



# RECONCILING WITH THE TALIBAN?

TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE GRAND STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-483-7600  
Fax: 202-483-1840  
[www.CarnegieEndowment.org](http://www.CarnegieEndowment.org)

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# SUMMARY

The run-up to the announcement of President Obama's new "Af-Pak" strategy provoked a flurry of "new solutions" to the conflict. Promoting reconciliation with the Taliban is one idea that has reappeared—even in the administration's own White Paper on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. While this notion would rightly have been considered ridiculous a few years ago, many in Europe and the United States obviously believe that stabilizing Afghanistan may require just that. In fact, it would be the worst approach at this time—and it is destined to fail so long as key Taliban constituents are convinced that military victory in Afghanistan is inevitable.

Any effort at reconciliation today will, therefore, undermine the credibility of American power and the success of the Afghan mission. Most important, reconciling with the Taliban is both premature and unnecessary for the success of Western aims. The Afghan public, by an overwhelming margin of 82 percent to 4 percent, is still very much opposed to the Taliban—not only viewing them as the country's biggest threat but also desperately seeking the success that ought to accrue from the presence of Western military forces in their country. Consequently, although the situation in Afghanistan is serious, it is by no means hopeless—and can be retrieved through a concerted modification of current NATO strategy, including a return to proper counterinsurgency operations.

The central question for the United States is how to achieve victory in Afghanistan. If victory—understood as the marginalization of the Taliban as an armed opposition—can be attained, reconciliation between some Taliban elements and the Afghan state would become possible, but paradoxically at a time when it is also least necessary. Achieving victory, in any event, involves erecting an effective Afghan state that can control its national territory and deliver the personal security, responsive governance, and economic development necessary to ensure internal stability. Success in this respect is essential even if the United States focuses only on the limited objective of defeating al-Qaeda and its allies.

What will be required, however, is an ironclad American determination to stay involved in ensuring Afghanistan's security over the long term. Signaling American impatience with the mission by considering exit strategies will spur insurgents to outlast the international coalition; encourage important Afghan bystanders to persist in their prevailing ambivalence; and induce Islamabad to eschew relinquishing its support for the Taliban because they could once again be required to protect Pakistan's interests in Kabul.

Accelerating American support to Afghanistan to ensure an early exit will not work either. Such an approach would also motivate the insurgents, the bystanders, and the regional states to simply wait Washington out while they protect their own interests through means that would ultimately defeat President Obama's professed intention "to defeat al-Qaeda and combat extremism." There is no cheap route to success in Afghanistan—no "improve-and-exit" strategy. Only a serious, long-term commitment to building an effective Afghan state—an "invest-and-endure" strategy—will work. While this latter approach undoubtedly adds to America's current economic and political burdens, the cost to U.S. national security objectives of not doing so would be much, much greater. ■

# INTRODUCTION

The year 2008 was a difficult one in Afghanistan. The incidence of violence reached an all-time high, surpassing even the record levels witnessed during the previous year. Popular dissatisfaction with the Hamid Karzai government increased further as widespread corruption, governance and development failures, and continued narcotics production interacted viciously to undercut state effectiveness. Finally, the inability of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops to defeat the Taliban as quickly as many in Europe and the United States initially expected, coupled with rising Afghan discontent about civilian casualties from combat operations, all exacerbated by astutely effective Taliban propaganda, gave rise to a new bout of public angst about the wisdom and effectiveness of the West's current political and military strategy in Afghanistan. Many observers began to ask despairingly whether this conflict could ever be won, and, as President Barack Obama reviewed his own strategy, a plethora of new solutions ranging from escalating the military combat operations in Afghanistan to engineering new grand bargains with the principal regional stakeholders was proposed.

Among the more provocative ideas that have gained currency in recent months is the notion of promoting reconciliation with the Taliban. Such a proposition would have been considered simply ridiculous a few years ago; after all, the United States defeated the Taliban and drove it out of Afghanistan in a fit of righteous anger because of its refusal to surrender the al-Qaeda masterminds who directed the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington. After several years of wearying military operations, however, many in Europe and the United States now appear to believe that resolving Afghanistan's problems of stability may necessitate negotiating a peace with the Taliban insurgents and ending the conflict, so that Western troops currently operating in the country may finally come home. Fareed Zakaria captured this sentiment when he urged the United States plainly to "talk to the Taliban." Although conceding that the timing of such an initiative would have to be judged carefully,

Zakaria argues that the goal of separating, “as often as possible, the global jihadist from the accidental guerrilla,” warrants a conversation with all insurgents willing to forsake diehard opposition, perhaps “even the most hard-line Taliban—the so-called Quetta Shura led by Mullah Omar—who have at various points made overtures to the Afghan government, always asking that they be distinguished from Al Qaeda.”<sup>1</sup>

While Zakaria’s larger analysis is sound, a worse solution could not be imagined right now. Reconciling with the Taliban is a deceptively beguiling strategy for pacifying Afghanistan—and one that is doomed to fail presently. Not only is the Taliban leadership uninterested in such conciliation, even initiating it could lead to a perverse set of consequences: It could exacerbate the ethnic fissures within Afghanistan; it could signal to both opponents and bystanders within the country that a Western defeat was imminent and, hence, did not warrant any premature compromise—ironically making the success of reconciliation itself more improbable; and worse, it could open the door to a renewed civil war that inveigles all the major regional actors and creates fresh opportunities for al-Qaeda to nourish itself amid the resulting lawlessness and attack the West with renewed vigor.

President Obama’s recent review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan appears to recognize these risks. The White Paper summarizing the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on the subject acknowledges clearly that “Mullah Omar and the Taliban’s hard core that have aligned themselves with al Qaeda are not reconcilable,” further admitting that the United States “cannot make a deal that includes them.” Yet it also concludes that “the war in Afghanistan cannot be won without convincing non-ideologically committed insurgents to lay down their arms, reject al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan Constitution.” Toward that end, it suggests that “an office should be created in every province and [that the United States] should support efforts by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance to develop a reconciliation effort targeting mid-to-low level insurgents to be led by provincial governors.”<sup>2</sup> It is unclear how this initiative would differ from the national reconciliation program already being promoted by the Afghan government. But, more problematically, it assumes that a renewed investment in integrating the non-ideological insurgents can actually succeed at this point in time if it is implemented at the provincial level, despite the reverses now being suffered by the Western coalition vis-à-vis the Taliban.

The current setbacks afflicting NATO’s counterinsurgency campaign imply that any attempt at reconciliation through a negotiated bargain centered on the formal exchange of obligations—as opposed to the quiet and progressive defection of insurgents resulting from coalition victories that change their political incentives—would fail to deliver the stability that the United States seeks as its near-term objective in Afghanistan. Even attempting to reach out to plebeian insurgents before the Taliban have been defeated by a sound American political and military strategy in Afghanistan would signal weakness on the part of Washington and Kabul—and it would make the task of accommodating

even the common rebel all the harder. The persistence of such failures would undermine the credibility of American power worldwide and would energize all the radical Islamist movements intent on wreaking their orgies of violence against the United States. Most important of all, reconciling with the Taliban is both premature and unnecessary for the success of Western aims in Afghanistan. Although the situation in Afghanistan is serious, it is by no means hopeless—and it can be retrieved through a concerted modification of current NATO strategy.

This report is divided into five chapters. The first chapter analyzes the tortuous politics of reconciliation within Afghanistan. It suggests that many of the initiatives associated with this process represent political theater of a high order, implicating President Hamid Karzai's bid for reelection, his fears of abandonment by the United States, and efforts by the opposition parties within Afghanistan to extend their influence in the Pashtun-dominated southern and southeastern areas of the country. Given these complexities, this report concludes that the idea of reconciliation, understood as a negotiated bargain with either the Taliban leadership or its base soldiery, is unlikely to be successful at this point in time.

The second chapter revisits the concept of reconciliation from a strategic perspective. It identifies the several vexatious problems that any successful effort at conciliation must overcome, and it argues that reconciliation between the state and the Taliban opposition cannot be produced as a result of an agreed compromise but only through a coalition political-military victory that diminishes the rewards for continued resistance. If such a victory can be achieved, "reconciliation" between militants and the state will become inevitable, paradoxically at a time when it is also least necessary.

The third chapter addresses the issue of Western goals in Afghanistan. Noting that clarity of objectives is a prerequisite for any successful political-military strategy, it demonstrates that building an effective Afghan state is essential even if coalition goals are restricted mainly to the prosecution of terrorism. Because the effective control of national territory is at issue, the discussion establishes the superiority of a democratic regime in Afghanistan over all its alternatives, such as a return to acephalous tribalism, accommodating fundamentalists within the government, or accepting an authoritarian system. Consequently, the strategic choices between counterterrorism and state building in Afghanistan, which are often posed as alternatives in the political debate in Europe and the United States, represent a false and misleading dichotomy that should be rejected. Further, the emerging claims that Washington can live with radical Islamists like the Taliban while continuing the war against al-Qaeda or that it could exit Afghanistan and yet prosecute al-Qaeda successfully in Pakistan are shown to be fallacious. The discussion, accordingly, concludes that the United States should reaffirm the original goal of building an effective Afghan state; and achieving this objective, in turn, requires an appropriate strategy for victory in Afghanistan.

The fourth chapter, then, focuses on what it would take for the Western coalition, and the United States in particular, to achieve such a victory. By analyzing the changes required at the strategic, operational, domestic, and external levels of action, it argues that a political-military success is not only eminently possible in Afghanistan, but that it would require a combination of constancy of commitment on the part of Washington, a return to proper counterinsurgency operations of the kind that were pursued between 2003 and 2005, and a significant transformation of Afghan governmental performance in regard to governance. If these three components can be sustained, the coalition's limitations in regard to eradicating Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan can be substantially offset, thus benefiting U.S. relations with Kabul and Islamabad simultaneously.

The fifth chapter, a short conclusion to the report, reprises the main themes and argues for a return to a correct grand strategy, that is, one focused on securing victory in Afghanistan rather than implementing reconciliation with the Taliban as the solution to the current predicaments facing Washington. In this context, it urges President Obama not to be deterred by the hoary myths about Afghanistan being the “graveyard of empires”—because it is not—and argues that an appropriate recipe for success will not be one that merely improves conditions within the country in order to accelerate an American exit, but rather one that remains committed to investing and enduring in Afghanistan over the long term. Only the latter approach can preserve an Afghanistan “whole and free”—one that does not again become a bastion from which terrorist groups can conduct catastrophic attacks against the international community. ■

# CONVOLUTED POLITICS OF RECONCILIATION

The idea of reconciling with the Taliban is not at all recent or novel. In the aftermath of the initial successes of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the Afghan and Pakistani media were already speculating about the need to accommodate the “moderate Taliban” as a means of consolidating success in the war-torn country. There is also enough evidence that President Karzai himself was eager to explore some kind of compromise with the Taliban even before he was elected to office. In part, this was due to his close relationship with many Taliban figures during the 1990s; but in the aftermath of his election in 2002, his interest in reaching out to the disaffected Pashtuns, who provided the manpower for the defeated Taliban regime, only became more evident. As early as February 2004, Karzai formally introduced the Program Takhim-e-Solh (PTS), or the “strengthening peace” initiative, aimed at conciliating rank-and-file insurgents and encouraging them to return peacefully to Afghanistan. This effort, which still continues and is overseen by an Independent National Commission for Peace and Reconciliation led by a Karzai ally, Sebghatullah al-Mojaddedi, offers those insurgents willing to renounce violence and pledge support to the Afghan state the opportunity to rejoin their tribal communities.

Although the program enjoyed some early successes, in that it convinced over two thousand individuals to lay down their arms, it has on the whole been a less than conspicuous achievement. The weaknesses of the effort, which included the inability to appropriately validate insurgent credentials, the absence of effective monitoring in the aftermath of formal reconciliation, and the progressive loss of credibility because of Afghan leadership shortcomings and larger governmental failures, led the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States to actually abandon their financial support for this initiative. The deplorable history of the PTS program should be cautionary at a time when the Obama administration appears recommitted to “encouraging Afghan government efforts to integrate reconcilable insurgents.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the termination of Western assistance, the PTS initiative has nevertheless continued. Even as it did, however, its managers have occasionally mounted more dramatic efforts at reconciliation aimed not at the rank and file but at the leadership of the insurgency itself. For example, in May 2005, Mojaddedi dramatically offered amnesty to the Taliban emir, Mullah Omar, and the Hizbe Islami chieftain, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, if they laid down their arms, accepted the Afghan constitution, and recognized Karzai's leadership. This offer, which was then severely criticized both by the international coalition and by the non-Pashtun leaders in Afghanistan (who subsequently created the National Front in opposition to Karzai), was hurriedly rescinded, but the idea of ending the Afghan conflict through a negotiated compromise with the Taliban's *rahbari shura* (leadership council) has never been extinguished, at least in the minds of Pashtun leaders like Mojaddedi and almost certainly Karzai.

Because the odds against success have always been high, however, the reconciliation initiatives aimed at the *shura* since 2004 have proceeded at a rather languid pace. In fact, the basic pattern of politics in Afghanistan has not changed since the early victories produced by OEF: the Karzai government has supported the international effort to rout the Taliban militarily, while occasionally airing half-hearted offers of settlement toward the Taliban leadership in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the Pashtun populations in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. These desultory overtures would have continued indefinitely were it not for the critical presidential and Provincial Council elections scheduled for 2009. Karzai's desire to secure a second term as president, despite his regime's failures with regard to providing security, good government, and development in Afghanistan, has engendered a campaign strategy involving three distinct themes: first, the use of harsh rhetoric against foreigners, both in the West and in Pakistan, who are blamed for the current problems affecting security and development within the country; second, the need for Afghan self-reliance, which though ostensibly justified as an antidote to excessive dependence on the international community is in fact a veiled criticism of those political rivals perceived to enjoy Western support; and, third, the renewed attempt to explore reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban leadership—while vigorously denouncing its Pakistani counterpart—as a means of shoring up Pashtun support for Karzai's candidacy, particularly in the disturbed provinces of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Karzai's reelection campaign, more than any other internal development in Afghanistan, has thus been responsible for the recent upsurge in national rhetoric pertaining to reconciliation. By stoking attention to a possible compromise with the Taliban, especially Mullah Omar—whom Karzai has called “one of our own” and whom he has defended by asserting that “whatever [Omar] says, he is ours, [and] that is all right”<sup>5</sup>—the president has reached out to the *shura* while simultaneously deflecting criticism of his regime's poor performance during the past seven years. By loudly and repeatedly condemning NATO's “conduct of war,”<sup>6</sup> despite the fact that the coalition's presence is what ultimately assures his own power, Karzai has attempted to appeal to those Pashtuns who have suffered as a result of the military operations occurring in Regional Commands East (RC-E) and South

(RC-S). Karzai's criticism of foreigners in general is also intended to appeal to those poor and uneducated Afghans who have been marginalized by the return of their Western-educated countrymen now dominating the development and planning institutions in the fledgling Afghan state. Because these returning elites contain among their fold Karzai's most articulate and formidable critics, he has denounced them in most vituperative terms as "corrupt element[s],... strongly connected ... with ... some members of the international community,"<sup>7</sup> who are incapable of becoming "Afghans meaningfully."<sup>8</sup>

These electoral considerations have come to the fore when Karzai's fears of Western abandonment have been more than matched by the growing disenchantment in Western capitals with his regime's performance. The government of Afghanistan's inability to deliver good governance, especially in the south and east of the country, is viewed in Europe and the United States—correctly—as exacerbating the Taliban insurgency. This perception, in turn, intensifies the fear that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won and leads corrosively to the widespread discussions about exit from the country. When complemented by NATO's poor choice of counterinsurgency strategy in recent years—a strategy that emphasizes firepower and standoff attacks against insurgents but that also produces excessive collateral damage—the popular alienation that results leaves Karzai forsaken at precisely the time when he is unable to confidently conclude that his Western allies are committed to winning the war in the right way and staying the course in Afghanistan. In these circumstances, the political necessities of survival press him to promote reconciliation with the Taliban even more fervently than usual, although he is canny enough to understand that this avenue is unlikely to produce any worthwhile successes immediately. Thus, for example, when, in a recent interview aboard Air Force One, President Obama cautiously speculated that "there may be some ... opportunities in Afghanistan"<sup>9</sup> for exploring reconciliation, Karzai seized on what was only a guarded presidential response to assert dramatically that "Mr. Obama [has] accepted and approved the path of peace and talks with those Afghan Taliban who he called moderates.... This is good news," Karzai declared, averring that "this is approval of our previous stance and we accept and praise it."<sup>10</sup>

Karzai's recent emphasis on reconciling with the Taliban is, thus, deeply enmeshed in a larger strategy that includes externalizing Afghanistan's myriad problems, burnishing his own image as a national unifier, and positioning himself as someone who can stand up to foreign powers even as he fears being deserted by them—all colored by the effort to assure his own reelection. He may, of course, privately believe that reconciliation with the Taliban leadership is ultimately necessary for the success of the Afghan state-building project, but the history of his public exhortations on this issue suggests that he is driven currently more by the compulsions of electoral politics than by any considered strategy for reaching a genuine compromise—if such a conciliation with the Afghan Taliban's hardened and obstinate *rabbari shura* is in fact possible. This conclusion is only confirmed by the fact that Karzai's now frequent endorsements of reconciliation have been neither coordinated with his international partners nor integrated into NATO's current political-

military strategy in Afghanistan, even though the latter has been formally approved by the Afghan government. Equally relevant and to the point is that Mullah Omar and his coterie have repeatedly rejected every reconciliation offer put on the table by Karzai, clearly viewing these as disingenuous, and, when entertaining them on the rarest occasions, have responded with their own bills of particulars that are so outrageous as to be dismissed immediately by Kabul.

