative institutions, and majority rule undermined the arguments of critics who claimed that democracy was an alien transplant doomed to fail in inhospitable Afghan soil. But the success of the Bonn process was not a foregone conclusion. Similar UN-sponsored processes in postconflict countries have collapsed and led to renewed violence, including in Angola and Liberia in the 1990s. It succeeded in Afghanistan because of strong international engagement and support at every stage of the process.

Afghans continue to face challenges in their effort to institutionalize a process of peaceful political competition. The 2009 and 2010 elections were notoriously marred by fraud and low turnout. But it is important to note that power brokers, accustomed to enforcing their writ undemocratically, decided to manipulate the electoral system to serve their own interests rather than ignore it altogether, because they recognized that Afghans now embrace the new democratic constitution as the basis for their state's legitimacy. The international community must pressure the Afghan government to crack down on corruption and develop robust political parties. But to declare total failure is to ignore Afghanistan's political transformation.

REBUILDING PROSPERITY

In response to the economic and humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan in 2001, the international community undertook one of the largest and most ambitious relief, reconstruction, and development efforts in the world—eventually committing a total of $18.4 billion in aid to economic reconstruction, economic development, and humanitarian relief between 2001 and 2009. The donors invested heavily in rebuilding the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, the Treasury, and the Customs Department and helped phase out the old Afghan currency and launch a new one.

The result was an unheralded and dramatic success. Partly because of U.S. and international aid, Afghanistan experienced a post-Taliban economic boom. Real GDP grew by nearly 29 percent in 2002 alone—faster than West Germany in 1946—and averaged 15 percent annual

licit growth from 2001 to 2006, making Afghanistan one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (it was still averaging 13.5 percent through 2009, after a drought in 2008). The pace of its growth was due in part to the low base from which it had started, but the rapid pace itself was an important achievement. Afghanistan had not grown significantly in more than two decades; the economic boom signaled a new era in Afghan life.

Between 2001 and 2009, almost every indicator of human development showed measurable improvement. By late 2008, 80 percent of the population had access to basic health services, up from eight percent in 2001. Also by 2008, Afghan children were being immunized against diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus (DPT) at the same rate as children in the rest of the world and at a higher rate than in the rest of South Asia. The infant mortality rate fell by a third, and life expectancy inched upward. After the fall of the Taliban, school enrollment skyrocketed from 1.1 million students in 2001 to 5.7 million students in 2008—a third of whom were girls—promising to double or triple Afghanistan's literacy rate in a decade.

Meanwhile, infrastructure greatly improved with international help. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) built 1,600 miles of roads, and the international community rebuilt three-quarters of the main highway from Herat to Kabul. In total, almost 33 percent of all roads in the country were paved by 2008, up from 13.3 percent in 2001. By 2008, Afghanistan had caught up to its regional and income cohorts in access to telecommunications—an astonishing feat. The cell-phone industry, nonexistent before 2001, had nearly eight million subscribers by the end of 2008. At the same time, the construction sector tripled in size, donors spent $312 million on water projects, and the number of Afghans with access to water more than doubled, from 13 percent to 27 percent. And access to sanitation rose from 12 percent to perhaps 45 percent.

The impressive growth and improvement since 2001—stronger than in any postconflict state in which the UN has deployed a peacebuilding mission since the end of the Cold War—demonstrate that progress is achievable with robust resources and international attention. Aid dependency and a poorly diversified economy threaten Afghanistan's long-term economic stability, but the greater risk is that the country's recent progress will unravel unless security is greatly improved.

THE UN'S BLIND SPOT

After 2001, the international community's priority was to prevent the reemergence of the 1992–96 civil war between rival warlords in control of ethnic militias. UN disarmament programs, coupled with the international community's forceful diplomacy, successfully contained fighting among the warlords and prevented the country from relapsing into civil war—an underrated achievement, especially considering the eruptions of violence during and after other international peacebuilding missions, such as in Angola in 1992 and 1998, Liberia throughout the 1990s, Cambodia in 1997, and Iraq in 2006–7. The UN secretary-general reported in August 2005 that "factional clashes—a prominent feature of insecurity three years ago—have become a localized issue and are no longer a threat to national security."

The international community's strategy in regard to the warlords had a flip side, however. Because the United States and the UN could not confront the warlords directly without risking violence, they had to coax them into giving up their weapons by promising them a place in the new Afghan political order. The warlords thus made a successful entry into Afghan politics as governors, legislators, and cabinet ministers without ever facing prosecution or even a truth commission for alleged war crimes. In hindsight, nearly all scholars and commentators condemn the international community for allowing the warlords to retain power. Yet these same critics often deride the reverse strategy of building up a central government at the expense of local power brokers. After the fall of the Taliban, the international community attempted to navigate between these competing imperatives—disarming the warlords without unleashing a backlash and building a central government while respecting local authority. The result has been imperfect but better than permitting the warlords to retain their conventional military power, on the one hand, or risking violence by attempting to put them on trial, on the other.

Despite its success against the warlords, the international community failed to train enough new Afghan security forces or successfully contain the residual Taliban threat between 2001 and 2006. Early efforts to train Afghan police and reform the security sector had not achieved notable results by 2006. Washington had spent $4.4 billion on security assistance and had trained 36,000 soldiers and a comparable number of police officers in the first five years—too few to provide effective security. The police, moreover, were widely reported to

be corrupt and incompetent. At the same time, ISAF did not hold large swaths of territory or provide security to the vast majority of Afghans. Indeed, it did not have the mandate or the authorization to do so.

ISAF was relatively small in size, it was initially confined to Kabul, and it was hampered by restrictive rules of engagement and national caveats limiting where the soldiers were permitted to deploy or what kinds of operations they were allowed to engage in. (In 2003, the peacekeeping force had only 5,500 troops assigned to it.) Then, in 2005, ISAF was authorized to operate in the country's northern and western provinces, but it still numbered fewer than 10,000 troops, or four soldiers for every 10,000 Afghans (compared to approximately 42 soldiers per 10,000 civilians in the relatively successful UN-British operation in Sierra Leone in 2002).

The net effect of the international community's light involvement in the security sector, combined with the lack of progress on governance, became evident with the rise of the Taliban insurgency, beginning in 2005. The Taliban and other insurgents had initiated sporadic, uncoordinated attacks against international military forces and the Afghan government in the years following the Taliban's fall from power. Yet they averaged only about four attacks per day nationwide in 2003 and five per day in 2004. In July 2005, Taliban militants assassinated the pro-Western head of the Kandahar Ulema Shura—a council of religious scholars—and then suicide-bombed his funeral, the boldest terrorist attack in the country since 2001. The funeral attack dramatized the Taliban's lethal reach and resilience, the Afghan government's weakness and inability to respond, and ISAF's absence. Following the sudden revelation of the militants' unexpected strength, violence grew markedly worse in the latter half of 2005, increasing to over eight attacks per day and killing 1,268 people. The militants began to make persistent and notable strides in the scope, scale, and sophistication of their attacks. The violence began to escalate dramatically each year thereafter, killing 3,154 people in 2006 and 5,818 in 2007. By late 2005, what had begun as an incoherent and decentralized campaign of violence had gelled into a cohesive insurgency dedicated to eroding Western political will and overthrowing the Afghan government.

The Taliban were able to regroup and launch an insurgency because, effectively, nothing stood in their way. The Afghan government was still unable to offer services or resolve disputes, and there were too few international soldiers to secure the whole country. The state's institu-

tional capacity remained weak, the rule of law was nonexistent, and the security services were still embryonic. "Weak governance is a common precondition of insurgencies," writes Jones, the Afghanistan expert; "Afghan insurgent groups took advantage of this anarchic situation."

Critics are right to argue that the rise of the insurgency is proof that the international state-building campaign had, as of 2006, failed to build a functioning Afghan state. But the intervention did not end in 2006. A U.S. National Security Council review of Afghan policy in late 2006 recognized the emerging challenges and called for substantially more security and development assistance. Following the review, U.S. funding for the Afghan security forces nearly quadrupled, from $1.9 billion in 2006 to $7.4 billion in 2007, and aggregate U.S. spending on security assistance increased fivefold. Starting in late 2007, entire district police units were sent to a training academy, and U.S. trainers were assigned to embed with each unit on graduation. In addition, the international community began experimenting with programs to enlist the aid of local, indigenous, and tribal security forces.

To staff the expanded training programs and provide security while the Afghan forces were coming up to speed, the United States more than quadrupled its military presence in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010, from 22,100 troops to over 100,000—Washington's third-largest military deployment since Vietnam. Partner nations increased their troop deployments as well, from roughly 21,500 in early 2007 to 35,800 by the end of 2009. ISAF deployed nationwide in 2006, assuming responsibility for security assistance in the country's east and south for the first time. General Stanley McChrystal, who was then the commander of ISAF, also began in 2009 to change how U.S. and NATO troops were used. He sought to make the entirety of ISAF a part of the training and mentoring of the Afghan army and police and to focus on protecting the Afghan population. The moves collectively represented a huge shift in emphasis from a "light footprint" counterterrorism mission to a more robust, if still partial, counterinsurgency campaign. As a result, the United States nearly tripled the size of the Afghan army in three years, increasing it from 36,000 soldiers in 2006 to almost 100,000 by the end of 2009. It brought the Afghan police force up to its authorized strength of 82,000 and made incremental progress toward improving its capabilities.

Rising violence and the persistence of a Taliban safe haven in Pakistan have bred pessimism about the war and created a mystique about the resilience of the insurgency. Violence has indeed continued to escalate—insurgents initiated an average of 19 attacks per day in 2007, almost 30 per day in 2008, and 52 per day from January to August of 2009—but the spike in violence is a predictable effect of sending more troops into battle; there are more targets for the insurgents to attack. What matters is not the scale of the violence but the outcome of the battle. While ISAF has made impressive strides in its practice of unconventional warfare, the Taliban have not. The Taliban are not invincible superwarriors hardened by millennia of fighting and xenophobia; indeed, they are hardly even very competent insurgents compared to Nepal's Maoists, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers, or Colombia's FARC. They continue to espouse an unpopular extremist ideology and murder large numbers of fellow Pashtun Muslims. Meanwhile, Washington's rumored recent expansion of its drone strikes will erode their safe haven in Pakistan. The single greatest resource the United States now needs is not more troops but more time.

THE GOVERNANCE VACUUM

In one respect, the effort in Afghanistan has seriously faltered. The international community has largely stuck with a failing light-footprint approach toward Afghan governance and capacity development. Partly in reaction to the recent UN missions in Kosovo and East Timor, which were criticized for relying too heavily on experts from abroad, the UN secretary-general publicly and openly instructed UNAMA to "rely on as limited an international presence and on as many Afghan staff as possible." UN officials never considered whether the Afghans, whose human capital had been destroyed by war and depleted by emigration, were able to do the job.

Donors similarly neglected governance programs. They pledged a total of $1.2 billion for Afghan governance and rule-of-law programs between 2001 and 2006, or about $200 million per year, and only disbursed about half that amount. A substantial amount of this was dedicated to the 2004 and 2005 elections, leaving just a few hundred million dollars to train civil servants, judges, prosecutors, and lawyers; rebuild government offices and courthouses; and pay the international advisers and consultants to ministers and other government officials. Considering that Afghanistan was the weakest state in the

world in 2001, these funds did not come close to meeting its needs. The international community was effectively asking Afghans with no shoes to lift themselves up by their bootstraps.

For example, a proposed Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission was supposed to lead efforts to streamline the bureaucracy, introduce a new pay and grade system, develop merit-based hiring and promotion criteria, and establish a civil service training institute. For this ambitious agenda, the Asian Development Bank gave $2.2 million starting in 2003, and the UN Development Program gave $500,000. A 2007 USAID review of capacity-development efforts in Afghanistan concluded that "capacity building has not been a primary objective of USAID projects" and that "what has occurred has been more ad hoc and 'spotty' rather than systematic and strategic." The review could identify only four ministries out of 25 that were "considered reasonably competent to carry out their primary responsibilities." The Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, a nongovernmental organization, judged in late 2006 that public-administration reform had been "'cosmetic,' with superficial restructuring of ministries and an emphasis on higher pay rather than fundamental change." The Civil Service Commission did not open until January 2007, and after five years in power, the government could boast of only 7,500 civil servants hired under the new merit-based criteria in a government of 240,000 employees.

Similarly, the international community did not prioritize rebuilding the justice system or improving the rule of law. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and USAID did initiate a host of programs, but in practice they were too small to make a measurable difference in the worst justice system in the world. The Afghan government estimated that it would cost $600 million to implement its National Justice Sector Strategy, but donors had disbursed just $38 million in aid to the justice sector by the end of 2006. The UN secretary-general wrote that same year that "with approximately 1,500 judges and 2,000 prosecutors in the judicial system, demand for training far outstrips supply."

As a result of these shortcomings, Afghanistan ranked second worst in the world for the rule of law in 2006, after Somalia, according to the World Bank's governance indicators. Without the rule of law, corruption predictably exploded as the economy grew. As the political scientist Samuel Huntington noted long ago, moderniza-

tion without strong institutions almost always yields corruption, and Afghanistan was no exception.

Corruption was increasingly fueled by the drug trade. The poppy crop had soared to 408,000 acres in 2006 and 477,000 in 2007, and Afghanistan was producing 82 percent of the world's poppy and 93 percent of the world's heroin by 2007, making the drug trade worth $4 billion—equivalent to half of Afghanistan's licit GDP. Because the Afghan government lacked strong institutions and the ability to enforce the rule of law, Afghanistan was becoming a lawless and corrupt narcostate.

When the crisis in governance became apparent with the rise of the Taliban insurgency in 2005 and 2006, the international community moved to bolster its governance programs. In dollar terms, the international community roughly doubled its training efforts in the Afghan civil administration and justice sectors, to $688 million, over the next three years, still a paltry figure relative to Afghanistan's needs. In 2007, USAID started the Capacity Development Program, a $219 million, five-year project to strengthen Afghan institutions such as the Ministries of Finance and Education and the Civil Service Commission. The program was a big improvement but still small in absolute terms. U.S. spending on rule-of-law programs doubled from 2006 to 2007 and nearly doubled again in 2008. The United States also doubled its much more substantial investment in counternarcotics programs—to $3.3 billion. The increased focus on governance and the rule of law spurred some institutional innovations in the Afghan government, but they have, to date, failed to markedly improve the quality of governance. Afghan President Hamid Karzai named an entirely new slate of justices to the Supreme Court in late 2006. The new court established a Regulation of Judicial Conduct, and the new justices began inspection tours of provincial courts to ensure their compliance with judicial standards. The Afghan government formed an anticorruption unit in the attorney general's office in 2009 to investigate and prosecute cases of high-level corruption, but Afghanistan fell further on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, to 179th—second from the bottom—in 2009. According to a survey conducted by ABC News, the BBC, and the German television station ARD, the number of Afghans who believed the government was doing an excellent or good job fell from 80 percent in 2005 to 49 percent in 2008—most likely because their great expectations of 2001 remained unfulfilled.

The international community paid an enormous opportunity cost by failing to play a greater role and provide sufficient resources from the start. Most observers of Afghan governance focus on Karzai's policies, behavior, and fitness for office. But any other Afghan president would face a nearly insurmountable challenge trying to enact policy through an institutional apparatus that, for all intents and purposes, does not function. Others have focused on how centralized or decentralized, institutionalized or tribalized, the Afghan government should be. But that argument is moot. The international community's interest is in making governance effective, whatever it looks like, and that is what the international community failed to invest in building after 2001.

THE ROAD TO VICTORY

The United States is not yet winning the war in Afghanistan, but it is not losing as swiftly or as thoroughly as the current crisis of confidence would suggest. Although Afghanistan remains poor, violent, and poorly governed, it is richer, freer, and safer than it has been in a generation. The security situation is a major challenge, but the United States and its allies have moved since 2006 to adopt a much more aggressive military posture in response—and with the funding to match it.

The application of increased military resources and a coherent strategy almost certainly will have an effect on the Afghan battlefield if given enough time to succeed and backed by a complimentary civilian strategy. In particular, U.S. President Barack Obama should show the same flexibility toward his announced July 2011 withdrawal date that he showed toward his initial timeline for withdrawal from Iraq. He wisely announced that the withdrawal will only "begin" in July 2011, leaving open the door for a gradual and phased withdrawal. He should seize on that to give ISAF the time it needs, now that it finally, for the first time in nine years, has adequate resources.

The single greatest strategic threat is the weakness of the Afghan government. Efforts in recent years to increase the size and scope of governance-assistance efforts are a welcome gesture, but they are not enough. The Obama administration should push for a dramatically more ambitious capacity-development program, starting with a much larger civilian presence in the Afghan bureaucracy and court system. Washington should also recognize that it can choose to withdraw from Afghanistan quickly at high risk or slowly at low risk. The programs, budgets, and strategies that are now finally in place have only been

operating for a few years; it is unlikely that there will be dramatic progress by July 2011. The Obama administration has calculated that some degree of withdrawal is necessary to pressure the Afghan government, but it should be wary lest a precipitous withdrawal lead to panic in Afghanistan, undoing a decade of careful gains.

If the international community had withdrawn from Afghanistan shortly after the initial round of elections in 2004–5, as it did in Cambodia, Haiti, and Liberia in the 1990s, the intervention would have failed. Governance had not improved, and most important, war had resumed. Remarkably, the international community did not seize on the completion of the Bonn process as a chance to declare victory and withdraw. Reflecting a realism and resilience evident in other recent operations—such as in Sierra Leone in 2002 and Iraq in 2007—international actors recognized the emerging problems and attempted a midcourse correction. They did so in part because prior experiences in Afghanistan had demonstrated that success was possible. The same knowledge should help the United States and its partners overcome the current crisis of confidence.

The Afghan mission is still plagued with difficulties, in particular endemically weak institutions and a poor governance-assistance effort. But recent history has shown that, contrary to popular belief, outsiders can make a positive difference in Afghanistan if given the right time, resources, and leadership.

The Three Futures for Afghanistan

Why the Country Needs a Long-Term Commitment From the United States

Zalmay Khalilzad

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Ten years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the gains that the international coalition has made with its local partners are real but reversible. Afghanistan is no longer a global hub of terrorist activity, but a Taliban resurgence would threaten to make it one again. Reconstruction assistance has produced demonstrable progress in health, education, and economic well-being, but corruption and governance problems have undermined popular support for the government in Kabul and constrained the overall level of progress. Internationally, a coalition still backs the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military mission. However, NATO's will is waning; China, Russia, and India are largely free riders; and Pakistan and Iran publicly say the right things, while destabilizing Afghanistan by privately meddling to their own ends.

Political and economic realities in the United States make the current level of American engagement in Afghanistan unsustainable. But as the commitment of coalition partners fades, what Washington de-

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cides will shape the future of South Asia. Looking ahead, there are three different scenarios for American engagement in Afghanistan.

It remains to be seen exactly which route Washington will take. But it is clear that U.S. interests require a long-term commitment not only in Afghanistan but across the region. Lest it be forgotten, the consequences of ignoring the region in the 1990s were visited upon the United States on 9/11. So the most vital goals today are defeating the remnants of al Qaeda in Pakistan, preventing the reemergence of terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan, ensuring the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, and discouraging Pakistan's use of extremism and terror as a policy instrument.

There are three ways forward. Each entails a different degree of involvement and carries varying risks and rewards. The first option is the riskiest.

FUTURE #1: IMMEDIATE DEPARTURE AND THE REALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

Discontent among the U.S. public over the war is already at an all-time high. Increased political demands on the White House could lead U.S. President Barack Obama to accelerate the planned withdrawal. In turn, Congress would slash economic assistance. Reconstruction responsibilities in Afghanistan would be left largely to international institutions and the government in Kabul. Even if the European powers, Japan, and South Korea sustained modest economic assistance, they, too, would likely follow the U.S. out the door. The counterinsurgency mission would come to an end.

With a more limited involvement, the United States would still try to pursue basic counterterrorism operations. For example, it would deploy special forces and drone and air strikes, but obtaining bases of operation in the region for these forces might prove problematic, if not impossible. At Pakistan's request, the United States is already withdrawing from the Shamsi air base, which had been used for drone operations. The Central Asian states may be reluctant to make up for the loss of bases in Pakistan; Russia and China would likely encourage them to resist U.S. requests. And Kabul would be less willing to provide base access if Washington focuses narrowly on counterterrorism objectives without a commitment to state building in Afghanistan. That would leave the future of Afghanistan to be determined principally by two factors: the durability of the Afghan government and the outcome of regional rivalries.

After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, the communist regime in Kabul unexpectedly held power for another three years. It was not until the Soviets abruptly cut off assistance—and key internal alliances frayed—that Mohammad Najibullah's regime in Kabul fell. The current Afghan government is more popular than Najibullah's was, but President Hamid Karzai's government is not without vulnerabilities and certainly would not be able to stand entirely on its own.

Consider that a sharp U.S. drawdown would make nationwide elections, scheduled for 2014, almost impossible. Instead of the Afghan people, outside powers would likely determine the fate of the central government. Pakistan would probably accelerate its support for the insurgency in an attempt to install a client regime in Kabul. China, India, Iran, Russia, and the Gulf States would pursue their interests whether elections worked or not—by funneling support either to the Karzai government or, should it suit them, to favored proxies. In all likelihood, violence would dramatically increase and Afghanistan would, once again, be home to a vicious cycle of proxy wars.

For the United States, a rapid drawdown would have mixed consequences. On the plus side, U.S. troops would no longer be in harm's way, Congress would reallocate resources (albeit while accepting heavy losses in sunk costs), and the United States would have greater freedom of action to engage in other parts of the world.

On the negative side, terrorist sanctuaries would likely reemerge. The Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other extremists, infused with momentum, would make a renewed push for more control of the country. The United States would lose access to markets promised by the New Silk Road initiative, and it would not be able to establish enduring bases to help deal with problems in Pakistan, Iran, and the rest of a neighborhood that is, to put it mildly, dangerous.

The bottom line: After a decade's effort in blood and treasure, Afghanistan could face the 1990s all over again.

FUTURE #2: PHASED DRAWDOWN AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE EFFORT

Assuming the U.S. public and Congress allow Obama the political breathing room to pursue his announced strategy and dedicate attention and resources to Afghanistan for a bit longer, Washington would proceed with a drawdown of forces as planned, transferring security responsibility to the Afghans by 2014. The Obama administration

could add a new feature to its strategy by seeking greater engagement from outside powers to stabilize Afghanistan.

Considering the significant interests of other major powers in Afghanistan, that prospect is not far-fetched. Russia and India have been the victims of terrorist attacks by groups linked to Afghanistan and Pakistan. China's western territories are vulnerable to Islamist extremists mixed with ethnic separatists. All stand to gain from either the economic growth from a New Silk Road plan or the vast mineral resources in the country.

With more time, Washington could work with others to reach consensus on desired outcomes and a joint vision for Afghanistan. Collaborating with regional partners, they would exercise coordinated influence over Pakistan and Iran to stem conflict and bring about some modicum of cooperation. China has major influence in Islamabad, and the combined efforts of China, India, and Russia could sway Tehran.

Regional cooperation amid a phased U.S. pullback is most likely to succeed if the UN, with U.S. support, establishes an enduring diplomatic forum, consisting initially of the major world powers, to work toward promoting Afghan peace and regional stability. Washington would use such a body as a vehicle for accommodating outside powers in the decision-making process but only if they contribute their fair share to the mission. Such a great power concert would negotiate redlines for the activities of regional powers in Afghanistan; monitor the Afghan reconciliation process; pressure the Afghan government to improve governance and the rule of law; provide long-term funding for economic development and the buildup and training of Afghan national army and police forces; and finally, construct infrastructure—roads, railroads, pipelines—to establish the new Silk Road connecting Central and South Asia into a single economic zone. The concert would enable major powers to preserve their core interests in Afghanistan while creating the conditions needed to stabilize the country.

