

# No-Win Policy for Afghanistan

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*The United States* has been fighting the war in Afghanistan for more than eight years. That's longer than U.S. participation in the Second World War or the Iraq War. By the end of 2010, it will have surpassed the length of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. It has taken the lives of just under one thousand Americans, more than nine thousand others have been wounded, and it has cost more than \$250 billion. Most important, the original goal of the mission has been achieved; al Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan has been destroyed and its Taliban allies pushed from power.

Yet when Barack Obama delivered a major speech on the topic at West Point in December, he was not there to claim victory but to make the case for why the United States should stay longer in Afghanistan and actually increase its military presence. The president's announcement that thirty thousand more troops would be deployed to Afghanistan meant the U.S. military footprint would rise to nearly one hundred thousand—all this to face a Taliban insurgency that by some estimates totals around twenty thousand core fighters and an al Qaeda organization in Pakistan that counts perhaps two hundred key operatives.

For a war with clear links to a post 9/11 world, it was not surprising that Obama's remarks featured many of the same rhetorical tricks so often utilized in the Bush years. There was the scary imagery of September 11, 2001; the agitated warnings about the risks of an al Qaeda return to Afghanistan; vague platitudes about the need for resoluteness in the face of terrorist threats; and above all, meager specifics on how the latest U.S. policy shift would turn the tide of battle.

Obama's speech, rather than clarifying America's new approach in Afghanistan, revealed a glaring discrepancy between the

ambitions of U.S. leaders, the capabilities of its military, and the increasingly divergent interests of its partners in the region. What is needed in Afghanistan is not a radically new approach, but a more modest one, one that recognizes the limitations of U.S. power and the constraints that all counterinsurgencies face. Only by recognizing these limitations can the United States hope to put in place a policy that will safeguard U.S. interests and stabilize Afghanistan.

## The Cult of COIN

During his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama obliquely referred to Afghanistan as the "good war," (in stark contrast to the "bad war" in Iraq). He pledged to increase attention to the conflict, which he claimed was ground zero in the fight against al Qaeda.

Missing from Obama's rhetoric was a clear strategic rationale for escalation. Although there is no doubt that the Taliban insurgency has gathered steam since 2006, it is less clear that the United States has direct interests in stabilizing the country (not to mention the capabilities for doing so). Al Qaeda has not maintained any serious presence in Afghanistan since 2002; and across the jihadist blogosphere, there are growing signs that the Taliban and al Qaeda are not as closely allied as they were before 9/11. Indeed, a relatively similar phenomenon took hold in Iraq in 2006 when the global jihadist goals of al Qaeda-in-Iraq ran headfirst into the more local concerns of Iraqi Sunnis.

Nonetheless, in February 2009, with little public debate, Obama sent seventeen thousand more troops to Afghanistan and began an internal review of U.S. policy toward that country. This culminated, a month later, in his announcement that the United States would eschew nation-building in Afghanistan and instead focus on the more discrete task of "disrupting, dismantling and defeating" al Qaeda. That would mean focusing on its erst-

while Afghan ally—the Taliban—so that al Qaeda would not be able to recreate its sanctuary in the country.

The president offered no clear path for accomplishing that goal, but the military had its own answer—counter-insurgency, a tactical approach endorsed by the inter-agency white paper that accompanied Obama's speech. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, described the basic philosophy underpinning a COIN mission in his guidance to U.S. troops last summer:

Success will be defined by the Afghan people's freedom to choose their future—freedom from coercion, extremists, malign foreign influence, or abusive government actions . . . .The ongoing insurgency must be met with a counterinsurgency campaign adapted to the unique conditions in each area that: Protects the Afghan people, allowing them to choose a future they can be proud of; Provides a secure environment allowing good government and economic development to undercut the causes and advocates of insurgency.