The cold truth of the matter, therefore, is that there is less Afghan governmental interest in reconciling with the Taliban leadership than is usually believed—a sentiment fully reciprocated by the *rahbari shura* in Quetta as well. Reconciliation with the *shura* has become a kabuki play—an elaborate ritual driven by transient considerations that in the end signify little. Yet Karzai’s ruffles and flourishes in this matter have already had an effect—sometimes an odd one. For example, in April 2008, senior members of the opposition National Front, unnerved by Karzai’s recurrent calls for conciliation and fearful that a secret deal with the insurgents might be in the making, suddenly announced their own support for a peaceful compromise with the Taliban. This apparent turnabout by key non-Pashtun politicians, who had in fact led the armed struggle against the Taliban during the 1990s, made both their professed acquiescence to reconciliation and their further claim of being asked by the Taliban to mediate with the Karzai government incredibly hard to believe. Their bitter accusation that Karzai had sought to use the specter of negotiations with the Taliban as “a [political] weapon against [his] election rivals”<sup>11</sup> clearly underscores the reality that is often misunderstood in the West: reconciliation with the Taliban leadership is fundamentally about jockeying for power in Afghanistan and not about bringing stability to the country through conciliation and compromise.

Karzai’s interest in trumpeting reconciliation is obvious: it deflects attention from seven years of governance failures yet permits him to persuade marginalized Pashtuns, especially the Ghilzai tribes that offer succor to the Taliban in the south and east, to support his reelection. This very calculus compels the National Front, otherwise the most rabid opponents of the Taliban whose bases of support lie among the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras in the north and in the west, to play the same game: assenting to reconciliation, however insincerely, because it is useful for expanding their own electoral support in the south and embellishing their claims to being a genuinely multiethnic political entity that represents all of Afghanistan.

This competitive wrangling over reconciliation with the Taliban would have remained merely an artifact of domestic Afghan politics were it not for the fact that many of the most conspicuous developments have occurred at a time when European public opinion is tiring of what seems like an interminable—and unwinnable—war in that country. That these maneuverings materialized amid a contentious presidential campaign in the United States, where the conduct of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became important electoral issues, only gave the question of reconciliation more attention than it might have otherwise received. And, finally, the stunning news—as David Ignatius noted in the *Washington Post*—that “Saudi King Abdullah met in Mecca with representatives

of the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani” and with “Afghanistan’s president, Hamid Karzai, who was represented in Mecca by his brother Qayoum Karzai”<sup>12</sup> in a secret mediation effort aimed at cementing rapprochement with the Taliban, decisively opened the floodgates of speculation that not only the Afghan government but also the West itself was slowly moving toward a settlement with its principal foes as the means of ending its larger military operations in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

The wisdom of pursuing such a strategy appeared to be emphasized when a leaked French diplomatic cable from Afghanistan quoted Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the UK ambassador to Kabul, as asserting that the current NATO campaign against the Taliban insurgents was doomed to failure and that the best hope for success hinged on a speedy exit of all foreign forces from the country.<sup>14</sup> That such a view would be uttered by British officials, who have been among the strongest public supporters of the coalition’s military operations in Afghanistan, shocked the already wavering European audiences and reopened the question of whether reconciliation with the Taliban ought to be accelerated as a means of ensuring the early departure of Western forces.

For those in Europe and the United States who are not convinced about either the wisdom of the current effort in Afghanistan or the strategy being implemented to secure its goals, Cowper-Coles’s alleged remarks only provided renewed justification for examining reconciliation with the Taliban as an exit strategy for the West. That the ambassador’s remarks were garbled seemed to matter less; despite Cowper-Coles having previously emphasized on the record that Britain’s involvement in Afghanistan was likely to last “for decades,”<sup>15</sup> his purportedly new and more pessimistic view received wide publicity and further fueled the expectation that reconciliation with the Taliban leadership was inevitable given NATO’s alleged inability to win in Afghanistan.

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates inadvertently fueled such sentiments when, in comments to reporters at an October 9, 2008, meeting of NATO defense ministers in Budapest, Hungary, he contended that “there has to be ultimately—and I’ll underscore ultimately—a reconciliation as part of a political outcome” that ends the conflict in Afghanistan. Suggesting that a similar strategy had worked in Iraq, Gates noted that the United States had “promoted a reconciliation that involved people we were pretty confident had been shooting at us and killing our soldiers.” Concluding laconically—and wrongly—that “at the end of the day, that’s how most wars end,” Gates held that a reconciliation with the Taliban would be desirable only if it occurred on the Afghan government’s terms and if it ensured that the Taliban would subject themselves to the legitimate Afghan state.<sup>16</sup> Gates’s remarks further strengthened the view that reconciliation with the Taliban was inevitable—and only a matter of time.

Most of the audiences in Europe, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even the United States appeared to discount Gates’s critical qualification that reconciliation was desirable only

“ultimately” because he failed to emphasize the all-important distinction between reconciliation occurring as a consequence of, and pursuant to, successful military operations, and reconciliation transpiring in lieu of, and actually precluding the necessity for, combat successes on the ground. While the experience in Iraq arguably represents more the latter than the former, the circumstances in Afghanistan suggest that the same would be difficult to replicate *if* Gates’s consequential desiderata—that reconciliation occur on the Afghan government’s terms and involve the Taliban’s acceptance of the sovereignty of the Afghan state—are to be realized. Further, Gates’s ambiguity in identifying who the targets of the reconciliation effort ought to be, that is, whether it should be directed at the Taliban’s *rahbari shura* or the common run of the insurgency, only made his comments appear even more resigned than he probably intended. After all, a reconciliation program targeted at the Taliban’s ordinary soldiery already exists, even if it is largely unsuccessful, and so his endorsement of a new conciliation effort could only mean encouraging one or more of Karzai’s newer, high-profile overtures toward Mullah Omar and his coterie in Quetta.

This, at any rate, was how Gates’s remarks were interpreted, and before long the press in southern Asia, Europe, and the United States amalgamated fragmentary reports about the preelection reviews of the Afghanistan war then being conducted in the White House by General Douglas E. Lute and at United States Central Command (CENTCOM) by General David Petraeus with the then candidate Barack Obama’s cautious suggestion that talking to the Taliban “should be explored”<sup>17</sup> to conclude that reconciliation with the insurgency would form a critical component of Washington’s new Afghanistan strategy. One Pakistani newspaper, for example, succinctly summarized these perceptions for its large Urdu-speaking readership by declaring forthrightly in its October 19, 2008, edition that “after its failure in the ongoing war against terrorism, the American government has accepted the Taliban as a contending party. In this regard, it has started secret efforts through the Pakistani and the Afghan governments to make it possible for the Taliban to participate in an upcoming *jirga* later this month in Islamabad.”<sup>18</sup>

The growing perception that the United States had endorsed reconciliation with the Taliban—whatever that meant—as a new policy objective was viewed widely in South Asia and elsewhere as evidence that Washington’s military operations in Afghanistan had in fact failed and, hence, could represent the prelude to a major American withdrawal from the region. Even if this withdrawal was not imminent, the pervasive discussion about reconciliation certainly justified the exploration of new negotiated solutions to the Afghan conflict. Consistent with this expectation, the Afghan–Pakistani mini *jirga* held in Islamabad on October 27–28, 2008, “formally tasked” its delegates, in the words of the leader of the Pakistani delegation, North West Frontier Province governor Owais Ahmed Ghani, to establish contacts with “all rivals and seek a way out for reconciliation and peace”—an effort, he claimed, that was supported by the “people as well as the governments of both countries.”<sup>19</sup>

Although the mini *jirga's* conclusions were promptly rejected by both the Taliban *shura* and the Hizbe Islami chief, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as “worthless,”<sup>20</sup> the larger momentum toward reconciliation with the Taliban leadership is justified by so many on the ground that, as Secretary Gates put it, “at the end of the day, that’s how most wars end.” Although this perception about how internal conflicts terminate is common, it also happens to be erroneous. As one academic study has pointed out, of all the civil wars occurring between 1940 and 1992, 71 percent have ended on the battlefield, with only 29 percent ending in negotiated settlements.<sup>21</sup> Even more interesting, although internal antagonists appear to fight to the last in the large majority of cases, they also exhibit a remarkably high willingness to seek peaceful exits from their struggles—but unfortunately end up with relatively low rates of successful settlement. These dismal outcomes usually obtain because the combatants either have little real regard for compromise, or because the underlying conflicts of interests do not yield acceptable terms of cooperation, or because—even when agreements are possible—credible guarantees of equitable enforcement are often lacking.

Although the last impediment can sometimes be overcome by the presence of outside actors, it is hard to imagine how that would apply in Afghanistan, where the principal external agent is the most powerful country in the world that happens to be already allied to one of the key combatants involved in the struggle. All of this only implies that reconciled endings to internal strife are far less frequent than Gates’s remarks in Budapest seemed to suggest—and also that, if a successful conclusion to the conflict in Afghanistan is to obtain, it will have to be procured, at least in the first instance, by means other than a reconciliation with the Taliban leadership.

This indubitable conclusion is reinforced because Mullah Omar and his *rahbari shura* in Quetta have shown no inclination whatsoever to engage in any settlement of the sort rhetorically offered by Karzai. On the odd occasions when such offers appear to be entertained, the Taliban leadership has responded with outrageous and obviously unacceptable conditions, such as the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, the ceding of the ten southern Afghan provinces by Kabul to Taliban control, and the acceptance of the Taliban’s “Islamic” constitution as the political foundation of the Afghan state. As if emphasizing their thorough rejection of any conciliation with Kabul, the few insurgent leaders who have indicated a willingness to reach agreement with the Afghan government in the past have been invariably killed. Although this outcome is usually attributed in Afghanistan, with some justification, to the Pakistani intelligence services, it remains a dramatic signal to all would-be reconciles that whatever Karzai’s or the international coalition’s preferences may be, neither Omar nor Hekmatyar nor Haqqani appears to have any interest in a negotiated end to the war in Afghanistan. This unnerving fact will continually undermine even the Obama administration’s recent endorsement of integration, which is aimed at the non-ideologically committed branch of the Taliban.

Given the consistent rejection of reconciliation by the Taliban leadership over the years, the news reports that Saudi Arabia, once the chief financial backer of the Taliban, hosted

secret talks in Mecca between representatives of the Karzai government and the Taliban's *rahbari shura* seemed dramatic and utterly atypical. The confused reporting about this furtive event further amplified its impact. Some stories claimed that King Abdullah himself supervised the "negotiations"; others claimed that the former Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, brokered the meeting and was present at the discussions; still others claimed that representatives of the Taliban's allies, Hekmatyar and Haqqani, were present, and that Mullah Omar himself had submitted a list of demands that became the subject of negotiation.<sup>22</sup> All told, the various news reports about this event, which took place in September 2008 around Eid al-Fitr, conveyed the impression of a fresh and concerted Saudi initiative that was intended, after many years of diplomatic absence, to force a negotiated termination of the conflict in Afghanistan because of the kingdom's recognition of "the political weakness of Pakistan and the need to stem the growth of al Qaeda."<sup>23</sup>

Although many details of this meeting are still unclear, it turns out that this Saudi-hosted event was far more prosaic than initially believed. For starters, neither Nawaz Sharif nor any representatives of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani were actually present; more important, Mullah Omar and his *rahbari shura* were also not represented in any way. The highest Taliban members present at the meeting appear to be Mullah Abdul Salam Zaif, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, and Maulavi Ahmad Mutawakil, the former Taliban foreign minister during the years in power. Neither Zaif nor Mutawakil is close to Omar, enjoys his confidence, or poses as his representative. Further, the initiative for the meeting—surprisingly, given all the news reports—did not come from the Saudis at all. In fact, Riyadh's embarrassment at being associated with the Taliban historically and its general reticence in matters of diplomacy ensured that Karzai's occasional requests for intercession with the Taliban were consistently ignored.<sup>24</sup>

The idea for this meeting instead came from Qayum Karzai, a U.S. citizen and the brother of the Afghan president, who worked several back channels for close to two years in an effort to pull together a private, informal discussion to explore the prospects of Taliban reconciliation outside of the official PTS program. The Saudis then played host to what was essentially a track-two effort, an orientation that all sides seem intent on maintaining because of the justified fear that any official odor could stymie the fledgling effort and render it otiose, just as the PTS initiative has become for most part. Finally, and most important, the Mecca meeting involved no negotiations between any of the parties, in part because the main Afghan "representative," to the degree that he can be so labeled, was Qayum Karzai, who has no official position and, despite his relationship to the president, went out of his way to emphasize that he did not represent the Afghan government. Although the Saudi hosts are believed to have raised some political issues, the subsequent exchanges that occurred were for most part religious, appropriate perhaps for a seventeen-member Afghan delegation consisting of mullahs visiting Mecca for Ramadan. As Maulavi Ahmed Mutawakil, the former Taliban foreign minister who attended the event later described truthfully, "There were no talks and no Taliban representative was there. It was an ordinary and normal meeting and dinner."<sup>25</sup>

For all its secrecy and hyperbole, the Saudi-hosted parleys therefore cannot be considered to be a meaningful contribution toward reconciliation with the Taliban leadership—at least not yet. The *rahbari shura* in any event rejected the initiative entirely with Mullah Hasan Rahmani, an intimate of Mullah Omar, declaring plainly that “today the Taliban are successful and the Americans and the NATO forces are in a state of defeat. The enemy wants to engage the Taliban and deviate [*sic*] their minds. Sometimes they offer talks, sometimes they offer other fake issues. The Taliban never ever tried for such talks, neither do we want these talks to be held. Neither the Saudi Arabian initiative [in Mecca] nor the Saudi Arabian proposal [regarding Mullah Omar] is acceptable.”<sup>26</sup> Al-Qaeda’s second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, chimed in as well, tellingly noting that Afghan attempts to negotiate with the Taliban were “a sign of the government’s weakness.”<sup>27</sup>

On balance, reconciliation with the Taliban thus appears to be more convoluted than it appears at first sight. Although there are many participants and possibly even more advocates, there has been little tangible progress despite the increasingly clangorous discussion on the subject inside and outside of Afghanistan. The PTS initiative, which concentrates on integrating the insurgent cadres, has yielded meager success, and negotiations with the Taliban leadership, as the tortured history analyzed above reveals, have not even gotten off the ground. Failure in the latter instance has derived mainly from the consistent rejection of rapprochement by Mullah Omar and his coterie in Quetta. The chances of success, at any rate, have not been helped by Karzai’s episodic but conspicuous forays into conciliation, with the most recent upsurge driven more by his electoral predicaments than anything else.

The dismal record of reconciliation with the Taliban, however, has not prevented a new wave of advocates from championing it vociferously as the solution to the current difficulties of the West in Afghanistan. For Europeans seeking to bail out of this war and avoid making more military contributions than they already have, the idea of reconciliation is attractive because it provides a solution that permits the conflict to be terminated early and at lower cost to themselves, without incurring the opprobrium of hasty withdrawal or consenting to defeat. For Americans tired of fighting a war that offers no end in sight at a time when the nation is wracked by serious problems at home, reconciliation with the Taliban offers similar advantages. Those who believe in the cause but are not convinced about the wisdom of the current NATO strategy and who despair about the feasibility of any alternative also end up as reluctant supporters of reconciliation.

It is no surprise that Afghanistan’s neighbors remain among the most fervent opponents of the idea. India, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia continue to be mortally opposed to any negotiated arrangements that would permit the Taliban either to be treated as a legitimate force in Afghan politics or to return to power in Kabul after having been ejected from the capital by force. Their preferences are echoed by all the non-Pashtun groups within Afghanistan itself, whose interests are articulated most clearly by key constituents of the National Front. And, if the results of the repeated polls in

Afghanistan are any indicator, even the Pashtun majority within the country is opposed to the Taliban. Given the intensity of opposition to the Taliban both within and outside Afghanistan, it is almost certain that the group's relegitimation or its return to power through nonelectoral means would precipitate a new civil war within the country, with different factions being supported by different neighboring states in varying ways.

Odd as it may seem, even Pakistan, which historically has been and still remains the Taliban's strongest base of support, is ambivalent about the idea of reconciliation. Although all moderate Pakistani civilian leaders are formally supportive of the notion, their anxieties about the rehabilitation of a group with decidedly antediluvian predilections make them less than enthusiastic because of their fears concerning its impact on Pakistan. The Pakistan Army too has been apprehensive about reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban because it threatens to undermine the ongoing military operations now under way against the Pakistani counterpart.

All told, then, the idea of successfully reconciling the Afghan government with the Afghan Taliban leadership does not look especially promising, even if it seems to have more advocates now than ever before. The principal obstacle is, of course, the Taliban themselves. So long as they are convinced that military victory in Afghanistan is inevitable, Mullah Omar and his *rahbari shura* have no incentives whatsoever to contemplate any kind of reconciliation with the Afghan government. Thus, even President Obama's recent cautious ruminations about reaching out to the Taliban have been met with sharp derision and decisive rejection. Reacting to the president's March 8, 2009, remarks aboard Air Force One, the Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, contended that "it is ridiculous to sort [the] Taliban [into] so-called "moderate[s]" or "fundamental[ists]." He also declared that there could be no talks with the Karzai regime until "all the international troops withdraw from Afghanistan." Emphasizing that the Taliban was a movement united "under the only leadership of Mullah Omar" [*sic*], Mujahid dismissed all overtures at reconciliation—whether Afghan or American—and reiterated the insurgents' intention to continue their war until the Afghan government was defeated.<sup>28</sup>

That the Taliban can successfully promote their claim that victory is plausible—despite their repeated failures on the battlefield—is a tribute to their unexpectedly effective propaganda on one hand, and also a testament to the irresoluteness of Western populations on the other. By convincing key audiences in NATO countries that the insurgents are invincible and therefore capable of confronting the coalition with a protracted and unwinnable war, the Taliban have made the clamor for reconciliation more urgent at just the time when it is certain to be most unsuccessful. This bald reality of politics promises to undermine the Obama administration's recent interest in reconciliation as well, even if the policy is aimed mainly at the common run of the insurgency and not its supreme leadership. ■

# THINKING ABOUT RECONCILIATION STRATEGICALLY

The worst time to contemplate any reconciliation with the Taliban is when the perception is gaining ground, however incorrectly, that the movement's objectives are on the cusp of being realized. If the breathless claim advanced by one organization is true—that “the Taliban now holds a permanent presence in 72% of Afghanistan, up from 54% a year ago” and that its “permanent presence in the country has increased by a startling 18%”<sup>29</sup> within a year—no Taliban leader would have any incentive to reconcile with the Afghan government or the West because political control of the embattled state could be secured through battlefield successes far more easily than through any reconciliation efforts, which could involve potentially painful compromises. Seeking negotiations with the insurgents in such circumstances would only suggest that the coalition has accepted the inevitability of defeat and would evoke either more outrageous Taliban conditions or simply a dismissal of coalition entreaties because victory is already at hand.