Even with greater involvement of outside powers, however, U.S. efforts to internationalize the mission will not succeed without a sustained level of U.S. military and civilian engagement. While the UN would facilitate the concert, the United States is the sole power capable of galvanizing and incentivizing international cooperation behind economic integration and a regional settlement. Great powers are only likely to cooperate so long as they feel that free riding is no longer an option and that cooperation with a U.S.-backed re-

gional design remains the most viable means of securing their national interests. Without a real commitment from Washington, the best plans will fail.

The perception that the United States wishes to disengage from the region is already impeding the coalition's ability to influence key players. After all, during periods of ascendant influence, Washington was never able to persuade Pakistan to cease support for insurgents in Afghanistan. Relations with Karzai, meanwhile, have become difficult, with the coalition struggling to persuade his government to tackle corruption. Disengagement is likely to make these problems worse, as government leaders worry about their own futures.

FUTURE #3: SUSTAINED, DETERMINED U.S. ENGAGEMENT

A determined U.S. strategy would maintain a high level of military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan until the Kabul government is capable of policing its own territory. Washington would negotiate with the Afghan government on a long-term strategic partnership, including a sustained military presence for the foreseeable future. It could be complemented by a multilateral effort to create a great power concert to stabilize Afghanistan and the region.

U.S. engagement would need to concentrate on three goals. First, it would have to force Islamabad's hand to shift its policy from supporting the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other insurgents to facilitating a political settlement. Washington would have to offer Pakistan a variety of inducements, while addressing legitimate Pakistani concerns—for instance, by offering a guarantee that Afghan territory is not used as a staging ground for attacks against Pakistan.

If Pakistan does not cooperate, however, Washington would escalate coercive tactics, dramatically reducing military assistance, curtailing support programs to Pakistan through international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, and increasing military operations against insurgent targets on Pakistani territory.

If this effort fails, the United States should explore a long-term effort to contain, isolate, and transform Pakistan into a more stable, moderate state. This would require a sizeable presence of residual U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan to harden the Afghan state and conduct cross-border operations on Pakistani soil. The United States would also need to enhance bilateral relations with India and strengthen Afghan security forces to the point where they can with-

stand Pakistan's possible escalation of pressure. These moves would give Kabul and New Delhi sufficient leverage to negotiate a reasonable agreement with Islamabad.

Second, the United States would improve the capacity of the Afghan state. It would need to continue counterinsurgency operations, conditioning its drawdown on the ability of Afghan security forces to take over. Washington would continue to push for international assistance but would need to assume greater and even unilateral responsibility to build up and train Afghanistan's national army and police.

On the political front, the United States would need to persuade the Afghan government to deal with corruption and the rule of law. Significant progress on governance issues should be linked to the completion of negotiations with the Afghan government on a strategic partnership agreement governing the post-2014 U.S. presence. If real progress is not made on the governance front, the same objective will need to be pursued by strengthening pro-reform forces in the country so that they can influence the results of the next presidential elections in 2014.

Third, Washington would pursue a positive vision for the region based on economic integration and the establishment of a New Silk Road. Preferably in conjunction with allies, the United States would strengthen Afghan institutions. While a certain amount of aid will be necessary during a transitional period, the objective would be Afghan self-reliance. Engagement with the private sector would help Afghanistan develop its agriculture sector and mineral resources. And proactive U.S. diplomacy would be the critical factor in commencing negotiations to reduce trade barriers and develop roads, rails, pipelines, and other infrastructure projects.

For now, sustained U.S. engagement is the strategy most likely to ensure regional security. Heavy combat operations need not continue indefinitely, but core U.S. interests would require the U.S. to remain in Afghanistan for another decade to build up and train Afghan forces, conduct counterterrorism operations, and respond to regional contingencies. By and large, the Obama administration has embraced a determined U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Now, it should explain the imperative of getting the endgame right. Cementing a long-term U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan would enable counterterrorism missions in the region and give Afghanistan's national security forces enough time to reach a sufficient size and capacity to assume responsibility from the coalition. The United States would have a platform for

dealing with a variety of regional contingencies, such as a Pakistani state collapse in which nuclear weapons fall into the hands of extremists.

Most important, a demonstration of U.S. willpower provides the greatest hope for preventing counterproductive hedging by Afghan political players and regional powers, leaving them no choice but to accommodate the reality of a strong and stable Afghanistan with political and military ties to the United States.

OF ANY FUTURE

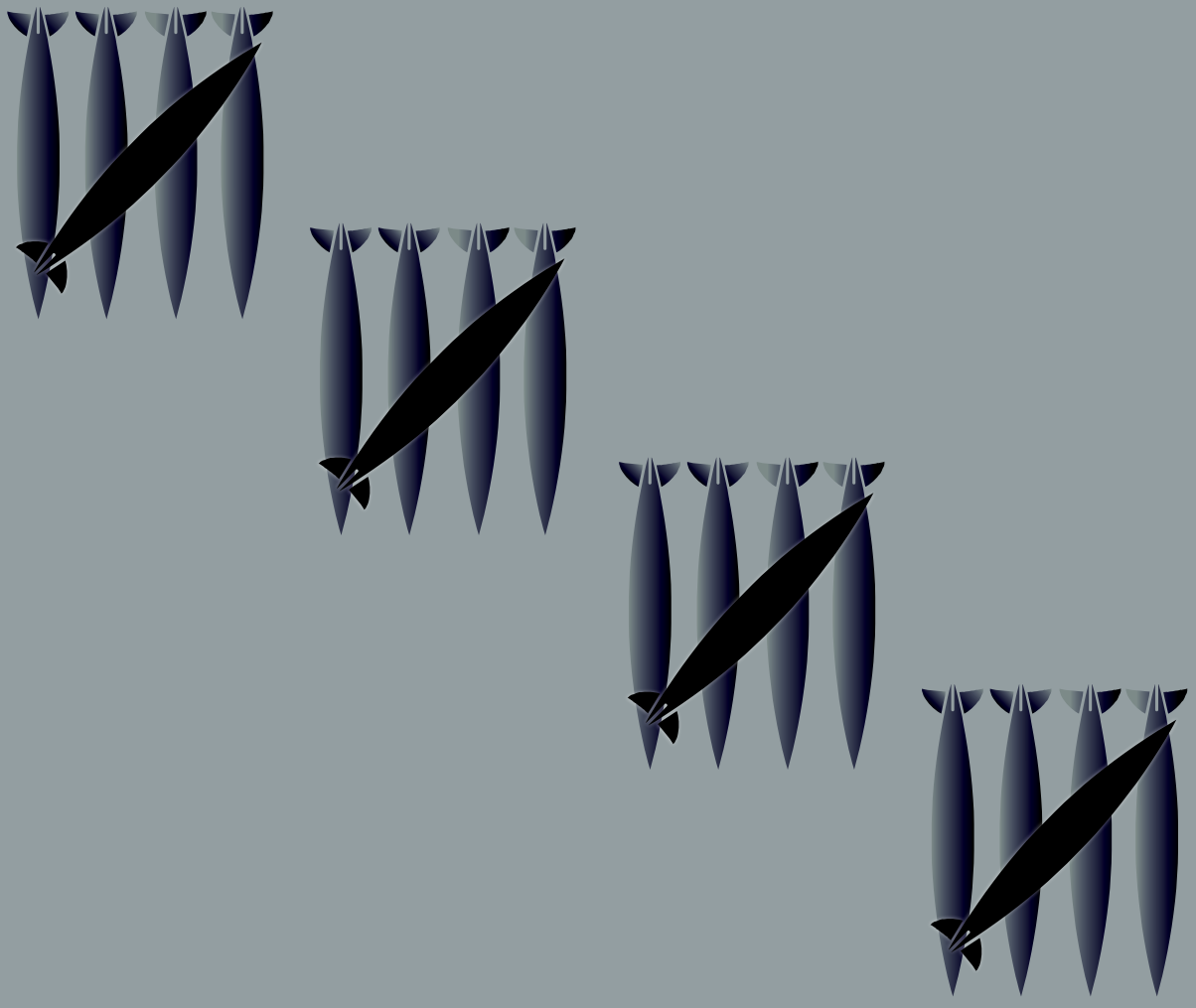
Regardless of which approach, or combination of approaches, the United States ultimately pursues, Washington must plan for a wide number of contingencies.

Even in a positive scenario—in which the United States makes progress on key priorities such as counterterrorism, managing Pakistan, reconstruction, governance reforms, and a regional settlement—consolidating gains will require other forms of U.S. engagement for some time to come. The military component would be a much smaller part of the U.S. strategy, while the relative role of diplomacy and economic involvement would increase.

Since World War II, U.S. statecraft has succeeded by sending American forces to regions of critical importance and working with partners—for decades if needed—to address mutual threats, build stability, and foster progress.

This formula eliminated major power wars in Europe and East Asia for more than a half century and successfully concluded the Cold War—a historic triumph. The necessary engagement in Central and South Asia will not be nearly as difficult or expensive as those previous efforts, which involved U.S. occupation governments and a military presence large enough to counter the looming communist threat. Given the risks and the opportunities ahead, it is an investment worth making.

A WAY OUT?



Leaving Afghanistan to the Afghans

A Commander's Take on Security

David M. Rodriguez

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011

In the summer of 2011, I visited the Afghan army's Regional Military Training Center in Helmand Province. The recruits had been there for two weeks, and they looked as strong as any group of U.S. soldiers in basic training. The Afghan drill instructors were as competent, and had the same cocky swagger, as American ones. "Sir, look at all of our volunteers," one drill sergeant proudly said to me. "They're great. We have already won. . . . We just don't know it yet."

To comprehend the United States' progress in Afghanistan, it is important to understand how and where we have focused our resources and what work lies ahead. To be sure, the United States and its coalition partners still have plenty of challenges left to tackle in Afghanistan. However, there are indisputable gains everywhere we have focused our efforts.

In 2009, General Stanley McChrystal, then the commander of U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops, with the help of David Petraeus, then the commander of the U.S. Central Command, worked hard to design a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign for Afghanistan that would "get the inputs right," as

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Petraeus often said. The upshot was more resources, troops, and civilian support and better command coherence. There are now more Afghan and coalition soldiers in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces alone than there were in all of Regional Command East, the formation responsible for security in Afghanistan's 14 eastern provinces, when I commanded the latter from 2007 to 2008. As 33,000 U.S. troops begin the drawdown, returning to the United States by next summer, 352,000 Afghan soldiers and police will be in place to continue their work. There are clear signs of progress in Afghanistan, and coalition forces have regained the initiative.

The strategy has worked because it sought to match the coalition's goals with available resources. It involved four major concepts. First, use a bottom-up approach founded on good governance, capable security forces, and engagement with local communities. If towns had good leaders and security providers, populations would find local solutions to their local problems, with just a little help from Kabul. Insurgents could no longer exploit popular grievances about security, justice, and a lack of basic services.

Yet coalition troops did not have the resources to carry out a local, bottom-up approach everywhere simultaneously, hence the second principle: certain areas—population and commercial centers and major transportation routes—are more important to the effort than others. The coalition identified about one-third of the country's landmass and one-fourth of Afghanistan's districts as such key terrain. Since then, with much-expanded Afghan security forces, it has focused on securing those places. Meanwhile, the coalition's civilian counterparts have supported the strategy by concentrating their development programs in the key terrain that troops have cleared of insurgents.

Even in those areas, coalition forces could not let what they wanted to achieve distract them from what they needed to achieve. The third principle, then, was to do only what was required to meet the coalition's objectives. In the spring of 2011, I was traveling with General Shir Mohammed Karimi, chief of staff of the Afghan army. An Afghan soldier asked him when his unit was going to get more GPS devices. "Why do you ask me this?" Karimi responded. "We are a poor country! Get out your maps." He knew all too well that we should not try to build for Afghanistan the equivalent of the United Kingdom's security forces, or Germany's government, or try to achieve Poland's level of development. Afghanistan resides in a

rough neighborhood, and the coalition must be realistic about its objectives. At a minimum, the security forces must keep Afghans safe enough to live basically normal lives. Of course, it is important to monitor trends of violent activity, but such data alone do not tell the whole story. On May 8, 2011, the day after several simultaneous attacks rocked Kandahar City, I traveled there with Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, Afghanistan's minister of the interior, to study the police response. It was apparent that the police had responded well, leaving the people feeling safe enough to resume their everyday lives almost immediately.

The fourth concept of the strategy was that the Taliban and their associates were not the Afghans' only enemy. Venal or incompetent officials alienate the population. Criminal patronage networks have thrived on poorly managed aid dollars. And some of the practices of the coalition forces, such as their early reliance on casualty-heavy air strikes and brutish warlords, created legitimate grievances among the population. Over the past year, the coalition has made preventing civilian causalities a top priority. Coalition troops are experts at the precise application of violence, and they are learning to let an insurgent live to fight another day if the collateral damage from killing him would outweigh the benefits. Casualties caused by the coalition decreased by 20 percent between 2009 and 2010 and were vastly outnumbered by those caused by insurgents.

If the combined Afghan and international civil-military team enabled good leaders, limited the freedom of action of criminal patronage networks, and reformed poor international practices, the insurgency would be much easier to deal with. As U.S. troops depart, and Afghans are handed control, these tasks will become even more important.

THE CAMPAIGN

In 2009, the Taliban enjoyed nearly uncontested control over Afghanistan's southern Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. Drawing on the four principles, that year the coalition and its Afghan partners drafted a military campaign plan for Afghanistan called Operation Omid (*omid* means "hope" in Dari). The coalition hit the Taliban where it hurt, attacking their leaders and their control of territory and people. Soon, Afghan and coalition forces had pacified the central Helmand River valley, which bisects the province. The area around the valley is also rapidly being stabilized.

Next, Afghan and coalition forces drove the Taliban, who seemed unprepared for the forces' strength, out of key terrain in Kandahar Province: Kandahar City and its environs, other densely populated areas, and commercial routes between the two provinces. Meanwhile, troops also expanded the security zone around Kabul, in eastern Afghanistan, and continue to interdict insurgents on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Parts of other central and eastern provinces —Khost, Laghman, Logar, Nangarhar, and Wardak—have also seen concrete gains in terms of stability.

In Afghanistan's north, insurgents have made headlines, assassinating General Mohammed Daud Daud, northern Afghanistan's chief of police, and General Abdul Rahman Sayedkhili, a provincial police chief. Both men were prominent Tajik leaders. But the region's key terrain—Mazar-e Sharif and the commercial route along the Baghlan-Kunduz corridor—remains secure.

Finally, in Afghanistan's west, Herat City is bustling and ready to initiate the transition to local control. The area has even become stable enough to begin construction on the road to link the western province of Badghis and the northern province of Faryab, which will connect Herat to Mazar-e Sharif.

Thanks to their successes, the Afghan security forces have garnered more popular support countrywide, cultivating people's desire to work with Afghan soldiers and police to defend themselves against the insurgency. As a result, the population is more willing to tip off Afghan and coalition troops about enemy activity. Polling in Helmand has indicated that the number of respondents who believe they are secure has risen fourfold since 2009. The increased scope and tempo of Afghan and coalition operations have helped. For example, by 2011, the combined forces were recovering four times as many weapons caches per week as they had been even the year before.

In other words, the coalition strategy has been a success, and it continues to create the conditions for expanded Afghan control over security. Insurgents face more effective Afghan security forces and a more widespread government presence. They seem to have recognized this change and shifted their strategy accordingly. Insurgents now target those things and individuals who threaten their control over the people: government officials, police stations, and elders of representative community councils. They attempt spectacular attacks, such as the recent one on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, and

frequently wear Afghan army or coalition uniforms, in the hopes of weakening the population's growing faith in Afghanistan's security forces. So far, they have failed.

The goal is for Afghan forces to assume lead responsibility for security by the end of 2014, and they are already on their way to meeting it. At the end of 2010, the army was almost 143,000 strong, surpassing that year's goal of 134,000 soldiers. The force has quickly become one of the country's most respected institutions, but before taking their hand off the back of the bicycle seat completely, coalition forces will still have to help the army develop better leadership, decrease its attrition rate and absences without leave, balance its tribal and ethnic representation, and improve its handling of logistics.

In 2011, 95 percent of all Afghan army units have been partnered with coalition forces, and they are showing steady improvement in providing security and in their ability to independently thwart insurgent attacks. This past year, the Afghan army doubled the number of operations it successfully led. It is gratifying to see the army taking responsibility and doing some things even better than coalition troops, such as avoiding civilian casualties. As one Canadian junior officer told me, "I never leave the forward operating base without my [Afghan] partner. If I do, I am blind, deaf, and dumb."

For many Afghans, the police are the most visible security providers and representatives of the government. By the end of 2010, the Afghan police force boasted nearly 120,000 officers, 11,000 more than its target. It is imperative that the police force continue to develop professionally. For a time, police recruiting and training focused on quantity rather than quality. Only recently has the proportion of adequately trained officers exceeded half. To remedy the force's shortcomings, the coalition has initiated programs to develop leadership qualities and improve literacy. The Afghan National Civil Order Police, Afghanistan's gendarmerie-like force, is the police force's most capable arm. Its recruitment is strong, and officer retention is improving. The force is in constant and effective use, but it should not be overburdened, lest attrition become a problem.

Meanwhile, better security has allowed civilians in the Afghan government to renew their own efforts. There are now significantly more trained civil servants in Afghanistan than there were two years ago. They have been deployed to key terrain districts that have been cleared, where they provide services to people who have never before had

them. Informal representative community councils have emerged, taking the opinions, needs, and desires of the people to the local governments. Those people have begun to hold their local governments more accountable. I have witnessed courageous acts. I'll never forget one 2010 meeting of local officials in Helmand Province. A young man stood before one of the region's major power brokers and, pointing his finger in the man's direction, announced to the room, "This man does not represent me."

Indeed, there have also been notable signs of progress in governance at the district and provincial levels this past year, particularly in the Helmand River valley, which saw a hard-fought contest for control; in Kandahar City and surrounding districts; and in some cities in eastern Afghanistan. These improvements are largely the work of good government officials, professionals who are unencumbered by, or are assisted in, the task of exercising local control. Last year, hundreds of government officials were replaced at the subnational level, the vast majority because someone else was more qualified for the role, showing that the Afghan government recognizes the importance of good leadership and merit-based hiring. Kabul must now supply reliable funding to help these new government officials provide services to the people.

The example of Helmand Province is illustrative. Official assessments show that governance has improved there; almost all the critical civil servant positions there have been filled, which helps ensure that the government will keep providing basic services, including stepping in during disputes and when traditional justice mechanisms fail. This is critical. One of the things that the Taliban offered was a justice system, which, although brutal, was preferable to none.

The 2010 publication of the U.S. military's *Counterinsurgency (COIN) Contracting Guidance*, authored by Petraeus, was accompanied by new initiatives to make the coalition's assistance more transparent. One, Task Force 2010, focused on correcting the coalition's contracting problems. The other, Joint Task Force Shafafiyat (*shafafiyat* means "transparency" in Dari and Pashto), sought to address corruption. As a result of this guidance, coalition forces have been doing a much better job of channeling assistance and construction dollars into the right hands. All companies that compete for contracts worth more than $1 million are vetted, and large contracts are routinely broken down into smaller ones to ensure broader (and fairer) competition. Coalition contracts can also

now be canceled without notice or penalty in the case of wrongdoing and generally include requirements to use local labor, structure salaries fairly, and teach the Afghans those skills that are in greatest demand. In general, the new strategy, bolstered by more resources, has proved to be successful wherever we have focused our efforts.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The coming reduction of U.S. troops in Afghanistan may mean that the coalition will have to find alternative ways to accomplish some of its lowest-priority objectives. But the logic of the campaign will not change. For now, Afghan and coalition troops will continue to concentrate on securing southern Afghanistan, with supporting efforts to expand security in other areas, such as into the northern Helmand River valley, Kandahar City, Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, and Herat and along the Baghlan-Kunduz corridor and the "ring road." In fact, many of these areas are already quite secure, especially Kabul, which is home to one-fifth of Afghanistan's population.

As stability comes to these regions, Afghan and coalition forces will likely move the main effort eastward. There is a lot of work left to be done in the country's east, and Afghan forces, supported by the coalition, will have a tough fight ahead. It is unlikely that they will ever be able to completely deny insurgents a haven, kill all their leaders, or interdict all the routes they use to infiltrate the eastern provinces. Still, Afghanistan should be able to withstand those challenges and avoid falling into the hands of the Taliban or hosting foreign terrorists, and the United States' main interest in the region will thus be met.

In the end, Afghanistan will at least see its densely populated areas and commercial routes better connected. Improved governance will cement and accelerate the security gains and bolster the population's trust in the government's ability to provide for a better future. Short of a significant increase in terrorist activity emanating from Afghanistan's neighbors, I am confident that Afghan forces, supported by the coalition, can achieve irreversible gains and successfully secure Afghanistan's key terrain by the end of 2014.

Afghan leaders and soldiers will start to lead more operations, with the coalition providing only advisory or technical support. The Afghan security forces will be capable of fighting and managing the vast majority of the organizational, administrative, and logistical tasks related to counterinsurgency on their own. Of course, the United States will con-

tinue to assist them with intelligence support, air support, medical evacuation, and quick-reaction forces (which will be located increasingly further away) until their own programs develop. I expect that U.S. special operations forces will operate in Afghanistan for some time.

Meanwhile, the police will have to serve the population more effectively, in partnership with Afghanistan's own army. In major urban centers, this is already starting to take place. Afghans are fighters and bring to the security forces significant spirit and capability. Their partnership with coalition troops helps them build up their confidence to use the skills they already have and learn the ones they don't. With the drawdown approaching, the task will be to do all this faster.

To win the race against time, coalition forces will need to address four issues. First, they must figure out how to maximize partnerships with all levels of the Afghan government, so as to create a comprehensive political strategy. The coalition's and the Afghan government's public criticism of each other should stop; constructive talks based on mutual interests should be the coin of the realm. The coalition must be more understanding of the constraints and pressures on the Afghan political leadership, and both must hold each other accountable for actions that clearly run counter to shared interests.

Second, the United States must work with Pakistan to address the challenges that emanate from the Taliban's and other extremist groups' sanctuaries there. If the situation worsens in Pakistan's ungoverned spaces, the Afghan government will have to build even stronger security forces and local communities. It would take time to build them up to a point where they were resilient enough to handle an expanded threat from the other side of the border.

Third, there are several reasons to worry about ethnic tensions within the government and the security forces. Although all Afghan government and security institutions have prescriptions for the balance of ethnicities, better mechanisms are needed to enforce those rules. Stability in Afghanistan depends on the existence of sufficiently fair representation and a sense of ownership among all constituencies.

Finally, the dialogue between the United States and Afghanistan, and between NATO and Afghanistan, must advance. The West's immediate objectives can best be met if it offers Afghanistan and other states in the region predictability and assurances about its plans beyond 2014. The long-term strategic partnership must be defined in advance to minimize the relationship's volatility.

When I stepped down as commander of the ISAF Joint Command in July of this year, I was certain of having tried to make best possible use of the manpower and funding available. I know the American men and women in uniform and civilian personnel who remain in Afghanistan—and the United States' coalition partners—will continue to meet the goals of the mission. As a result, U.S. troops can begin to return home from Afghanistan knowing that they are drawing down from a position of strength.

We have proved that wherever Afghan and coalition forces focus their efforts, they make progress. And as we go forward, we must continue to be disciplined in allocating resources, staying true to our objectives, and combating all the enemies of the Afghan people. We must continue to support the Afghan security forces and the government, encouraging good leaders and inspiring others to join in helping create a positive future. If we maintain momentum, it is possible to achieve what we desire and what the people of Afghanistan deserve —a country stable enough to ensure a future free of the threat of al Qaeda's return or an insurgent overthrow of the government.

