

Afghanistan: What Can We Achieve?

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The U.S. war in Afghanistan started off with rousing optimism in the fall of 2001, but by the end of the decade has devolved into a quagmire for U. S. troops and potential disaster for the Afghan people. For all its twists and turns, it has had one striking constant—nearly every decision made by Western policymakers and Afghan leaders in fighting it has been the wrong one.

The litany of mistakes began in the first months of military engagement, when U.S. officials turned to Afghan militias to fight the final battle against the remnants of al Qaeda at the terrorist group's redoubt at Tora Bora. Osama bin Laden and many of his top lieutenants were cornered at the cave complex along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, but were able to escape to safe havens in Pakistan—a failure that, according to a recent Senate report, laid “the foundation for today's protracted Afghan insurgency and inflame[ed] the internal strife now endangering Pakistan.”

Next came the disastrous choice at the Bonn Conference in 2001 to create one of the most centralized political systems in the world for post-Taliban Afghanistan, rather than a decentralized federal system in the tradition of Afghan governance. The choice of the ineffectual and indecisive Hamid Karzai as the country's first president compounded this error, as did the decision to exclude the Taliban from having any say in the country's future.

NATO's decision in 2002 to maintain foreign security forces in and around Kabul rather than disperse them throughout the country was another crucial missed opportunity that contributed to the country's deteriorating security situation and to the later reemergence of the Taliban. Then came the calamitous U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq,

which diverted time, resources, and attention from Afghanistan. Other mistakes would follow: the focus on poppy eradication, which drove countless ordinary Afghans into the arms of the Taliban; the lack of appropriate and effective aid resources for improving infrastructure and the rural economy; and the failure of U.S. policymakers—either with carrots or sticks—to push for a Pakistani crackdown on Afghan Taliban safe havens in their midst.

It is a mind-numbing tale of failure that has brought the United States and NATO to a painful decision point about the war in Afghanistan. They must realize that it is time to move beyond the U.S. military's dreams of winning in Afghanistan and focus instead on best preparing the country for a partial drawdown of U.S. troops and a shift in mission from population-centric counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism and stabilization.

Fighting The Good War

When Barack Obama took office in January 2009, things were going to be different. The candidate who had promised during the 2008 presidential campaign to devote more resources to the “good” war in Afghanistan became a president who piled more bad decisions upon past ones.

Obama has wrongly and dangerously referred to the fight in Afghanistan as a “vital national interest” of the United States and, even worse, argued that the war is necessary to defeat, disrupt, and dismantle al Qaeda, even though the terrorist group has not had any verifiable presence in Afghanistan since 2002. He has acceded to the U. S. military's request for approximately 50,000 additional troops since January 2009 and tacitly endorsed its preference for a counter-insurgency strategy, the limitations of which have

been laid bare over the past year. There is little indication that the strategy being executed now will be any more successful than those that have failed in the past.

And after more than nine years of war, few good options remain on the table. The Taliban insurgency has gained momentum across the country at the same time that falling support for the war at home will constrain the president's ability to sustain a long-term military commitment.

"Winning" in Afghanistan is no longer in the cards, if it ever was. Instead, the president and his advisers must choose from a set of worst-case scenarios. Picking the least worse one—which protects U.S. interests while, one hopes, stabilizing Afghanistan—must be the focus of U.S. policy going forward. That begins with laying the groundwork for a political strategy to spur reconciliation between the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents.

Political, not Military, Strategy

The shift in strategy must begin with a shift in the mindset of the U.S. military. Right now, U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan are focused too directly on using military force to "slow the momentum" of the Taliban insurgency. As one European diplomat recently quoted by Matthew Waldman noted about the United States, "They don't compromise, their model is winning . . . they have a radically different perception of what a political solution means."

Indeed, it is worth noting that a year after extolling the importance of a counter-insurgency strategy focused on "protecting the population," military leaders have returned to a metric they once scorned—namely, publicizing body counts of enemy insurgents. The U.S. approach to the war seems to be based on the notion that they can pummel Taliban fighters into submission and eventual "compromise" in political negotiations.

But there are clear and obvious dangers in such an approach. The first is the likelihood that even stepped-up U.S. and NATO attacks will not seriously weaken the insurgency, particularly as it continues to find safe haven across the border in Pakistan. Although there

is indication that U.S. Special Operations forces are wreaking havoc with Taliban leadership cadres, there is less indication that the Taliban's ability to cause mayhem has decreased significantly.

In fact, according to a recent report from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), the surge in troops has had little impact on the insurgency, which it described as "maturing" and "ascendant." Between July and September of 2010, Taliban attacks increased by 59 percent, compared with the same period in 2009. For all the efforts to stabilize the southern city of Kandahar, ANSO estimates that there are as many as 4,000 Taliban fighters in the city. In the once-peaceful North, ANSO reports that a third of the region's provinces have had significant jumps in violence. This was a recurring refrain during my own recent trip to northern Afghanistan. Local Afghan and NGO officials said that once peaceful districts have increasingly become off-limits, and that security across the region has declined in the past year.