After the perceived success of counter-insurgency tactics during the 2007 surge in Iraq, COIN has become the fad in military strategy. It has been described as the graduate level of war-fighting, even a “warm and fuzzy” approach to waging war. Counter-insurgency involves less focus on the enemy and more on cultural and civic outreach to the population, which is considered the “center of gravity” in a COIN fight. In fact, McChrystal has provided his troops with rules of engagement that instruct them to avoid any possible situation where civilians might be harmed, including allowing the enemy to escape if necessary.

Such a move requires nothing less than a cultural overhaul of how the U.S. military operates—from targeting the enemy to serving as “armed social workers.” But on a deeper level, an effective COIN operation means the extension of government control to most corners of the country; the provision of goods and services; and, above all, improved security for civilians that will lead them to turn away from the Taliban.

Accomplishing this goal requires the support of the Afghan government and regional allies—

and a civilian “surge” to “hold and build” large sections of the country. But above all it requires more U.S. troops. In fact, according to the military's own counter-insurgency guide (FM 3-24), the proper ratio of troops to population is twenty-five to one thousand civilians. So it hardly came as a surprise, in the fall of 2009, when McChrystal formally asked the president for another significant troop increase—and even less surprise when it was granted.

But like the president's speech at West Point, the general's request, which was accompanied by a strategic review arguing that population-centric counterinsurgency was the only operational approach that could potentially stabilize Afghanistan, provided neither clarity to U.S. policy in Afghanistan nor a road map for eventual de-escalation. If anything, it augured precisely the opposite: a long-term struggle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Indeed, the current mission seems, if anything, an effort to stick the square peg of COIN into the round hole of Afghanistan.

### **America's Afghan Partner**

It is generally recognized that, without the strong support of a host government, a robust counter-insurgency effort will not succeed, particularly one that is backed by a foreign military. That support comes not only in political legitimacy but also in military capacity. Unfortunately, the Kabul government lacks both.

According to a recently leaked Pentagon report, the Afghan Army is defined by “corruption, nepotism and untrained unmotivated personnel who make success all but impossible.” What's more, Afghan forces remain highly dependent on their U.S. partners and have been wracked by desertions. In offensives in Southern Afghanistan during the summer of 2009, the Afghan Army was all but nonexistent. Yet, the U.S. military remains intent on increasing the ranks of the Afghan Army to 170,000.

Bigger challenges lie with the Afghan government. Early this year, seventeen of twenty-four Cabinet officers named by the Karzai government were rejected by Parliament. Amazingly, President Karzai nominated for the ministry of counter-narcotics

Zarar Ahmed Moqbel, who had been fired as interior minister for blatant corruption and incompetence.

*That the United States* can “clear” an area of Taliban fighters is uncontested. But this was also true for the United States in Vietnam and for the French in Algeria. As any smart counterinsurgent will tell you, a COIN operation is 80 percent political and 20 percent military. The problem comes in holding and building—and that requires not only military capacity but a host government with the legitimacy to inspire confidence among the people. The French lost that legitimacy in Algeria, and the South Vietnamese never inspired it.

Little that has happened in the past year indicates that the Karzai government is close to having such strong popular support, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated and Taliban-sympathetic South. In fact, recent U.S. deals with Afghan tribes such as the Shinwari may actually be undermining the government in Kabul.

Yet the problems with Karzai were not unexpected. His weakness was confirmed and even endorsed by McChrystal, whose strategic review takes the Afghan government and its security forces to task for their incompetence, corruption and lack of capacity. That the commanding general would support an operational approach that his own review concludes is fatally undermined by the incapacity of the Karzai regime suggests a misplaced and dangerous allegiance to counter-insurgency for the sake of counter-insurgency. But in the U.S. Army of 2010, the efficacy of population-centric counter-insurgency (which supposedly brought such success to war-fighting efforts in Iraq) is practically sacrosanct.

### **The Pakistani Challenge**

The internal Afghan obstacles to waging an effective counter-insurgency are surpassed by the external problems. Many have speculated that Obama’s Afghanistan strategy is really about shoring up Pakistan, which has been home to the top al Qaeda leadership for the past eight years and has a nuclear arsenal of an estimated sixty warheads.