In the future, new wars may emerge in other poorly governed and underdeveloped nations. It is imperative for the U.S. military to learn from its decadelong engagement in Afghanistan, absorbing the lessons of the experience there to avoid having to relearn the same lessons again later. The army must be versatile enough to succeed in regular wars, irregular wars, and wars that combine aspects of both. Those forces that can adapt with the greatest speed will prevail. As a wealthy nation, the United States has tended to rely on technology and cutting-edge equipment to prepare for war. As Americans ponder what we have learned from Afghanistan, we would do well to heed another truism: equipment becomes obsolete, but leadership and people do not. Ultimately, the U.S. military will succeed by cultivating leaders who can think critically, be adaptable, and embrace uncertainty —just as it has done in Afghanistan.

The Right Way Out of Afghanistan

Leaving Behind a State That Can Govern

Stephen Hadley and John D. Podesta

JULY/AUGUST 2012

The signing in May of a strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Afghanistan came at a tense time in the Afghan war. As NATO and the International Security Assistance Force work to transfer security responsibility for much of the country to the Afghan government, the agreement establishes the contours of a long-term relationship and a framework for future cooperation. But it notably leaves out details on the levels of forces and funding the United States will commit to Afghanistan after 2014. Meanwhile, insurgents continue to mount frequent attacks against high-visibility targets throughout the country and have assassinated international personnel and Afghans with ties to the government of President Hamid Karzai. Trust between the U.S. and Afghan governments has eroded as a result of Afghan civilian casualties, attacks on U.S. and other international forces by Afghan troops, and blunders by U.S. military personnel, including the burning of Korans at an air base.

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Although the Obama administration has reached out to the Taliban and Pakistan in the hopes of achieving a negotiated settlement, the U.S. transition strategy still prioritizes military activity over diplomacy. As Washington draws down its troops, it has armed both regular and irregular Afghan forces and targeted insurgent commanders and other extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The military campaign has had significant successes, particularly in dismantling al Qaeda and largely destroying its senior leadership in the region, achieving a primary U.S. national security objective. It has also weakened Taliban insurgents and restored Afghan government control over significant portions of southern Afghanistan.

But in its focus on security, the United States has not sufficiently used its influence to pressure the Karzai government to forge a legitimate Afghan state that is governed by the rule of law, stabilized by checks and balances between the branches of government, and upheld by relatively free and fair elections. This has left the future of Afghanistan and of broader U.S. interests in the region in doubt. A transition that focuses primarily on Afghan security force levels and capabilities cannot adequately address the flaws in governance that have alienated ordinary Afghans from the Karzai administration and fueled the insurgency. Nor can an exclusively military strategy calm regional hostility or eliminate insurgent threats entirely. In addition, the dependency of the Afghan government and its security forces on high levels of international assistance for the foreseeable future, especially in a time of global austerity, threatens to undermine the current strategy.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan will face a rocky political transition, especially if the United States and its allies do not devote to that transition the same degree of attention that they have given the security transition. Karzai is required by the Afghan constitution to step down following the presidential elections in 2014. This electoral process should ideally facilitate the creation of a more inclusive, legitimate political system. Yet political parties in the country remain weak and marginalized, the voter registry is inadequate, and the country's electoral institutions lack guarantees of independence. Policymakers have not prepared for the real possibility of a repeat of the fraud-ridden and destabilizing Afghan presidential and parliamentary elections of 2009 and 2010.

To make matters worse, distrust between the United States and Pakistan has spiked. The countries hold opposing visions for Afghanistan's political makeup and position within the regional security

balance. The United States' objective remains a relatively stable Afghanistan that does not once again become a sanctuary for transnational terrorist groups or destabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan. Pakistan, however, seeks to maximize its own influence in Afghanistan, and minimize India's, through support for the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. Although both the United States and Pakistan have indicated a desire for rapprochement, their disagreements continue to complicate efforts to find common ground even on issues on which the countries' interests have the potential to align, such as counterterrorism and nuclear security.

Guarding against instability in Afghanistan will require the presence of some U.S. forces there beyond 2014. But sustaining the current level of foreign military involvement indefinitely is not an option. Although American and allied soldiers have acted with bravery and professionalism over the past decade, Afghan and Pakistani leaders must take responsibility for their own countries' security and prosperity.

In this regard, the United States needs to synchronize the reduction of its military and financial investment in Afghanistan with efforts to resolve the internal political dimensions of the Afghan conflict. An uncoordinated withdrawal would risk the collapse of the weak Afghan security forces and, in turn, the weak Afghan state. Such a breakdown could spark renewed bloodshed and large-scale population displacement inside Afghanistan and into neighboring countries and leave swaths of territory unprotected against militants and terrorists, thereby undermining U.S. strategic interests in the region.

STATE OF CRISIS

The international community has staked its transition strategy in Afghanistan on the strength of the Afghan security forces and the government in Kabul. But that government is deeply flawed and, should the world stop compensating for its deficiencies, in danger of imploding. The constitutional system, which vests great power in the hands of the executive without real checks and balances, lends itself to abuses of authority. Officials often use formal state institutions to support their patronage networks, fueling high levels of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism on the national and local levels.

Karzai has failed to use his position to advance a reform agenda or to support merit-based appointments of officials. Instead, his administration has actively opposed measures that would have promoted greater

accountability and empowered other branches of government. The weakness of the parliament, the judiciary, and local governmental bodies means that there are few channels, outside the presidential palace, for Afghans to influence decision-making or hold leaders accountable.

The absence of transparent and effective systems of justice and law has provided Taliban insurgents with an opening to mobilize domestic opposition to the Afghan government. The ability of the Taliban to organize marginalized and disaffected communities contributes as much to the Taliban's resiliency as do their safe havens across the border in Pakistan. Furthermore, the centralized, winner-take-all political system complicates efforts to reconcile Afghanistan's competing constituencies. Opponents who might otherwise opt to share power have few guarantees that those with authority will not abuse it.

Unlike other centralized political systems, the Afghan government actually has very limited means to support and assert itself. Although the Afghan economy has grown by double digits since 2002 and the government has improved its ability to collect taxes and customs revenues, Kabul still depends on financial assistance from the international community to fund the majority of its operations, salaries, and services. The cost of fielding the large Afghan military and police forces established by NATO trainers over the past several years eclipses the country's entire national budget.

The United States and other international donors will not sustain their current levels of assistance indefinitely. The dismal state of the global economy, attacks by Afghans against foreign personnel, and disputes between the United States and Afghanistan make it extremely risky for Kabul to rely so heavily on external aid. The Afghan government must expand its base of domestic support, both politically and financially. Crafting a more stable political system will require a combination of reforms that address the lack of accountability and undue centralization of the executive. To move beyond years of unrest, the government must also seek a political settlement with nonviolent opposition groups and other elements of Afghan society, as well as with the armed insurgents.

A SYNCHRONIZED STRATEGY

Left unaddressed, the major weaknesses in Afghanistan's political structure will reduce the likelihood of a stable and secure Afghan state after 2014. The United States needs a more robust political strategy to actively

support the transition, one that presses for a more legitimate Afghan government, a political settlement among the broad range of Afghan actors outside the current system (including those Taliban elements willing to participate), and a regional settlement that involves Pakistan.

First, in order to help bring about a more legitimate Afghan government, the United States and its partners must ensure a smooth presidential transition in 2014, when Karzai is constitutionally required to step down. In the short term, the United States will need to make clear, as it has to date, that its pledges of support under the strategic partnership agreement are conditioned on Karzai's ceding power to a legitimately elected successor. Karzai may reasonably expect assurances that when he departs, he and his family will be kept safe, his core allies and constituents will not be shut out of the government, and he can leave office with honor. Offering him a senior position either in Afghanistan or in an international institution after his term expires could help assuage his fears of marginalization and open the door for other political actors to emerge.

Facilitating a democratic transition of power that truly broadens political participation also requires the international community to press for badly needed electoral reforms well in advance of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015. These should include the establishment of a credible national voter registry (or an effective substitute) and a commitment to the independence and transparency of the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, Afghanistan's two main electoral bodies. Burdensome party-registration processes and the single nontransferable voting system, which offers voters only one choice among potentially hundreds of candidates for multiple parliamentary seats, have disempowered voters in previous elections and have also hamstrung the formation of political parties that could more effectively represent the interests of Afghanistan's fractious political landscape. As the principal financial and logistical contributors to Afghanistan's recent elections, the United States, the United Nations, and other international donors must demand that the 2014 and 2015 elections meet higher standards than previous contests have while, of course, leaving the actual choice of leaders to the Afghan people.

Over the long term, the United States needs to use its diplomatic muscle to support the creation of stronger checks and balances and other reforms that would allow opposition groups to participate on a

level playing field. This will require holding the Afghan government accountable for the pledges it has made to that end in the strategic partnership agreement and at international conferences. The international community can grant more explicit recognition to legitimate domestic opposition and civil-society organizations by interacting with them and sponsoring formal training programs for political parties. To strengthen Afghanistan's ability to manage dissent peacefully, the United States should encourage the parliament to take on an increased role in overseeing the appointment of government officials and in the development and approval of national budgets. Only through such reforms can Afghanistan heed the concerns of the public and offer former combatants the ability to advance their interests through politics rather than the use of force.

Moreover, U.S. financial assistance should support Afghanistan's political transition, seeking to ensure that the Afghan state does not collapse as foreign aid drops and the economy weakens. Several successful programs initiated during the past decade deserve continued support, such as the National Solidarity Program and a program to develop a basic package of health services, which work at the community level to deliver services and fund development projects often overlooked by national planners. Washington should support management teams in important ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Mines. The United States should also channel a higher percentage of its assistance through the Afghan budget, rather than through outside contractors, and then use it as leverage to push the government toward stronger anticorruption measures. These measures should include the prosecution of some high-profile offenders, such as those who recently brought down Kabul Bank, to make clear that impunity will no longer be the norm.

Second, the United States must facilitate a political settlement among Afghanistan's opposing factions. Any strategy for reconciling Afghan's diverse groups should include an effort to reach out to the Taliban. The success of such an effort is far from assured: the Taliban have repeatedly rejected talks with the Afghan government; their plans to open a political office in Qatar, once seen as a step toward negotiations, have not materialized; and U.S. efforts to coordinate a prisoner exchange have hit an impasse. Both the Afghan government and the insurgency are fragmented, and Karzai has insisted on controlling the negotiations. Insurgent commanders and criminals in Af-

ghanistan who benefit from the persistence of conflict, as well as regional spoilers such as Iran and Pakistan, have made negotiating a settlement all the more difficult.

But even an ultimately unsuccessful effort may carry benefits. By promoting negotiations, the United States can test the intentions of various actors in Afghanistan and Pakistan, clarify which Taliban representatives have the authority to speak for which parts of the movement, and better understand the vision of Pakistani leaders for Afghanistan's future. And outreach efforts by the U.S. and Afghan governments may themselves weaken the insurgency. Recent reports suggest that the Taliban's discussions with the United States have lowered morale and generated confusion and conflict within the insurgency's ranks.

The basic contours of a political settlement with the Taliban have been in place for several years: the Taliban must respect the Afghan constitution, renounce armed conflict, and sever their ties with al Qaeda. Little progress has been made, however, in establishing a process to operationalize these concepts in an agreement. For a successful settlement to be reached by 2014 or soon thereafter, this work must be undertaken in earnest.

As a first step, U.S. civilian and military officials must redouble their efforts to establish a road map for negotiations that includes not only the United States and some combination of the Taliban and the Karzai administration but also other stakeholders, such as the parliament, domestic opposition groups, and women's and civil-society organizations. The whole of Afghan society must be made to feel comfortable with the process of reaching out to the Taliban and whatever results from it. If the negotiations are not transparent, each participant will suspect that its counterparts are attempting to forge separate peace accords. This would weaken both the prospect for a consensus agreement and the ability of leaders to negotiate on behalf of their supporters, who remain divided over the benefits of talks. Whether negotiations take place under the auspices of the United Nations, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or another neutral mediator, the process will gain traction only through sustained engagement by all the relevant parties.

Washington should also suggest a number of confidence-building measures that could advance peace talks. Leaders of the Taliban and the Afghan government need to demonstrate to their constituents

that their interests will be best protected through negotiations, not violence. Steps to build mutual trust that are already under discussion include guarantees of safe passage for negotiating teams and prisoner transfers. If the insurgents took certain positive steps, such as entering into a serious dialogue with the Karzai administration or halting assassination attacks on government employees, the United States might respond by supporting the removal of Taliban figures from the UN blacklist, which groups them together with al Qaeda members and subjects the group to international sanctions.

Third, any political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan will be sustainable only if it forms part of a larger regional settlement. The Pakistanis, in particular, need to come on board and may require some U.S. prodding to get there. Pakistan has undermined the prospects for long-term peace in Afghanistan by providing sanctuary, training, and financial support to the insurgency, in part to counter what it fears will be undue Indian influence in the country. U.S. officials must pursue a frank and candid dialogue with Pakistan's civilian leadership and security and diplomatic establishments to figure out what role they can play in reconciliation efforts. Without these conversations, Pakistan appears unlikely to use its influence to bring militant groups to the table. Of course, the Karzai government must be part of these discussions.

Greater dialogue with both insurgents and the Pakistanis will clarify which groups might be willing to engage in negotiations and which remain irreconcilable and thus will need to be defeated by force. The United States should appoint an official, based in the region and reporting to Marc Grossman, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, to be specifically tasked with working with Afghan and Pakistani officials to develop a plan for engaging the Taliban. The United States should use both carrots and sticks to get Pakistan to act against those insurgents who are unwilling to negotiate.

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

The future of Pakistan, even more than the future of Afghanistan, will determine the stability of South Asia as a whole and thus has greater implications for U.S. national security. Therefore, one of the central objectives of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has been to prevent the further destabilization of Pakistan. But the Afghan conflict places tremendous pressure on Pakistan's society and leadership and increases

friction between Washington and Islamabad, complicating the United States' ability to advance its interests when it comes to Pakistan. These interests are threefold: eliminating transnational terrorist groups that can directly threaten the United States and its allies, preventing the use or proliferation of the country's nuclear weapons, and supporting its transition to a mature, civilian-led democracy.

Given the distrust in the relationship, the United States may be tempted to escalate its indirect conflict with Pakistan over Afghanistan, break any pretense of cooperation, and instead seek to contain the Pakistan-based insurgency to prevent it from operating in Afghanistan, India, or elsewhere. Proposals for ramping up pressure on Pakistan include increasing the drone strikes, conducting U.S. Special Forces operations in the country, cutting Islamabad off from international financial resources, labeling Pakistan a state sponsor of terror, and imposing sanctions. But ending cooperation with Islamabad would considerably undermine U.S. interests in the country. And given the resiliency of the Taliban insurgency and the inability of the Afghan government to support itself, such a break is unlikely to achieve U.S. goals in Afghanistan, either.

The United States should thus attempt to de-escalate tensions with Pakistan and restore security and political cooperation. Washington should maintain the ability to act unilaterally in cases in which the United States' immediate security is at risk or if renewed cooperation with Islamabad fails. But this approach will prove too costly—for both the United States and Pakistan—if pursued over the long term.

That is why the Obama administration and Pakistani leaders are attempting to redefine the relationship in the wake of the Pakistani parliament's lengthy review of the two countries' terms of cooperation. The United States and Pakistan will continue to disagree on a host of issues, such as drone strikes and the perceived threat from India. But after a series of crises in the relationship over the past year, both sides should see with renewed clarity the need to find a working relationship that accommodates their core interests.

The United States should also encourage Pakistan's transition to a mature, civilian-led democracy. Lacking basic mechanisms of accountability, successive Pakistani military and civilian governments have faced few consequences for their mismanagement of the country's deep political and economic challenges. The failure to educate and provide opportunities for the country's burgeoning youth population

and the lack of success in integrating the country's economy into the region have left Pakistan at risk of falling behind its neighbors.

A more democratic, civilian-led Pakistan would better respond to the will of its citizens, expand the rule of law, and begin to address its economic crises and fraught civil-military relations. This could stabilize Pakistan and its ties to its neighbors, two important U.S. national security goals for the region. Despite strains in the U.S.-Pakistani relationship, Washington must do what it can to support Pakistan's civilian institutions and fledgling democracy.

To start with, Washington should send clear diplomatic messages to all Pakistani political actors that military coups or other extra-constitutional ousters of a civilian government will carry drastic consequences for U.S.-Pakistani cooperation. Over time, Washington also needs to shift its principal forum of dialogue with Pakistani officials from the military to the civilian sector. To be sure, working with the military through the civilian government, rather than directly, may be impossible at a time when the United States' policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan are so intrinsically linked. But Washington can start by lowering the public profile of the visits of its military envoys to Pakistan in favor of enhancing its interactions with civilian counterparts. Moreover, the United States should not limit its engagement with Pakistan's civilian leadership to only those serving in government but engage with all political parties and civil-society groups in the country. And Washington should cultivate relationships with the next generation of civilian leaders, who offer the best hope for a turnaround in Pakistan.

Taking a longer view of Pakistan's democratic transition will also require the United States not to hold its economic and development assistance hostage to short-term security objectives. This does not imply condition-free aid. Rather, the conditions Washington sets for its economic and development assistance should focus on ensuring the effectiveness of that assistance, through transparency and accountability, and encouraging the Pakistani government to develop its own methods of boosting growth.

GET GOING

Achieving U.S. interests in Afghanistan while simultaneously reducing the high costs of American involvement there requires a more robust political strategy. This strategy, which needs bipartisan support domestically and support from U.S. allies abroad, should aim for

an inclusive political process and badly needed governmental reforms that can reconcile the fractious elements of Afghan society and foster more legitimate and effective governance for Afghanistan's people. With Pakistan, Washington should reinvigorate its diplomatic ties, challenge Islamabad to contribute to a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, and commit to the country's long-term democratization. As the United States brings its engagement in the region to a more sustainable level, it must focus more on this political strategy, synchronizing it with its military activities.

Many U.S. policymakers have attempted to identify the best means to conclude the decadelong intervention in Afghanistan without squandering the United States' hard-earned gains and countless sacrifices. One must be mindful, then, that the success of this proposed political strategy is far from assured. But in order to have a chance of succeeding, these efforts must start now, before the military and political transitions of 2014 are suddenly upon us.

Ending the War in Afghanistan

How to Avoid Failure on the Installment Plan

Stephen Biddle

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International forces in Afghanistan are preparing to hand over responsibility for security to Afghan soldiers and police by the end of 2014. U.S. President Barack Obama has argued that battlefield successes since 2009 have enabled this transition and that with it, "this long war will come to a responsible end." But the war will not end in 2014. The U.S. role may end, in whole or in part, but the war will continue—and its ultimate outcome is very much in doubt.

Should current trends continue, U.S. combat troops are likely to leave behind a grinding stalemate between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Afghan National Security Forces can probably sustain this deadlock, but only as long as the U.S. Congress pays the multibillion-dollar annual bills needed to keep them fighting. The war will thus become a contest in stamina between Congress and the Taliban. Unless Congress proves more patient than the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, funding for the ANSF will eventually shrink until Afghan forces can no longer hold their ground, and at that point, the country could easily descend into chaos. If it does, the war will be lost and U.S. aims forfeited. A policy of simply handing off an ongoing

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war to an Afghan government that cannot afford the troops needed to win it is thus not a strategy for a "responsible end" to the conflict; it is closer to what the Nixon administration was willing to accept in the final stages of the Vietnam War, a "decent interval" between the United States' withdrawal and the eventual defeat of its local ally.

There are only two real alternatives to this, neither of them pleasant. One is to get serious about negotiations with the Taliban. This is no panacea, but it is the only alternative to outright defeat. To its credit, the Obama administration has pursued such talks for over a year. What it has not done is spend the political capital needed for an actual deal. A settlement the United States could live with would require hard political engineering both in Kabul and on Capitol Hill, yet the administration has not followed through.

The other defensible approach is for the United States to cut its losses and get all the way out of Afghanistan now, leaving behind no advisory presence and reducing its aid substantially. Outright withdrawal might damage the United States' prestige, but so would a slow-motion version of the same defeat—only at a greater cost in blood and treasure. And although a speedy U.S. withdrawal would cost many Afghans their lives and freedoms, fighting on simply to postpone such consequences temporarily would needlessly sacrifice more American lives in a lost cause.

The Obama administration has avoided both of these courses, choosing instead to muddle through without incurring the risk and political cost that a sustainable settlement would require. Time is running out, however, and the administration should pick its poison. Paying the price for a real settlement is a better approach than quick withdrawal, but both are better than halfhearted delay. For the United States, losing per se is not the worst-case scenario; losing expensively is. Yet that is exactly what a myopic focus on a short-term transition without the political work needed to settle the war will probably produce: failure on the installment plan.

THE COMING STALEMATE

The international coalition fighting in Afghanistan has long planned on handing over responsibility for security there to local Afghan forces. But the original idea was that before doing so, a troop surge would clear the Taliban from strategically critical terrain and weaken the insurgency so much that the war would be close to a finish by the time the Afghans took over. That never happened. The surge made

important progress, but the tight deadlines for a U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's resilience have left insurgents in control of enough territory to remain militarily viable well after 2014. Afghan government forces will thus inherit a more demanding job than expected.

The forces supposed to carry out this job are a mixed lot. The ANSF's best units should be capable of modest offensive actions to clear Taliban strongholds; other units' corruption and ineptitude will leave them part of the problem rather than part of the solution for the foreseeable future. On balance, it is reasonable to expect that the ANSF will be able to hold most or all of the terrain the surge cleared but not expand the government's control much beyond that. Although the Taliban will probably not march into Kabul after coalition combat troops leave, the war will likely be deadlocked, grinding onward as long as someone pays the bills to keep the ANSF operating.

Those bills will be substantial, and Congress will have to foot most of them. The coalition has always understood that an ANSF powerful enough to hold what the surge gained would be vastly more expensive than what the Afghan government could afford. In fiscal year 2013, the ANSF's operating budget of $6.5 billion was more than twice as large as the Afghan government's entire federal revenue. Most of the money to keep the ANSF fighting will thus have to come from abroad, and the lion's share from the United States.

In principle, this funding should look like a bargain. According to most estimates, after the transition, the United States will contribute some $4–$6 billion annually to the ANSF—a pittance compared to the nearly $120 billion it spent in 2011 to wage the war with mostly American troops. The further one gets from 2011, however, the less salient that contrast becomes and the more other comparisons will come to mind. Annual U.S. military aid to Israel, for example, totaled $3.1 billion in fiscal year 2013; the amount required to support the ANSF will surely exceed this for a long time. And unlike Israel, which enjoys powerful political support in Washington, there is no natural constituency for Afghan military aid in American politics.

Afghan aid will get even harder to defend the next time an Afghan corruption scandal hits the newspapers, or Afghan protests erupt over an accidental Koran burning, or an American adviser is killed by an Afghan recipient of U.S. aid, or an Afghan president plays to local politics by insulting American sensibilities. Such periodic crises are all but inevitable, and each one will sap congressional support for aid

to Afghanistan. I recently spoke to a gathering of almost 70 senior congressional staffers with an interest in Afghanistan and asked how many of them thought it was likely that the ANSF aid budget would be untouched after one of these crises. None did.

In the near term, Congress will probably pay the ANSF what the White House requests, but the more time goes on, the more likely it will be that these appropriations will be cut back. It will not take much reduction in funds before the ANSF contracts to a size that is smaller than what it needs to be to hold the line or before a shrinking pool of patronage money splits the institution along factional lines. Either result risks a return to the civil warfare of the 1990s, which would provide exactly the kind of militant safe haven that the United States has fought since 2001 to prevent.