Even if the problem of weak Taliban incentives to negotiate at this juncture is surmountable, it is simply unclear how the Karzai government and the coalition more generally can overcome the traditional challenges associated with successful reconciliation: distinguishing between the “redeemables” and the “eternal warriors” in the opposition; reaching out to the former in effective ways; and, finally, ensuring that any reconciliation, if it can be carried out, will in fact be permanent. There is actually some good news here: reconciliation with key elements of the Afghan resistance *is* possible. But there is some unsettling news as well: such rapprochement cannot occur either before Taliban strategy is actually defeated on the ground or as a substitute for correcting the conditions that have made Taliban inroads successful in Afghanistan. In other words, meaningful reconciliation will occur only after the coalition achieves the strategic objectives it has fought for since 2001; if the Obama administration pursues the integration of the non-ideological insurgents explicitly on this premise, it will stand a greater chance of success.

BOX 1

## THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT

### The Taliban comprise:

- The *rahbari shura* centered around Mullah Omar and his cohort in Quetta and the subsidiary war councils in Quetta, Miran Shah, Peshawar, and Karachi;
- The ideologically committed Taliban cadres who survived the defeat in Afghanistan are controlled by the regional *shuras* and continue to draw on the *madaris* in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the refugee camps in Pakistan for their continuing recruitment;
- The tribal networks of former mujahideen commanders like Jalaluddin Haqqani, who operates in Paktika, Paktia, and Khowst provinces and provides a key bridge between al-Qaeda and the Taliban; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who leads the Hizbe Islami and operates in Nangarhar, Konar, and Nuristan provinces; Anwar-ul-Haq, who leads the Hizbe Islami, Yunus Khalis faction, who also operates in the Nangarhar area and is believed to lead the Tora Bora Military Front; and Saifullah Mansoor, a veteran field commander who is known to be active in the eastern areas of Afghanistan;
- The Pakistani Taliban commanders like Baitullah Mehsud, the chieftain of the Mehsud tribe in South Waziristan; Maulana Faqir Muhammad, who is associated with the Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shari'at-e-Muhammad (TNSM) and who operates in the Bajaur Agency; Maulana Qazi Fazlullah, also affiliated with the same group but operating out of Swat; Mangal Bagh Afridi, who leads the Lashkar-e-Islami in the Khyber Agency and is believed to be part of a larger local opposition network led by Mufti Munir Shakir; and Sharif Khan and Nur Islam, tribal leaders who have demonstrated considerable operational effectiveness in South Waziristan;
- The groups formerly focused predominantly on Kashmir, such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, but that have now become fervent allies of the *rahbari shura* and, in the case of the latter, al-Qaeda as well;
- The drug lords in eastern and southern Afghanistan, especially in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, who are either taxed or willingly contribute revenues that are indispensable for the Taliban war against Kabul;
- The sundry former anti-Soviet commanders who control small groups of fighters and are engaged primarily in criminal activities such as bank robberies, kidnappings for ransom, and assassinations of local officials while they simultaneously offer their services as guns for hire;
- The disaffected Afghan Pashtun tribes, most conspicuously the rural Ghilzai but also the smaller Durrani formations, which, feeling disenfranchised in the current governing arrangements, continue to support the Taliban with manpower and sanctuary within Afghanistan; and, finally,
- Al-Qaeda, which, while distinct from all the foregoing groups in that its focus of operations remains the global jihad, nonetheless collaborates with the Taliban in order to assist the insurgents in recovering control of Kabul while it continues to preserve its sanctuary in the FATA in the interim.

Understanding this conclusion requires an appreciation of the internal demographics of the Taliban insurgency. Although the “Taliban” are often discussed as if they were a homogenous opposition, the noun itself is essentially an economizing abstraction: never a tight and cohesive political entity at the best of times, the Taliban today have become an even looser network of affiliated individuals and groups. As things stand currently, the Taliban can be described most accurately as a disparate congeries of several elements (see box 1) united only by a common religious ideology; a desire to regain power in either Afghanistan or their local areas of operation; and a deep antagonism toward the current government of Afghanistan and the United States and its regional allies.

Across many of the constituent entities that form the Taliban, it is possible to identify three broad categories of actors, each with different attitudes toward reconciliation. The first category of insurgents consists of the core leadership of various groups that share the Taliban’s ideology and objectives and the groups’ committed foot soldiers who are dedicated to overthrowing the current Afghan government and regaining power in Kabul through force.

The second category consists of ordinary Afghans, Pashtuns who choose to support Taliban operations as full-time or part-time participants either because doing so remains a lucrative source of income and employment in circumstances where few other opportunities exist; or because the local Taliban presence provides public goods such as security, justice, governance, and development that the Afghan state has neglected; or because participation in the Taliban insurgency becomes a form of protest against the corruption and abuse suffered at the hands of local state functionaries such as the police or the district governor’s office.

The third category consists of Afghan tribal leaders, and influential personalities in the tribes, subtribes, clans, and villages more generally, who support the Taliban in the south and the east. The strongest supporters of the Taliban in these areas are individuals affiliated with the tribes belonging to the Ghilzai confederation, although some members of the smaller deprived Durrani tribes such as the Alizai, Ishaqzai, and Noorzai support the Taliban strongly as well.<sup>30</sup>

This identification of Taliban supporters by tribe does not imply that the major Afghan tribal confederations or even specific tribes within them are always the relevant units of action when analyzing the insurgency. Unless the tribe as an institution is pertinent to a particular argument, tribal affiliations throughout this report mainly identify the sources from which the rebellion draws its manpower. Consequently, tribal affiliations do not necessarily connote that tribes as social structures or inter-tribal rivalries *per se* are responsible for stoking the uprising. The Taliban insurgency in fact is *not* an exclusively tribal phenomenon: although tribal politics plays an important role in many ways, tribal affiliations can also disguise rational decisions made by individual agents for other personal, religious, or nationalist reasons.

When the tribal labels are not nominalist, however, the evidence suggests that diverse calculations drive the support offered by tribal and village influentials for the insurgency. In some instances, tribal leadership support for the Taliban derives from interclan competition. Because the Karzai regime has often favored members of certain consanguineal tribes for political office, patronage, and resources, their disenfranchised competitors often support the Taliban as a means of getting even with those who have monopolized the spoils.

In other instances, many tribes and their leaders support the Taliban simply because they have concluded that the insurgents are winning or because the rebels are viewed as more effective vehicles for advancing their specific local interests. In still other instances, tribal support for the Taliban derives from the fact that the religiously driven insurgents have shown themselves to be incorruptible—unlike their governmental counterparts—and have often brought law, order, and justice through a parallel governance system to areas under their control. Stories are legion in southern and eastern Afghanistan about how key tribal and village elders have acquiesced to the Taliban presence, even if they are otherwise uncomfortable with the group's ideology, because the insurgents have provided a breather from the interminable petty corruption that seems to plague those areas under control of the government or the warlords.

Whatever the reasons may be in any given case, the critical distinguishing trait of the tribal leadership's support for the Taliban often is that it does not emerge from ideological solidarity with the movement's ambitions. Rather, support for the insurgency represents a convenient device to protest against the marginalization of certain tribes, subtribes, or clans; or an effort to bandwagon with what appears to be the winning side in the ongoing struggle for power; or sometimes simply a desire to enjoy the fruits of security and sustenance, which the resistance seems able to deliver in the areas under their control in contrast to the government, which cannot. This instrumental character of tribal support for the Taliban insurgency in the south and east is most obviously confirmed by the fact that, because minority tribes dominate politically in the former and majority tribes in the latter, the strongest support for the resistance derives from the losers in each instance.<sup>31</sup>

Analyzing the demographics of the Taliban movement in this way indicates the possibilities of reconciliation and the strategies required to achieve it. Those in the first category are perhaps the smallest in number of the three groups, but, being the true ideologically committed adherents of the movement, they are unlikely to be reconcilable on any terms. They seek the complete destruction of the moderate regime in Kabul through the physical takeover of the south and the east as a prelude to the complete conquest of Afghanistan. The United States and its coalition will have no alternative but to defeat and destroy the members of this target set because they are truly implacable foes.

The second category of Afghans, the disparate individuals who resist the coalition, is probably the largest in number and is reconcilable in principle if the political deficits that spur their protest—the absence of personal security, justice, and economic opportunity, coupled with pervasive governmental corruption and abuse—are mitigated through deliberate action. If the Afghan state and the international coalition acting in tandem can implement strategies that enhance the safety and well-being of ordinary Afghans (particularly those in rural areas whose welfare is threatened as much by criminals, militias, drug lords, local police, and other government officials as it is by the insurgents), provide a decent system of dispensing justice speedily at the local level, and offer licit economic opportunities to the populations living outside of the country's major cities, the stage would be set for the progressive defection of the rent-a-Taliban *lumpenproletariat* away from Mullah Omar and his coterie and toward the government in Kabul.

The third category of Taliban supporters, which consists of the tribal and village hierarchs in the southern and eastern provinces and who probably fall somewhere between the first and the second groupings in number, is also reconcilable in principle because its constituents are not always committed to aiding the insurgency as a matter of ideology. Their political grievances against the central government in regard to the sharing of power and resources and their willingness to support whoever appears to be winning in Afghanistan implies that currently unfriendly tribal leaders can be induced to shift their loyalties toward Kabul if the local governing arrangements become more equitable, meaning that the state alters its current policy of patronizing certain favored consanguineal tribes and leaders and, perhaps even more important, if the government is seen to be gaining the upper hand in its current standoff with the Taliban. There is perhaps nothing that would move the Ghilzai and Durrani chieftains who currently support the Taliban to rapidly reconcile with the legitimate authorities in Kabul more than the perception of victory accruing to the Western coalition. This process can be aided by those techniques that have traditionally worked in Afghanistan: subornment, targeted rewards and penalties, and offers of protection to supporters. These instruments become doubly effective if the regime that implements them is both successful and perceived to be successful in a political sense against its adversaries.

When considered strategically, the logic of reconciliation, then, comes full circle. If the Afghan state can, with the assistance of its foreign partners, implement strategies that beget success on the ground—that is, provide personal security and opportunities for sustenance to the populace at large, minimize the governmental abuse of power, and co-opt the tribes through power sharing that reflects democratic principles—the individuals who populate the two categories of resistance for non-ideological reasons would have rational incentives to steer away from opposition toward more constructive collaboration with the state. Because reconciliation in these circumstances is not the result of empty political initiatives centered on negotiated bargains incorporating a formal exchange of obligations—as has been the approach thus far—but through

the transformation of the situations that had made resistance justifiable, the problems associated with past reconciliation failures can henceforth be obviated. If changes in the political environment cause opponents to shift toward supporting the government, state authority is freed from the burden of having to distinguish a priori the “reconcilables” from the “eternal warriors.” Moreover, the government is spared the challenge of having to craft formal strategies of compromise because settlement occurs not because of a particular political program, but because the structural incentives to defy the state have themselves progressively disappeared. And, finally, the regime is liberated from the fear of having to cope with recidivism because, so long as the government is able to durably satisfy the demands that previously precipitated hostility, the danger of reconciled individuals lapsing into violence is considerably minimized.

The success of reconciliation in Afghanistan requires, therefore, an enduring victory in regard to the state- and nation-building efforts already under way. Failure on this score would not only destroy all prospects for successful rapprochement within the country but also, and even worse, plunge it into the large-scale chaos that abets further terrorism and invites opportunistic meddling by Kabul’s neighbors. The central question in this context, then, remains one of how to produce the political-military victory that makes reconciliation possible—even if, at that point, formal compromise becomes least necessary. ■

# WINNING THE WAR BY SEEKING CLARITY ABOUT GOALS

Any strategy that seeks to encourage reconciliation through political-military success requires clarity about the overarching goals. This is especially important in the case of Afghanistan, where the operations under way involve a large coalition of some forty-one countries in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which includes NATO's twenty-six members, many of which appear to have unique interests, seem to be pursuing different goals, and are buffeted by diverse political pressures at home. It is in fact particularly problematic that even after eight years of combat operations, there is widespread uncertainty in both the United States and Europe about what the coalition's military activities are intended to achieve in Afghanistan. Such confusion not only corrodes alliance cohesion but also undermines the ability of the partners to muster the necessary resources required for the success of the mission.

The goal of coalition operations in Afghanistan must be to erect an effective state that can control its national territory and deliver the personal security, responsive governance, and economic development necessary to ensure internal stability. Nothing less will suffice for purposes of attaining victory in Afghanistan—and conspicuous failures along any of these dimensions will only reproduce the political circumstances that made the country hospitable to al-Qaeda to begin with. While this definition of war aims is arguably reasonable—and has, at any rate, implicitly undergirded the American efforts in Afghanistan since the Bonn Conference in 2001—it has now become increasingly suspect in both the United States and Europe as the twin ISAF and OEF operations in Afghanistan have turned out to be more wearying than initially expected.

Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.), for example, has warned against any ambitious reconstruction in Afghanistan intended “to make it our 51st state,” suggesting that allied objectives in that country be limited merely to ensuring that “it does not become an al-Qaeda narco-state and terrorist beachhead capable of destabilizing neighboring

Pakistan.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Vice President Joseph Biden, in a February 2009 speech at the Munich Security Conference, called for “clear and achievable” goals,<sup>33</sup> qualifications that have been widely interpreted, against the backdrop of news reports about pessimistic administration assessments, as limiting U.S. aims in Afghanistan. Even President Obama, who throughout his election campaign repeatedly affirmed that Afghanistan was “the central front on terror” and that he would “make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be” because “this is a war that we have to win,”<sup>34</sup> appeared to be retreating. In a December 7, 2008, interview on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Obama articulated only the “very limited” objective of ensuring that Afghanistan “cannot be used as a base to launch attacks against the United States” and, warning of fierce Afghan resistance to the presence of foreign troops, stated that his “number one goal” would be to stop al-Qaeda.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, the original goal that the United States and the international community committed themselves to, first, through the Bonn Agreement and, later, through its successor, the Afghanistan Compact in January 2006—namely, raising an effective Afghan state—is under pressure if not outright attack. Four broad critiques of this objective currently appear to be coalescing, each articulated with varying degrees of clarity.

The first critique asserts that, given Afghanistan’s history, its sociopolitical particularities, and its comparative stage of development, building a modern Afghan state is simply beyond the capacity of the West in current circumstances and, hence, NATO (to include the United States) ought to recommit itself to the more modest goal of simply eliminating al-Qaeda, which was the original precipitant that justified U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.

The second critique, borrowing many of the assumptions from the first school, also argues that the current U.S. objective of raising a modern Afghan state is chimerical because the country historically has never enjoyed an unbroken tradition of strong and institutionalized central authority; instead, its experience of personalized politics, which derives its vitality from subnational social formations such as ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian tribes, implies that the only viable goal in Afghanistan should be restoring its tribal society minus the extremism, not attempting to construct a new centralized state. In effect, this view would seek to reconstruct Afghanistan as an acephalous polity. In the literal sense, an acephalous state is one that lacks a head and, in the Afghan context, the term can be used to refer to the presence of significant subnational social formations that compete among themselves in the absence of an overpowering national arbiter.

The third critique, again accepting many of the preconceptions that animate the other two schools of thought, would argue that not only is a modern state impossible to construct in Afghanistan, even a moderate acephalous polity would be hard to establish because of the deep support for conservative versions of Islam—represented by the Taliban—in some key regions of the country. Consequently, pursuing some kind of

reconciliation with the Taliban that permits their confessional system to be peacefully accommodated within the state—by creating a mixed polity with fundamentalist components—represents the best hope for an end to conflict.

The fourth critique rejects the conclusions offered by the other three schools. It accepts that the goals of primarily eliminating al-Qaeda, reconstituting a moderate tribal society, and incorporating the Taliban into the polity will not suffice either individually or collectively to achieve the coalition's larger aims in Afghanistan. It would affirm, therefore, the necessity for creating an effective political order as a desirable strategic objective but would argue that the impediments to stable politics identified by the other critiques imply that such a regime in Afghanistan will of necessity be authoritarian. Consequently, this school would urge the Western coalition to invest in creating a modern state, but one that is not necessarily democratic in character. So long as the regime can control its territory effectively, a benevolently authoritarian state ought to suffice. This would be especially true if the costs of holding out for a stable, properly representative government in Afghanistan are likely to lie beyond NATO's political capacity and reach in the foreseeable future.

Although these critiques ought to be pondered as a corrective to what may sometimes appear as excessively ambitious nation-building goals, their recommended political aims should be rejected because they would undermine the *minimal* strategic reason for the current international involvement in Afghanistan. That reason, shorn of all subtlety, is simply to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a haven that extremist groups of different stripes can use to mount catastrophic attacks on other members of the world community. As President Obama correctly emphasized, "Our men and women still fight and die" in Afghanistan because "Al Qaeda and its allies—the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks—are in Pakistan and Afghanistan.... And if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban—or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged—that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can."<sup>36</sup> Given the enduring U.S. national security interest in ridding Afghanistan of its al-Qaeda and Taliban parasites, *none* of the alternative aims proposed by the four critiques can ensure the realization of this least negotiable objective. This painful fact ought to be contemplated carefully, particularly at a time when the Obama administration is likely to come under considerable pressure from Congress and the Europeans to settle for what are ostensibly "less ambitious" goals in Afghanistan.