But the problem is that Pakistan has long

viewed the Afghan Taliban as a strategic partner that protects its interests in Afghanistan. Since the fall of Kabul in 2002, the Afghan Taliban leadership has enjoyed a safe haven in The Pakistani city of Quetta, known as the Quetta Shrua. It is from here that much of the insurgency is directed. This sanctuary is unmolested by the Pakistani military or even U.S. drone strikes and offers sanctuary for Taliban fighters who slip back and forth over the border to Afghanistan. Without support from the Pakistani government—or at least a lack of interference—the Taliban insurgency could not survive.

In the days after Obama’s West Point speech, his advisers increased public pressure on the Pakistanis. They suggested, through a number of press leaks, that enough was enough—the Pakistanis must crack down on the Afghan Taliban or else the United States would begin to dramatically expand its drone war there.

The response from the Pakistanis, who continue to deny that there is any significant Afghan Taliban presence in their country or that Taliban leader Mullah Omar resides within their borders—an assertion few believe—was swift. The Pakistanis made clear they had no interest in doing America’s bidding. Instead their venom was aimed at their supposed American allies, who described a campaign of harassment against U.S. diplomats in Pakistan.

Yet, as this article goes to press, there is some halting indication that the Pakistani government may be changing its tune when it comes to cracking down on its Afghan Taliban allies. In February, working with the CIA, the ISI, Pakistan’s military intelligence agency, captured the Taliban’s top military commander, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. In subsequent days, other top Taliban leaders were targeted both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But whether this reflects a sea change in Pakistani attitudes it’s simply impossible to say. By some accounts the Pakistanis’ actions represented an effort to distance themselves from the Afghan Taliban—while by other accounts the arrest of Baradar was an effort to silence a Taliban leader who is perhaps more open to reconciliation than other members of the group’s top leadership.

The tenuous dependence on Afghan and Pakistani support reflects what Steven Metz, a professor at the Strategic Studies Institute,

described to me as a “deep pathology in American security,” namely “the reliance on allies whose perceptions, priorities, values, and objectives are very different from those of the United States.” George Washington in his farewell address may have expressed the sentiment best, that “’tis folly for one nation to look for disinterested favors from another.”

Indeed, this has been a recurrent problem in U.S. policy toward the region. In the months after 9/11, the United States began channeling billions of dollars to the Pakistani government nominally to fight al Qaeda. Most of the money, however, went to build up Pakistan’s defenses with India, as al Qaeda and the Taliban regrouped in the wilds of Western Pakistan.

The same problem that Metz identifies is true of American support for the Karzai regime. The Afghan president achieved power through the help of America and NATO, but he maintained his rule via corruption and patronage. So while U.S. officials were furious that Karzai chose as his vice-presidential running mate Mohammed Fahim, a former Northern Alliance commander and reputed drug kingpin, the Afghan president understood that Fahim’s link to the country’s northern Tajik population was crucial to his political hopes.

After the widespread fraud of the first round of the Afghan presidential election, Karzai was forced by a desperate U.S. government to accede to a second round of balloting. But his actions quickly made clear that he was going to steal that round as well. His main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, conceded defeat before the balloting could take place. In his inaugural address, Karzai pledged to crack down on corruption, but it is hard to take his words seriously. Afghanistan is the second most corrupt country in the world, behind Somalia. According to the United Nations, Afghans paid out \$2.5 billion in bribes and kickbacks, or one-quarter of the country’s gross domestic product. The income from graft is exceeded only by the estimated \$2.8 billion generated by the country’s drug trade.

Looking the other way allows Karzai not only to maintain power but also to prosper (his brother is reportedly one of the country’s biggest drug dealers). To do what the American government wants him to do would spell his political—and possibly personal—demise.