Managing the congressional politics around sustaining Afghan forces after the transition was feasible back when Washington assumed that a troop surge before the transition would put the Taliban on a glide path to extinction. The United States would still have had to give billions of dollars a year to the ANSF, but the war would have ended relatively quickly. After that, it would have been possible to demobilize large parts of the ANSF and turn the remainder into a peacetime establishment; aid would then have shrunk to lower levels, making congressional funding a much easier sell. But that is not the scenario that will present itself in 2014. With an indefinite stalemate on the horizon instead, the politics of funding the ANSF will be much harder to handle—and without a settlement, that funding will outlast the Taliban's will to fight only if one assumes heroic patience on the part of Congress.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

Since outlasting the Taliban is unlikely, the only realistic alternative to eventual defeat is a negotiated settlement. The administration has pursued such a deal for well over a year, but so far the process has yielded little, and there is now widespread skepticism about the talks.

Many, for example, doubt the Taliban are serious about the negotiations. After all, in late 2011, they assassinated Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's High Peace Council and the Kabul official charged with moving the talks forward. Since the Taliban can wait out the United States and win outright, why should they make concessions? Others argue that the Taliban are interested in negotiations only insofar as they provide a source of le-

gitimacy and a soapbox for political grandstanding. Still others worry that bringing together multiple Taliban factions, their Pakistani patrons, the Karzai administration, the governments of the United States and its allies, and intermediaries such as Qatar will simply prove too complex. Conservatives in the United States, meanwhile, doubt the Obama administration's motives, worrying that negotiating with the enemy signals weakness and fearing that the White House will make unnecessary concessions simply to cover its rush to the exits. Liberals fear losing hard-won gains for Afghan women and minorities. And many Afghans, especially women's groups and those who are not part of the country's Pashtun majority, also worry about that outcome, and some have even threatened civil war to prevent it.

Yet despite these concerns, there is still a chance for a deal that offers more than just a fig leaf to conceal policy failure. The Taliban have, after all, publicly declared that they are willing to negotiate—a costly posture, since the Taliban are not a monolithic actor but an alliance of factions. When Mullah Omar's representatives accept talks, other factions worry about deals being made behind their backs. Taliban field commanders wonder whether the battlefield prognosis is as favorable as their leaders claim (if victory is near, why negotiate?) and face the challenge of motivating fighters to risk their lives when shadowy negotiations might render such sacrifice unnecessary. The Taliban's willingness to accept these costs thus implies some possible interest in a settlement.

There may be good reasons for the Taliban to explore a deal. Mullah Omar and his allies in the leadership have been living in exile in Pakistan for over a decade—their children are growing up as Pakistanis—and their movements are surely constrained by their Pakistani patrons. Afghans are famously nationalist, and the Afghan-Pakistani rivalry runs deep; exile across the border surely grates on the Afghan Taliban. Perhaps more important, they live under the constant threat of assassination by U.S. drones or commando raids: just ask Osama bin Laden or six of the last seven al Qaeda operations directors, all killed or captured in such attacks. And a stalemate wastes the lives and resources of the Taliban just as it does those of the Afghan forces and their allies. While the Taliban are probably able to pay this price indefinitely, and while they will surely not surrender just to stanch the bleeding, this does not mean they would prefer continued bloodletting to any possible settlement. The conflict is costly enough that the Taliban might consider an offer if it is not tantamount to capitulation.

What would such a deal comprise? In principle, a bargain could be reached that preserved all parties' vital interests even if no one's ideal aims were achieved. The Taliban would have to renounce violence, break with al Qaeda, disarm, and accept something along the lines of today's Afghan constitution. In exchange, they would receive legal status as a political party, set-asides of offices or parliamentary seats, and the withdrawal of any remaining foreign forces from Afghanistan. The Afghan government, meanwhile, would have to accept a role for the Taliban in a coalition government and the springboard for Taliban political activism that this would provide. In exchange, the government would be allowed to preserve the basic blueprint of today's state, and it would surely command the votes needed to lead a governing coalition, at least in the near term. Pakistan would have to give up its blue-sky ambitions for an Afghan puppet state under Taliban domination, but it would gain a stable border and enough influence via its Taliban proxies to prevent any Afghan-Indian axis that could threaten it. And the United States, for its part, would have to accept the Taliban as a legal political actor, with an extra-democratic guarantee of positions and influence, and the probable forfeiture of any significant base structure for conducting counterterrorist operations from Afghan soil.

From Washington's perspective, this outcome would be far from ideal. It would sacrifice aims the United States has sought since 2001, putting at risk the hard-won rights of Afghan women and minorities by granting the Taliban a voice in Afghan politics and offering a share of power to an organization with the blood of thousands of Americans on its hands. Yet if properly negotiated, such a deal could at least preserve the two most vital U.S. national interests at stake in Afghanistan: that Afghanistan not become a base for militants to attack the West and that it not become a base for destabilizing the country's neighbors.

As long as the Taliban are denied control of internal security ministries or district or provincial governments in critical border areas, the non-Taliban majority in a coalition government could ensure that Afghanistan not become a home to terrorist camps like those that existed before the war. Chaos without a meaningful central government, by contrast, would preclude nothing. And whatever fate Afghan women and minorities suffered under a stable coalition would be far less bad than what they would face under anarchy. A compromise with the Taliban would be a bitter pill to swallow, but at this point, it would sacrifice less than the alternatives.

GETTING TO YES

Simply meeting with the Taliban is only the starting point of the negotiating process. To create a deal that can last, the U.S. government and its allies will need to go far beyond this, starting by laying the political groundwork in Afghanistan. Although negotiators will not have an easy time getting anti-Taliban northerners to accept concessions, the biggest hurdle is predatory misgovernance in Kabul. Any settlement will have to legalize the Taliban and grant them a political foothold. This foothold would not give them control of the government, but their legal status would allow them to compete electorally and expand their position later. Over the longer term, therefore, the containment of the Taliban's influence will depend on political competition from a credible and attractive alternative—something the establishment in Kabul is not yet able or willing to provide.

The Taliban are not popular in Afghanistan; that is why they will accept a deal only if it guarantees them a certain level of representation in the government. But at least they are seen as incorruptible, whereas Karzai's government is deeply corrupt, exclusionary, and getting worse. If Karzai's successor continues this trend, he will hand the Taliban their best opportunity for real power. Should Kabul's misgovernance persist and worsen, eventually even a brutal but honest opposition movement will make headway. And if a legalized Taliban were to eventually control critical border districts, enabling their militant Pakistani allies to cash in some wartime IOUs and establish base camps under the Taliban's protection, the result could be nearly as dangerous to the West as the Afghan government's military defeat. The only real insurance against that outcome is for Kabul to change its ways.

To date, however, the West has been unwilling to compel reform, preferring so-called capacity-building aid to coercive diplomacy. Such benign assistance might be enough if the problem were merely a lack of capacity. But Afghanistan is misgoverned because its power brokers profit from such malfeasance; they won't change simply because the Americans ask them to, and unconditional capacity building just creates better-trained kleptocrats. Real improvement would require, among other things, that donors withhold their assistance if the Afghan government fails to implement reforms. But donors have shied away from true conditionality for fear that their bluff will be called, aid will have to be withheld, and the result will be a delay in the cre-

ation of a higher-capacity Afghan civil and military administration—the key to current plans for Western military withdrawal.

If the West cannot credibly threaten to withhold something Kabul values, then Afghan governance will never improve. It is late in the game to begin such an approach now; the West would have had more leverage back when its aid budgets were larger and military resources more plentiful. Still, credible conditionality could make even a smaller budget into a stronger tool for reform. Using conditionality properly, however, would mean accepting the possibility that the West might have to deliberately reduce the capacity of Afghan institutions if they refuse to reform—a task that is neither easy nor pleasant, but necessary if the West is going to be serious about a settlement.

The Obama administration will need to undertake serious political work in Washington as well as in Kabul. Any viable settlement will take years to negotiate and require the West to make real concessions, and such a process will offer ample opportunities for members of Congress to embrace demagoguery and act as spoilers. The Obama administration's initial experience on this score is instructive: as an early confidence-building gesture, last year the administration offered to free five Taliban detainees at Guantánamo in exchange for the release of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, the Taliban's only American prisoner. But U.S. lawmakers howled in outrage, the detainees were not released, the Taliban charged bad faith (both on the detainee issue and on the addition of new conditions from Karzai), and the negotiations collapsed. Serious negotiations toward a final peace settlement would provide countless opportunities for such congressional outrage, over much larger issues, and if legislators play such games—and if the administration lets itself be bullied—then a viable settlement will be impossible. Likewise, if Congress defunds the war too soon, unfinished negotiations will collapse as the Taliban seize victory on the battlefield with no need for concessions.

For talks to succeed, Congress will thus need to engage in two acts of selfless statesmanship: accepting concessions to the Taliban and prolonging unpopular aid to the Afghan military. The latter, in particular, would require bipartisan compromise, and achieving either or both goals may prove impossible. If they are going to happen, however, one prerequisite will be a sustained White House effort aimed at building the congressional support needed. The president will have to

make a major investment in garnering political backing for a controversial Afghan policy, something he has not done so far.

FISH OR CUT BAIT

As daunting as the obstacles to a negotiated settlement are, such a deal still represents the least bad option for the United States in Afghanistan. If the White House is unwilling to accept the costs that a serious settlement effort would entail, however, then it is time to cut American losses and get out of Afghanistan now.

Some might see the Obama administration's current policy as a hedged version of such disengagement already. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan will soon shrink to perhaps 8,000–12,000 advisers and trainers, and U.S. aid might decline to $4–$5 billion a year for the ANSF and $2–$3 billion in economic assistance, with the advisory presence costing perhaps another $8–$12 billion a year. This commitment is far smaller than the 100,000 U.S. troops and over $100 billion of 2011, and it offers some chance of muddling through to an acceptable outcome while discreetly concealing the United States' probable eventual failure behind a veil of continuing modest effort.

Only in Washington, however, could $14–$20 billion a year be considered cheap. If this yielded a stable Afghanistan, it would indeed be a bargain, but if, as is likely without a settlement, it produces only a defeat drawn out over several years, it will mean needlessly wasting tens of billions of dollars. In a fiscal environment in which $8 billion a year for the Head Start preschool program or $36 billion a year for Pell Grant scholarships is controversial, it is hard to justify spending another $70–$100 billion in Afghanistan over, say, another half decade of stalemated warfare merely to disguise failure or defer its political consequences.

It is harder still to ask Americans to die for such a cause. Even an advisory mission involves risk, and right now, thousands of U.S. soldiers are continuing to patrol the country. If failure is coming, many Afghans will inevitably die, but a faster withdrawal could at least save some American lives that would be sacrificed along the slower route.

It would be preferable for the war to end a different way: through a negotiated compromise with the Taliban. Talks so complicated and fraught, of course, might fail even if the United States does everything possible to facilitate them. But without such efforts, the chances of success are minimal, and the result is likely to be just a slower, more expensive version of failure. Getting out now is a better policy than that.

The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan

The Other Side of the COIN

Karl W. Eikenberry

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Since 9/11, two consecutive U.S. administrations have labored mightily to help Afghanistan create a state inhospitable to terrorist organizations with transnational aspirations and capabilities. The goal has been clear enough, but its attainment has proved vexing. Officials have struggled to define the necessary attributes of a stable post-Taliban Afghan state and to agree on the best means for achieving them. This is not surprising. The U.S. intervention required improvisation in a distant, mountainous land with de jure, but not de facto, sovereignty; a traumatized and divided population; and staggering political, economic, and social problems. Achieving even minimal strategic objectives in such a context was never going to be quick, easy, or cheap.

Of the various strategies that the United States has employed in Afghanistan over the past dozen years, the 2009 troop surge was by far the most ambitious and expensive. Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine was at the heart of the Afghan surge. Rediscovered by the U.S. military during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, counterinsur-

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gency was updated and codified in 2006 in *Field Manual 3-24,* jointly published by the U.S. Army and the Marines. The revised doctrine placed high confidence in the infallibility of military leadership at all levels of engagement (from privates to generals) with the indigenous population throughout the conflict zone. Military doctrine provides guidelines that inform how armed forces contribute to campaigns, operations, and battles. Contingent on context, military doctrine is meant to be suggestive, not prescriptive.

Broadly stated, modern COIN doctrine stresses the need to protect civilian populations, eliminate insurgent leaders and infrastructure, and help establish a legitimate and accountable host-nation government able to deliver essential human services. *Field Manual 3-24* also makes clear the extensive length and expense of COIN campaigns: "Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources."

The apparent validation of this doctrine during the 2007 troop surge in Iraq increased its standing. When the Obama administration conducted a comprehensive Afghanistan strategy review in 2009, some military leaders, reinforced by some civilian analysts in influential think tanks, confidently pointed to *Field Manual 3-24* as the authoritative playbook for success. When the president ordered the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan at the end of that year, the military was successful in ensuring that the major tenets of COIN doctrine were also incorporated into the revised operational plan. The stated aim was to secure the Afghan people by employing the method of "clear, hold, and build"—in other words, push the insurgents out, keep them out, and use the resulting space and time to establish a legitimate government, build capable security forces, and improve the Afghan economy. With persistent outside efforts, advocates of the COIN doctrine asserted, the capacity of the Afghan government would steadily grow, the levels of U.S. and international assistance would decline, and the insurgency would eventually be defeated.

More than three years after the Afghan surge's implementation, what can be said about the efficacy of COIN and the U.S. experience in Afghanistan? Proponents might, with some merit, claim that the experiment was too little, too late—too late because an industrial-strength COIN approach was not rigorously applied until eight years after the war began, and too little because even then, limits were placed on the size and duration of the surge, making it more difficult

to change the calculations of Afghan friends and enemies. Moreover, even though President Barack Obama announced plans to end U.S. participation in combat operations in Afghanistan by 2014, the war continues and the outcome remains indeterminate. Still, it is possible to answer the question by examining the major principles of COIN and analyzing how these fared on the ground.

The COIN-surge plan for Afghanistan rested on three crucial assumptions: that the COIN goal of protecting the population was clear and attainable and would prove decisive, that higher levels of foreign assistance and support would substantially increase the Afghan government's capacity and legitimacy, and that a COIN approach by the United States would be consistent with the political-military approach preferred by Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Unfortunately, all three assumptions were spectacularly incorrect, which, in turn, made the counterinsurgency campaign increasingly incoherent and difficult to prosecute. In short, COIN failed in Afghanistan.

PROTECTING THE POPULATION

The first principle of COIN doctrine is the need to secure the indigenous population in areas deemed centers of gravity politically, economically, and militarily. Surge advocates argued that behind the protective shield of increasing numbers of foreign and Afghan security forces, good government would emerge, the rule of law would take root, and prosperity would grow. A more secure and content people would rally behind local elected and appointed officials, and peace and stability would follow.

"Protect the population" makes for a good bumper sticker, but it raises the question: Protect it from whom and against what? It certainly meant protecting the Afghan people from marauding Taliban insurgents. But what about criminal narcotraffickers, venal local police chiefs, or predatory government officials? What should be done about tribes that turn to the Taliban for help in fighting more powerful tribes with patrons in the Kabul government? And what about complex cases of ethnic violence with roots dating back a century or more? Young men without jobs are supposedly ripe for insurgent recruiting, so should protection be offered against unemployment? The provision of basic health care is frequently cited as a service the Taliban cannot offer. To make the Afghan government appear comparatively more effective, should the people be protected against illness?

These were not hypothetical questions but rather very real challenges that U.S. military forces, civilian diplomatic personnel, and development specialists in Afghanistan struggled with daily as they sought to implement COIN doctrine.

Late in 2010, the comedian Kathleen Madigan, participating in a USO tour in Afghanistan, visited a forward operating base in Helmand Province. With some humorous exaggeration, she told a story about meeting a young Marine captain who pointed to a nearby Afghan village and enthusiastically described how his unit was busy building a school, establishing a health clinic, creating a local government center, training and reforming the police force, helping the people with grievance resolution, actively supporting gender rights via a U.S. Marine "female engagement team," improving agricultural productivity, and more. As the list continued to grow, Madigan finally interrupted and asked, "Marine captain, when are you going to invade Detroit?"

Her quip hit the mark. "Protect the population" is a vague and open-ended guide to action, with increased effort alone regarded as an end in itself. But COIN adherents believed that even if the goals were not well defined, such an approach vigorously and simultaneously applied at the national, provincial, and district levels would steadily reduce the ground on which the Taliban stood and inevitably cause their defeat. Every military leader, traditionally a professional specializing in the management of violence, was now instructed that he must be prepared, in the words of the mid-twentieth-century French counterinsurgency expert David Galula, "to become . . . a social worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, a boy scout. But only for as long as he cannot be replaced, for it is better to entrust civilian tasks to civilians." Given the prestige Galula is accorded by enthusiasts of modern COIN doctrine, it is worth parsing his guidance.

First, deploying highly trained U.S. soldiers and marines to Afghanistan to serve as social workers or to manage development projects comes at a very high price. The U.S. government spends about $1 million per year per soldier deployed in Afghanistan. At the height of the surge, Washington had about 100,000 troops in theater, costing about $100 billion annually. Moreover, it was sheer hubris to think that American military personnel without the appropriate language skills and with only a superficial understanding of Afghan culture could, on six- or 12-month tours, somehow deliver to Afghan villages everything asked of them by the COIN manual. The typical 21-year-

old marine is hard-pressed to win the heart and mind of his mother-in-law; can he really be expected to do the same with an ethnocentric Pashtun tribal elder?

Second, Galula tempered his enthusiasm for assigning armed forces personnel such a broad range of tasks by stipulating that an army had to perform those tasks only in the early stages of a counterinsurgency campaign, when it was the only actor around with the necessary capabilities and resources to do so. But eventually, he argued, the military should be relieved of civic duties by capable civilian entities. Yet experience has shown that the required civilian capacity will never emerge, because no U.S. government department or agency will make the major investments necessary to develop highly specialized niche skills that would be utilized only briefly and rarely. Nor will Congress authorize additional department or agency funding to encourage such efforts. With no squadrons of civilian cavalry on the horizon in Afghanistan, the U.S. military, with stated reluctance but genuine verve, moved to fill the gaps. Over time, it even arrogated to itself the responsibility for deciding where these gaps existed, and then it methodically developed plans and relentlessly acquired the resources from the Pentagon and Congress needed to take action. Some examples include spending hundreds of millions of dollars on fiscally unsustainable diesel generators to power Kandahar City, paradoxically assigning a U.S. Army brigadier general to mentor Afghan officials on the importance of civilian leadership and the rule of law, and deploying multimillion-dollar female engagement teams without a clear purpose. But these expensive ad hoc efforts, while well intentioned, simply did little to pave the way for the establishment of good Afghan governance and economic prosperity.

Moreover, although reasonably competent at establishing and training foreign military forces—and, to a lesser extent, foreign police forces—the U.S. military has overly optimistic expectations about the timelines required to build healthy local civilian institutions, such as a competent civil service or a functioning justice system. Civilian government organizations require more highly educated work forces than their military counterparts, are often only one component within a complex bureaucracy, and are more susceptible to domestic political interference. The growth rates of organic government and civil society are sociologically constrained, and at some point, adding larger and larger doses of foreign resources and assistance becomes counterproductive.

Commentators would occasionally highlight extraordinary "COIN successes," supposedly achieved by certain uniquely talented U.S. civilian and military officials in parts of Afghanistan, and conclude that the problem was not doctrinal inadequacy but the inadequacy of team members and their leaders. What was needed was many more Lawrences of Arabia. Of course, even a great professional basketball coach must occasionally dream of fielding a team whose players are all clones of Michael Jordan at his prime. However, the coach does not develop a winning strategy based on such flights of fancy. Moreover, T. E. Lawrence specialized in inciting revolts, not in state building. Historically, visionary indigenous leaders backed by native populations have been the key to building viable states—not foreigners serving one-year tours of duty, no matter how passionate and skilled they might be.

Finally, Galula described a path for counterinsurgents to follow but did not specify a destination. Absent clearly defined political goals, a COIN trek might continue for many years at extraordinary expense without ever knowing when and where the journey might end. Diplomats and soldiers both agree that conflicts are concluded only when the warring parties agree to the terms of a political settlement. By contrast, COIN partisans focus on the struggle between insurgents and the host-nation government, with conflict termination achieved principally through insurgent defeat or co-option. But a different theory of conflict resolution is required in Afghanistan, where the principal causes of insecurity arise from the absence of national reconciliation (predating the rise of the Taliban by several decades), coupled with the presence of ineffectual, corrosive governance.

Blindly following COIN doctrine led the U.S. military to fixate on defeating the insurgency while giving short shrift to Afghan politics and hence the political logic of the overarching campaign. U.S. military commanders became obsessed with convincing Commander in Chief Karzai to use his rapidly expanding and staggeringly expensive security forces to defeat the Taliban. However, their main efforts should have focused on helping President Karzai deliver an inclusive peace and Chief Executive Karzai build an adequate state apparatus.

Galula's writings about counterinsurgency were inspired by his service as a French army captain in the Algerian War from 1956 to 1958. Ultimately, however, France lost. Although Algeria and Afghanistan mark two very different conflicts, they resonate in one important way. It was assumed in both campaigns that a grab bag of "doctrinally

sound" military actions would somehow add up to a strategic win. In Algeria, that assumption proved to be erroneous, and a similar outcome appears likely in Afghanistan.

CREATING AN ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT

Field Manual 3-24 states that as a counterinsurgency campaign is successfully prosecuted, the "government secures its citizens continuously, sustains and builds legitimacy through effective governance, . . . and can manage and meet the expectations of the nation's entire population." Unfortunately, the assumption that robust and well-designed foreign development assistance programs would, over time, yield effective governance and popular legitimacy proved to be a bad one in Afghanistan.

In theory, the president of a democratic republic enters into an implicit contract with the electorate. The president's administration collects taxes in return for delivering services, such as security, justice, health care, and education. If the value of the benefits received is seen as less than the price charged, the president or his preferred successor will likely be defeated in the next election. Executive accountability and inducements to improve effectiveness are thus built into the political system. This theory, however, does not apply to the Karzai administration in Afghanistan.

The Afghan government collects an extremely low level of revenue (less than ten percent of GDP), and a large share of this comes from customs rather than taxation. In effect, Afghans are not really charged by their government for the services they are provided. Moreover, for the most part, the Afghan government neither funds nor delivers the key public services offered in the country. According to estimates by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, in recent years, the United States and other donors paid for about 90 percent of Afghanistan's total public expenditures, including funding for the Afghan National Security Forces. In addition, the provision of many key services remains highly dependent on foreign advisers and experts.

In their 1967 book, *The United States in Vietnam*, George Kahin and John Lewis wrote that "U.S. aid thus provided [South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh] Diem with a degree of financial independence that isolated him from basic economic and political realities and reduced his need to appreciate or respond to his people's wants and expectations." Like Diem, Karzai has had little reason to improve his state's effectiveness or accountability.

Americans tend to see Afghan political institutions as nonexistent or immature and therefore as requiring creation or further development. The traditional power brokers in and allied with the Karzai administration see matters differently. They consistently oppose foreign efforts to create transparent, rule-bound Afghan institutions because such projects threaten to undermine their political domination and economic banditry.