It is tempting, for example, to believe that defeating al-Qaeda alone (or even the Taliban in tandem) could subsist as a genuine alternative to building an effective state in Afghanistan. Ambassador Chas. W. Freeman Jr., for example, argues for precisely such a limited aim when he asserts that

We need to recall the reason we went to Afghanistan in the first place.... Our purpose was ... to deny the use of Afghan territory to terrorists with global

reach. That was and is an attainable objective. It is a limited objective that can be achieved at reasonable cost. We must return to a ruthless focus on this objective. We cannot afford to pursue goals, however worthy, that contradict or undermine it. The reform of Afghan politics, society and mores must wait.<sup>37</sup>

The limitations of this argument should be obvious: even if the conclusive defeat of al-Qaeda and its allies could actually be orchestrated in the absence of a minimally effective Afghan state—and this is a big *if* to begin with—achieving this more restricted goal does not guarantee that successor entities to al-Qaeda and its associates will not arise and attempt to use the stateless spaces within Afghanistan to mount exactly the same kinds of attacks previously mounted by Osama Bin Laden’s cohort.

Only the presence of a successful Afghan state, capable of exercising the Weberian “monopoly of force” within its national boundaries, can avert the recurrence of such a threat. To the degree that such an entity can actually deliver personal security, decent governance, and responsive rule to its citizenry, it would minimize the incentives for any of its inhabitants to actually support extremist groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their successors. Consequently, abdicating responsibility for constructing a stable and effective state, however difficult and burdensome that may be in the interim, arguably would not advance even the minimal objectives for which U.S. intervention in Afghanistan occurred originally. In fact, pursuing the limited goal of focusing only on al-Qaeda and its partners, such as the Taliban, to the exclusion of creating a stable Afghan state, could prove more costly in the long run.

A different variation of the first critique, which urges exclusive focus on counterterrorism to the neglect of state building in Afghanistan, derives from the distinction between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. As Fareed Zakaria has argued,

The United States is properly and unalterably opposed to Al Qaeda—on strategic, political and moral grounds—because its *raison d’être* is to inflict brutality on the civilized world. We have significant differences with the Taliban on many issues—democracy and the treatment of women being the most serious. But we do not wage war on other Islamist groups with which we similarly disagree (the Saudi monarchy, for example).<sup>38</sup>

The Taliban, in this analysis, are at worst a radical Islamist group that the United States may dislike, but with which it can live, unlike al-Qaeda, which is a remorseless foe that must be ruthlessly prosecuted. Other commentators have taken this distinction to its logical conclusion. Because al-Qaeda now exists primarily in Pakistan and not in Afghanistan, these commentators have argued that allied operations within Afghanistan should be slowly wound down in order to better concentrate resources against the al-Qaeda sanctuary in Pakistan’s tribal belt. This approach, according to its advocates, not only has the advantage of training international pressure on the real foe—as opposed

to the superficial opponent—it also averts all the problems associated with pressuring a fragile Pakistan to prevent the cross-border movement of Taliban insurgents from its territories into Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> Many in Washington find these arguments, based on the distinction between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, to be congenial. They justify a speedy and complete exit from Afghanistan without further investments in nation building while simultaneously preventing the advocates from appearing pusillanimous in domestic politics. After all, if the real adversary—al-Qaeda—is not even in Afghanistan any more to begin with, what good and self-interested reason could there be for the United States (and its allies) to remain engaged in this costly and burdensome state-building endeavor in Kabul?

Unfortunately for the advocates of exit from Afghanistan, the sharp distinctions that they seek to draw between the Taliban and al-Qaeda are simply not tenable today. Although there was indeed a clear distinction, and even an uneasy relationship between the two, in the years prior to September 11, 2001, many key elements of the Taliban insurgency and al-Qaeda have since become intertwined and inseparable.<sup>40</sup> Al-Qaeda's focus still remains primarily the global jihad, but it also aids a variety of Taliban and other insurgent activities in Pakistan's tribal belt and in Afghanistan. This support is usually manifested through financial assistance, technical training, operational coordination, and shared logistics, and it is oriented toward buttressing the insurgent networks and their sanctuaries that permit al-Qaeda to operate from and exploit as necessary for its continued effectiveness. Many of the Taliban's constituent components, in turn, contribute to al-Qaeda operations through assistance in recruiting, tactical cooperation wherever relevant, and cooperative attacks on common adversaries.

The bottom line, therefore, is that it is virtually impossible today to distinguish between al-Qaeda and many of its Taliban confederates on the ground because their operational collaboration is so extensive and multifarious. Mullah Dadullah Akhund, a key Afghan Taliban commander described before his death the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda by stating plainly, "We like the Al Qaeda organization. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organization, which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our cooperation is ideal." Admitting that the Taliban cooperates with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, he acknowledged that "when we need them, we ask for their help. For example, the bombings we carry out—we learned it from them. We learn other types of operations from them as well.... We cooperate and help each other."<sup>41</sup> This symbiotic relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban is now also reflected in the latter's worldview. As Thomas Johnson has demonstrated in his careful analysis of Taliban "night letters," the early focus on local Afghan issues has been complemented by new invocations directed toward the global *ummah*, often employing the locutions associated with Osama Bin Laden. This expanding worldview, even if largely rhetorical for now, corroborates the deepening entanglement between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, a shift that Johnson concludes is explicable only "as the Taliban gather strength and other international events turn against the West."<sup>42</sup>

Even if Western aims in Afghanistan are therefore limited to the most minimal goals of defeating terrorism, and only al-Qaeda terrorism at that, there will be no alternative for the United States and its alliance partners to prosecute the war against the Taliban just as vigorously *in Afghanistan*. This is because the evidence suggests that after almost a decade of conflict with the United States, al-Qaeda and many key Taliban constituents—such as the *rabbari shura*, Hekmatyar, Haqqani, ul-Haq, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, just to name a few—are all intermixed in a veritable witches’ brew of opposition to both the government of Afghanistan and the Western coalition writ large. All these Taliban entities and many more cooperate with al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan as well as outside it. Consequently, the United States will not have the luxury of being able to segregate some pristine Taliban remnant that can be accommodated because it happens to be an example of radical Islam but not concurrently one of global terrorism.

For the same reason, U.S. policy will also not be able to pull out of Afghanistan on the grounds that the real enemy is in Pakistan: if the coalition were to cede Afghanistan, or even some part of it, to the Taliban insurgency, all those militants who currently either operate within Afghanistan, or straddle the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, or are nestled within Pakistan would simply flow into this new sanctuary—after the United States withdrew—and continue their operations against the West uninterrupted. As President Obama summarized it well, an American exit from Kabul would gift the Afghan people with “a return to Taliban rule [that] would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people—especially women and girls. [Moreover,] the return in force of al Qaeda terrorists who would accompany the core Taliban leadership would cast Afghanistan under the shadow of perpetual violence.”<sup>43</sup> Defeating this threat requires that the United States remain ensconced in Afghanistan. Those analysts who urge continued opposition to al-Qaeda as they argue simultaneously for a withdrawal from Afghanistan seem to believe that counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda (and against the Taliban, if necessary) can be conducted satisfactorily even if Washington maintains no tangible military presence in Afghanistan. On the assumption that al-Qaeda terrorists can be effectively suppressed through standoff attacks conducted by unmanned combat air systems (such as the MQ-1 Predator or MQ-9 Reaper) or air strikes, they conclude that a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan should in no way undermine ongoing counterterrorism operations.<sup>44</sup>

That this argument is flawed is not hard to see. Even if the problem of al-Qaeda being intermixed with the Taliban is entirely disregarded for purposes of argument, the notion that standoff attacks would suffice to suppress this elusive adversary is entirely quixotic. For starters, even vehicles capable of conducting interdiction strikes need to be based in some proximity to the enemy; operations against al-Qaeda today are conducted primarily through combat air power and Special Forces based in Afghanistan. Because Pakistan and the Central Asian states will not permit basing war-fighting assets on their territories—a fact unlikely to change in the foreseeable future—the only alternative,

if coalition military forces exit Afghanistan, will be to rely either on airfields farther away in the Persian Gulf states or on American aircraft carriers operating in the Arabian Sea.<sup>45</sup> The latter, of course, cannot base the Predator systems at the present time; and, although other forms of air power can be deployed from both the Gulf states—assuming they are agreeable—and from aircraft carriers, the distance from launch site to target in both instances is so great that it would be shocking if such missions turned out to be effective in any but the smallest number of cases.

Targeting information pertaining to al-Qaeda threats historically has always been extremely fragile and time sensitive; even with U.S. forces deployed close to such targets—in Afghanistan—the record of successfully neutralizing al-Qaeda operatives has been mixed at best. Given this reality, it is simply mystifying as to how anyone can conclude that standoff attacks conducted against such fleeting targets from locales even farther away than Afghanistan can be successful when persistent and repeated strikes from Afghan bases during the past eight years have been unable to completely eradicate the most important terrorist targets of interest to the United States.

This problem could, of course, be circumvented by negotiating arrangements with Afghanistan for combat basing of Predators and strike aircraft even after Washington abandons Kabul, pulls its troops out of the country, and renounces its mission of state building in Afghanistan. Why the Afghans would have any interest in such an agreement remains inexplicable, particularly because Kabul would, through such a deal, have transformed its own country into a target for al-Qaeda attacks at precisely the time when it had lost all the substantive protections previously offered by the United States. For all these reasons, the notion that standoff attacks conducted from a distance would suffice to neutralize al-Qaeda in the face of a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan must be judged as fanciful, especially when such operations conducted under far more favorable circumstances today have produced only alloyed results. Moreover, at a time when the al-Qaeda network is becoming ever harder to distinguish from its various Taliban allies as far as threats to the United States and its partners are concerned, the idea that standoff attacks can be conducted successfully, even in the face of a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, confounds the imagination.

These pessimistic conclusions, then, all coalesce to underscore one basic point: successful counterterrorism operations, even if these are focused only on al-Qaeda, require targeting al-Qaeda's allies as well; and even if this is not the case, American counterterrorism goals, however narrow, cannot be permanently realized in Afghanistan without being embedded in the larger endeavor of state and nation building. What will be required, therefore, is a recommitment to this original objective, namely, raising an effective Afghan state that, by being able to control its territory and earn the support of its populace, can counter the terrorism threatening American interests far more effectively than the purported alternatives of simply pursuing narrow counterterrorism aims in Afghanistan or prematurely exiting the country.

Seeking to restore an acephalous Afghan polity dominated by traditional tribal structures also provides no assurance that threats like al-Qaeda or the Taliban would be conclusively eviscerated. This conclusion is significant because many, such as David Boaz of the Cato Institute, have asked whether “in a country that has always been only loosely ruled, does it make sense to devote American strength to building a strong central state? Or might we be able to extricate ourselves sooner if we accept a decentralized Afghanistan with some regions ruled by groups that are currently fighting against our troops?”<sup>46</sup> It is important to recognize, for starters, that periods of truly acephalous politics have been rare in modern Afghan history. Moreover, the pristine tribal system in Afghanistan, which produced romantic images of the indigenes as fierce but noble savages, has been largely shattered thanks to the decades of war and internal conflict spawned by the Soviet invasion of 1979. Today, it is hard to find tribal leaders in Afghanistan who can exercise unqualified control over their traditional territories through either charismatic or patrimonial leadership. Rather, tribal politics throughout the Pashtun belt has fundamentally fragmented, with struggles for power and resources occurring not merely among the largest tribal confederations but even between the smallest habitations populated by members of the same tribe. One Arab locution has captured the dynamic succinctly, “Me against my brothers, me and my brothers against my cousins, me and my cousins against the world.”<sup>47</sup> The current political competition in Afghanistan, therefore, resembles Hobbes’s mythical “state of nature,” with deadly rivalries arising frequently among superordinate and subordinate social units for varying and often bewildering reasons. The idea that a return to halcyon politics, centered primarily on the traditional tribal system, is then possible is entirely chimerical. In fact, despite all its attendant difficulties, creating a minimally effective central state might turn out to be just a tad easier than reconstituting the political system based on the primacy of relatively peaceful, self-governing tribes. As Marin Strmecki has pointed out,

Too often, commentators mistakenly take the view that Afghanistan has been either ungovernable throughout history or has lacked a central government whose reach extended throughout its territory. In fact, until the late 1970s, Afghanistan had been a relatively stable developing country for much of the twentieth century. It was a poor country, to be sure, but one with a state that carried out basic governmental functions and that enabled gradual political and economic progress.<sup>48</sup>

Because fierce political competition within Afghanistan is likely to remain the norm for a long time to come, the vision of a return to a peaceful acephalous regime will remain an evanescent one. It could also be particularly dangerous. If rivalry between and within Afghanistan’s various social formations—occurring in the absence of effective central authority—leads some of them to reach out to terrorist groups for support in their own local struggles for power, the situation that provoked the original introduction of al-Qaeda into Afghanistan would only be replicated. In an age where access to

international terrorist networks for finance, technology, and manpower is easy thanks to globalization, seeking to resurrect an acephalous polity—centered on the questionable assumption that tribal institutions will be self-restrained and self-equilibrating—could be fatal, given both the character of the political rivalry that characterizes the Afghan tribal system and the recent ideological radicalization in the Afghan borderlands.

Mitigating these pathologies requires an effective central state. The necessity for such an organization, however, does not imply that the existing tribal structures ought to be obliterated or their traditional privileges entirely abridged. Rather, central authority is essential precisely in order to make the legitimate tribal institutions effective while it simultaneously acts as a restraint on their potential for excesses. As the history of Afghanistan has shown, its monarchical interregnums at their best were successful in maintaining political order precisely because they were able to utilize tribal authorities to control rebel activities and negotiate peace by holding the elders materially responsible for any dissidents' actions. Such a devolutionary strategy of maintaining peace required perforce a minimally effective state; while such an institution need not be radically unitary, as exemplified by a monarchy, it must be sufficiently powerful to ensure that all subordinate societal groups do not end up, for reasons of local competition, pursuing political alliances with either foreign states or nonstate actors who could pose a threat to the Afghan polity or the international community. This aim cannot be achieved by reconstructing an acephalous regime as an alternative to the current U.S. aim of creating an effective state in Afghanistan; because the former would fall far short of what is required to ensure American and international security, Washington has no choice but to pursue its present objective to a successful conclusion, no matter how challenging that task is likely to be for all the reasons identified by the critics of the current policy.

If the alternative goals of simply eliminating terrorist and extremist groups in Afghanistan and restoring an acephalous polity based on the primacy of tribal institutions or some other social organizations cannot produce the critical benefit justifying U.S. intervention—eliminating Afghanistan as a source of threat to all—the third substitute, creating a mixed regime by accommodating a fundamentalist Taliban that commits to peace, turns out to be equally disastrous as well. Leslie H. Gelb advocates such a compromise when he argues that, “as nasty as the Taliban are, America’s vital interests do not require their exclusion from power in Afghanistan, so long as they don’t support international terrorists.”<sup>49</sup> Plausible as this claim might seem *prima facie*, the chief problem with any power-sharing solution remains the Taliban themselves—and their political objectives, which, whatever they may have been in the past, are now clearly absolute and unremitting. Simply stated, Mullah Omar and his *rahbari shura* aim to progressively enlarge their control over critical Pashtun territories, district by district, as a prelude to wresting the city of Kandahar—the birthplace of the Taliban—with the ultimate goal of recovering Kabul and returning to power in all of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s current political-military strategy is oriented entirely toward this end and, driven by their conviction that the West will be unable to stay the course in Afghanistan over the

long haul, Omar and his allies have consistently refused all overtures of reconciliation because of their belief that total victory will one day appear within their grasp.

Even if, *mirabile dictu*, the Taliban were to agree to power sharing as a result of conciliation with the Afghan government, such a settlement would only be pursued as a tactical compromise designed to force the exit of the international community from Afghanistan. On the rare occasions when the Taliban leadership has evinced any interest in political reconciliation, the most important precondition advanced by the insurgents has been not surprisingly the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country. After achieving this goal, the Taliban would be able to turn on their erstwhile coalition partners, collaborating as necessary with their ideological confreres within and outside Afghanistan, to systematically destroy all political opposition and secure absolute control of the state.

Having secured power in such a fashion, Mullah Omar's regime may turn out to be entirely inward looking, with its radicalism posing a threat to no one other than the Afghans under its grip. At any rate, such was the argument used by Pakistan during the 1990s, when it urged deepened U.S. engagement with the Taliban. But this outcome is not at all certain—at least not today, after almost a decade of war with the United States. Precisely because the Taliban remain obdurately committed to an obscurantist brand of Islam, one that perceives the West to be decadent and immoral, not to mention a mortal threat to the entire Muslim world, there is nothing that prevents this group, once it has returned to power, from offering succor and assistance to other radical Islamists who would exploit this hospitality to wage war against other regional countries, the United States, and the West more generally. Indeed, it does so already. Even when out of power, the Taliban are intensely involved with a variety of extremist groups that have as their mission, primary or otherwise, the murder of “oppressors” and “infidels” who oppose their ideals. The notion of encouraging some kind of reconciliation with the Taliban that permits their confessional system to be accommodated in Afghanistan's governing arrangements is therefore highly flawed—even if it were feasible *ab initio*—and would only reproduce the circumstances that precipitated U.S. military intervention to begin with.

After the extended conflict with this group and its al-Qaeda allies, accepting a Taliban presence at the core of the Afghan state, or even accepting their presence as a political force in Afghan society through some sort of negotiation short of surrender, would only signal an American strategic defeat of far-reaching consequence throughout the Islamic world. It would also represent a profound betrayal of the hopes of most ordinary Afghans who, through the Bonn process and its aftermath, have clearly indicated their desire for a moderate political regime incarnated in a modern state. The Taliban and the forces in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) that support them represent only a minority in national politics; consequently, any reconciliation with the Taliban that involves their participation in legitimate governance can occur only after their fundamentally

unrepresentative aims have been defeated through a combination of political and military instruments. When such an outcome occurs, the Taliban will have ceased to be a security threat and all political accommodation thereafter can take place on terms defined fundamentally by the Afghan state.