### A Way Forward?

In the end, the fundamental problem with America’s strategy in Afghanistan is its ambition. It isn’t just that the United States relies on allies with far different agendas; it isn’t just that the military’s COIN strategy assumes a level of sophistication, focus, support, and political will that doesn’t exist; it’s that the United States and its NATO allies are trying to do too much. By focusing on stability across the country—and by seeking to extend the writ of the government to even lawless and Taliban-sympathetic areas—the United States risks trying to accomplish everything and thus, in the end, doing nothing.

Evidence of the inherent flaws in the U.S. approach could be found in Afghan public opinion polling that appeared in January 2010. Though polling Afghans is a difficult task, the results coincided with regional differences that have long existed. While the U.S. military presence is generally well received, the numbers in the South and East—the Pashtun belt—tell a different tale. Only 42 percent of Afghans in these regions support the U.S. presence in these regions, as opposed to 78 percent in the rest of the country.

What these numbers suggest is that the United States should be crafting a military and political strategy that embraces modest, but achievable goals that would allow troop withdrawals to begin in the middle of 2011, as Obama promised at West Point. This would mean prioritizing future U.S. and NATO efforts on those parts of the country most amenable to a U.S. presence and supportive of the Kabul government. In short, what is needed is a recognition that the U.S. and NATO cannot pacify and stabilize every inch of Afghanistan; nor do they need to.

For example, in the days after the president’s West Point speech, U.S. commanders sent a new contingent of troops into Helmand Province, a southeastern province that represents the heart of the Taliban insurgency and is one of Afghanistan’s largest opium-producing areas. How a mission in a sparsely populated area, where Taliban fighters could slip across the border into safe havens in Pakistan, comported with the president’s focus on “securing key population centers” or even McChrystal’s stated

preference for a population-centric strategy still remains unclear.

The offensive is Exhibit A in the incoherence of our current military strategy. Even if U.S. troops were able to clear Helmand, they barely have the capability—or local support—to hold or build there. Sending more troops to clear the area is, in the parlance of British forces previously stationed in Helmand, the military equivalent of “mowing the lawn”: the grass always grows back.

*Focusing its military* efforts in the North and West, where the Taliban have begun to make inroads but are still unpopular, would be a more promising strategy. Although nobody wants to cede the South and East to the Taliban, in the short term, this might be the smartest approach, and one that might also weaken the Taliban’s recruitment efforts because of the unpopularity of U.S. occupation in Pashtun-dominated areas.

Even more beneficial, such a strategy would pave the way for a possible political resolution of the conflict. The only real solution to the Taliban insurgency is a political one. And if the Taliban can be led to believe it can have some political influence, the path toward genuine reconciliation may become clearer. At the same time, a more enemy-focused approach would increase pressure on the Taliban and aid in the process of bringing them to the negotiating table.

Along these lines, the United States should adopt a more modest goal for the Afghan military—one defined not by its quantity but by its quality in protecting the country from a Taliban takeover. What Afghanistan needs more than a 170,000-man army of dubious capability is a 90,000-man military that is not only effective but is trained to fight like an Afghan army—not an American proxy force. A smaller

military and a reliance on local militias allied with the Kabul government to push back on the Taliban (a step already being undertaken by the United States and NATO) would likely be a more effective strategy than building up a paper tiger military.

These goals require that the president demand his generals discard their dreams of counter-insurgency and recognize the limitations of American power. Indeed, it is worth returning to Obama’s West Point speech on this point. The last third of his remarks took an unusual turn—laying out an aspirational and progressive foreign policy vision of restraint and modesty. Adopting the language of a realist, Obama declared, “I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests. And I must weigh all of the challenges that our nation faces.” He even cited Dwight Eisenhower’s legendary farewell speech warning of the dangers posed by a potent military-industrial complex. Obama talked about the importance of rebuilding America’s economy and infrastructure and argued that a stronger and more just America would serve as an example to other nations.

The success of Obama’s policy in Afghanistan—and indeed his presidency—may rest on how successful he is in making that more modest vision a reality. To be sure, there is still time for the president to salvage his Afghanistan policy and avoid the sort of military quagmire that destroyed the last Democratic president with a domestic agenda as ambitious as Obama’s. But the clock is ticking.

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