In the absence of an enforceable democratic contract between the ruler and the ruled, the U.S. embassy in Kabul, as an advocate of Afghan government reform, frequently served as the de facto political opposition. Such advocacy, however, found little support among U.S. military commanders, because with some 130,000 NATO-ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops on the ground, their top priority was to defeat the Taliban. The military had the resources and the potential leverage to influence and persuade Karzai to make the difficult decisions of state, but its leaders were focused on the tactical battlefield and the development of the Afghan National Security Forces rather than on political and economic reform. Most assumed that good governance would inevitably follow, rather than precede, the defeat of the Taliban insurgents, elections, and generous development assistance.

This erroneous assumption damaged the U.S. war effort in various ways. It created a disjointed civil-military approach, allowing Karzai to operate in the seams, exploit bureaucratic differences, and attempt to pit the embassy against the military command (and often the intelligence agencies). It also damaged U.S. credibility with the Afghan people, who saw Americans less as protectors than as the supporters of the weak and predatory Karzai government (once again replaying the Vietnam dynamic). Ultimately, taking the legitimacy of the Karzai government as a given has even jeopardized the costly U.S.-led efforts to train and equip capable Afghan army and police forces, which, no matter how tactically proficient they might become, can contribute to stability only if they are reliably employed on behalf of a politically legitimate government.

MISALIGNED STRATEGIES

The COIN field manual declares, "U.S. and [host-nation] military commanders and the [host-nation] government together must devise the plan for attacking the insurgents' strategy and focusing the collec-

tive effort to bolster or restore government legitimacy." Heavily influenced by COIN doctrine, the political-military strategy employed in Afghanistan during the surge (and to a lesser extent in the years prior) did not meet this criterion.

U.S. military commanders diagnosed Afghanistan's problem as an indigenous insurgency, albeit one made worse by the insurgents' access to sanctuaries in Pakistan. By contrast, Karzai and many of his compatriots diagnosed the problem as militant extremism, exported from Pakistan but cleverly masquerading itself in local garb. So while U.S. military commanders argued that a long, costly counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan was necessary to decisively defeat al Qaeda in the Central and South Asian region, Karzai consistently held that the so-called insurgency was mostly a "Made in Pakistan" product that Islamabad was forcefully exporting across the border. He had a point.

In late 2001, the world watched in awe as small numbers of U.S. ground forces, operating together with mostly Northern Alliance militias and enabled by twenty-first-century intelligence, communications, and precision strike ordnance, quickly routed the Taliban forces that had dominated Afghan battlefields for some five years. The Taliban regime was dismantled, but it was not destroyed. Aided by Pakistan's military and intelligence services, the Taliban's leadership began to reconstitute across the Durand Line, beyond the reach of the American military. In short order, the Taliban soon reestablished influence inside Afghanistan.

The Afghans observed these developments at first with puzzlement, then with frustration, and ultimately with anger. They were initially puzzled as to why the U.S. government and military generally refused to publicly admit for several years that the Afghan Taliban's center of gravity had shifted from Kabul to Islamabad. They then became frustrated when they realized that the United States would not attack the Afghan Taliban inside Pakistan because of Washington's worry that violations of Islamabad's sovereignty would risk more important strategic objectives (such as defeating al Qaeda and preserving stability in a problematic, nuclear-armed power). And finally, they became angry when the costs of counterinsurgency seemed to far exceed the benefits delivered.

As the United States launched the surge, Karzai ever more frequently and publicly made such statements as "Al Qaeda was driven

out of Afghanistan in 2001. They have no base in Afghanistan. The war against terrorism is not in Afghan villages and is not in the Afghan countryside." Still, the southern Afghan countryside was designated ground zero of the counterinsurgency campaign by the U.S. military. Karzai came to regularly protest aerial bombardments of Afghan villages, coalition night raids that violated Afghan homes, detentions of Afghan citizens by international military forces, abuses by armed contractors and local militias paid by and loyal to foreign forces, and the rising tide of inadvertent but inevitable civilian casualties. American commanders always respectfully listened to such complaints and genuinely tried to make amends. Yet they never stepped back and asked whether Karzai's list of grievances could properly be dealt with in a checklist fashion or if together they were actually symptomatic of strategic divergence. Getting the answer right mattered profoundly.

The irony was considerable. Karzai acquiesced to the surge because it guaranteed further U.S. and international commitment to the still fragile Afghan state, but he did not support its central premise. In a different world, he would have preferred that most of the surge forces be dispatched to Pakistan to attack Afghan Taliban sanctuaries, with perhaps others deployed to accelerate the training of the Afghan National Security Forces. Instead, the vast majority were sent to those locations where Karzai said there was no war on terror to be fought—the Afghan countryside.

Despite the sharply contrasting perspectives, U.S. and other NATO-ISAF forces still managed to perform impressively, usually improving security in their areas of emphasis. Yet as these hard-won tactical wins were chalked up, Karzai seemed both uninterested in and unappreciative of what the COIN advocates took as mounting evidence that all was going according to plan. For his part, Karzai could not have cared less about complex COIN metrics invented by foreign military staffs and think tanks (such as trend lines on the number of attacks with improvised explosive devices being thwarted by tip-offs from Afghan civilians or the number of Afghan army battalions operating at the level called "capability milestone 1"). What mattered to him was achieving the interdependent aims of regaining Afghanistan's de facto sovereignty, strengthening political legitimacy and control, and bringing peace and stability to his country. In his mind, the American military's way of war did not appear to bring him closer to any of these goals.

The escalation of the war in 2009 delayed the exercise of real sovereignty, something all Afghans wanted. Over the next two years, the number of American boots on the ground essentially doubled, from about 50,000 to almost 100,000. Nighttime raids and detentions of Afghans by international military forces skyrocketed. Foreign military commanders, their pockets stuffed with cash (COIN disciples emphasize that, properly used, "cash is a weapon") and accompanied by civilian diplomats and development specialists, were suddenly ubiquitous. Savvy provincial governors, district chiefs, and tribal elders all followed the bank robber Willie Sutton's maxim and made their way to the NATO-ISAF military headquarters and provincial reconstruction teams because that was where the money was. Karzai's constant complaint about the international community establishing "parallel government institutions" had merit.

None of this nurtured the growth of organic Afghan governance or politics, nor did it bolster the Karzai administration's legitimacy. As the noted anthropologist Thomas Barfield has written, "The country's past suggests that to be successful . . . a ruler will need to convince the Afghans that he will not be beholden to foreigners even as he convinces these very same foreigners to fund his state and its military." Accordingly, Karzai often criticized the Afghan National Army as being more like indulged American mercenaries than an authentic native force. He frequently berated his technocratic expatriate cabinet ministers and agency heads (whose offices truly were overrun with foreign advisers and mentors) as American spies and lackeys. And he worried greatly that his people would see through the veneer designed by the U.S. military to portray him as a good leader, concluding instead that he was a puppet propped up by an infidel foreign coalition. The more resources the Americans threw into the Afghan cauldron, the more Karzai felt compelled to burnish his own nativist credentials by lashing out at what he decried as pernicious U.S. influence.

A final strategic conundrum was that the surge temporarily increased the importance of the NATO-ISAF logistical supply lines passing through Pakistan, further reducing Washington's already weak leverage when it came to securing Islamabad's cooperation in attacking insurgent sanctuaries. So while U.S. military commanders endlessly traveled to Pakistan bravely maintaining the pretense of consulting with "allies in the war on terror," their troops and the Afghans continued to be hammered by the confederates of these same

supposed allies. If Americans were merely confused, observant Afghans were increasingly disillusioned and disheartened.

The United States' strategy suffered from a serious internal contradiction. Its military claimed to have a winning plan that it pretended was supported by the Afghan head of state and commander in chief. But this was a complete fiction. Karzai disagreed intellectually, politically, and viscerally with the key pillars of the COIN campaign. The result was that while American military commanders tirelessly worked to persuade the Afghan president through factual presentation, deference, and occasional humor that the plan was working, they never seemed to consider that Karzai just might not be on board.

None of this is meant to imply that Karzai's approach to the conflict was better or worse than that pursued by the American military. Frankly, it is not clear that Karzai even had an alternative in mind. He liked to cast himself as a Gandhi-like figure, desperately trying to defend his people against the twin depredations of a self-serving superpower and a rapacious and extremist Pakistan. He also increasingly used the United States as a convenient scapegoat for his administration's massive shortcomings in accountability and performance. Ultimately, however, a COIN approach is predicated on the general alignment of the foreign and host nations' overarching political and military strategies—and this was simply not the case in Afghanistan.

In its implementation of COIN doctrine in Afghanistan, the U.S. military was playing American football, so to speak. It was not at all clear what sport Karzai was playing, or indeed whether he was even in the same stadium as the Americans.

LEARNING THE RIGHT LESSONS

Waging war is serious business, and military commanders must ensure that their critical planning assumptions are based on empirical evidence and probabilities, not simply on hope. This was not done when the Afghan surge was designed in 2009.

"So what?" some might say. Even if the campaign plan was based on faulty assumptions, might not the final result still be an Afghanistan better off than before? That is possible. But while making Afghanistan a better place to live is certainly a noble goal, it is not necessarily a vital U.S. national interest, and the history is still worth revisiting so proper lessons can be learned.

First and foremost, the U.S. experience in Afghanistan should serve as a reminder that war should be waged only in pursuit of clear political goals—ones informed by military advice but decided on by responsible civilian leaders. U.S. military leaders should not necessarily be criticized for devising plans to fill the gaping policy hole they stumbled on years into the Afghan war. But the public marketing of these plans by some of these generals in an effort to enlist support from members of Congress, sympathetic think tanks, and the media should serve as a warning against granting too much deference to military leadership.

Unbounded and unconstrained by civilian authorities, the commanders of the incredibly well-funded U.S. armed forces fixated on a way forward that was breathtakingly expansive and expensive. Citing the logic of COIN doctrine, senior U.S. military leaders insisted that there was no alternative to adopting a full-court press aimed at rapidly and simultaneously improving Afghanistan's security, governance, judicial system, economy, educational standards, health-care delivery, and more. But as the ancient Chinese military sage Sun-tzu wrote, "There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited." Even in the case of the United States, the high opportunity costs of these extended spendthrift campaigns matter. From the time he entered office, Obama recognized this fact, and he accordingly limited the deployment time of the surge forces in Afghanistan and subsequently set a date certain for the end of U.S. combat operations there. Still, he faced considerable political opposition in doing so, because he refused to make an open-ended commitment to those military commanders who favored withdrawal only after favorable tactical conditions emerged on the ground.

Second, the war in Afghanistan has demonstrated that for all of the vaunted agility and resourcefulness of the U.S. armed forces, the risk of senior commanders' becoming intellectually arrogant and cognitively rigid is real. The COIN paradigm was applied with such unquestioning zeal that critical thought was often suspended. Countless commanders' memorandums detail how their multibillion-dollar discretionary spending appropriations (known as the Commander's Emergency Response Program) should be put into action across a mind-boggling array of socioeconomic conditions all in order to achieve variously described "COIN effects." Military commanders elevated the program to the grand macroeconomic level and promoted

projects such as the large-scale diesel generator power station in Kandahar in pursuit of these same vaguely defined COIN effects. A program to improve the transparency of U.S. military contracts was unsurprisingly named "COIN contracting." And so it went, with groupthink becoming the norm.

"COIN" evolved from a noun to an adjective, and its overuse became almost a parody of faithful Red Guards chanting Maoist slogans during the Cultural Revolution. As a former U.S. military commander in Afghanistan who later served as the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, I developed deep appreciation and respect for various embassy civilian department and agency heads who, not wedded to a certain doctrinal framework, would offer analyses that in hindsight were often more sober and realistic than those of their military counterparts. Well-conceived plans are usually an antecedent to operational success, and unquestionably, the U.S. military excels at planning. The assumptions and risk analysis that underpin a plan, however, must be continuously challenged in a dynamic and complex conflict zone, lest commanders find themselves fighting the wrong war. The U.S. military and its civilian masters must find ways to avoid this trap in the future.

Finally, even as the United States relearns the limits of intervention, it should not reject all the techniques and procedures put into practice in Afghanistan and Iraq. Fragile and failing states will continue to endanger U.S. and international security, and the choice of responses is not limited to doing nothing or deploying massive numbers of troops and civilians who must march in lockstep to the beat of *Field Manual 3-24*. A dispassionate civil-military study comparing the application of COIN doctrine during the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan could be useful in drawing appropriate lessons from these costly ventures.

The many successful efforts of American diplomats, development specialists, and soldiers in the field during the war in Afghanistan should also be duly noted. Americans are creative and innovative people, and these characteristics have been reflected in the work of the military and civilian teams on the ground. Working with great courage and skill, they have devised countless novel, pragmatic, and often inexpensive approaches to a myriad of difficult security, governance, and development challenges. Such rich experience, acquired at great cost and sacrifice, can and should be applied in ways tailored appropriately to future problems of instability in countries and situations that matter.

In sum, the essential task is deciding how to do less with less. It has been said that in Afghanistan, as in Southeast Asia 40 years earlier, the United States, with the best of intentions, unwittingly tried to achieve revolutionary aims through semicolonial means. This is perhaps an overly harsh judgment. And yet the unquestioning use of counterinsurgency doctrine, unless bounded politically, will always take the country in just such a direction. Before the next proposed COIN toss, therefore, Americans should insist on a rigorous and transparent debate about its ends and its means.

Time to Negotiate in Afghanistan

How to Talk to the Taliban

James Dobbins and Carter Malkasian

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Peace talks, if not peace itself, may be close at hand in Afghanistan. Over the past few months, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Afghan Taliban have made unexpected strides toward talks. In early May, members of the Taliban and the Afghan government even met in Qatar and expressed real interest in starting official negotiations—a heartening step.

Since 2001, opportunities for peace talks have come and gone. Sometimes, the process has stalled for political reasons, such as the United States' reticence to engage with the Taliban. Other times, discussions have broken down due to miscommunications or a lack of political consensus. It was not until 2010 that the United States fully embraced peace talks as the best way to end the violence in Afghanistan, and even then, progress was slow and halting.

But this time may be different. Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's new president, has placed peace talks at the center of his agenda. Pakistan

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and China both appear willing to help jump-start the process. And the Taliban themselves have hinted that they may be willing to support an end to violence.

The United States must seize the moment, doing what it can to move the peace process forward. Washington will need to employ a mix of carrots and sticks while remaining committed to Afghanistan's security. It should help Afghan forces hold the line on the battlefield, pressure Pakistan to keep the Taliban at the table, and accept that in the end some concessions will be necessary. Most important, it will need to stay flexible on the withdrawal timeline and dedicated to supporting Afghanistan into 2017 and beyond.

Of course, peace talks may not yield a lasting peace. In 2007, the political scientist James Fearon noted in these pages that just 16 percent of civil wars and insurgencies end through a negotiated peace settlement. But even if negotiations are a long shot, they are the best option for Afghanistan and the United States. To stick with the status quo would be to consign Afghanistan to a long war of attrition that would ravage the country, upend regional stability, and strain the budgets of the United States and its allies.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

In December 2001, a group of high-ranking Taliban officials met with Hamid Karzai, the soon-to-be Afghan president, whose own anti-Taliban fighters were then advancing on Kandahar, the Taliban's southern capital. According to the journalists Anand Gopal and Bette Dam, the members of the delegation were willing to lay down their arms in return for immunity. They gave Karzai a letter—possibly signed by the Taliban's supreme commander, Mullah Omar—detailing how the Taliban might step down peacefully. The opportunity never came to anything. U.S. officials denied immunity to Mullah Omar, and U.S. and Afghan forces advanced precipitously on Kandahar City. Whether for these or other reasons, Mullah Omar and the bulk of the Taliban's leadership fled to fight another day. Angered by 9/11 and buoyed by its battlefield victories, the United States did not involve the Taliban in a postinvasion settlement.

In 2002, senior Taliban delegations reached out to Karzai once again. Karzai mentioned the contacts to U.S. officials, only to have the United States strongly discourage his government from negotiating with the Taliban. That same year, U.S. troops even imprisoned the former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, when he

arrived in Kabul to meet with the Afghan government. By 2003, the Taliban had shifted their focus to taking territory, and once the Taliban offensives began in 2006, peace feelers fell away.

It was not until the last months of the Bush administration that peace talks regained momentum. Within the Taliban, a moderate faction had retained an interest in negotiations, and in 2008, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Omar's deputy, allowed subordinates to meet with Afghan government officials under Saudi auspices. He also began communicating directly with members of the Karzai family, who happen to be his fellow tribesmen. Around the same time, a Taliban delegation began meeting with Kai Eide, then the UN envoy to Afghanistan, in Dubai. But all conversations came to a halt in February 2010, when Pakistani officials detained Mullah Baradar in Karachi, a move widely interpreted as a Pakistani veto on direct negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban. As a Pakistani security official admitted to *The New York Times* in 2010: "We picked up Baradar . . . because [the Taliban] were trying to make a deal without us. We protect the Taliban. They are dependent on us. We are not going to allow them to make a deal with Karzai and the Indians."

Meanwhile, the idea of a negotiated peace, first championed within the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama by Richard Holbrooke, then Obama's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Barnett Rubin, one of Holbrooke's top advisers, was gaining traction in the United States. In May 2010, Karzai visited Washington, and Obama lifted the Bush-era ban on talking to the Taliban leadership. As a result, a month later, Karzai held a *loya jirga*, or grand assembly, to discuss the possibility of peace negotiations. And in September, he created the High Peace Council, which would be the public face of his peace effort, a 70-member body led by former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and filled with Afghan mujahideen commanders and former Taliban members.

Around the same time, the White House encouraged Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's former top official in Kabul, and Thomas Pickering, a former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, to examine the possibility for peace talks in Afghanistan. They led an international group of diplomats that traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and met with former and active Taliban representatives. They reported back to Washington that the Taliban were interested in the possibility of talks with the United States.

The ball was rolling. In November 2010, U.S. diplomats and Taliban representatives met for the first time, in Germany. In February 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States was officially ready to begin peace negotiations, although she cautioned that any settlement would have to require the Taliban to lay down their arms, accept the Afghan constitution, and sever ties with al Qaeda. After some delay, talks between U.S. and Taliban representatives proceeded in late 2011 and continued into the early months of 2012, at which point the Taliban broke off contact, rejecting a request from Washington that they begin negotiating with Kabul.

It was a particularly substantial missed opportunity: a failure to initiate a peace process at the peak of U.S. leverage, as NATO troops were retaking large swaths of the Taliban's heartland in Kandahar, Helmand, and nearby provinces. All parties were to blame. On the Afghan side, Karzai did his best to obstruct a process he feared would marginalize him and demanded that the Taliban speak to his government directly. The Taliban refused to negotiate with Kabul unless they first secured the release of several of their former leaders from the U.S. detention facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The United States, for its part, followed up on Clinton's initial offer cautiously, hindered by lengthy interagency wrangling and indecision. The Defense Department could not agree with the State Department on a variety of issues relating to the negotiations. General David Petraeus, for example, who commanded the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011, preferred to hold off on peace talks until the surge produced greater military success. Other Pentagon officials balked at the suggestion that the United States should release prisoners from Guantánamo in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. Army sergeant being held by the Taliban. The White House was slow to forge agreement on a way forward, and so the opportunity slipped away.

The "will they, won't they" saga continued into 2013, when the Taliban sent signals to Washington that they were willing to reopen peace talks and also to meet with the Afghan government. Through intermediaries in Qatar, the Taliban planned to open a political office in Doha dedicated to the negotiations. The initiative foundered at the last moment, however, due to a miscommunication. Taliban leaders knew that U.S. and Afghan officials refused to address them as representatives of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name adopted by their former government. But they believed, based partly on discussions with Qa-

tari officials, that they could use the title to describe themselves to the outside world. When it opened, the office displayed the flag of the Islamic Emirate and a sign with the name. The United States, having been assured by the Qatari government that the office would not describe itself as part of the Islamic Emirate, demanded that Qatari officials remove the flag and the sign. In response, the Taliban closed the office and cut off all contact with Washington and Kabul.

The experience taught both sides to be more careful when communicating through third parties. In 2014, working again through Qatari intermediaries, the United States and the Taliban were able to arrange the release of Bergdahl in return for the transfer of five former Taliban officials from Guantánamo to Doha, where they would remain for a year. The agreement was not perfect: it sparked a lively controversy in the United States over the legitimacy of the five-for-one exchange rate and whether Congress should have been notified in advance of the deal. But it did demonstrate to each side that the other could deliver on an agreement once reached. Neither side made any attempt to follow up on this success, however, and the momentum for peace talks stalled once again.

A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

After a period of radio silence, the opportunity for peace talks reemerged suddenly in February of this year—and this time, the prospects of success may be better. That month, Pakistan's army chief, General Raheel Sharif, went to Kabul and told the newly elected Afghan president that the Taliban would be willing to begin official meetings with the Afghan government as early as the next month and that the Taliban were being told by Pakistani officials that it was no longer acceptable to carry on the war. Although months passed as Taliban moderates and hard-liners worked out what to do, in early May, ranking members of the Taliban met openly and unofficially with members of the Afghan High Peace Council in Qatar. During the meeting, the Taliban participants stressed their interest in peace talks and in reopening their Doha office.

A variety of factors make this particular opportunity more promising than the ones before. The first is new leadership in Kabul. Karzai had an embittered relationship with the United States. He was nearly a decade ahead of Washington in seeking to reach out to the Taliban, but by the time U.S. officials came around to his view, he no longer

trusted them. Convinced that the United States wanted to cut a separate deal with the Taliban that would divide Afghanistan, Karzai sought to monopolize any talks with the group. He began to believe that the United States was deliberately sabotaging negotiations in an attempt to prolong the war and keep a U.S. military presence in the region. Other governments, such as France and Japan, tried to foster intra-Afghan dialogue, but Karzai objected to these forums, which he felt reduced his government to simply another Afghan faction.

Ghani, who succeeded Karzai as president in late 2014, promises to be a different sort of leader. Both he and Abdullah Abdullah, the country's chief executive officer, campaigned on their support for a negotiated peace, and unlike Karzai, they appear willing to make concessions and work with other governments to get there. During a trip to Beijing last October, Ghani encouraged other governments to support his country's reconciliation process, implicitly endorsing China's desire to help launch peace talks. Ghani went on to discuss the peace process with representatives from China, Pakistan, and the United States.

The second promising development is Pakistan's positive attitude toward negotiations. Since 2002, Pakistan has offered the Taliban sanctuary, a place to rest, regroup, and hide. Pervez Musharraf, who served as Pakistan's president from 2001 to 2008, has admitted that his government purposely helped the Taliban in order to secure his country's interests in Afghanistan and counter Indian influence in the region. In recent years, Pakistan's civilian and military leaders have pledged to end the practice, but little has changed. And although Pakistan has occasionally played a positive role in the reconciliation process—releasing Mullah Baradar, for example—it has never brought key Taliban leaders to the table.

That seems to be changing. True to Sharif's word, since February, Pakistani officials have been meeting with Taliban leaders and encouraging negotiations. Although Pakistan's leadership is divided over how hard to pressure the Taliban to seek peace, Islamabad appears to feel that it has more of a stake in a peaceful Afghanistan than originally thought. Without a plan for a negotiated peace, the departure of U.S. troops cannot end well for Pakistan. The drawdown might give the Taliban the opportunity to seize more ground, which would increase Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. But the Afghan government would then almost certainly turn to India for money and arms, leaving Pakistan to fight a long-term proxy war against its rival—or,

worse, accede to an Indian protectorate over northern Afghanistan. For Pakistan, this is debatably a worse outcome than a neutral Afghanistan committed to staying out of the Indian-Pakistani rivalry.

Taliban battlefield successes might have other drawbacks as well. The extremist threat to Pakistan could grow. Emboldened by such successes, the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban might start collaborating more, and safe havens for Pakistani terrorists could emerge on the Afghan side of the border, a long-standing fear of the Pakistani government. That risk was underscored on December 16, 2014, when the Pakistani Taliban attacked the Army Public School in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, killing 132 schoolchildren.