The alternative presented by the fourth critique—a benevolent authoritarianism—certainly appears enticing in contrast with the other three approaches, but it too would ultimately be found wanting. It is unfortunate that many European bureaucrats appear to be comfortable with such a solution. As one senior NATO official, describing the Obama administration’s shift toward “being much more realistic” about Afghanistan, approvingly noted, “It doesn’t need to be a democracy, just secure.”<sup>50</sup> The strategy of settling for “an acceptable dictator”<sup>51</sup> in Kabul no doubt has some important—but superficial—affinities with current Western aims in Afghanistan: it endorses the idea of creating a modern state able to control its territory and offer human security comprehensively to its inhabitants. Where it differs fundamentally is in its willingness to sacrifice representative government, because of the difficulties of incarnating such a form of rule in Afghanistan, in favor of an autocratic regime that can guarantee order and thereby prevent the country from breeding threats to itself and to the international community. This expedient is often championed sotto voce in Europe as an alternative to the traditional American goal of promoting a democratic Afghanistan because it is presumed that a soft authoritarianism in Kabul would be easier to institutionalize and, hence, could be realized at reduced cost in blood and treasure to the West.

It is unlikely, however, that any authoritarianism would actually deliver as its votaries imagine. Even if the nagging questions of whether benign dictatorships ever stay benign over the long term and whether the Afghan people would be satisfied with such a regime are disregarded, there is good reason to suspect that a nonrepresentative government would ultimately fail to deliver even on preserving domestic order. This would be particularly true in Afghanistan, which is a contentious society. Because no authoritarian regime can maintain order through pure coercion alone but must rely on co-opting certain social groups in order to sustain its hold on power, any dictatorship in Afghanistan will end up inevitably legitimizing the hegemony of one particular social formation, be it the tribe or the subtribe or the clan, over others. This favored social group, which benefits either because of its consanguineal or other ties with the rulers, will of necessity be a pampered lot because resources would have to be inequitably distributed in their favor if their political support is to be maintained. This very inequality, however, would exacerbate the tensions between winners and losers in Afghanistan, with the state then being compelled to rely increasingly on coercion to manage these struggles and keep them within bounds. The expanding reliance on coercion would before long obliterate any pretense that an authoritarian regime in Afghanistan could actually subsist as a benevolent entity.

More problematically, however, because political competition is invariably a struggle for power and plenty, there will be little to prevent the disadvantaged entities within the country from allying with whatever sources of support might be available—including international terrorist groups—to overthrow the existing order since, by definition, neither the peaceful transfer of rule nor the nonviolent reallocation of resources is possible within an authoritarian state, especially one that derives its social basis of support from some narrow, competitive, and exclusionary subnational formations. This very dynamic, in fact, reflects why the Taliban currently have been able to secure significant local backing in the southern and eastern regions of the country. If a democratic dispensation, such as that represented by the Karzai regime, has already contributed mightily to the upsurge in the Taliban insurgency through its unhelpful policy of favoring some consanguineal tribes at the expense of others, any authoritarian government in Kabul will only magnify the problem even more dangerously. Whatever its promises *ex ante*, therefore, even a benevolent dictatorship will not produce *ex post* the increases in Afghan national security required to satisfy the international community and the United States.

None of the four critiques, accordingly, provides a good alternative to the aims pursued by U.S. policy in Afghanistan since 2001. It is to President Obama's credit that, despite strong pressure emerging from various constituencies in Washington (most of which reside within his own party), he has rejected all of the options that compete with building an effective state. His formal statement of March 27, 2009, and the administration's White Paper issued that same day, corroborates this fact, albeit with varying degrees of clarity. Clearly, the president has renounced the overly narrow focus on counterterrorism that some of his own advisers were advocating. Although he has asserted that the United States will have a "clear and focused goal," namely, "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future," this objective will not be pursued either in isolation or in any circumscribed fashion. No other conclusion can be derived from President Obama's clear rejection of any "return to Taliban rule." Moreover, his administration's policy statement clearly declares that among Washington's "realistic and achievable objectives" would be "promoting a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan that serves the Afghan people and can eventually function, especially regarding internal security, with limited international support." And, finally, "developing increasingly self-reliant Afghan security forces that can lead the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism fight with reduced U.S. assistance" is also upheld as one of the key objectives that contribute to the fundamental goal of defeating terrorism comprehensively in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>52</sup>

Whether explicitly stated or not, these propositions suggest that the United States will not abdicate state building in Afghanistan; will not recognize the Taliban as an acceptable Islamist group in contrast to, for example, al-Qaeda, which all acknowledge must be extirpated; and will not exit Afghanistan either as an end in itself or to better focus

on Pakistan, as some analysts in the United States have suggested. The administration's reiteration of the need for a "a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan that serves the Afghan people"<sup>53</sup> also implicitly conveys a rejection of all acephalous strategies of governance, a refusal to integrate an unrepentant Taliban into any Afghan organs of rule, and a decisive repudiation of authoritarianism as a solution to the political problems in Kabul.

To be sure, it would have been helpful if the recently released White Paper had transparently declared that the United States was committed to building an effective democratic state in Afghanistan. The failure to asseverate this objective distinctly—even as the administration has committed to promoting a competent government in Kabul; raising strong Afghan national security forces; bolstering the legitimacy of the Afghan regime; strengthening provincial and local governance; targeting narcotics production; and mobilizing international support for reconstruction and stability—then opens the door to expectations that President Obama's strategy for defeating terrorism in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) can be implemented without "the vast attempt at nation-building [that] the Bush administration had sought in Iraq."<sup>54</sup> Although such arguments invariably are intended to curtail the U.S. commitment to building an effective Afghan state, and, although they often posit that state building and defeating al-Qaeda are effectively competing political goals—further recommending that Washington concentrate on the latter while forgoing the former—the analysis above only illuminates the fallacy of such assertions.

Accordingly, the Obama administration should unambiguously clarify at the earliest opportunity that the strategic objective of U.S. policy in Afghanistan is to aid the creation of a modern Afghan state, one that incarnates moderate politics and effective government and represents the aspirations of all its diverse ethnic constituents mediated through some kind of democratic mechanisms. Pursuing this goal is simply not optional: it is indeed a necessity because none of the broad alternatives—merely targeting al-Qaeda (and the Taliban), resurrecting a peaceful tribalism in Afghan society, incorporating the Taliban into Afghan governance, and leaving behind an authoritarian dispensation in Kabul—can deliver an Afghanistan "whole and free," a state that does not become a renewed threat to the international community.

Despite all their limitations, numerous opinion polls conducted by the U.S. government as well as private institutions in Afghanistan, such as the Asia Foundation, also confirm that this is very much the choice of the Afghan people. The data from such polling, especially that conducted in 2006, suggest that very few Afghans consider a democratic state to be either an unaffordable luxury or simply beyond reach; instead, it is viewed as a necessity, with more Afghans, in comparison with, for example, Pakistanis, Jordanians, Iranians, and Indonesians, expressing a preference for democracy.<sup>55</sup> Equally important, the democratic aspirations of the Afghan people are expressed in terms of liberal politics—a desire for freedom, personal rights, rule of law, regular elections, and government by the people—followed by the need for peace and security and economic

prosperity. Although these institutions have been colored by Islamic constraints in the Afghan constitution and the importance accorded to them has dropped in polling conducted since 2006, largely because of the deteriorating security situation within the country and the growing pessimism about its prospects, most ordinary Afghans still overwhelmingly value freedom, followed by peace.<sup>56</sup> Given these attitudes, the United States should lead the formation of an international consensus in support of creating an effective state based on democratic principles in Afghanistan because, first and foremost, the Afghan people want it and, second, a responsive government that reflects local preferences and focuses on providing enhanced security, good governance, economic opportunity, and increased welfare remains the best means of defeating the Taliban insurgency and resolving the problem of reconciliation.

Moreover, as box 2 indicates, only a modern democratic state in Afghanistan can best secure the multiple objectives that the international coalition has sought to procure through the military campaign under way since 2001. At a time when there appears to be profound confusion about what the West is fighting for in Afghanistan, the Obama administration could do no better than to start simply by defending the validity of the original goal pursued by the United States and securing allied support for it because of its inherent superiority compared with the other alternatives. ■

BOX 2

## THE WORTH OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

OBJECTIVES	ALTERNATIVES	Modern democratic state	Acephalous polity	Mixed-fundamentalist state	Authoritarian state
Defeat al-Qaeda and other extremist groups		✓	☞ → ✗	✗	✓
Control national boundaries		✓	✗	✗ → ☞	✓
Provide personal security universally		✓	☞	☞	☞
Provide economic development nationwide		✓	✗	✓	☞
Provide responsive governance		✓	☞	✗	✗
Control narcotics production		✓	✗	☞	✓

KEY ✓ PLAUSIBLE ✗ IMPLAUSIBLE ☞ UNCERTAIN

# WINNING THE WAR BY SEEKING CLARITY ABOUT STRATEGY

Maintaining clarity of goals is only half the challenge of winning the war in Afghanistan. The other half consists of reorienting the strategy pursued by the United States to correct the significant deterioration that has occurred within the country since about 2006. Although it was unfashionable to say so during the Bush administration, the sad truth is that the reverses in Afghanistan occurring in recent years have been fundamentally due to strategic neglect. Although this campaign has been widely regarded as the “good war,” the operation in Afghanistan has been poorly resourced and, given the competing priorities in Iraq, the United States simply settled for doing what it could in Afghanistan rather than what was necessarily required. As Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), candidly admitted to the House Armed Services Committee in 2007, “In Iraq, we do what we must. In Afghanistan, we do what we can.”<sup>57</sup>

The sharply divergent levels of U.S. funding for the two conflicts establish the point clearly: thus far, Washington has spent roughly \$171 billion during eight years for operations pertaining to Afghanistan compared with the \$653 billion spent during six years to support U.S. commitments in Iraq. The foreign aid and diplomatic support funding for Afghanistan also was a little more than one-third of the amount comparably committed to Iraq.<sup>58</sup> The failure of the international community to make good on its commitments to Afghanistan further exacerbated the challenge. Although all of Washington’s partners were supposedly united behind the objective of building an effective Afghan state, their contributions have never quite matched their rhetoric. From the Tokyo Conference in 2002 onward, international pledges totaled something to the order of \$40 billion, but commitments barely exceeded \$25 billion, and actual disbursements have been closer to \$15 billion.<sup>59</sup> As many officials in Kabul have ruefully observed, only 60 percent of these outlays actually reach the Afghan people because the costs of delivery, including the burdens of sustaining numerous Western consultants

and a huge aid bureaucracy, have resulted in “a staggering 40 percent [being] returned to donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries.”<sup>60</sup>

Afghanistan’s lesser priority has also been reflected in the troop strength associated with the mission: even as late as 2008, Afghanistan had just about one-third of the U.S. troops present in Iraq, and until 2007 that ratio stood at something less than a fifth.<sup>61</sup> Despite the fact that the mission in Afghanistan is essentially one of manpower-intensive counterinsurgency, with an embedded nucleus centered on counterterrorism, the United States was never able to commit anything near the troop levels called for by its army’s own war-fighting manuals. If the requirements laid down in FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*,<sup>62</sup> are strictly applied, some 650,000 men under arms would be required for the success of the military mission in Afghanistan. This figure refers of course to the total security force necessary, that is, all host nation police and military components along with any international contributions, as appropriate. After taking into account the distinctive particularities of the country; the nature of the adversary; and U.S. strengths in communications, tactics, intratheater mobility, and firepower, the U.S. troop strength realistically required for success drops to somewhere between one-third to one-half the number nominally necessary.

The inability to provide anything resembling such troop levels, coupled with the desire to test NATO’s relevance to the out-of-area operations that will increasingly become the norm in the post–Cold War era, resulted in the United States finally accepting alliance contributions to the Afghan campaign. This assistance, however, was undermined from the very beginning by the relatively small size of the forces deployed, the political caveats on their employment, and the fractured command and control associated with the mission. The failure to target the needed force size correctly and then build up indigenous Afghan security forces expeditiously—to compensate for some of the allied manpower deficits—only exacerbated these difficulties further.

But most problematic of all was the U.S. divestiture of responsibility for the Afghan operation to NATO. Although the participation of the European allies in the Afghan mission should have been a source of strength, the mid-2005 U.S. declaration that NATO would assume full responsibility for military operations, followed by the (later rescinded) announcement of the withdrawal of some 2,500 U.S. combat troops from the theater, sent unfortunate and, in retrospect, costly signals throughout the region. To Afghanistan and its neighbors, it heralded the potential exit of the United States from southern Asia, thus providing them with the incentives to pursue unilateral strategies designed to protect their own interests in America’s absence. In the case of Pakistan, this involved accelerated support for the Taliban and its cross-border operations in Afghanistan. To the Taliban resistance both inside and outside Afghanistan, it signaled the limits of American patience with military missions abroad and inadvertently reinforced the *shura’s* conviction that success required only that the insurgents outlast the United States, which appeared to be rushing toward the exit anyway.

The new reorientation in strategy that the Obama administration is beginning to implement in order to salvage the operation in Afghanistan will have to address these and many other challenges, as its White Paper frankly concedes. These problems cannot be addressed here in any detail, and they are, in any case, the subject of detailed discussion at CENTCOM and in the White House. What follows, therefore, is merely an overview of some of the principal changes required to win the war in Afghanistan, thereby obviating the need for the problematic reconciliation with the Taliban now advocated in many quarters. “Winning” the war, in this context, implies raising a successful enough Afghan state sufficient to marginalize the Taliban as a violent and organized opposition in domestic politics; it does not entail physically eliminating every insurgent or even eradicating the insurgency altogether, but merely reducing it to the level where it can be managed by the tools of domestic law enforcement.

If it is assumed that the original goals pursued by the United States remain defensible even in the current context—the thrust of the argument thus far and one that appears to be implicitly accepted by President Obama—the question of the means necessary to secure these aims becomes immediately relevant. In general, critical transformations at the strategic, operational, and domestic levels (in addition to progress in neutralizing the external sanctuaries in Pakistan) will be necessary if success in Afghanistan is to be realized.

## **STRATEGIC CHANGE**

The alterations that are necessary at the strategic level serve as the foundation for accomplishing all other American and allied objectives in Afghanistan. These changes are vital because they lend purpose to the entire enterprise and impose a unity of effort that thus far has been conspicuous mainly by its absence.

**Staying to win.** The first and most important adjustment required at the strategic level is a clear public declaration by President Obama not only that the United States intends to win the war in Afghanistan but also that it will stay involved in the country over the long term. Both components of this declaration are essential. An unmistakable communication of the U.S. intention to seek victory—corroborated by committing the necessary resources to the task—is fundamentally necessary to undermine the hedging strategies currently pursued by various critical actors inside Afghanistan. Throughout the land, numerous tribal chiefs and village elders as well as provincial influentials, uncertain about whether the United States has the determination to bring its military operations to a successful conclusion, continue to withhold critical cooperation from the government of Afghanistan, which if available would help to defeat the Taliban insurgency more rapidly. Fearful that Washington might tire of the war and leave the Taliban in control of Afghanistan in the future, these important swing constituencies currently are locked in a watch-and-wait mode, tacitly aiding the Taliban on occasion while supporting the government on others but refusing to decisively partner with the

coalition because of their uncertainty about Washington's determination to eliminate the insurgents as an effective opposition.

If the correlation of social forces within Afghanistan is therefore to shift in support of the Afghan government, the coalition's determination—and, most important, America's resolve—to see the war to a successful conclusion must become apparent to all. President Obama's forthright declaration that defeating al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including the Taliban, represents “the goal that must be achieved” could not have come at a better time. Further, his reminder “that [this] is a cause that could not be more just,” and his categorical notice—“to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: we will defeat you”—can only help to move various constituencies inside Afghanistan toward supporting their government and the United States.

While it would have strengthened U.S. objectives immensely if the president had also clearly declared his intention to stay in Afghanistan for the long term, the need to carefully straddle a course that avoids unnerving domestic constituencies fearful of open-ended involvement in another Asian war, coupled with the desire to fend off perceptions of the United States as an occupying power in Afghanistan, appear to have led President Obama to tackle this issue more obliquely by noting that, “We are not in Afghanistan to control that country or to dictate its future. We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists.”<sup>63</sup> Whatever the reasons for this equivocation, it is imperative that the administration quickly clarify its intention to stay engaged in assuring Afghan security for the long term because there is no greater threat to the accomplishment of American goals than the perception within Afghanistan and elsewhere in South Asia that the United States will cut and run before the task of state building is successfully completed.

Because the totality of the administration's plans arguably conveys a longevity to the American commitment in Afghanistan, President Obama should not shy away from asserting that the United States will remain in Afghanistan for as long as is necessary to achieve its larger strategic goals and so long as its presence enjoys the support of that country's legitimate government. Having said this, however, the next test will not be at the level of rhetoric but on the plain of action. If what comes out of Washington in regard to financial resources, troop commitments, and diplomatic attention over the next several years is hesitation, a diminution of responsibility, a competitive wrangling between the branches of government, or anything that suggests preparation for an exit, the critical constituencies whose cooperation will be necessary to defeat the Taliban will draw the conclusion that it is not worth supporting what will eventually be the losing side, thereby making NATO's struggle against the insurgency all the harder.

This reality also highlights the dangers of minifying strategic goals or ruminating about the possibilities of departure and it is indeed consoling that neither the president's formal statement nor his administration's White Paper reflects his own earlier assertion, "there's got to be an exit strategy . . . there's got to be a sense that this is not a perpetual drift."<sup>64</sup> Exemplifying the paradox that Karl Popper once called the "Oedipus effect," all such sentiments, however well intentioned and focused upon improving the strategic environment, will only end up contributing to its deterioration because they suggest to important stakeholders that the current dispensation in Kabul is unlikely to be permanent and, hence, unworthy of enduring support. For this reason, it is gratifying that the Obama administration has not accepted the recommendation offered by one study—that it "signal to the Afghans that the [U.S.] military commitment is not open-ended"<sup>65</sup>—because such a message would have the effect of spurring the insurgents to outlast the international coalition while encouraging bystanders to persist in their prevailing ambivalence.