The second problem is that there is a divide among various Taliban leaders. There are some who believe now—when the Taliban is at its strongest military point—is the best time to make a deal with the Karzai government. There are others who would rather wait out the United States and NATO and want to keep fighting and hunkering down in Pakistan. The United States needs to empower the former group but risks emboldening the latter, who will ask why the Taliban should trust the Americans and enter into negotiations when they are regularly being pounded by U.S. forces.

In addition, as the United States kills Taliban mid-level commanders who receive guidance from the leadership in Pakistan today, there is the risk of such commanders being replaced by more radical and less controllable fighters tomorrow.

The third and perhaps most important reason is that the Taliban will want to enter negotiations from a position of relative strength. Further fighting may encourage the Taliban to bide its time, as time is running out for the United States.

In the nearterm, the United States and NATO might be able to clear some areas in

southern and eastern Afghanistan, which is the current focus of U.S. operations. But the hold-and-build part of the counter-insurgency equation will not be sustainable, particularly as there are few Afghan forces to hold cleared areas. Moreover, the more focus the United States places on the South and East, the greater the risk that the Taliban will continue to make political inroads in the North and West, where it is increasingly making alliances with non-Pashtun groups, in effect nationalizing the insurgency.

Paradoxically, weakening the Taliban may run counter to U.S. interests, which should be focused on disengaging from the conflict. If there is evidence that the Taliban and the Afghan government are interested in negotiations, then the United States should jump on the opportunity. At the very least, they should take steps to seed the ground for such a possibility

Political Reconciliation

Political reconciliation in Afghanistan will not be easy to achieve. There are almost certainly elements in the Taliban leadership that are tired of nine years of war, tired of Pakistani manipulation, and tired of living in exile. But there are others who believe that momentum is on their side, and that a Taliban return to power is possible (although there is some question as to whether that is even the primary goal of the movement).

At the same time, non-Pashtun groups in Afghanistan, such as the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, are deeply fearful of a political deal with the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. The potential for civil war over a political arrangement between Karzai and the Taliban, while unlikely, is still a possibility. From a civil society perspective, many groups in Afghanistan have reason to be wary of a deal with the Taliban, particularly women, who could see their limited freedoms in post-Taliban Afghanistan further constrained. Finally, there is a difficult regional component as well: Pakistan will not countenance a political deal that doesn't protect its interests, give it a say in Afghanistan's future, and minimize Indian influence in the country. Making sure the Pakistanis are on board will

be essential to the success of any political negotiation.

But these are not insurmountable obstacles, and there is embryonic interest in all corners of the region—even among extremist groups—to proceed with political talks. Ironically, it is the United States—and in particular its military leadership—that represents one of the key stumbling blocks.

In September, when reports surfaced of preliminary talks between Taliban leaders and Karzai, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell threw cold water on the potential breakthrough, saying, "The secretary of defense believes we still need to make more progress with regards to security on the ground. We need to take the fight more aggressively and for a greater duration to the Taliban."

Moreover, demands by the United States that the Taliban surrender its weapons and pledge to recognize the Afghan Constitution are misguided and unrealistic—and tangential to direct U.S. interests.

Ultimately, the United States would be better off focusing its political agenda on the one issue that is most basic to U.S. national security—al Qaeda. The primary interest of the United States vis-à-vis Afghanistan is that the terrorist group cannot re-establish a safe haven in the country. Of secondary concern would likely be the viability of military bases such as Forward Operating Base Chapman in eastern Afghanistan, which allows the United States to maintain military pressure on al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan.

So long as these redline conditions for the United States are addressed, the outlines of a political deal to guide Afghanistan's future, whether it's a power-sharing arrangement or a decentralized governance structure that apportions more power to regional powerbrokers, should be the decision of the Afghans and Afghans alone.

As much as U.S. policymakers would like to see a liberal democracy take root in Afghanistan, such a goal is not realistic and runs counter to what remains a fundamentally conservative and traditionally patriarchal society. For example, during a recent trip to the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif I saw

perhaps a dozen women out of hundreds who were not wearing a burka, and this in a city where Taliban influence is almost nonexistent. No matter who is in power in Kabul, it is difficult to imagine that this unequal situation will change radically any time soon. Although the United States should promote fundamental human rights in Afghanistan, it should understand the limitations of such an approach. Perhaps more effective would be an effort to ensure that Afghan civil society groups have a seat at the table during any peace negotiations so that their voices are heard. But imposing a solution that guarantees that the rights of women—and others—are protected in Afghanistan, while a noble fight, is likely a losing battle.

An Agenda for U.S. Departure

How, then, should the United States proceed? First, they must lend their support to political negotiations—and in particular support a UN mandate for an independent, non-U.S. mediator. Former Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who has already engaged in discussions with all parties, seems an obvious and inspired choice.