If Pakistan is beginning to realize that it has more to gain from an Afghanistan led by Ghani than one led by the Taliban, the new Afghan government deserves part of the credit. Whereas Karzai let the Afghan-Pakistani relationship sour—in 2011, he even signed a strategic partnership agreement with India—Ghani has made an effort to reassure Islamabad, going so far as to take military action against the Pakistani Taliban and cancel a weapons deal with India. Still, it is too early to tell if Pakistan will stand fully behind peace. Not all Pakistani officials and military officers agree that rapprochement with Afghanistan is the best way to secure their country against India.

China has also played a role in galvanizing Pakistani support for peace talks. After Ghani's visit to Beijing, the Chinese government hosted Taliban delegations and offered Pakistan additional aid to encourage the Taliban to join the peace process. China's requests carry weight in Pakistan. The two countries have enjoyed a long and close bilateral relationship. China, for its part, has a strong interest in a stable Afghanistan, since it wants to prevent extremism from spreading to its western region of Xinjiang, which contains a large Muslim population. China also has mineral and energy investments in Afghanistan, and so it would lose out if the country were torn apart by a civil war. More broadly, as China grows into its status as a global superpower, it has been willing to play a greater role in promoting regional stability, especially as the United States steps back.

WHAT THE TALIBAN WANT

Of the various players, the Taliban themselves may be the most reluctant to negotiate. A moderate faction, including members of the Quetta Shura (the movement's central organization) and influential religious

leaders, wants to put an end to years of bloodshed. But other Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Omar's current deputy, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, have taken a harder line. Having observed the Taliban's post-2001 comeback, Mansour believes the movement has a chance of outright victory in a protracted war. News reports suggest that it is this internal divide that has slowed the Taliban's coming to the table.

Whether moderate or hard-line, the Taliban have not stopped fighting, nor are they likely to do so before any negotiations are concluded. In 2014, the Quetta Shura launched its biggest offensive in years, pushing back Afghan forces in the southern province of Helmand and striking the provinces of Kandahar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar. Our contacts in the Taliban say they expect to take more ground this year and next, including provincial capitals. If outright victory on the battlefield seems feasible, Taliban leaders will be unlikely to negotiate. Pakistan and China may have leverage over the Taliban, but the Quetta Shura will be sure to resist foreign pressure that it sees as outside its interests.

If the Taliban do decide to participate in peace talks, the next question will be how much they will concede. According to some Afghanistan experts, such as Thomas Ruttig, Michael Semple, and Theo Farrell, the Taliban may be willing to meet the most important of the three U.S. conditions for peace: the renunciation of al Qaeda. Plenty of Taliban leaders have denied any desire to wage international jihad, and in 2009, the Quetta Shura announced that if foreign forces left Afghanistan, the Taliban would not seek to attack other countries, nor would they let outside terrorist groups use Afghanistan as a base of operations. The Taliban have also made clear, however, that they will officially renounce al Qaeda only once they have gotten what they want out of a peace deal.

A bigger sticking point involves the Afghan constitution. For many in the Taliban, the demand that they accept it is untenable, since doing so would force them to cede the legitimacy of what they see as a puppet regime. The Taliban will also want to elect a new government, in which they will expect to participate. In this sense, a peace agreement would mean not merely a cease-fire but also a reconceptualization of the Afghan state.

The Taliban's other major demand is likely to be the removal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Foreign occupation is a major reason the Taliban's rank and file fight. At the May meeting in Qatar, Taliban participants allegedly said that they would accept a cease-fire only

after the withdrawal of all foreign forces. Given the salience of this issue, there can be little doubt that the initial Taliban position in any negotiations will be that all U.S. troops must leave.

Of course, hard-liners within the Taliban—or even within outside groups, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or ISIS—could always take matters into their own hands. If extremists assassinated Mullah Omar, for example, negotiations would collapse. Although the Islamic State currently has little influence in Afghanistan, the death of a leader such as Mullah Omar could allow the group to gain a foothold, win over extremists, and carry on an even more violent and vicious war.

WAR AND PEACE

A tiny window of opportunity for a negotiated settlement has opened up, and the United States should take advantage of it while it can. Although all sides agree that the talks should be led by Afghanistan, at least three outside powers—China, Pakistan, and the United States—will be directly or indirectly involved. The United States, for its part, can take five concrete steps to keep the negotiations moving forward.

First, it must do its best to prevent large-scale Taliban military victories. Peace begins on the battlefield: if the Taliban capture more ground, particularly provincial capitals, the Quetta Shura will see little reason to bargain, believing that an Afghan government defeat is imminent. The summer fighting season will be particularly critical to Taliban decision-making, as the leadership will take note of successes and failures on the battlefield to decide whether war will be more profitable than peace. A strong performance by the Afghan army could therefore deal a serious blow to the Taliban's confidence, pushing the peace process forward.

To beef up Afghan military capabilities, the United States and its allies should continue to provide financial and material support until a settlement is reached, and possibly beyond. Obama made the right decision in March, when he granted Afghan requests to slow the drawdown of U.S. troops from the country, promising to maintain a force of 9,800 through the end of 2015. He should be just as flexible when it comes to drawdowns in 2016 and 2017. Obama should also continue to grant U.S. forces the authority to carry out limited special operations and air strikes, both of which give the Afghan army and police a strategic edge. Strikes against Quetta Shura members in Afghanistan and Pakistan should not be ruled

out, especially so that additional pressure can be brought to bear in the course of the negotiations, if needed.

Second, the United States should weigh in behind the scenes to help Ghani and Abdullah form a disciplined government, capable of the executive action necessary to wage war and broker peace. So far, the Afghan government has been a model of indecision. It took Ghani and Abdullah seven months just to choose their cabinet. Such gridlock, whether over cabinet posts or military policy, emboldens the Quetta Shura. A weak, disjointed government will undermine peace talks. The United States, along with the rest of the international community, should continue to press both camps to work together more effectively.

The third area in which the United States can help involves Pakistan. Washington should do what it can to ensure that Islamabad keeps the Taliban at the bargaining table. The United States has many interests in Pakistan—including securing Pakistan's nuclear weapons and working with Islamabad to weed out al Qaeda—that have distracted it from focusing on ending Pakistan's support for the Taliban. Luckily, the drawdown in U.S. forces will largely eliminate one of these interests: the U.S. military's dependence on Pakistani ports and roads to support its presence in Afghanistan. Washington should condition its substantial military and civilian assistance on Pakistan's agreeing to support the peace process and deny a safe haven to the Taliban.

Fourth, the United States must accept that a workable peace settlement will have to include a new Afghan constitution or institutional arrangements that allow the Taliban to become a legitimate part of the Afghan government. In fact, Washington should assume that a settlement will provide for a *loya jirga* in which representatives of the Taliban, the Afghan government, and civil society come together to amend the current constitution or write an entirely new one. In such a restructuring, certain civil freedoms, particularly women's rights, would be endangered. The Taliban hold deeply conservative views on women, to put it mildly. Prior to any cease-fire, therefore, the United States should seek to secure from all parties a commitment to leave current civil rights protections unchanged in a new constitution.

The fifth step will come if and when a settlement is reached. At that point, the United States may need to keep troops on the ground only until the constitutional debate is over and any subsequent election has taken place. But even when its troops have departed, the United States should remain committed to a strategic partnership with Afghanistan

and continue to provide a base level of military aid. Otherwise, the balance of power may shift to the Taliban, undoing the peace.

Most Afghanistan experts believe that the war will continue for years to come. They generally agree that the Afghan government will stay in power only with continued U.S. economic and military assistance, without which violent militant groups will reign freely. The peace process offers an alternative future, one that the United States should pursue with determination and patience. Success is far from guaranteed—in fact, it's a long shot—but the attempt is worth the effort.

The alternatives would be costly. One is to keep paying for the Afghan security forces, at between $2 billion and $5 billion a year, and let the war go on. In this scenario, an outright government victory would be unlikely, even if the Obama administration left military forces in Afghanistan past 2016. Another option is for the United States to get out of Afghanistan, cut off funding, and accept the attendant Taliban resurgence in Kabul. In either case, the United States might be tempted to bet that the mutual interest of the Afghan government, Pakistan, and China in avoiding regional instability will ultimately bring peace. That would be quite a gamble. Without U.S. pressure on all players, negotiations may never happen, and a full-blown civil war may become inevitable. In that event, extremism would grow: there is little evidence that the Taliban would unilaterally break from al Qaeda or be able to stop al Qaeda or the Islamic State from operating in Afghanistan. And if Iraq is any lesson, even total withdrawal may not prevent the United States from being sucked right back into the morass.

Staying the Course in Afghanistan

How to Fight the Longest War

Kosh Sadat and Stan McChrystal

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The cigarette glowed red as he took a drag, and the smoke rose rapidly as he exhaled. It had been a long afternoon. It had been a long war.

It was February 2010, and after months establishing a relationship, Pakistan's chief of army staff, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and one of us, Stan McChrystal, were having the kind of conversation senior military commanders are supposed to have, discussing the role of the NATO-led coalition's efforts in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan. We'd spent hours alone, each laying out in detail a strategy for the conflict. While not quite my second home, the Pakistani army's headquarters in Rawalpindi was now familiar ground, and Kayani, a colleague with whom I spoke easily. Nothing, however, could soften the blow of his message to me. "For the mission you've been given, you have the right strategy," he told me. "But it won't work, because you don't have enough time."

There was nothing revelatory in the general's assessment, because like many others, I had already reluctantly concluded that it was likely

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correct. It may seem laughable that back in 2010, nine years after the war had begun and eight since I had first started serving there, we felt pressed for time. But for most of those years, the coalition's efforts had been underresourced and poorly coordinated. And in December 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama had announced a commitment to begin reducing the United States' role in 18 months. The clock was ticking. Still, the president had also decided to reinforce the U.S. effort so that it would comprise 150,000 U.S. and coalition forces and include an ongoing effort to train, equip, and advise 350,000 Afghan forces. If ever the United States had a realistic shot of success in its post-9/11 involvement in Afghanistan, it was then.

That was seven years of hope, effort, blood, and frustration ago. Today, anything that feels like success looks more distant than ever. The U.S.-backed government in Kabul remains plagued by political infighting and corruption, and the Afghan security forces cannot control significant parts of the country. The Taliban, while no longer the idealistic young fighters that swept north in 1994 and not particularly popular with the Afghan people, have leveraged Kabul's weaknesses to make gains in recent years.

Against this backdrop, U.S. President Donald Trump has outlined a new strategy. As he detailed in a speech in August, the United States will continue its commitment in Afghanistan, modestly increase the number of troops to boost the capacity of the Afghan security forces, and redouble counterterrorist operations against the Islamic State, or ISIS, and other groups. It is largely more of the same.

The announcement represented a major reversal: as a candidate, Trump unequivocally declared his intention to end the U.S. military's involvement in Afghanistan, but as president, he has pledged to extend it. In truth, however, there wasn't much room for a different decision: withdrawing would risk turning the country back into the terrorist safe haven it was before 9/11, and drastically ramping up the U.S. presence would be a political nonstarter. That leaves something resembling the current approach as the only real option. Stuck with doing more of the same, Washington must try to do it better.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to destroy al Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban regime that was hosting it. The overarching goal was always to protect the United States by denying terrorists

a safe haven in which to plan and train, but over time, the mission grew. Eventually, it came to include the establishment of an Afghan nation that defended its own sovereignty, embraced democracy, educated women, and cracked down on opium production.

Although the initial operations appeared to work, complexities on the ground, plus the distraction of the war in Iraq, sidetracked the effort, and the Taliban's presence expanded. When Obama came into office, in 2009, he took a hard look at the Afghan campaign and announced a surge of U.S. troops and a reinvigorated counterinsurgency strategy. But by the middle of 2015, the troop surge was complete, and a subsequent drawdown left only 9,800 coalition troops in the country, most of whom were focused on training and advising the Afghans. Progress had been made, but it was limited.

Today, Afghanistan is struggling to survive. Although the Taliban have de facto control over only limited areas of the country, their presence and influence are likely at their highest levels since the group lost power in 2001. Remnants of the al Qaeda network and one of its branches, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, are also active, having been pushed out of Pakistan's tribal areas in late 2014 by the Pakistani military. The Islamic State in Khorasan, as the branch of ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan is known, enjoys free rein on both sides of the two countries' border. Although each of these groups has its own transnational agenda, all have made common cause with the Taliban to overthrow the Afghan government.

The fragility of Afghanistan's security sector is making their job easier. The 180,000 soldiers of the Afghan National Army, trained and equipped largely by the United States, are employed primarily at static checkpoints around the country that are vulnerable to Taliban attacks. The Afghan National Police, which is riddled with corruption and poor leadership, is used more for the protection of members of parliament and other officials than for its intended purpose of enforcing law and order. Afghanistan's premier intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, is increasingly involved in military operations against terrorist groups instead of providing essential intelligence.

Compounding the challenges, the Afghan legal system struggles to deal with corruption and criminality. Knowing little about the law and the rights of citizenship, Afghan security forces often make critical mistakes, for instance, detaining innocent civilians. By contrast, Taliban fighters—especially those in the lethal Haqqani network, an offshoot of

the Taliban based in Pakistan—often have a thorough understanding of the law. When captured, they have proved adept at minimizing their sentences or avoiding conviction altogether.

In Kabul, meanwhile, politics have reached a standstill. Despite its name, the National Unity Government—a power-sharing deal brokered by the United States in 2014 that made Ashraf Ghani president and Abdullah Abdullah chief executive—is deeply divided.

Whatever progress the United States has made after 16 years, it is inarguably incomplete. To some Americans, the effort has succeeded in building a shaky foundation on which more can and should be constructed. To others, it represents a fruitless waste of blood and treasure. For the ordinary Afghan, however, the U.S. campaign has led to frightening uncertainty about the future.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In 1902, Vladimir Lenin published a now famous pamphlet titled *What Is to Be Done?*, in which he prescribed a strategy for what later became the Bolsheviks' successful takeover of Russia's 1917 revolution. Lenin argued that Russia's working classes required the leadership of dedicated cadres before they would become sufficiently politicized to demand change in tsarist Russia. It was a clear-eyed assessment of reality. The same is needed for Afghanistan now.

The United States has three basic options in Afghanistan: do less, continue on the current path, or do more. There is material for endless debates about the merits of each, but it helps to begin by remembering what the United States' objectives in Afghanistan were and still are. As Obama said in his 2009 West Point speech about Afghanistan, "We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government, so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future."

If those objectives, or anything close to them, remain valid, it is hard to view doing less as an acceptable course of action. Although the government of Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah survived for three years after the Soviets withdrew, before falling to opposition forces, it took muscular logistical support and infighting among the opposition warlords to keep it in the fight for so long. Many observers believe that absent at least the current level of support, Ghani's government could last only a small fraction of that time.

As for the doing-more option, why couldn't the United States consider a version of the 2009 troop surge again? That strategy, while flawed due to ambitious timelines and the failure to execute a truly whole-of-government approach, could have succeeded had Washington demonstrated the necessary patience and commitment. But executing a counterinsurgency campaign over an extended period, always difficult for the American psyche, was a particularly tall order after the recent experience in Iraq. Today, gathering the popular and political support for a major increase in U.S. troop levels and a renewed commitment of many years is even more unlikely. Unless conditions on the ground changed drastically, it would be unrealistic to propose such a strategy. Besides, Afghans across the nation appreciate that a stepped-up U.S. presence would not be politically sustainable for long, thus increasing their concerns about what would happen after the Americans left.

That leaves the current approach as the only viable option. Under this strategy, Washington would have to lower its ambitions in Afghanistan, with the goal being merely a long-term relationship with and a limited military presence in a troubled but functioning country. As they shed some of the loftier goals of the past, policymakers will have to make it clear that the United States is unequivocally committed to its core goals. It would still promote regional stability, encourage modest but steady economic development, and maintain a platform from which to collect intelligence and carry out counterterrorism operations. Although this strategy would indeed come at a cost, its advantages—namely, ensuring the survival of a non-Taliban government—would be worth the price.

Critics may charge that following this course would meet the definition of insanity—which, as that old adage has it, is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. But as with everything in Afghanistan, the truth is more complicated. The United States has no better choice at hand, and in fact, this one is not all that bad. What's more, within the confines of this strategy, there is room for improvement—in terms of fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, dealing with them and their allies in Pakistan, and building a more responsible government in Kabul.

TARGETING THE TALIBAN

Continuing to dismantle the Taliban in Afghanistan is easier said than done, of course, but it is probably essential to the survival of Afghanistan as a nation. No other opposition group in the country has been

as successful in building a movement as the Taliban have. Portraying themselves as the more legitimate alternative to the current regime, the Taliban threaten the state and continue to offer sanctuary to ISIS and other transnational threats.

The United States should continue to squeeze the Taliban with a steady campaign of targeted strikes against their leadership, training camps, and other facilities. But Washington also needs to look outside Afghanistan and seek to increase international pressure on the group. Getting a UN resolution designating the Taliban as a global terrorist group would be a powerful move—it would severely undercut their legitimacy and reduce their access to external support—but an admittedly heavy lift. More likely to bear fruit would be the application of diplomatic pressure on countries offering support and sanctuary to the Taliban, especially the Arab Gulf states, where to this day, the Taliban freely collect donations and run businesses.

That would also mean putting pressure on Pakistan, of course, a tactic that has proved difficult and largely ineffective. Although the Pakistanis have taken action against some threats, the leaders of the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other terrorist groups continue to operate relatively freely in major Pakistani cities, such as Peshawar, Quetta, and even the capital, Islamabad. It would be nice if it were possible to secure Afghanistan without reorienting the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, but experience proves that it is not.

Disappointingly, pressuring Pakistan to take more effective actions to deny the Taliban sanctuary is not the silver bullet some hope for. Pressure could come in the form of reduced military assistance, but Washington's leverage is relatively limited and could threaten U.S. supply lines that run through Pakistan, as well as add further friction to an already strained relationship. Still, wherever possible, pressure is appropriate.

A political solution to the problem of the Taliban would be preferable, and it's possible that renewed military pressure could drive the group to the negotiating table. But it would be a mistake to overestimate the Taliban's sensitivity to such efforts. As long as the group believes there is any probability of success, even over a long time horizon, it is likely to stay in the fight, so a peace deal remains a distant prospect. It's worth remembering that the efforts of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, a body designed to negotiate a deal with the Taliban, came to a halt in 2011, when its leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated. (Rabbani was killed when someone claiming to

be a member of the Taliban who wanted to discuss peace detonated a bomb hidden in his turban.) And the Taliban's steady drumbeat of high-profile attacks in Afghanistan, resulting in scores of civilian deaths, makes negotiations nearly impossible in the current environment. The best the United States can do is to put unrelenting pressure on the Taliban while helping build the capacity of the Afghan state—so that the Afghans can eventually assume full responsibility for maintaining their sovereignty and preventing the reemergence of terrorist sanctuaries.

FOLLOW THE ENEMY

There is a common Afghan saying that roughly translates as "If water is muddied downstream, don't waste your time filtering it; better to go upstream." Likewise, no U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan can succeed if the enemy enjoys a safe haven in Pakistan. The United States must therefore refine and focus its operations there.

Filtering the water upstream, so to speak, has proved politically difficult across national borders. The U.S. military's 1916–17 incursion into Mexico to hunt the guerilla leader Pancho Villa was famously controversial, as were its campaigns against North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam War. British forces acting on behalf of Malaysia conducted cross-border operations in Indonesia in the 1960s; the Soviets threatened to attack mujahideen safe havens in Pakistan in the 1980s; and during the Iraq war, U.S. Special Forces reached into Syria in pursuit of al Qaeda in Iraq operatives. In each case, the complexities were huge.

Still, it would be a mistake to rule out U.S. operations in Pakistan. Like the mujahideen in the 1980s, the Taliban today are organized around three main hubs in the country—the province of Baluchistan, the Waziristan region of the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas, and the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. From all three places, the Taliban launch attacks across the border into Afghanistan with impunity. Teams of Haqqani network operatives sent to conduct high-profile attacks have even managed to pass through the Torkham border crossing, in the famous Khyber Pass, using legitimate documents. Specially selected and trained inside Pakistan, they conduct meticulously planned and rehearsed lethal attacks against foreign embassies, Afghan government offices, and U.S. and NATO military installations.

A purely defensive strategy against these threats will never be sufficient; highly focused offensive operations, primarily in Afghanistan but, when necessary, also inside Pakistan, are required. To be sure, the United States has conducted such operations since the war in Afghanistan began, but it can do more. To maximize their effectiveness, the United States should assemble an integrated task force with Afghanistan that allows the two countries' intelligence communities, law enforcement agencies, and militaries to collaborate. (Washington should also break down its own organizational silos that inhibit coordination and intelligence sharing when it comes to threats in Afghanistan.) In the best-case scenario, Pakistan would willingly participate in these joint efforts, but in the event that it does not show such unprecedented cooperation, they should go on regardless.

A MORE CAPABLE KABUL

The final element of the United States' strategy in Afghanistan should involve convincing the Afghan government to press forward with reforms. Absent a concerted and effective campaign to reduce corruption and increase the effectiveness of key institutions, legitimacy with the Afghan people will remain elusive. Over the past 16 years, Washington has spent billions of dollars on training and equipping Afghan forces and building Afghanistan's infrastructure, yet the country still has few properly functioning institutions. The handful of ones that do work owe their success to investments in developing leadership.

Driving reform in the Afghan government will require continuous coordination with the Afghans themselves, and many more than three cups of tea. Improving Afghanistan's institutions will take the long-term work of building human capital and changing officials' behavior, rather than short-term infrastructure or other projects. Accordingly, the United States needs to work closely with Afghanistan to select, train, mentor, and support the right caliber of leaders. Putting in place a "civilian surge" of large numbers of nonmilitary experts, as some have called for, is impractical. Creating and fielding such a group has proved difficult in the past, and the American public has little appetite for such an effort. But the United States could find purchase in supporting a smaller network of U.S. and international civilian advisers who would stay in Afghanistan for longer tours of duty. Driving change in any society is difficult, but Afghanistan's complex environment is no place for well-intentioned neophytes or dilettantes. For

the greatest probability of long-term success, the United States will need to create across multiple organizations a cadre of dedicated professionals who are steeped in the language, culture, and political realities of Afghanistan and who are connected by a coordinated strategy.

PRESSING ON

It's tempting to view any further effort in Afghanistan as the ultimate example of stupidity or stubbornness. In the so-called graveyard of empires, failure may seem inevitable. But such pessimism ignores that a majority of Afghans oppose a Taliban regime and few would benefit from the Taliban's return to power. Furthermore, the United States and its allies in post-9/11 Afghanistan have largely avoided being cast as colonialists. To be sure, Afghans have expressed their frustrations—from outrage over civilian casualties to disappointment about the lack of economic progress—but more of them wish for a better-executed effort than wish for abandonment.

Other skeptics may argue that even a limited effort could fail, and if it does, Washington could be forced into the hellish position of reluctantly increasing its commitment to an unworthy client state. The prospect brings to mind memories of the gradual, and ultimately unsuccessful, escalation in Vietnam. This is indeed a risk, but it is manageable, if Washington carefully identifies its objectives, and worth accepting in light of the alternatives.

As satisfying as it might be to declare "game over" and move on, a post-American Afghanistan is not a pretty picture. Even though too great a Western presence in the Muslim world generates resentment, it is also true that a total absence reinforces the narrative that the United States doesn't care about the non-Christian parts of the world. Without resurrecting the domino theory from the Cold War, one can still say that an American retreat from Afghanistan is unlikely to return the country to the tranquil place that served as the exotic setting for James Michener's 1963 novel *Caravans*. More probable is a repressive and ideological regime that supports transnational terrorist groups. Among a range of unpalatable choices, the best option is to pursue some version of the current policy. The United States might as well do that as well as it can.