Conveying the U.S. determination to stay in Afghanistan over the long term "through deeds as well as words"<sup>66</sup> is vital for changing the calculus of the country's rivalrous neighbors as well. Because Iran, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia have interests in Afghanistan that are opposed to the Pakistani desire for paramount influence, the only way to minimize the incentives for malignant competition is to ensure that Kabul remains fundamentally nonaligned vis-à-vis these key feuding entities. Ambassador Karl F. Inderfurth and Ambassador James Dobbins have argued that the way to produce this outcome is to "establish Afghanistan as a permanently neutral state" through "a multilateral accord that establishes principles and guarantees for [such a] long-term status."<sup>67</sup> While this proposal should no doubt be explored carefully, it is unlikely to bear fruit any time soon because the strategic interests of the regional contenders in Afghanistan are at the moment acutely competitive. Given Kabul's relative weakness and the historic proclivity of its neighbors, especially Islamabad, to reach consistently for self-interested gains, only a long-term U.S. presence within Afghanistan will be able to assure its neutrality and deter the regional neighbors from meddling in Afghan politics with the aim of securing political advantages over their rivals.

The need for a lasting American commitment to, and involvement in, Afghanistan is therefore unassailable. Not only would such dedication be necessary for the successful reconstruction of this poor country destroyed by thirty years of war, it is also indispensable if a permanent return to the so-called Great Game is to be avoided. Other analysts have sought to avert this prospect of renewed regional competition by proposing that Washington intervene more energetically in the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir.<sup>68</sup> These suggestions are brave but impractical because as the history of the past sixty years abundantly attests, this quarrel will be difficult to resolve even through external intervention; furthermore, the Kashmir imbroglio is one where U.S. political capital could be rapidly frittered away with few results to show; finally, even a

successful resolution of the altercation over Kashmir is unlikely to obviate Indian and Pakistani rivalries in Afghanistan.

Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a playground for its regional neighbors is, therefore, better ensured by a direct application of U.S. resources conveyed through a long-term commitment by Washington to Kabul. As a matter of fact, nothing would reduce Pakistan's incentives to continue its current support for the Taliban—a strategy aimed at securing influence within its western neighbor both for independent reasons and vis-à-vis India—more than an iron-clad American determination to ensure Afghan success by winning the war against the insurgency and staying involved within the country over the secular future. What is necessary, therefore, is definitely not a strategy centered on “improve and exit,” as many in Europe and the United States believe to be the case, but rather one that involves a concerted effort to “invest and endure” in Afghanistan. For the moment at least, it appears as if the Obama administration, too, believes this to be the case.

In an effort to communicate such a resolution credibly, Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.) has recently called for a bilateral defense pact with Kabul that would include explicit security guarantees and some kind of lasting U.S. military presence within the country. The Obama administration would do well to make this idea its own because, as Lieberman correctly put it, “nothing will put an end to that dangerous uncertainty” that causes both Afghans and their neighbors to hedge their bets because of their fears about “what will happen ‘the day after’ America grows tired and abandons the region,” more than “a long-term American security commitment to Afghanistan.”<sup>69</sup>

There is one more reason for President Obama to unequivocally affirm the U.S. commitment to winning the war in Afghanistan and remain involved in protecting that country over the long term: the Afghan people have trusted Washington since 2001 to do just that. Afghanistan is an impoverished country. For decades, it has known little but war and the fruits of war: violence, immiseration, poverty, and disorder. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan became the crucial instrument that enabled Washington to humble the Kremlin, demoralize the Red Army, and accelerate the ending of the Cold War. Despite their contributions to this epochal American victory, the people of Afghanistan were never suitably rewarded for their sacrifice. This neglect ended, unfortunately in tragic ways, after September 11, 2001, but despite the best intentions of the Bush administration, the United States has not yet made good on its commitment to assist the Afghans in realizing their yearnings for freedom and prosperity. It is now time for the United States to repay its old debts to Afghanistan. By making a durable pledge to Kabul, Washington can not only aid the Afghan people but also contribute toward strengthening its own security.

This latter consideration is just as important. As President Obama has argued correctly on numerous occasions, Afghanistan *is* the central front in the global war on terrorism.

Although Afghanistan is no longer a sanctuary for al-Qaeda, it would quickly become one again were the Taliban to return to power in the face of either an American defeat or a retrenchment of its military efforts. Conclusively overcoming American adversaries in this theater would, therefore, not only be an investment in protecting its own homeland, it would also deal a tremendous psychological blow to radical Islamists worldwide intent on threatening the United States. Of equal significance is the fact that American success in Afghanistan strengthens Washington's hand in South Asia more generally: it would aid Pakistan's own struggle against extremism, accelerate the ongoing transformation of U.S.–Indian relations, and position the United States favorably in managing the marriage of Central and South Asia with all the potential that holds for rejuvenating both regions in the years ahead.

**Altering command and control.** The second important change at the strategic level that the Obama administration must shepherd pertains to the command and control (C<sup>2</sup>) of coalition operations in Afghanistan. The recent White Paper acknowledges this problem in general terms, but does not elaborate. Besides the challenge of improving interagency coordination within the United States, which cannot be discussed here, an alteration of the current C<sup>2</sup> arrangements, after appropriate review, is necessary at three levels.

To begin with, the failure of the United States to preserve the apex-level unity of command necessary for the success of the current mission needs to be rectified. Since the end of 2006, when the Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan (CFC-A) relinquished control of its operations to NATO, the mission's responsibilities in practical terms have been divided among the Commander, CENTCOM; the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR); and the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM); not to mention the U.S. Department of State. The CENTCOM commander, who is overstretched by the ongoing military operations in Iraq, nonetheless provides (under OEF) key U.S. war-fighting components and critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to ISAF; SACEUR oversees the NATO components of that force, including U.S. elements specifically allocated to ISAF; SOCOM controls key U.S. units involved in the U.S.–controlled counterterrorism mission, which is distinct—at least conceptually though not in practice—from ISAF's nation-building operations in Afghanistan; and, finally, the State Department coordinates with all the coalition members involved in the counternarcotics mission.

Although all four institutions collaborate as required, CENTCOM retains responsibility for critical tasks such as ISR; logistics and medical support; raising Afghanistan's security forces; and special operations, counternarcotics, and regional engagement (most importantly with Pakistan) even though NATO, and by implication SACEUR, has responsibility for the entire mission in Afghanistan. On a day-to-day basis, the divide between CENTCOM and SOCOM may be largely nominal because they are both U.S. commands and because the nature of SOCOM's activities demands, at least in

theory, high levels of coordination. In practice, however, the synchronization between even these two commands is far from ideal. But it is the seam between CENTCOM, which provides critical assets, and NATO, which oversees operations and is the largest troop contributor, that has turned out to be both significant and problematic. SACEUR's onerous responsibilities, but without the appropriate corresponding powers and resources, have undermined the principle of unity of command; not only is there no formal relationship between NATO and CENTCOM, even though both are deeply involved in the conflict in Afghanistan, but the absence of a single theater commander with a unified headquarters and direct and comprehensive authority over *all* forces operating within the country makes the problems posed by multiple missions and competing chains of command highly intractable.

Given this violation of the unity of command—only the second occurrence since Vietnam—one thoughtful analysis has urged Washington to realign the entire Afghan mission under the auspices of the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), where everything from resourcing to training to combat would be fully integrated under NATO.<sup>70</sup> An alternative solution proposed by Ambassador James Dobbins, former U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan, centers on making the CENTCOM commander into a supreme allied commander—Afghanistan, in which capacity he would report directly to NATO's secretary general, thus freeing SACEUR to focus entirely on Europe, which remains an important obligation anyway.<sup>71</sup> Whichever solution the Obama administration opts for—and there may be good reasons to support the second so long as it does not undermine the prospect of sustaining continued European contributions to Afghanistan—the larger task of rationalizing higher-level C<sup>2</sup> arrangements in Afghanistan cannot be put off any longer without further dangers to the mission.

Rectifying the higher-level C<sup>2</sup> problems in Afghanistan has to be complemented by restructuring the authority over the operations now being conducted in the regional commands, RC-E and RC-S, which today remain the *schwerpunkt* of the Taliban insurgency. Although the United States has relied on Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands to provide combat forces in these two commands, it is increasingly obvious that these allied forces are neither sufficient for the mission nor prepared for winning a vicious counterinsurgency struggle. Recognizing the latter problem, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates noted recently that “most of the European forces, NATO forces, are not trained in counterinsurgency; they were trained for the Fulda Gap.” Consequently, he expressed fears that NATO had deployed forces “that are not properly trained,” admitting that “I’m worried we have some military forces that don’t know how to do counterinsurgency operations.”<sup>72</sup>

Although it is possible that the European components deployed in RC-S and RC-E have by now developed some experience on the job, the larger mission is nonetheless still hobbled by the lack of a unified NATO doctrine on counterinsurgency that can be uniformly implemented throughout these two zones. Moreover, the current command

arrangements, where the United States leads in RC-E and where Canada, Great Britain, and the Netherlands rotate leadership in RC-S, is also unlikely to ensure the defeat of the Taliban in these areas, particularly in the south where the insurgency is the strongest because resource limitations; multiple command chains; and differences in counterinsurgency doctrine, combat tactics, and war-fighting competency conspire to prevent a coherent response to the evolving threat. The solution to this problem consists not of ejecting the allies but rather of integrating them more tightly into a new subnational command that unifies RC-E and RC-S under de facto U.S. military leadership.

This new command must be provided with all the combat capabilities necessary to defeat the Taliban, swinging these from Iraq and elsewhere as required. The allies too should be encouraged to contribute more military forces, without any operational restrictions, if that is possible. As things stand, NATO performance in this arena has been dismal. Although all the European allies have offered some troops to the Afghan mission, outside of the British, German, Canadian, Italian, Dutch, French, and Polish contingents, most national contributions have thus far been merely token ones—and, even among the larger contributors, the German and Italian units have resisted participating in major combat operations. Moreover, the allied troop contributions in Afghanistan are invariably only a minuscule portion of the total military capabilities possessed by these states; consequently, it is hard to make the argument that competing commitments elsewhere have prevented them from supplying troops willing to undertake combat operations in Afghanistan. In most instances, it is instead the lack of clarity about the political objectives of the war, the rising domestic opposition to the Afghan mission, and the disagreements about strategy and tactics within the alliance that have left the European partners unable to make the meaningful military contributions necessary for victory.

Because it is unlikely the European allies will be able to summon the political will to make the troop contributions necessary to defeat the Taliban any time soon, Washington has no alternative but to take responsibility for providing these forces itself. Making minimalist assumptions about the number of allied and Afghan National Army contingents likely to become available, the United States should plan for a significant increase in its own combat capabilities in Afghanistan, all operating under a single U.S. three-star officer with the full authority to use these according to need. Although such an assertion of U.S. control would ordinarily not be desirable, the weaknesses of the current coalition force in Afghanistan make such a radical solution inevitable and necessary. The new subnational command that would unify RC-E and RC-S under U.S. control should remain standing until the Taliban insurgency has been defeated or brought under control; it can fly a NATO flag, but it must be a full-fledged U.S. command.

The final C<sup>2</sup> improvement that the Obama administration should implement is ensuring better integration between civilian reconstruction activities and military operations

and among the civilian development activities themselves. There is no doubt that the international community has poured billions of dollars in reconstruction assistance into Afghanistan since 2001, but these efforts have been fragmented, sometimes duplicated, and in any event not subordinated to a unified strategy. Most of the development activities occurring thus far have materialized under the aegis of either foreign military–led provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) or foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

This has produced three sets of problems. First, the desire to implement developmental projects according to donor preference rather than need has often resulted in wasteful investments. As Ali A. Jalali summarized it, competing PRT and NGO activities have often resulted in “a clinic that you cannot find doctors for, . . . a school that [is probably located] in an area that no children can go to, or there are two countries building two schools in the same area, same village.”<sup>73</sup>

Second, development activities have not been integrated into counterinsurgency planning, especially outside the U.S.–led RC-E. As a result, PRTs and NGOs have invested in reconstruction activities mainly in the safer regions of the country, thus neglecting completely the need for creating economic opportunities in precisely those areas where such investments could make the difference in swinging popular support away from the insurgency. As Thomas Johnson has noted, “whole districts in provinces such as Helmand, Oruzgan, Zabol, Paktika, Wardak and Logar are essentially war zones with virtually no chance of rehabilitating fractured infrastructures—a prerequisite for the counterinsurgency.”<sup>74</sup>

Third, and perhaps most consequentially, the critical mass of economic development and reconstruction activities currently occurring in Afghanistan is led by foreigners, either through PRTs or NGOs, with little or no governmental presence, and, consequently, they produce no increases in either state penetration or state legitimacy. Such a development has been driven mainly by fears about corruption within the Afghan government, but it has had the most corrosive effect of distancing the state from its population at a time when success in a counterinsurgency campaign depends fundamentally on increasing national support for the legitimate organs of rule. As Jalali sensibly concluded:

Development helps security and stability [only] if it is part of a national strategy, part of [the] reconstruction or state-building of Afghanistan. In all developing countries [or in] post-conflict situation[s], different actors come and do different things. However, it helps only if . . . the centrality of the state is maintained there. Otherwise, it’s uncoordinated, transient, and also maybe it duplicates and actually sometimes work[s] at cross-purposes.<sup>75</sup>

The most important challenge from a C<sup>2</sup> perspective, therefore, is to integrate development activities with counterinsurgency operations more effectively and in particular

to direct such integration toward increasing the presence and the legitimacy of the Afghan state. NATO took the first steps in this direction only as late as 2006 with the unveiling of its “comprehensive strategy” for Afghanistan and even this improvement is largely superficial. As part of this effort, ISAF created a deputy tasked with overseeing reconstruction and stabilization. Although this may at first sight seem like an improvement, it could in fact be retrograde if creating this position reinforces the separation between counterinsurgency operations and reconstruction. This partition, although beloved in NATO, has already produced an unproductive bifurcation even at the lowest levels of the mission, thus undermining the larger state-building enterprise. Consequently, if the new deputy’s position is to be useful, it must be strengthened considerably and fully integrated into the counterinsurgency operations overseen by the unified headquarters supporting the theater commander. The office’s counterpart within the government of Afghanistan too needs to be revitalized with the objective of redirecting resources toward the insurgency-infested southern and eastern regions. This realignment of effort will, of course, not be feasible except in the context of an entirely new counterinsurgency strategy in these two areas, which will be discussed in the next subsection. The bottom line, in any case, is that if development and reconstruction are divorced from counterinsurgency operations, both suffer to the continued advantage of the Taliban.<sup>76</sup>

While integration of counterinsurgency operations and reconstruction efforts is thus important, better coordination among the various development activities now under way in Afghanistan is also necessary. Because the current reconstruction initiatives are supported primarily by different national programs, all operating independently and, where relevant, reporting principally to their host capitals with little coordination with the government of Afghanistan, these efforts are often characterized by duplication and wastefulness. At a time when resources are at a premium, the need to recover value from every dollar spent on development cannot be overstated. The most recent special envoy appointed by the United Nations, Kai Eide, a veteran Norwegian diplomat, has been specifically tasked with bringing order to the multifarious development activities occurring in Afghanistan and, in particular, improving the coordination between the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan and NATO, ISAF, and U.S. activities within the country. News coming out of Kabul suggests that, thus far at least, Eide has not succeeded in his mission. It is not clear whether this is because he lacks adequate staff and resources for the task. If he does not, this lacuna needs to be rectified and, once again, his success will be contingent not simply on his ability to liaise with individual countries and their PRTs and NGOs but also, and most important, on his personal and institutional ties with the theater commander in Afghanistan. Without these relationships, all the current problems associated with the disjuncture between development activities and counterinsurgency strategy will only persist to the detriment of the mission. The Obama administration’s decision to encourage the secretary general of the United Nations to appoint U.S. diplomat Peter W. Galbraith as Eide’s deputy is

a welcome corrective insofar as it provides for an important American presence at the highest level of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan.

**Reorienting the counterinsurgency campaign.** The third important change at the strategic level that the Obama administration must direct is the reorientation of the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign to focus on the simple, yet radical, objectives of protecting civilians over destroying the enemy; protecting civilians by accepting risks if necessary to the safety of coalition forces; and protecting civilians by using at all possible times minimum rather than maximum force. The administration's White Paper thankfully makes this objective its own when it declares that "our counter-insurgency strategy must integrate population security with building effective local governance and economic development. We will establish the security needed to provide space and time for stabilization and reconstruction activities."<sup>77</sup>

The protection of the population must once again take center stage in the conduct of coalition military operations in Afghanistan. The U.S. Army's new counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24, directs that the mission be prosecuted in exactly this way. It is also the manner in which the United States systematically conducted counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan from late 2003 until 2005. After 2005, the U.S. military leadership in Afghanistan drifted back into an excessively "kinetic" approach to counterinsurgency, in which the use of superior firepower to attack insurgent groups took priority over protecting the population among whom they operated. Whatever this way of doing things gained in terms of enemy kills, it lost just as much if not more in terms of popular support for the coalition's war against the Taliban, thanks to the awful increases in collateral damage produced by this strategy. As a result, the Taliban were able to replenish their ranks from the increasingly disaffected populace far faster than the U.S. military was able to destroy them.<sup>78</sup>

The continuance of such an attrition-centered counterinsurgency strategy will contribute ultimately to the defeat of the United States in Afghanistan because it will deepen the alienation within the population and increase support for the Taliban uprising. It is often easy to forget—especially by a technologically superior force—that the strategic goal of any counterinsurgency campaign is not the comprehensive physical destruction of the insurgents in the first instance, but rather shaping the political end game such that the people, among whom the insurgency operates, gradually shift their loyalties toward the state and away from the resistance. Strengthening this dynamic requires that the population be convinced that the government of the day will provide it, first and foremost, with personal security, namely that which Hobbes called the freedom from "fear of sudden death." Loyalty toward the government is also enhanced by the provision of effective governance (meaning the presence of law and order and the speedy delivery of justice), responsive government (that is, rule that in some way incorporates consent and embodies binding ties between rulers and ruled at various levels), and minimal

development (which must include the availability of adequate sustenance to ensure physical survival together with some opportunities to better one's station in life).