Second, the U.S. military must focus less on taking the fight to the Taliban and more on confidence-building measures to move the process of political negotiation forward. There are a number of measures it could take:

- Delisting insurgent leaders from UN sanctions lists and also Special Operations kill and capture lists
- Releasing detained insurgent fighters
- Negotiating local cease fires
- Promoting agreements between the Taliban and the NGOs to allow these groups to operate more effectively in “red areas” (a process that is already taking place informally)

These steps should be predicated, in part, on Taliban reciprocal measures, such as cease-fire agreements or an end to attacks on civilian targets.

Third, the United States must make it a pri-

ority to leave Afghanistan in as potentially a stable form as possible. This means continuing to focus on creating an Afghan security force capable of preventing a Taliban takeover of the country. Efforts must be made to consolidate support—and target Taliban groups—in the parts of the country where Taliban support is more tenuous and reversible. Military efforts should be expanded in the increasingly vulnerable North rather than the lost cause South and East. The goal here would be to lay the groundwork for a political environment that will strengthen the country’s anti-Taliban forces for when the United States leaves.

At the same time, efforts to improve governance and promote economic development must continue. The United States needs and wants to leave Afghanistan, but a run to the exits will clearly destabilize the country. Every effort must be made to ensure that even after the United States withdraws, Afghanistan is not left a hollow shell.

Fourth, the United States can play perhaps the most direct and important diplomatic role in corraling regional support for a political agreement. This may include pressuring Pakistan to in turn pressure the Afghan Taliban to accept a deal that falls short of its ultimate goals; and working with India to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan, while at the same time minimizing its influence in the country’s affairs. Recognizing Pakistan’s nuclear program and pledging U.S. support for a civilian nuclear initiative could go a long way toward ensuring greater Pakistani cooperation on issues related to Afghanistan. Paradoxically, rapprochement between India and Pakistan would help stabilize Afghanistan over the long term; and while near-term hopes for such reconciliation are dim, it should remain a focus of U.S. policymakers.

Fifth and most important, the United States will need to restate its commitment to Afghan security, the viability of the current Afghan state, territorial integrity of the country, and—as unpalatable as it may seem—the Karzai government. This will likely mean that the U.S. and Western financial, and potentially military, commitment to Afghanistan will continue for many years, possibly permanently. This doesn’t mean endless war in the Hindu Kush, but an enduring focus on

Afghanistan's economic and political future. After all, there is no evidence that Afghanistan has the capacity to maintain itself as a self-sufficient country. As has been the case for most of its history, it will rely, in some measure, on the largesse of others.

None of these steps will be easy—and in some cases, they will require an outlay of significant political capital by Obama. But the alternative is far worse: ignominious withdrawal or miring the country more deeply in the conflict that is sapping U.S. blood and treasure at a pace far greater than its relationship to actual U.S. interests. It's high time

for the United States to recognize its own limitations in Afghanistan and seek a solution that is not perfect but that is realistic and achievable. The moment cries for leadership and a demand that the nation's generals get with the president's program.

After nine years of the West's making poor decisions, Obama has a rare opportunity to make a right one. He cannot afford to let it pass him or the United States by.

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Interpreting Protest in Modern China

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When Americans on the Left—and in the Center and on the Right, for that matter—turn their attention to the issue of protest in contemporary China, they most often think back to the traumatic upheavals of 1989, which began with inspiring student-led demonstrations in April and May and ended with the June massacres. What they sometimes forget, though, is that many of the Chinese who contributed to the struggle and who suffered most in that year of miracles and tragedies were not students.

Some were young teachers, such as Liu Xiaobo, who is now world famous as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, but who was then one of China's rising stars in the field of literary criticism. Inspired by the bravery of student activists—as many journalists, schoolteachers, and professors were—he joined them at Tiananmen Square. Liu soon became one of the most impassioned voices within the movement calling for moderation; he strove to persuade the most militant students to avoid taking steps that would box the authorities into a corner and make it hard for any kind of

compromise to be negotiated, even one that could be seen as a partial victory. In the end, Liu was among the last protesters to leave Tiananmen Square in the wee hours of June 4; as soldiers were firing on civilians nearby, he helped broker a deal that provided safe passage out of the plaza for many of the students who had remained there with him. He was later jailed for his alleged role as one of the inspirational “black hands” behind the movement, the first but not the last time he would end up a prisoner of conscience.

Other important participants in the 1989 uprising were neither students nor professionals but young workers. Members of this group were gunned down in greater numbers than were educated youths in the Beijing massacre and the related one that took place in Chengdu, one of Sichuan's largest cities. And some of them too, like Liu Xiaobo and student leader Wang Dan, ended up serving extended prison terms. This was the case, for instance, with Han Dongfang, who played a key part in 1989 in forming one of the autonomous labor unions that partnered with the student unions springing up on campuses throughout China. One of the main reasons the Communist Party's leaders called in the troops was because, with Solidarity's rise in mind (that organization, ironically, won its