The United States' Perpetual War in Afghanistan

Why Long Wars No Longer Generate a Backlash at Home

Tanisha M. Fazal and Sarah Kreps

AUGUST 20, 2018

In October, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan will turn 17. The human and material costs of what has become the United States' longest-ever war are colossal. More than 2,000 U.S. military personnel have been killed and over 20,000 have been injured. The UN estimates that nearly 20,000 Afghan civilians have been killed and another 50,000 injured since 2009 alone. The United States has spent some $877 billion on the war. The Trump administration's recent initiative to seek direct peace talks with the Taliban—a first since the start of the war in 2001—highlights that Washington is actively looking for new ways to wind down its involvement in the conflict. But why has the U.S. intervention lasted so long in the first place?

Part of the answer is that Afghanistan's toxic mix of "state collapse, civil conflict, ethnic disintegration and multisided intervention has locked it in a self-perpetuating cycle that may be simply beyond out-

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side resolution," as Max Fisher and Amanda Taub summarized in a *New York Times* post. But their diagnosis does not speak to a critical dimension of the conflict: namely, how the relative indifference of the U.S. public has allowed the war to drag on.

In theory, leaders in a democracy have incentives to heed public preferences or risk being voted out of office, which means that public opposition to a war makes its continuation untenable. Yet when it comes to Afghanistan, the U.S. public has favored the status quo at best and expressed deep ambivalence at worst. In polls taken a year ago, only 23 percent of Americans believed the United States was winning the war in Afghanistan, and a plurality (37 percent) supported a troop drawdown. At the same time, however, 44 percent wanted to either keep troop levels about the same or increase them, while 19 percent did not have an opinion. Another poll showed that 71 percent of respondents agreed that "full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan would leave a vacuum that would allow terrorist groups like ISIS to expand." Americans are not necessarily enthusiastic about sending more troops to Afghanistan, but they certainly are not clamoring for withdrawal.

Contrast this with the vocal opposition to the Vietnam War. What began as a small antiwar movement in 1964–65 scaled up as the war escalated in 1966, giving rise to massive protests in 1967: 100,000 people marching in Washington, D.C., and half a million protesting in New York City. Passions in the antiwar movement reflected opposition in the public as a whole. Most Americans knew little about the war until the Johnson administration ramped up troop levels, but as it became clear that the war would be long and protracted, elite disaffection increased. And public opinion, dragged down by the unpopularity of the draft, began "a path of slow and steady decline" from which it would never recover. When citizens were asked in 1965 whether sending troops was a mistake, only 24 percent agreed. Three years on, 46 percent said yes. By 1970, the proportion rose to 57 percent, and it remained at around 60 percent until the end of the war.

LONG BUT PAINLESS

That public disaffection at home hastened the end of the Vietnam War is now widely acknowledged. By contrast, the American public has so far failed to turn up the heat on leaders to end the war in Afghanistan—even though few think that the country is winning. Protests against the war have been few and far between.

Popular anger is absent because the public is no longer directly affected by the war legally, personally, or financially. For one, today's wars are less noticeable because they are increasingly unofficial. As the laws of war have proliferated, putting ever more constraints on what states at war can and cannot do, governments have looked for ways to sidestep this legal regime. At times, this simply means not signing international agreements: U.S. presidents of both parties have been unwilling to push for ratification of the Rome Statute, the treaty that founded the International Criminal Court, lest U.S. military personnel abroad be prosecuted unjustly. More often, however, states avoid stepping over any bright lines that put them unequivocally in the legal domain of war. As a result, the United States has gradually moved away from the legal formalities that had defined war for centuries. It has not issued a formal declaration of war since World War II. Congress did not invoke its power to declare war under Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution to send troops to Afghanistan. Instead, it passed the sweeping Authorization for Use of Military Force, which has limped along since 2001 despite a constant barrage of bipartisan criticism. Likewise, the United States has not signed any formal peace agreements since the 1973 Paris Peace Accords—a trend that bodes ill for negotiations with the Taliban. Because such treaties have become less frequent, citizens no longer expect a formal end to war. Today's informal wars are more easily normalized and even obscured from public view, removing some of the pressure to conclude them at all.

Second, most U.S. citizens no longer bear the physical costs of war personally. The end of conscription and the creation of an all-volunteer military in the 1970s have led to an opt-in system and a growing gap between most citizens and the military. In 1980, 18 percent of the population were veterans. By 2016, that number was down to 7 percent, which means that the average person today is far less likely to have experienced war. And the fact that not even one in 200 U.S. citizens serves in the military today means that few people directly know someone on active duty. Today's public is more insulated from the human costs of war than previous generations.

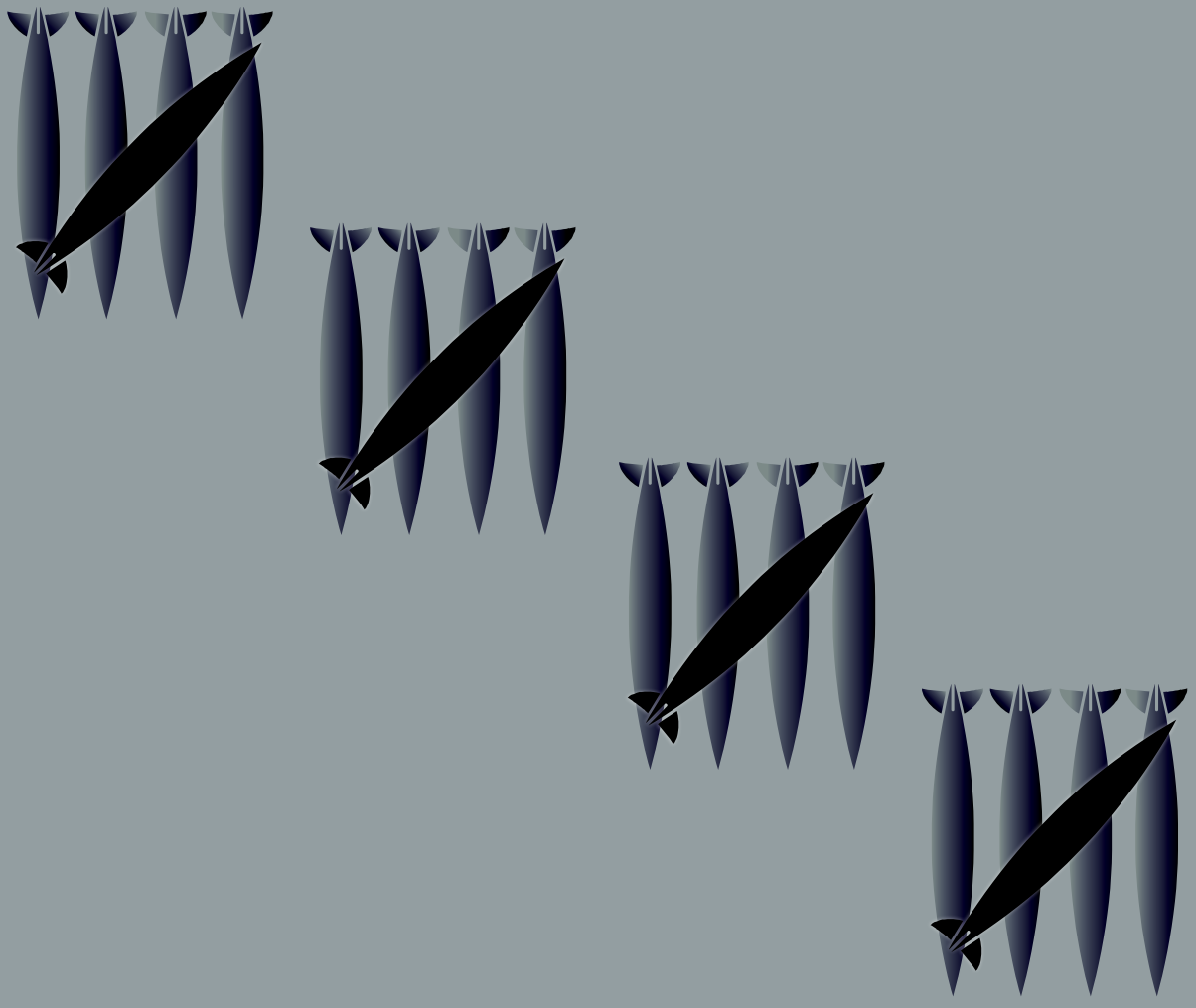
Third, the nature of those physical costs has changed. Nonfatal casualties have almost always outnumbered fatal casualties in war, but this gap is increasingly stark for the United States today. For every U.S. soldier who died during World War II, four others were wounded. This wounded-to-killed ratio mostly held steady through Korea and

Vietnam. In Afghanistan, however, it has more than doubled, and there are now ten wounded soldiers for every fatality. That media and polling organizations tend to focus on fatalities rather than the injured obscures this particular cost of war.

Finally, war no longer has the direct financial impact on U.S. citizens that it once did. Up until the Vietnam War, the United States levied war taxes. As a result, the public was patently aware of the costs of the war, and when citizens felt that a military campaign was no longer worth the costs they personally had to bear, they pressured leaders to bring it to a close. Tax hikes in 1968 to fund the fight in Vietnam were not the only reason millions took to the streets, but they were clearly a contributing factor. Based on official estimates, the war in Afghanistan had cost $714 billion by 2017 and continues to cost about $45 billion per year. But taxpayers wouldn't know it, since these costs are just added to the national debt. Because the war is but one source among many to blame for the growing mountain of U.S. debt, its financial impact is easily overlooked.

All of these changes—legal, civil-military, and financial—are unlikely to reverse themselves anytime soon, which means that the way Americans feel the effect of conflict is unlikely to change either. But without being confronted with the grim realities of war, the public is unlikely to exercise the levers of accountability that it did in the past by voicing opposition and pressuring leaders to bring a close to the war. And without pressure from below, Congress is unlikely to act. War without end will be not the exception but the rule.

THE ENDGAME



Is the Taliban Making a Pledge It Cannot Keep?

Militant Organizations Won't Stop Using Afghan Territory for Terrorism

Tricia Bacon

FEBRUARY 21, 2019

In Doha in late January, the United States and the Afghan Taliban agreed in principle to the contours of a peace deal. Under its terms, the Taliban would guarantee that Afghan territory will never be used by terrorists. The concession is critical to the United States, but while some commentators have heralded the Taliban's promise as a major breakthrough, analysts have noted that the group has made, and failed to keep, similar assurances in the past. Questions remain about whether the Taliban is genuinely willing to break with al Qaeda—the very prospect at which the group balked back in 2001, prompting the United States to invade.

The terrorist landscape in South and Central Asia extends far beyond al Qaeda. The Taliban has been fighting the Islamic State's affiliate in the region, the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), inflicting serious losses without succeeding in eradicating this rival. Since 2002, the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan has been a unifying cause for militant organizations in the region. At least 18 terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan. The Taliban exercises some influence over the activities of 14 of them, providing entrée to the insurgency in exchange for manpower and expertise. These groups will expect a payoff in the event of

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a Taliban victory and will likely seek to continue using Afghan territory as a base for terrorist activities. If the Taliban proves unwilling or unable to prevent the country from becoming a free-for-all for militant organizations after the U.S. withdrawal, the United States, as well as Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian states, will be threatened.

THE THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES

From the United States' standpoint, the Taliban's most important affiliation is with al Qaeda, which continues to prioritize striking the United States homeland. The Taliban has never successfully curtailed al Qaeda's activities. Rather, it supplied the group a safe haven in Afghanistan while its leadership planned and executed attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000; and the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. Al Qaeda leadership did not ask the Taliban permission to conduct these attacks; in fact, al Qaeda carried them out in direct defiance of Taliban orders to abstain from international attacks. The 9/11 attacks led the United States to invade Afghanistan and remove the Taliban from power. Nonetheless, the Taliban refused to sever ties with al Qaeda and remained unable to prevent its rogue behavior.

Since 2001, al Qaeda has continued to enjoy refuge with the Taliban. In particular, al Qaeda found haven in North Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), under the protection of the Haqqani network, a faction within the Taliban. Until 2014, when a Pakistani military offensive disrupted a number of militant groups operating in this area, most of al Qaeda's major plots and attacks against the United States and Europe emanated from the tribal areas, particularly North Waziristan. There is no evidence that the Taliban or the Haqqani network assisted in these attacks or that it even knew about them, but it also did nothing to prevent them.

Another of the Afghan Taliban's allies, the Pakistani Taliban, has a vendetta against the United States, which is responsible for the deaths of three of its leaders. In 2010, this group planted a bomb in Times Square. (The device did not detonate.) The Pakistani Taliban is a highly decentralized umbrella group that seeks to expel Pakistani forces from the tribal areas, overthrow the Pakistani government, eliminate Shiite Muslims from Pakistan, and push the United States out of Afghanistan. Ever since the Pakistani military forced many of its operatives over the border following operations in South Wa-

ziristan in 2009 and North Waziristan in 2014, the Pakistani Taliban has operated in large part from Afghanistan. And while its agenda is more localized than al Qaeda's, it will likely exploit opportunities to attack the United States if and when they arise.

The Taliban has not demonstrated a genuine willingness to actively hinder the operations of the two groups that are most likely to attack the United States. And even if it wanted to do so, it probably lacks the ability. If the Taliban continues to allow either group to operate in territory under its control—as it is likely to do—it will be seriously hamstrung in delivering on its pledge to prevent international attacks emanating from Afghanistan.

THE THREAT TO THE REGION

The Taliban has long received funds and haven from the Pakistani security establishment, but the relationship between the two is fraught with complexity. The Taliban cooperates with militant groups that seek to overthrow the government in Islamabad. In the past it has urged these groups to focus on Afghanistan and abstain from attacking Pakistan, to no avail. Al Qaeda's affiliate in South Asia, for example—al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent—cooperates closely with the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan; it also conducts terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan with the intent of weakening the government. Other groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban and its offshoots, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, also target the Pakistani government but also have long-standing ties with the Taliban and participate in the insurgency in Afghanistan.

The conflict in Afghanistan has served as a pressure valve for Pakistan, providing an outlet for anti-state groups such as these, particularly for those in the tribal areas. Pakistani security forces have made truces with some groups, promising to leave them alone in Pakistan as long as they focus their activities on Afghanistan. If the Taliban's insurgency ends and these groups gain more freedom to operate from within Afghanistan, they will likely choose to direct their attention toward Pakistan instead.

India also stands to lose if the Taliban does not keep its pledge. The greatest threat to India is that the Taliban will allow Pakistani militant groups traditionally close to the Pakistani state, notably Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, to operate in its territory. Both of these groups work closely with the Taliban's insurgency in Afghani-

stan, but their primary cause is contesting India's control of Kashmir. The groups also oppose India more broadly and have attacked other parts of the country. Both groups are closely aligned with the Pakistani security establishment, which uses them as weapons against India. In the event that the Taliban is charged with managing militant groups in its territory, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed would almost certainly seek to use Afghanistan as a safe haven to train and plan attacks against India and Indian Kashmir. The use of Afghan territory offers Pakistan plausible deniability. Pakistan used Afghanistan in exactly this way when the Taliban ruled in the 1990s.

Two other Pakistani militant groups that target India, Harakat ul-Mujahedeen and Harakat ul-Jihad-al-Islami, were also close to the Taliban in the 1990s and still have operatives in the insurgency in Afghanistan. These groups are no longer organizationally coherent, but people affiliated with them remain in Afghanistan and have been integrated into broader networks of militants. With more operating space in Afghanistan, these weaker groups could rebuild.

Even the Central Asian republics have something to fear from an Afghan state that is once again dominated by the Taliban. A smattering of terrorist groups with Central Asian origins have long operated in exile in Afghanistan. Groups such as Islamic Jihad Union, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, and factions of the Islamic Movement are primarily committed to the insurgency in Afghanistan and to opposing the Pakistani state, but they still nurture ambitions to strike their homelands. They will likely take advantage of a haven in Afghanistan under the Taliban to rebuild and develop their external capabilities.

And so while the United States has reason to be concerned, these countries likely face an even graver threat from the militant groups allied with the Taliban. The Taliban's pledge would require it to police over a dozen organizations with ambitions to strike at least five other countries. Making good on such a commitment would be a major undertaking for any government—let alone an insurgent group with long-standing ties to those organizations.

AN EMPTY PROMISE

The Afghan Taliban is the central hub in South and Central Asia around which other militant organizations revolve. Its insurgency enjoys substantial ideological authority and support. But this privileged position does not translate into control over the Taliban's partners,

who would need to be persuaded to relinquish their external ambitions—an unlikely proposition. And so to keep its pledge, the Taliban would have to be willing to either turn its back on longtime allies or use force to restrain them. Both scenarios are difficult to imagine.

Having supported the Taliban's campaign for more than 17 years, its militant partners certainly expect to see some benefit when the insurgency emerges victorious. The ultimate prize would be safe haven in areas under Taliban control, with the freedom to pursue their external agendas. In pledging to prevent terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, the Taliban is making a promise that it will struggle to keep—if it even intends to try.

The Myth of a Responsible Withdrawal From Afghanistan

Counterterrorism Without Counterinsurgency Is Impossible

Laurel Miller

JANUARY 22, 2021

President Joe Biden is now the fourth American leader to oversee the U.S. war in Afghanistan. He inherits a fragile peace process that members of his team have wisely signaled they will work to advance. In February 2020, then President Donald Trump struck a deal with the Taliban to withdraw all U.S. and NATO troops by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the United States received security assurances and a commitment from the Taliban to begin peace talks with the Afghan government. After 40 years of bloodshed and nearly 20 years of direct American involvement in Afghanistan, there is no question that Biden should give these talks a chance. Reaching a comprehensive settlement that ends the Taliban insurgency would be by far the best way for the United States to wind up its military engagement in the country.

But the slow-moving Afghan talks remain a long shot for peace. The Taliban and the Afghan government still disagree on fundamental issues,

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including whether the country should remain a republic or even retain any features of electoral democracy. And both parties have been hounded to the table; neither believes it has exhausted its military options.

The Biden administration will therefore have to decide quickly whether to honor Trump's agreement to withdraw all troops this spring or to extend the military mission, perhaps indefinitely. Some analysts advocate calling it quits regardless of what happens with the peace talks, arguing that the primary U.S. objective of decimating al Qaeda was achieved long ago. Others, including some former officials, call for the continued use of U.S. troops and firepower to prevent the Taliban from overrunning the Afghan government—at least until a peace settlement can be reached.

Given the shortcomings of both options—leaving promptly and staying indefinitely—a seeming middle-ground idea has come to dominate Afghanistan policy discourse: "responsible withdrawal," a conveniently malleable concept that holds out the promise of ending an "endless war" while continuing counterterrorism operations. Biden himself seemed to endorse a version of "responsible withdrawal" on the campaign trail, before the Trump administration struck its deal with the Taliban. In a February 23 interview on *Face the Nation*, Biden said the United States should maintain a "very small" counterterrorism footprint dedicated to preventing the resurgence of al Qaeda and the Islamic State, or ISIS.

But as attractive as splitting the difference may seem, it is almost certainly impossible. Regardless of what happens with the peace process, the Biden administration will soon find that it must choose a more decisive course in Afghanistan.

VANISHING MIDDLE

There is virtually no chance that the Taliban would agree to allow the United States to maintain an indefinite counterterrorism footprint on Afghan soil. Doing so would require the group to abandon its number one demand and the rationale for its insurgency: the removal of all foreign forces. Because they prize cohesion, Taliban leaders wouldn't make an agreement that they couldn't sell to the group's commanders and rank and file—especially since the Trump administration already agreed to withdraw all U.S. troops by May. One can't entirely rule out the possibility that a future Afghan government that includes the Taliban would agree to cooperate with the United States on counterterrorism, but Washington certainly shouldn't count on it.

Nor are the Taliban the only obstacle to an indefinite U.S. counterterrorism presence. To negotiate and implement any peace deal, the United States would need the support of regional countries such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia—none of which want to see permanent U.S. military bases in Afghanistan. To the extent that these countries support U.S. peace efforts, they do so because they expect a resultant agreement to herald a U.S. military departure. The U.S.-Taliban deal reinforced those expectations. If the United States jettisoned that deal in order to keep troops in the country, Pakistan in particular might decide to increase its support for the Taliban.

Of course, the peace process could fail, in which case the issue of regional support would become moot. But even then, the United States wouldn't be able to maintain an exclusively counterterrorism footprint. Having gained and then lost a U.S. commitment to withdraw, the Taliban would once again violently contest any U.S. presence. In such a scenario, just protecting U.S. personnel would require offensive operations against Taliban insurgents. And if the Taliban go back to fighting the United States, they would have little reason to sever their remaining ties with al Qaeda as they promised to do in the February 2020 deal—thereby sustaining the very terrorist threat that the United States seeks to counter.

Finally, the United States wouldn't be able to maintain bases in Afghanistan purely for its own purposes while withholding operational support from its host and counterterrorism partner. The United States would need to continue providing the Afghan military with at least some essential backup in its existential fight with the Taliban. Absent that support, the Taliban probably wouldn't sweep rapidly through the country, but the war would intensify and Kabul would lose ground. And if Afghan government forces felt abandoned, the risk of insider attacks against U.S. personnel could rise. In other words, it is impossible to disentangle counterterrorism from counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. If the United States wants to keep any forces at all in the country, it will have to maintain a footprint that looks a lot like "staying the course."

BUYING TIME

The Biden administration should accept that there is no feasible middle way for a "responsible withdrawal." Washington should instead attempt to reach an agreement with the Taliban to extend the May 1

troop withdrawal deadline—using this step to gauge the group's commitment to reaching a peace deal that, however unlikely, would be the best outcome for Afghanistan and for the United States. Three months is not enough time to reach any kind of deal—except, perhaps, one that grants extraordinary concessions to the Taliban, relies on support from opportunistic members of President Ashraf Ghani's political opposition, and involves the United States essentially greenlighting a coup against him. That kind of deal would not leave the United States feeling confident that its security concerns are assuaged.

Washington has been the primary driver of the peace process, so talks are unlikely to survive a near-term U.S. withdrawal. Nor are they likely to survive if the United States simply ignores the May 1 withdrawal deadline, since the Taliban are liable to walk away from the negotiating table in that case. The Biden administration must therefore explore the extent of the Taliban's patience and seek at least a six-month extension.

The Biden administration should spend those six months thoroughly assessing the terror threat emanating from Afghanistan and determining whether U.S. boots on the ground are necessary to neutralize it. Much of the threat analysis in the public domain focuses excessively on tabulating the numbers of militant groups and their members, measures that say little about their intent or their ability to carry out successful external operations. One reason for skepticism about the severity of the threat is the lack of public reporting in recent years of ISIS or al Qaeda plots against the United States originating from Afghanistan; another is that most successful attacks in the United States and Europe in recent years have been linked to militants in Syria and Iraq or perpetrated by local "lone wolves" inspired by jihadi media.

For the long term, the United States will need a counterterrorism capability that doesn't depend on a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The Biden administration should work swiftly to develop such options, enhancing counterterrorism cooperation with other countries in South and Central Asia, ensuring U.S. capacity to mount operations in Afghanistan from outside the country, and putting in place covert arrangements for monitoring and countering transnational terrorist activity. Some of these undertakings will be politically charged, and together they may not be as effective as the current U.S. setup in Afghanistan. But the only alternative is an indefinite, intertwined counterterrorism and counterinsurgency mission.