These attributes of good government are particularly essential in Afghanistan because the threats to the lives of the common folk derive not simply from the insurgency but also from local predators such as drug rings, criminals, warlords, militias, tribal and village power brokers, and even petty government officials. When the hazards of coalition military operations against the Taliban are added to this list, the net result is that the already strong anger harbored by the population toward the government for its inability to ensure personal security—the first task of any legitimate state—is deepened further and transmuted into an antagonism directed equally at Kabul and the coalition. If the United States, therefore, is to win the war against the Taliban, it must make as its primary order of business the provision of what William Maley has correctly identified as “human security”<sup>79</sup> and that requires, as Gilles Dorronsoro notes, reversing “the current trend of ever increasing violence.”<sup>80</sup> If the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy can shift its emphasis from primarily killing the insurgents to protecting the population, the social medium within which the Taliban now thrives will progressively become inhospitable. When that outcome obtains, the insurgency will either die a slow death or be reduced to a law-and-order problem that can be controlled by local police or other law enforcement agencies.

From late 2003 through 2005, the United States prosecuted counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan in exactly this way. Operating under a unified civilian-military leadership collocated at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Lieutenant General David W. Barno, commander of CFC-A, implemented a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that combined antiterrorism and anti-insurgency operations, the training of Afghan security forces, the delivery of reconstruction and governance, and regional engagement through an “area ownership” approach that emphasized the protection of the Afghan population above all else. The strategy of area ownership was a military innovation that was uniquely Barno's: in institutionalizing this concept of operations, he overturned—incidentally, without authority—the previous U.S. overemphasis on counterterrorism, prosecuted mainly through kinetic attacks, in favor of an integrated counterinsurgency strategy that tied together multiple political, military, development, and information operations in the service of protecting the Afghan people.<sup>81</sup> This innovation, which occurred long before the current U.S. Army counterinsurgency manual was revised to incorporate a similar approach, paid off in spades. Consequently, even though the Taliban insurgents were slowly creeping back from Pakistan to Afghanistan during this period, the political environment within Afghanistan was quite inhospitable to their operations.<sup>82</sup>

After 2005, however, rotations within the civilian and military command chains in Afghanistan unhelpfully interacted with decisions to physically separate the U.S. civilian and military leadership in Kabul and to narrow the comprehensive counterinsurgency

strategy to more traditional security tasks. These unfortunate choices were complemented by the international community's haphazard development efforts in country and the growing Afghan resentment with the Karzai government's incompetence, corruption, and, more important, its nepotism in regard to political appointments at the provincial and district levels throughout Afghanistan. Ironically, Karzai's decisions to appoint trusted agents from a few favored tribes to these positions was driven, at least partly, by a desire to ensure increased responsiveness to short-term counterterrorism and counterinsurgency needs; but the alienation they produced only had the effect of worsening the societal rivalries that the Taliban then exploited to expand their insurgency.

At a time when Pakistan was alternately alarmed and aroused by the U.S. decision to transfer the command of Afghan operations to NATO—a pronouncement that was viewed as the prelude to America's exit from the region, therefore justifying the unleashing of the Taliban in an effort to advance Pakistan's own interests in Kabul—the pressures related to the war in Iraq further prevented the Afghan theater from being reinforced with the troops required to prosecute successfully the rising insurgency within the country. The small U.S. force levels in Afghanistan, an outcome owed equally to the burdens of Iraq as well as the progressive neglect of this earlier war in Washington, thus produced a situation where too few troops were chasing too many rebels precisely when the insurgency itself was gaining in intensity and when it was being altered from one based mainly in Pakistan to one that began rooting itself deeply within, but not exclusively, the Ghilzai-dominated regions of Afghanistan where the resident tribes felt marginalized by the extant distribution of power.

Confronted by these challenges amid great limitations—primarily a shortage of troops—U.S. leadership shifted counterinsurgency strategy from its earlier manpower-intensive emphasis on population protection to the pre-2003 mode of warfare centered on repeated kinetic attacks often conducted at standoff distances and exploiting the technological proficiency of U.S. land and air power. These strikes were no doubt tactically devastating in every instance; they produced important counterterrorism kills and in many instances prevented small bodies of coalition troops from being overwhelmed by larger numbers of Taliban attackers. As a result, the rebels have suffered defeat in every encounter with coalition forces, but these firepower-heavy suppression attacks also produced increased civilian casualties that further alienated the population and only inflamed the insurgency even more. This degeneration, in turn, produced even more devastating kinetic strikes with added collateral damage, thus unleashing a vicious cycle that fashioned the metastasized insurgency confronting the coalition today.

Given this mess, the critical task at the strategic level now is to arrest the deterioration caused by the escalating cycles of violence and the progressive loss of popular support for the counterinsurgency in RC-E and RC-S; regain the initiative by implementing a new, though in reality traditional, counterinsurgency strategy centered on affording

human security; and stabilize the situation in these key territories long enough for other remedial actions at the political and economic levels to be undertaken that will begin a process of reducing alienation and thereby ultimately marginalize the Taliban. A successful effort along these lines would in effect isolate the first category of Taliban resisters—the *rahbari shura* and their ideologically committed allies and foot soldiers—from their larger bases of support among the tribes and village elders. It would permit this third category of critical actors to slowly shift their allegiance to the state as the coalition begins to appear more successful, is viewed as committed to being ensconced within the country over the long haul, and brings with it the resources necessary to secure their loyalties. These developments would also undermine the opportunistic resistance manifested by the second category of players described before—the *lumpen* fighters who constitute the rent-a-Taliban—because the presence of coalition-offered and state-supported economic opportunities, coupled with more responsive and effective local governance, would be more attractive to these masses than what the *rahbari shura* could offer in contrast.

A reorientation of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy—and one also promulgated to NATO allies in the fighting zones—to emphasize the provision of population security in situ, combined with accelerated investments in development and the rectification of deficiencies in governance, offers the United States and the Afghan government the best chance to degrade the Taliban insurgency even at this point in time, when it admittedly poses a dangerous, but not insurmountable, challenge. This call for a strategic reorientation is based explicitly on the premise that while the situation in Afghanistan has degenerated perilously, it is by no means conclusively lost and, hence, can be retrieved if the United States is willing to make the strategic alterations that have been the subject of discussion thus far: commit itself to victory in Afghanistan through the appropriate commitment of resources and a determination to stay engaged over the long haul; transform the debilitating C<sup>2</sup> structures at multiple levels to secure maximum benefits from the resources committed; and decisively alter the orientation of the counterinsurgency mission away from the current conflicted emphasis on kinetic kills, in the service of tactical victories over the Taliban, to the prominence previously accorded to providing population security to ordinary Afghans.<sup>83</sup>

Changing American fortunes in Afghanistan is, therefore, eminently possible for three reasons that are often insufficiently appreciated. To begin with, the Taliban simply do not control Afghanistan. Although they have mounted a hazardous challenge to the Afghan government and draw on the adherence of numerous supporters in RC-E and RC-S, the Taliban cannot eject the ruling government of the day so long as the international coalition is present within the country. In fact, it is more accurate to describe the present situation as an unfavorable stalemate where the government is unable to defeat the Taliban in the east and south—its traditional areas of support—while the Taliban appear unable to secure control of the state by force. Moreover, while the Taliban insurgency is undoubtedly serious, and could get worse if not countered by appropriate

changes in the coalition response, it is still—hyperventilating claims of organizations such as the International Council on Security and Development notwithstanding—a remarkably concentrated and geographically delimited insurgency. NATO’s best intelligence suggests—and this claim is corroborated by U.S. and Indian officials—that when Taliban control is assessed at the district level in Afghanistan, the insurgents dominate less than 15 percent of the districts in the country. These districts are judged to encompass about 20 percent of the country’s territory and a comparable percentage of its population.<sup>84</sup>

Although governmental control of the remainder of Afghanistan is by no means absolute, given that power is exercised by tribal chiefs, village elders, or independent warlords in a significant fraction of districts and authority is contested between the government and the Taliban in some others, the important fact is that the Afghan state controls the majority of the districts constituting the country and the bulk of its population. The critical implication is that the Taliban insurgency is emphatically not a nationwide eruption: it is limited in space—in terms of either its organic local support or control—to a small portion of the country’s territory, and, accordingly, the military resources needed to checkmate it do not have to be either metered against the size of the country writ large or against a technologically sophisticated adversary able to rapidly relocate across the realm at will. To be sure, the Taliban in recent months have begun to make an appearance in areas outside the south, especially the west, primarily through hit-and-run raids, isolated attacks, suicide bombings, and the detonations of improvised explosive devices. Although this expansion of operating areas certainly demands an appropriate coalition response, it is important not to conflate the size of the arena wherein Taliban actions occur with the areas in which they truly enjoy significant support or actually control.

Further, in NATO’s struggle against the Taliban, the coalition and the United States in particular are neither occupiers of Afghanistan nor viewed as occupiers, except by a small portion of the populace that traditionally has been suspicious of the presence of *all* foreigners within the country. With the exception of predominantly the Ghilzai tribes and a few others, who provide succor for most of the resistance because of their deep conservatism, their desire to preserve traditional social structures, and their determination to prevent the social change they believe will come inevitably as a result of Western presence in Afghanistan, most other social formations do not view the coalition’s presence within the country as either an occupation or corrosive to national stability. Even those Durrani tribes such as the Alizai, Ishaqzai, and Noorzai, whose members are often allied with the insurgency, oppose the coalition only because they have been losers in the internal Afghan struggle for power. Consequently, they resist NATO forces, viewing them as the protectors of the Karzai regime and the Popalzai Durrani clan from which the government draws its support, not because of any nationalist or cultural irritation precipitated by the coalition’s presence.

Certainly, there are powerful personalities in Afghanistan who oppose Western military forces for both ideological and political reasons: these include Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hizbe Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), Anwar-ul-Haq and his Hizbe Islami Khalis (HIK), Jalaluddin Haqqani and his Haqqani network, the Afghan Taliban *shura* and their hard-core adherents, and the remnants of Osama Bin Laden's International Islamic Front in Afghanistan. But the antagonism of these actors is driven entirely by fundamental differences in worldview or by competing political interests relative to the Afghan state and the West. What is most important, in any case, is that the Afghan people do not view these personalities as representing their true interests, except in certain specific districts in the southern and eastern regions of the country. The claim advanced by Gilles Dorronsoro, that "the presence of foreign troops [in Afghanistan] is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban,"<sup>85</sup> must accordingly be judged as at best a half truth. Foreign military presence is undoubtedly a precipitant for indigenous resistance in those areas populated by the most conservative rural Pashtuns, but in other cases there is no simple "link between Jihad and nationalism,"<sup>86</sup> at least not one that justifies the speedy exit of foreign forces from Afghanistan as *the* solution to defanging the insurgency. In fact, to the degree that foreign forces have exacerbated the insurgency, they have done so mainly by their ineptitude. As Nathaniel C. Fick and John A. Nagl summarized it:

Afghans are not committed xenophobes, obsessed with driving out the coalition, as they did the British and the Soviets. Most Afghans are desperate to have the Taliban cleared from their villages, but they resent being exposed when forces are not left behind to hold what has been cleared. They also cannot understand why the coalition fails to provide the basic services they need. Afghans are not tired of the Western presence; they are frustrated with Western incompetence.<sup>87</sup>

These facts imply that NATO does not need many hundreds of thousands of troops to defeat the Taliban as is sometimes inferred from facile comparisons between the size of Afghanistan and the size of Iraq. The numbers of American, allied, and local casualties, too, in each of these two conflicts is highly asymmetrical, with Iraq being far more violent than Afghanistan by most measures. What is needed, therefore, in Afghanistan is the persistent presence of a smaller number of troops—allied as well as indigenous—capable of protecting the population in certain critical areas so that these inhabitants can turn against the insurgency, as they are wont to, and defeat it.

Finally, the majority of the Afghan population is not opposed to the Western military presence in their country—they only seek the success that ought to accrue from the habitation of those forces. As survey after survey of Afghans has demonstrated, what the population yearns for after thirty years of unremitting war is the simple pleasure of being able to lead a peaceful and orderly life. It is here that the failures of the Karzai government have been most grating. If indeed there is a single factor accounting for

the growth of the insurgency, it is not the presence of foreign troops but rather the failures of governance associated with the presidency of Hamid Karzai. Karzai has been unable to provide ordinary Afghans with personal security and improved economic conditions, despite the vast resources being poured into Afghanistan. These resources have enriched a few at the expense of the many, and growing perceptions of corruption surrounding Karzai's closest relatives, coupled with the ethnic bias reflected in his key appointments, have driven conservative rural Pashtuns in the south and east, already ill-disposed toward central authority, to resist the government in Kabul by supporting the Taliban insurgency.

The good news is that despite these multiple failures, the most recent polling in Afghanistan still shows strong, albeit declining, popular support for Karzai and the Western military presence in the country. Interviews conducted in all of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ASCOR) for the British Broadcasting Corporation, ABC News, and ARD, Inc., in December 2008–January 2009 indicate that 52 percent of the Afghans polled still believe that President Karzai is doing a good-to-excellent job, but these numbers represent a drop in support compared with 63 percent who felt this way in 2007 and 83 percent in 2005. Similarly, 63 percent support the presence of U.S. forces in the country, a figure that has dropped from 71 percent in 2007 and 78 percent in 2006; 59 percent also support the presence of NATO–ISAF forces, a figure that has likewise dropped from 67 percent in 2007 and 78 percent in 2006. Although the falling support for the foreign military presence seems driven primarily by anger at the collateral damage caused by coalition military operations—with some 77 percent of those polled holding civilian casualties unacceptable—the Afghan public, by an overwhelming margin of 82 percent to 4 percent, is still very much opposed to the Taliban, viewing them as the country's biggest threat.<sup>88</sup>

What these data, therefore, suggest on the question of foreign troops in Afghanistan is not that they should leave, but that they must succeed—and fast. David Cowling, the BBC's editor of political research, summarizing the results of the latest polls succinctly concluded that the lowered expectations of the Afghan people reflect their disappointment that the changes hoped for have not materialized. "They are trapped," he concluded, "they feel less certain about the way ahead. But they're absolutely clear the one path they don't want to return to is the Taliban."<sup>89</sup>

Even if the United States does everything right in the next three years, the war in Afghanistan will not be won in 2009 or even in 2010 or 2011, but failure to appropriately address the challenges posed by the insurgency and the growing crisis of state legitimacy could well pave the way for a corrosive enervation in Western efforts during this time.<sup>90</sup> This deterioration would not manifest itself through military reverses but instead through the progressive loss of hope among Afghans about the benefits of foreign troops in their country and, from there, a decisive loss of support for the

mission even in the United States. Neither the Afghan nor the American people today are clamoring for an exit of Western forces from Afghanistan, although some American elites and European publics may already be nearing such a *dénouement*. The next few years, then, offer the coalition the decisive opportunity to turn things around in Afghanistan for the better. The war-weary people of that country yearn for progress and while being realistic about the resources available for that task will certainly advance the cause in the West, victory in Afghanistan cannot be achieved by, as Frederick Kagan aptly put it, “redefining success to be whatever we feel like we can accomplish with the effort we feel like putting forth.”<sup>91</sup>

## **OPERATIONAL CHANGE**

While changes at the strategic level are indispensable for success in Afghanistan, that objective will be realized only to the degree that the strategic-level alterations find reflection in a comprehensive transformation at the operational level. The political ingredient that has received the greatest public attention in this context is the much discussed “surge” of American troops to Afghanistan. Because of the success accruing to the comparable effort in Iraq, many observers seem to believe that sharply increasing the number of combat troops in Afghanistan will effectively replicate the accomplishments now witnessed in Iraq.

It is important to guard against the temptation of forcing facile comparisons between the two wars. Unlike Afghanistan, the worst elements of the Iraqi insurgency were essentially alien to the population on whose behalf they were supposedly fighting; they also operated primarily in urban or semiurban areas; they functioned amid a generally literate and politically sophisticated population; and they tended to target sectarian competitors, civilians at random, and opposing tribal clans in addition to coalition forces writ large. This concatenation of circumstances permitted the United States to exploit the alienation and resentment that the Iraqi Sunni tribes felt toward al-Qaeda in Iraq because there was an indigenous—and organized—tribal system that had survived both the war and the demise of Saddam Hussein’s regime. U.S. reinforcements could provide the protection necessary to turn these social formations against what turned out to be the common adversary and thereby alter the course of events in that country.

The situation in Afghanistan is considerably different. The Taliban draw their strength (in different ways) primarily *from* the local Durrani and Ghilzai tribes in the south and east; the insurgency is almost entirely a rural phenomenon that dominates in the main sparsely populated physical spaces; the rebels and their supporters are primarily poor, illiterate, and drawn from social groupings that tend toward the hierarchic (at least in the south); and the violence inflicted by the Taliban is not directed primarily at civilian populations but rather against coalition forces, supporters of the government, and the winners in Afghanistan’s local politics—with the levels of bloodshed too being less intense and highly limited in comparison to what had been seen in Iraq. Consequently,

although the Taliban astutely draw their support from those losing social factions in Afghanistan, defeating them through a strategy of allying with their tribal or village opponents is likely to be much harder than in the case of Iraq because of both the enervation of the tribal system resulting from three decades of war and its inherent complexities. This does not imply that the prospects for success in Afghanistan are hopeless, or that a radically novel counterinsurgency strategy must be devised if the Taliban are to be defeated; it only means that the fragility of Afghan social institutions (to include the tribal system) after internecine conflicts and the poor penetrativity of the Afghan state, especially in the south and east, will demand more concerted investments by the United States for a longer period of time if the objective of victory is to be attained.