"Responsible withdrawal" is not a real option for the United States in Afghanistan, to the extent that it means leaving a residual counterterrorism footprint in the country for years to come. As a result, the Biden administration faces essentially the same choice that bedeviled its predecessors: an indefinite military mission that isn't clearly making Americans safer versus a withdrawal that U.S. government analysts won't declare risk free for the United States and that would likely precipitate the Afghan government's undoing. The unpalatability of both options may be enough to persuade the Biden administration to push ahead with a low-probability peace settlement for as long as possible. Eventually, however, it will have to make a choice.

The Taliban Are Ready to Exploit America's Exit

What a U.S. Withdrawal Means for Afghanistan

Carter Malkasian

APRIL 14, 2021

In September of last year, peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government finally opened in Doha, only to immediately stall. Negotiators have been unable to address even the most basic issues, such as an agenda for a political process, let alone the tougher ones, such as what type of government the country should have. But as representatives of both parties have talked in circles in the Qatari capital, events in Afghanistan have taken a dramatic turn.

The United States has withdrawn thousands of troops from the country in accordance with a deal it struck with the Taliban in February 2020, leaving a security vacuum that the militants have readily exploited. Over the last six months, the Taliban have won major battles and recaptured large swaths of territory, likely incentivizing them to fight on and to shun compromise at the negotiating table. Why agree to share power when you can take it by force?

On Wednesday, April 14, U.S. President Joe Biden is expected to announce that all remaining U.S. troops will depart Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. His administration faced a difficult choice between completing the U.S. withdrawal as agreed with the Taliban and digging in for the long haul with the minimum number of troops

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needed to suppress the terrorist threat. Both would have been viable strategies. But the worsening situation on the ground, coupled with the poor outlook for the peace process, makes an American withdrawal more compelling. Regardless of what the Biden administration does, it can expect that the Taliban will resist compromise and that the war will continue to rage.

LOSING GROUND

It wasn't long ago that the Taliban were on the back foot. After winning sweeping victories in 2015 and 2016 in Kunduz, Helmand, and elsewhere, they faced three years of heavy casualties and military setbacks from U.S. special operations forces, drones, and airstrikes. The years 2017 through 2019 were bad ones for the Taliban. In a candid moment in 2019, one of the group's negotiators in Doha admitted to me that U.S. airstrikes had killed many Taliban and impeded their ability to capture territory. The 14,000 American boots then on the ground had created a costly stalemate, and the Taliban in Doha readily acknowledged that as long as the United States remained in Afghanistan, they would be unable to achieve a military victory. This environment offered at least some hope that peace talks could lead to compromise.

But the situation changed markedly in 2020. In February of that year, U.S. President Donald Trump struck a deal with the Taliban to withdraw all U.S. and NATO troops by May 1, 2021, in exchange for certain counterterrorism guarantees, a reduction in violence, and a promise to begin intra-Afghan peace talks. The U.S.-Taliban agreement required the United States to draw down to 8,600 troops within 135 days. But the Trump administration withdrew even more troops than it had promised, making it impossible for the United States to effectively advise Afghan forces and support continued heavy airstrikes. Less than a month after intra-Afghan talks began in September, the United States had drawn down to between 4,000 and 4,500 troops, opening the door to Taliban advances.

Almost immediately, in early October 2020, the Taliban assaulted Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand Province, reversing the tentative gains U.S. Marine–advised Afghan forces had made over the last three years. What happened next was worse. On October 27, at the beginning of the pomegranate harvest, 1,000 or more Taliban—Afghan estimates were as high as 3,500—attacked the farms and countryside surrounding Kandahar City, taking control of regions

such as Arghandab, Panjwai, and Zharey that had been firmly in government hands since the U.S. surge of 2009 to 2011. Afghan soldiers and police officers abandoned scores of security outposts, allowing the Taliban to seize in two days what U.S. soldiers had spent years fighting to protect. One Afghan from the province told me there were just "too many [Taliban] for the police to handle." Others said the police weren't manning their posts to begin with; in one district, only 150 out of 700 police officers were allegedly present.

The U.S. and Afghan forces responded to the Taliban offensive with airstrikes and counteroffensives by special operations forces. "If it weren't for the airstrikes," the Arghandab police chief Niaz Mohammed told *The Washington Post*, "the Taliban would not have fallen." Even so, they advanced to the edges of Kandahar City, which is second in strategic importance only to Kabul.

TALIBAN ASCENDANCE

The Taliban are now on the march. The group may be larger today than it was in 2018, when it numbered between 60,000 and 80,000, and its senior leaders are rumored to have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan. The group's fighters are also well armed and supplied, having captured large stocks of Afghan army equipment. In addition to local cadres, the Taliban field special "red units," or quick reaction forces, that are trained, often have night vision or optics for their rifles, and are deployed to spearhead major offensives.

On the other side of the conflict, Afghan government forces are in disarray. The Afghan National Army, which is meant to be the country's backbone of defense, and the blue-uniformed police, which tend to bear the brunt of Taliban attacks, are operating at roughly 50 to 70 percent of their official maximum strength of 352,000, due to a combination of corruption, attrition, and difficulty finding replacements. The most effective Afghan units are the special operations forces, which together with the remaining Americans, hold things together. Yet even the Afghan special operations forces struggle to hold back the Taliban without the help of U.S. advisers and airstrikes. After all, they are up against an enemy that uses suicide car bombs and improvised explosive devices, devastating tools that the Afghan government thankfully does not employ.

The government retains control of the country's cities, but these are hardly bastions. Taliban and Islamic State (or ISIS) cells have infil-

trated Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Kabul—the latter of which has become increasingly fortified. And the inhabitants of these cities are tired. Some minority of urbanites are now willing to tolerate Taliban rule if it means finally achieving peace. As one highly educated peace activist recently told me: "War keeps killing people. Whatever comes with the Taliban won't be so bad. . . . Why do hundreds of Afghans have to die every week because 2,000 Americans died on 9/11?"

The Taliban's recent success on the battlefield will almost certainly motivate the group to fight on—regardless of when the United States departs. Taliban commanders now see that battlefield gains are possible, and they will be compelled to continue achieving them. Some openly claim that their objective is total victory. As one senior Taliban commander told *The Washington Post* last month, "This fight is not to share power. This war is for religious purposes in order to bring an Islamic government and implement Islamic law."

Members of the Taliban political commission involved in the Doha peace talks have been more circumspect, but even their statements have ranged from obstinate to unconstructively ambiguous. Tayeb Agha, who led the Taliban's political commission from 2009 to 2015, claimed to have advised the late Taliban leader Mullah Omar that any attempt to reinstitute the Islamic emirate would prolong the war but that the Taliban "would be greatly disgraced" by accepting Afghanistan's 2004 constitution and sharing power with any elected government. The same sentiment may drive even so-called moderate Taliban today.

A PROBLEM OF TIME

Should the Biden administration follow through on its reported plan to withdraw all U.S. troops by September, the Taliban will probably capture most of the south and east of the country in a matter of months. After that, the government could collapse. It is also possible that the government, its special operations forces, and the old Northern Alliance—Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek leaders—could muster enough unity and grit to stave off the fall of Kabul. Indeed, the Northern Alliance is already rumored to be mobilizing forces to fight.

The problem then would become time. Without U.S. advisers, Afghan equipment would degrade and the country's special operations forces would be worn down. Politically, the current government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, who belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group, would struggle to justify its rule with the northerners providing most of

the fighters. And the northerners themselves may not be what they used to be. Over the past four years, the Taliban have scored victories in the north, raising questions about the old northern allies' will to fight.

Ultimately, not only Afghans and Americans will determine the course of the war. China, India, Iran, and Russia all have interests in Afghanistan and do not wish to see a Taliban emirate. Iran and Russia have long-standing relations with Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks who oppose the Taliban. The two countries have been playing both sides for years, arming or at least funding the Taliban as a way to press the United States out of their backyard while publicly rejecting the idea of a Taliban emirate. Interests will shift as the United States departs. The conflict could come to resemble the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, as different regional powers back different sides. Even if such regional intervention is enough to prevent the Taliban from regaining power, the outlook for Ghani's democratic government will not be good; of all the regional players, only India favors democracy.

PAINFUL TRUTHS

Could the forecast be different if the Biden administration were to decide to stay? Yes, but prolonging the American mission in Afghanistan is unlikely to bring peace. The United States could probably prevent the fall of Kabul and secure U.S. counterterrorism interests with between 2,500 and 3,500 troops. Given that the Taliban gained ground in the autumn, when many more American forces were in the country, the group is likely to advance farther this year regardless of whether a small American counterterrorism contingent remains. With gains in the offing, the Taliban will have little reason to compromise in peace negotiations.

The painful truth is that the United States is leaving behind a war that is now much further from a negotiated settlement than it was even one year ago. That changed reality—along with heightened competition with China, climate change, a pandemic, and other pressing matters at home—makes Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops all the more compelling.

Biden Made the Right Decision on Afghanistan

The United States Can Withdraw Without Walking Away

P. Michael McKinley

APRIL 19, 2021

The decision to withdraw the U.S. military from Afghanistan could have been made years ago or years hence: there was never going to be a perfect time, but the time has come, and President Joe Biden has made a difficult but right choice at a moment of historic shifts in global geopolitical realities.

Since 2001, successive U.S. administrations have carried out foreign policy through the prism and primacy of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the global "war on terror" in the broader Middle East. While Washington's attention was fixed on these concerns, China emerged as a global "strategic competitor" and Russia vied for influence in eastern Europe and the Middle East. The United States focused more energy on developing "out of area" NATO engagement in Afghanistan and the Middle East than on addressing the concerns that preoccupied its partners in Europe. And as the world underwent profound economic and social transformations, the United States spent more than $3 trillion and sent more than two million young Americans to fight and die in these conflicts, while failing to invest in modernizing the U.S. economy, infrastructure, and health and education systems.

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And yet if the flood of articles over the past couple of months and the reactions to the president's announcement are any indication, much of Washington still sees Afghanistan as central to U.S. national security interests. It is not. There is also the implication that the United States has a moral responsibility to remain in Afghanistan—a notion that slights the enormous sacrifices Americans have already made over the past 20 years. Too much of the body politic resists accepting that the United States has reached the limits of what it can achieve militarily.

Defenders of continued U.S. military engagement rarely account for how much the international environment, and Afghanistan's place in it, has changed since the conflict began. Their arguments have become stale.

THE ARGUMENTS DON'T HOLD

If, as many argue, the United States should stay in Afghanistan indefinitely to prevent another 9/11 from happening, then it is reasonable to ask why we do not increase our presence in other "ungoverned" spaces: the Sahel, Somalia, and Iraq are all considerably closer to the United States, and the al Qaeda offshoots and the Islamic State (or ISIS) in these places are significantly more powerful than the terrorist remnants in Afghanistan. In fact, the United States has succeeded in greatly reducing the direct terrorist threat from Afghanistan that was the original rationale for engagement.

If the argument is that the Afghan security forces are still not capable of holding back the Taliban after 20 years and an almost $100 billion investment in their development, shouldn't the question be why not? The United States can sustain its significant commitment to financing Afghanistan's armed forces. What does not follow is that American soldiers should continue to be the guarantors of the country's security, at the cost to the United States of additional billions every year and American lives.

Perhaps the argument is instead that an American military presence is necessary to support a reconciliation process in Afghanistan. But then the question becomes why, after 20 years, Afghanistan's political leaders still cannot find common ground to unite against the Taliban, a force most Afghans abhor. An indefinite U.S. military presence will not bring that unity about if, in this existential moment, and a year after the United States signaled it would leave in 2021, Kabul is still riven with political differences. Afghans will decide what to do, with or without an American troop presence.

Finally, some argue that the United States has an obligation to protect Afghanistan's social and democratic gains. But the United States has already invested more than $40 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan in addition to the more than $800 billion spent supporting the U.S. military effort in the conflict. The United States could make nation-building and humanitarian commitments on this scale in other parts of the world, some much closer to the United States—but it does not, because such investment is unsustainable over the long term. Development assistance to Afghanistan can continue, but with better management to prevent the fraud, waste, and mismanagement that have cost the United States more than $19 billion since 2009.

SUPPORT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE MILITARY

I am not writing as a neutral observer: I was the U.S. ambassador in Kabul from 2014 to 2016 and senior adviser to the secretary of state when the decisions were made in 2018–19 to negotiate with the Taliban. I know that the return of the Taliban outside the constraints of a successful peace process would spell disaster for Afghan women, education, and the country as a whole. I know the future is uncertain.

I also know that 20 years of our combat engagement have not brought about a military resolution in Afghanistan, and ten more are unlikely to. Washington should be under no illusions: should American troops stay, they will be targeted, and so will the broader U.S. diplomatic presence. Those who now criticize the president's decision to leave would instead be asking why he chose to remain—as they have done when U.S. casualties increased in the past. The United States also cannot impose a political agreement on Afghanistan, no matter how many analysts suggest that it can. Washington has failed to prevent regional countries from acting as spoilers, something they will continue to do.

President Biden's decision, however, is not an either/or proposition. The United States does not have to walk away from Afghanistan because it withdraws its forces. Washington can still play a central role in supporting a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan by working with the countries that are engaged in backing the talks. There is even an argument to be made that the announced withdrawal could lead to greater unity of effort among Afghan political leaders in Kabul.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Afghanistan on April 15 and reaffirmed the U.S. "security partnership" with Kabul. Military

withdrawal should not stop the United States and its partners from assisting Afghanistan's security forces and supporting its development, with a special emphasis on protecting the gains that women and girls have made over the past 20 years. Moreover, it should be possible for the United States to increase the level of its developmental aid, which the previous administration actually reduced at the Afghanistan donor conference in November 2020. The United States can continue to work regionally on countering terrorism and other potential threats. Not a single regional government, including Iran, is interested in seeing Afghanistan collapse or leaving the door open to al Qaeda. Afghanistan's neighbors and even our adversaries have a strong stake in the country's stability.

Sacrificing more American lives, however—which is what a continued military presence would mean—seems the wrong thing to do. As a coalition of veterans' organizations recently wrote to the president, we should not be "asking our women and men in uniform to remain entangled in a conflict with no clear military mission or path to victory." As I attended ceremonies for fallen American and coalition troops during my years in Kabul, and the Taliban continued to make gains on the battlefield, it was difficult not to share that sentiment.

There will be debate on the time frame the president has proposed, but the clock has run out on extended military engagement. The prior Republican administration acknowledged this reality when it set a May 1 deadline for complete withdrawal. The United States must now take on the other, more pressing national and international concerns that are on a scale not seen since 1945. Yesterday's conflicts—and yesterday's optics on what constitutes a security threat—do not help the country move forward. America's future, wherever it leads, is not in continuing the "forever wars."

Afghanistan's Moment of Risk and Opportunity

A Path to Peace for the Country and the Region

Ashraf Ghani

MAY 4, 2021

President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September represents a turning point for the country and our neighbors. The Afghan government respects the decision and views it as a moment of both opportunity and risk for itself, for Afghans, for the Taliban, and for the region.

For me, as the elected leader of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, it is another opportunity to reiterate and further my commitment to peace. In February 2018, I made an unconditional offer of peace to the Taliban. That was followed by a three-day cease-fire in June of that year. In 2019, a loya jirga (grand council) that I convened mandated negotiations with the Taliban, and since then, my government has worked to build a national consensus on the need for a political settlement that would comport with the values of the Afghan constitution and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. My government remains ready to continue talks with the Taliban. And, if it meant peace would be secured, I am willing to end my term early.

For the Afghan nation, the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal is another phase in our long-term partnership with the United States.

ASHRAF GHANI is President of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been through consequential withdrawals before. In 2014, the year I first took office, 130,000 U.S. and NATO forces withdrew, allowing Afghans full leadership of the security sector and of the institutions that our international partners had helped us build. Since then, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have protected and upheld the republic and made it possible for the country to carry out two national elections. Today, our government and our security forces are on a much stronger footing than we were seven years ago, and we are fully prepared to continue serving and defending our people after American troops depart.

The withdrawal also represents an opportunity for the Afghan people to achieve real sovereignty. Over the past 20 years, 40 different countries have deployed security forces to Afghanistan. Soon, however, all decisions regarding military approaches to the Taliban and other terrorist groups will be made by the Afghan government. Indeed, the Taliban's justification for war—jihad against a foreign power—will cease to apply.

The U.S. decision surprised the Taliban and their patrons in Pakistan, and it has forced them to make a choice. Will they become credible stakeholders, or will they foster more chaos and violence? If the Taliban choose the latter path, the ANDSF will fight them. And if the Taliban still refuse to negotiate, they will be choosing the peace of the grave.

To avoid that fate, the Taliban must answer critical questions about their vision for Afghanistan. Will they accept elections, and will they commit to uphold the rights of all Afghans, including girls, women, and minorities? Negative answers to those questions were suggested by the Taliban's recent decision to pull out of a peace conference that was supposed to begin in Istanbul at the end of April. The Taliban, it seems, remain more interested in power than in peace. A political settlement and the integration of the Taliban into society and government is the only way forward. But the ball is in their court.

THE FUTURE THAT AFGHANS WANT

Afghans cannot and absolutely will not go back to the horrors of the 1990s. We are not idly waiting for peace to chance upon us but continue to take steps to create the environment and platform for it to take hold. The risks of the U.S. withdrawal have been widely propagated in the news media, but we see little serious discourse about the opportunities it presents.

All international stakeholders and the Afghan people want a sovereign, Islamic, democratic, united, neutral, and connected Afghanistan. The Afghan people affirmed their support for that end state at a peace jirga in August 2020. The international community affirmed its desire for that end state in March 2020 when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2513, which made clear that the world does not want the return of the Taliban's emirate.

It is far less clear, however, what the Taliban want. They demand an Islamic system—but that already exists in Afghanistan. For any negotiations over a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban to succeed, the Taliban must articulate their desired end state with clarity and detail.

Negotiations would require a credible and neutral mediator. That need is highlighted by the talks in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban; the talks lack such a mediator and have, so far, reached an impasse. The best-placed organization for this role would be the United Nations.

The first topics of negotiation must be reaching the desired end state and putting in place a comprehensive cease-fire to bring peace and respite to the daily lives of the Afghan people and to restore credibility and faith in the peacemaking process. Because cease-fires established during peace negotiations often fall apart, however, it is critical that we have international monitoring.

Next, the parties would have to discuss and decide on a transitional administration. Although the structure of the republic must remain intact, a peace administration would maintain order and continuity while elections were planned and held. This transitional authority would have a short tenure, and it would end as soon as presidential, parliamentary, and local elections determined the country's new leadership. I would not run for office in such an election, and I would readily resign the presidency before the official end of my current term if it meant that my elected successor would have a mandate for peace.

The negotiations would confront difficult issues, such as whether and how the Taliban would end their relationship with Pakistan, which provides them with support for logistics, finances, and recruitment. The talks must also address the Taliban's ongoing connections to al Qaeda, which the UN detailed in a 2020 report. Thus it is crucial that the Afghan government and the Taliban also agree on an approach against the Islamic State (or ISIS), al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups

and that our agreement include a framework for counterterrorism that secures guarantees of support from other countries in the region and from international organizations. The agreement must also ensure the continuation of high-level regional diplomacy and welcome the involvement of the UN secretary-general's personal representative.

Once the Afghan government and the Taliban have reached a settlement, the Afghan people would need to publicly endorse it through our country's highest form of national consensus building: a loya jirga, a grand meeting of male and female community leaders from every province. The Taliban have been deprived of immersion in Afghan society for the past 20 years, and a loya jirga would offer an ideal opportunity for their leadership to interact with all segments of the population.

After a political settlement has been negotiated, inked, and endorsed, the hard work of implementation would begin. This is the process of building peace. There is always a temptation to make the temporary permanent, which is why the peace government must prioritize elections.

In the interim, however, the transitional leadership would have to make a series of hard decisions about how to govern. Economic development, education and health services, and other key functions of the state would have to continue without disruption. Any stoppage would have disastrous ramifications for the Afghan people and for the economy. There would also be new priorities, such as releasing prisoners of war; integrating members of the Taliban in all levels of government, the military, and society; and addressing the grievances of those who have lost loved ones, property, and livelihoods during the past two decades of war.

A newly elected government will have an important mandate to sustain peace and implement the agreement. That may require making amendments to the constitution. The constitution makes clear that, except for the Islamic character of the state and the fundamental rights of citizens, all else is subject to amendment, and there are mechanisms in place to enact those changes.

The new government would also confront the reintegration of refugees (particularly those who fled to Iran and Pakistan), the resettlement of internally displaced people, and the often overlooked issue of national reconciliation. Meanwhile, the transitional cease-fire would have to give way to a situation in which state institutions command a legitimate monopoly on the use of force. And Afghanistan would need to commit to permanent neutrality in order to mitigate the risk

of regional conflicts. The UN General Assembly or the UN Security Council would be the ideal venues for establishing and formalizing Afghanistan's neutral status.

THE PATH AHEAD

Even in an ideal environment, achieving a just and lasting peace would not be an easy journey. And unfortunately, the environment we are operating in is not ideal. There are many risks that this process could be derailed or disrupted, and Afghans may lose yet another opportunity for peace.

For one, the perception of uncertainty, fueled by dire predictions in the media, may incline many Afghans to leave the country. This could lead to a repeat of the refugee crisis that unfolded in 2015 and would deprive the country of talented people right at the moment when they are most needed.

Another risk is that a disrupted or disorderly transition could threaten command and control within the country's security sector. There must be an orderly political process to transfer authority so that the security forces are not left without leadership and direction. Moreover, it is critically important that the United States and NATO fulfill their existing commitments to fund the ANDSF. This is perhaps the single most important contribution that the international community can make to a successful transition to peace in Afghanistan.

There is also a risk that Afghan political figures will not galvanize around an orderly peace process. Thus we are reaching out to ensure that the process is inclusive, not only of internal political figures and different strata of Afghan society but also of regional actors who could potentially attempt to spoil the process.

The main risk to peace, however, is a Taliban miscalculation. The Taliban still believe their own narrative that they have defeated NATO and the United States. They feel emboldened, and because their political leaders have never encouraged their military branch to accept the idea of peace, the greatest risk is that the Taliban will continue to show no earnest interest in making a political deal and will instead opt for continued military aggression.

If that is what happens, the Afghan government and the security forces are ready. As we prepare for peace talks with the Taliban, we are also prepared to face them on the battlefield. Over the last two years, more than 90 percent of Afghan military operations have been con-

ducted entirely by Afghan security forces. Should the Taliban choose violence, it would mean a major confrontation over the spring and summer months, at the end of which the Taliban would be left with no good options except to come back to the negotiating table.

Pakistan might also miscalculate in a way that threatens peace. There have been positive signs that Pakistan will choose the path of regional connectivity, peace, and prosperity, as indicated in remarks delivered in March at the Islamabad Security Dialogue by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Pakistani army chief of staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Those remarks could signify an important pivot from a destructive to a constructive approach to relations with Afghanistan. Now is the opportunity to put those words into action.

If Pakistan chooses to support the Taliban, however, then Islamabad would be opting for enmity with the Afghan nation and would be foregoing the enormous economic benefits that peace and regional connectivity would offer. Pakistan would become an international pariah, as it would be left with no leverage in the aftermath of the U.S. troop withdrawal. The Pakistani government miscalculated in its response to the United States' plan of action for Afghanistan and the region, but it is not too late for Islamabad to emerge as a partner and stakeholder in an orderly peace process.

As we move into uncharted waters for Afghanistan, I am focused on achieving the best possible outcome of this long period of conflict: a sovereign, Islamic, democratic, united, neutral, and connected Afghanistan. I am willing to compromise and sacrifice to achieve that. The withdrawal of U.S. troops is an opportunity to get us closer to that end state, but only if all Afghans and their international partners commit to a clear path forward and stay the course.