Success in Afghanistan will, accordingly, demand not merely a surge in U.S. troops—if that is understood to mean a temporary expansion of the combat forces deployed into the country. It will require instead a durable reinforcement of effort, one that not only makes up for the resource deficits witnessed continuously since 2001 but that also remains in place until the political trends change permanently and for the better. As Senator Joseph I. Lieberman has convincingly argued, the increase in U.S. troop strength contemplated for Afghanistan will be less than efficacious if it is not complemented by enhanced strategic coherence of the overall effort, enlarging the civilian resources committed within both the U.S. embassy in Kabul and the country at large, expanding the size of Afghanistan's security forces and its national development programs, reengaging Kabul's neighbors to secure their enhanced cooperation, and, above all else, recommitting the U.S. government and the American people as a whole to the goal of securing victory in Afghanistan.<sup>92</sup>

While the most immediate threat to success in this theater might well be in Washington and in the capitals of the various European partners, where the claims “that Afghanistan is hard to fix, that al Qaeda is really in Pakistan, and that the ‘good war’ might not be so good after all”<sup>93</sup> are collectively but subtly employed to justify reducing coalition commitments to Kabul under the guise of pursuing “attainable goals,”<sup>94</sup> the war will certainly be lost inside Afghanistan if these rationalizations, colored by the economic crises of the moment, were to cement a reluctance to deploy the additional combat and other capabilities required within the country over the long term. The European disinclination to provide more troops for the Afghan mission, or to remove the current national restrictions that hamper the employment of those forces already committed, is well known.

What is pernicious is that both the European and the American opponents of increasing military contributions to the war effort have converged—when they are not advocating a diminution of war aims—around the misleading proposition that success in Afghanistan requires not better war-fighting solutions but rather more effective political antidotes. This sometimes confused and sometimes motivated dichotomy centered on

military versus nonmilitary solutions appears to have originated from a misreading of the congressional testimony of the chairman of the JCS, Admiral Michael Mullen, in which he argued, “We can’t kill our way to victory, and no armed force anywhere—no matter how good—can deliver these keys alone.” Based on his assertion “that no amount of troops in no amount of time can ever achieve all the objectives we seek”<sup>95</sup> in Afghanistan, meaning that force alone cannot produce the comprehensive success necessary for victory, many in Europe and the United States have drawn the erroneous conclusion that force itself is irrelevant to that outcome. President Obama himself might have inadvertently provided a fillip to such thinking when he argued previously that “what we can’t do is think that just a military approach in Afghanistan is going to be able to solve our problems.”<sup>96</sup>

While such an inference no doubt buttresses the reluctance of those states unwilling to make further troop contributions to begin with, the fallacy embodied in this conclusion must be corrected for the sake of the larger mission. General David Petraeus began the process recently when he succinctly stated:

Many observers have noted that there are no purely military solutions in Afghanistan, and that is correct. Nonetheless, military action, while not sufficient by itself, is absolutely necessary, for security provides the essential foundation for the achievement of progress in all the other so-called lines of operation—recognizing, of course, that progress in other areas made possible by security gains should also complement the security gains as well as contribute to further progress in the security arena—in essence creating an upward spiral in which progress in one area reinforces progress in another.

Arresting and then reversing the downward spiral of security in Afghanistan thus will require not just more military forces, but also more civilian contributions, greater unity of effort between civilian and military elements and with our Afghan partners, and what Admiral Mullen has termed “a comprehensive approach,” a whole of governments approach, *as well as* sustained commitment and a strategy that addresses the situations in neighboring countries.<sup>97</sup>

The first and most important nonnegotiable change at the operational level that the Obama administration will, therefore, have to oversee is the commitment of more U.S. troops—in the context of deploying other complementary resources—to Afghanistan. The recent decision by the president to assign 17,000 U.S. soldiers, or about two to three brigade combat teams, followed by another 4,000 soldiers to mentor the Afghan national forces, is certainly a step in the right direction. But, as the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan (U.S. Army) has repeatedly requested, the administration will sooner or later have to deploy the additional forces necessary to arrest the deteriorating security situation within the country. Although the exact number of troops required in total for victory is still unclear—General McKiernan

had requested about 30,000 American soldiers for this year in Afghanistan—the important fact is that the commitments required for success of the Afghan mission are still much smaller than those required for the stabilization of Iraq. Twenty-two brigades were deployed for the success of the surge in Iraq. In contrast, the largest number of units now being discussed as desirable in the Afghan context—nine brigades or so—is much smaller in comparison, although these formations will have to be committed to operations within the country for a period of at least five years if the current problems are to be redressed.

The 55,000 U.S. troops that will soon be present in Afghanistan, after the current tranche of 21,000 new soldiers deploys to the theater, will suffice primarily to hold the line, especially in the lead up to the summer, when the mountain passes between Afghanistan and Pakistan reopen and the Taliban insurgents are most active. If, however, the international coalition is to be able to guarantee safe presidential and Provincial Council elections in Afghanistan, now scheduled for late summer 2009, as well as materially improve the security environment in RC-S and RC-E steadily over time, there will be no alternative but to commit more U.S. troops for this purpose. Such an injection of additional forces will be necessary because the Obama administration has now declared that it will pursue “two priority missions” in Afghanistan, first, “securing Afghanistan’s south and east against a return of al Qaeda and its allies, to provide a space for the Afghani [*sic*] government to establish effective government control,” and, second, “providing the Afghan security forces with the mentoring needed to expand rapidly, take the lead in effective counterinsurgency operations, and allow us and our partners to wind down our combat operations.”<sup>98</sup>

Accomplishing these vital tasks will require more troops and President Obama, who has courageously declared that “we must make a commitment that can accomplish our goals,”<sup>99</sup> should provide his commanders with what they need for success. If Washington can find the resources required to sustain the nine or so brigade combat teams, or something closer to 100,000 troops, in Afghanistan, General McKiernan will be able to, in combination with Afghan security forces and allied contingents, spread out in depth wherever needed throughout the country, including the west, and push the change required to alter the course of the war in favor of Kabul. It is possible that fewer American troops may suffice for this task, particularly if the expansion of the Afghan National Army is accelerated in the interim, but the experience of Iraq and other counterinsurgency campaigns suggests that more veteran troops rather than fewer—deployed massively as opposed to in small increments—can sharply increase the probability of success within a theater. The Obama administration should, therefore, take its bearings from this history and field the largest American contingent possible in Afghanistan, and quickly.

In this context, Washington should avoid badgering NATO for additional troop contributions because, no matter how desirable more coalition forces may be, they are simply

unlikely to be forthcoming. For a variety of domestic political reasons in each case, none of the NATO states is likely to respond favorably to American entreaties for more manpower resources in Afghanistan; the same is likely to be true of the non-NATO countries currently operating within the country. While the Obama administration should by all means explore the limits of the possible in this regard, it should not expend substantial diplomatic capital in seeking greater troop contributions from U.S. coalition partners. Similarly, with the issue of “national caveats”: the administration should encourage the allies present in Afghanistan to eliminate all the restrictions currently hobbling the use of their forces as required by the theater commander, but it ought not to expend undue efforts in this regard either. Many of the allies present in Afghanistan are simply unable to offer up flexible military forces for the counterinsurgency mission because of their domestic political constraints, and wasting scarce political resources on trying to alter what simply cannot be changed will only end up embarrassing both Washington and its allies, further reducing domestic support for their commitments in Afghanistan without in any way transforming the strategic problems in the theater to American advantage.

To the degree that the administration ought to invest in pushing the allies to do more, it ought to be in the arenas of exacting greater coordination among the disparate peace-building and reconstruction efforts now under way; supporting renewed American leadership in confronting the military problems posed by the counterinsurgency through complementary contributions; and aiding Washington in accelerating the expansion and readiness of Afghan national security forces. Taking for granted that the levels of coalition troop contribution may not substantially change in the prospective future, the administration ought to expend its energies on better integrating the allied resources currently available to support the unified strategic plan that the United States itself must first develop if the campaign in Afghanistan is to be successful.

As part of this effort, the administration must take primary, if not sole, responsibility for providing the troop strength necessary for the success of the mission. The cold and sometimes unpalatable truth is that only additional American forces operating under American commanders, endowed with the entire range of supporting assets required for success, will make the fundamental difference in the struggle to stabilize and ultimately win in Afghanistan. Consequently, President Obama will have to draw primarily on U.S. military resources, whether redeployed from Iraq or elsewhere, to reinforce the campaign now under way in Afghanistan. If the United States can turn the tide of the war through its own efforts, it is possible that other coalition partners may change their minds and contribute more (or, alternatively, push against the constraints that currently limit their assistance) toward what is then seen as a winning military endeavor. Without waiting for that outcome, however, the administration should resolutely plow ahead by reaffirming its strategic commitment to Afghanistan and autonomously allocating the necessary military and other resources essential to achieving success within that country.

The immediate objective of any military reinforcement in Afghanistan must be to arrest the slide in security that undermines the confidence of the population in their own state and in the coalition's efforts as a whole. If the personal safety of the ordinary citizen can be improved in short order, it will be possible not only to implement a successful nationwide election that underwrites the building of a responsive government but also to sustain the economic reconstruction, ensure the effective delivery of key social services, and increase the regime legitimacy necessary to marginalize the Taliban as a political force and prevent the reemergence of an al-Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan. Only when these tasks are complete will it be possible to contemplate a gradual divestiture of security responsibilities to Afghan state institutions, which will, at any rate, require for their continued success a certain residual American military presence within the country for a long time to come.

The importance, therefore, of a quick injection of reinforcing, and not merely transiently surging, American troops into Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. These troops, once committed, will have to be deployed, along with those Afghan security forces already capable, for three distinct, but interrelated, tasks (in addition to the other concurrent mission of raising indigenous forces): First, to consolidate Afghan state control in those areas of the country that are either strategically vital or already under substantial writ of the government; second, to clear the insurgents ensconced within the Taliban-dominated districts in RC-S and RC-E in order that increases in state penetration and legitimacy may accrue progressively nationwide; and, third, to interdict the infiltrators who cross the border on combat missions, irrespective of how Pakistan performs for its part within the territories under its control. The relative priority and sequencing of these three tasks is one that Washington ought to leave entirely to the discretion of its field commanders because they have the resources to make the best judgments on these issues.

Based on the current indications emerging from Kabul, it appears as if senior U.S. military officials intend to use their immediate and prospective reinforcements primarily on the first and second tasks, without entirely neglecting the third. Accordingly, the initial wave of American forces is slated for deployment on Kabul's southern flank because of the perceived vulnerability to Taliban attacks of the capital and its immediately adjacent areas. Concurrently, additional troops are likely to be deployed to Logar and Wardak provinces, with other units scheduled to go to the border regions in the east, which have been the scene of fierce fighting recently. While the objective of hitting the "new Taliban strongholds" around the capital and "provid[ing] enough security in [the adjoining] provinces for development programs, which are essential to maintaining the support of [the] Afghan villagers,"<sup>100</sup> is eminently sensible, it also implies that the complete penetration of the south, where the insurgency is at its most intense, and the west, which represents an emerging open flank, will have to await the arrival of further U.S. reinforcements.

Some efforts at area ownership, however, can begin right away even in these regions if U.S. Special Operations Forces are teamed up with Afghan military components to initiate precursor operations. When more U.S. troops arrive, as they must over time, these early efforts at showing the flag and establishing presence can be dramatically expanded throughout even the most contested areas of the country. The key principle underlying the evolving U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan, therefore, consists of securing what is truly vital or already controlled by the government of Afghanistan before steadily reaching out to those areas that are either contested or denied—but, in any case, refusing to cede contested or denied territories to the adversary on a permanent basis.

This approach has already provoked some controversy. In a recently published paper, Gilles Dorronsoro has argued for an operational strategy that urges the coalition to renounce entirely the second and third tasks, while concentrating exclusively on the first.<sup>101</sup> Based on the assumption that the international community will never possess the resources necessary to perform all three tasks satisfactorily—and hence the conviction that strategy must be shaped by the resources available rather than being systematically driven by larger political objectives—Dorronsoro argues explicitly for accepting a trifurcated Afghanistan en route to an exit of Western military forces from the country, which he believes will occur inevitably for reasons of uncongenial domestic politics.

A successful military strategy in these circumstances should aim to differentiate among three areas within Afghanistan, with the coalition's political and military resources being applied accordingly. What must remain under complete Afghan and coalition control are the principal cities of Afghanistan (containing some 24 percent of the population<sup>102</sup>) and the critical lines of communication and transportation networks that connect these nodes. Around these strategic areas, the coalition ought to maintain critical buffer zones where allied military forces would confront their Taliban adversaries in a struggle for control. Finally, the coalition would simply cede the swaths of territory now dominated by the insurgents in RC-S and RC-E because these areas would be too hard to wrest from the Taliban and, hence, do not warrant any expenditure of effort and resources available.

This approach is explicitly premised, of course, on the assumption that “victory” in Afghanistan—understood as the marginalization of the Taliban and the raising of a minimally effective state in control of its existing national boundaries—is impossible, given the prevailing political constraints, and therefore must be substituted by more minimalist aims, which consist principally of leaving behind a stable Afghan government in control of significantly reduced territories, once coalition combat forces exit the country. Incidentally, this cannot-win approach echoes much of the pre-surge debate about Iraq in the United States and was recommended by many, including the Iraq Study Group, before the concerted surge in Iraq undermined all such arguments.

Odd as it may seem in retrospect, Dorronsoro's recommendations also reflect more or less, as he admits, the strategy adopted by the Soviet Union in the latter years of its occupation of Afghanistan. Recognizing that the Red Army did not have the resources to either defeat the mujahideen or remain permanently bivouacked within the country, the Soviet military command in Afghanistan concentrated on holding key cities (where just like today the insurgent presence was minimal), protecting the main lines of communication and transportation corridors (so that troop movements could continue unmolested), and surrendering only the rural areas to the adversary (where just like the Taliban today the insurgents of that era were based and operating). These more limited objectives were also prosecuted with the intention of leaving behind a stable governing regime that could survive a Soviet military withdrawal indefinitely. For a while after the troop departure, it appeared as if Moscow's war aims would in fact be realized as the government of Muhammad Najibullah survived for about three years. But, before long, pressures from without, including a cutoff in Soviet aid forced by the 1991 agreement with the United States, combined with defections from within to destroy the regime that supposedly was designed to endure the exodus of its protectors from Kabul.

There is no reason to believe that Dorronsoro's recommended approach would meet a happier ending—and for exactly the same reasons that the Soviet Union's exit strategy ultimately failed. Leaving the Taliban with an unchallenged sanctuary *within* Afghanistan, in addition to the one they already enjoy across the border in Pakistan, would result in the insurgency ultimately encircling the purportedly safe zones after coalition troops finally departed the country. Although the government of Afghanistan would arguably survive for a while—particularly if Western financial support continues indefinitely as Dorronsoro envisages—the bastions and areas lying under state control would inevitably become magnets for fierce, multipronged attacks by the rebels. The expectation that the allied coalition would continue to subsidize Kabul even after its combat troops depart Afghanistan could, of course, turn out to be fallacious. After all, if the Western powers pulled their fighting units out of the country because their populations lacked the stomach for an open-ended conflict, it is probable that sooner or later a termination of all but the most minimal assistance to Kabul would follow as well.

Even if this outcome could be avoided, the absolute ambitions of the Taliban today ensure that they would in time attempt to secure control of the entire country by force. The expectation that the insurgents would leave the urban areas largely undefiled, as Dorronsoro assumes, could therefore also prove to be erroneous. If that turns out to be the case, as is most likely, the Afghan government would be confronted by what is effectively a siege mounted by insurgents operating from their sanctuaries in the southern and eastern regions of the country. Coping with this threat through reactive means alone ensures that the surviving regime in Kabul runs the risk of collapse in due course as purely defensive responses either cease to suffice or become prohibitively

costly for the beleaguered defenders. Because no territorial enclaves, however robust, are likely to survive indefinitely if they eschew conducting offensive operations that engage the adversary on its own turf, clearing operations in rural areas would be needed as an essential adjunct to protect the key nodes and lines of communication that Dorrnsoro correctly argues ought to be protected at all costs.

If these offensive operations become necessary in the future, when the government of Afghanistan stands alone because its coalition partners' combat forces have exited the country, they arguably become all the more necessary today when stronger and more capable American security forces are being redeployed into Afghanistan and when the probability of success accruing to such missions is all the greater. Even if Dorrnsoro's limited objective of holding on to only the key strategic nodes and lines of communication is consequently to be realized, it will be essential for the reinforcing U.S. forces to engage and defeat the Taliban both within their rural bastions and as they come across the Afghan–Pakistani frontier at some point precisely in order to secure those conurbations that are so critical.

The chief problem with Dorrnsoro's solution is that his strategy of leaving Afghanistan partially secure, partially contested, and partially ceded is a recipe for defeat on an installment plan. It almost guarantees that the safe zones within the country will inevitably become targets for attack by the insurgents, particularly if his tactical recommendation that the Afghan state eschew offensive operations in rebel territories is followed assiduously. Even worse, such a solution would undermine the strategic objectives for which coalition forces are currently fighting in Afghanistan: permitting the Taliban to maintain an inviolate preserve within the country creates exactly those conditions conducive to regenerating an al-Qaeda sanctuary from which more attacks against the United States and its allies, including Pakistan, might be mounted over time. In short, a trifurcated Afghanistan would embody a strategic defeat for Washington.

If the United States is therefore to make the high sacrifice of reinforcing its military presence in Afghanistan—despite the unfavorable political and economic circumstances worldwide—it should aim to do the job right from the very beginning. This certainly implies protecting those areas already under the control of the Afghan state through the use of coalition and Afghan security forces but, equally important, moving when ready to progressively clear those Taliban districts dominated by the insurgency and interdict infiltration across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Given the present circumstances in Afghanistan, U.S. commanders will not enjoy the luxury of choosing permanently between these missions, even if the relative emphasis placed on one or the other varies in intensity over time.

Because Afghan security forces will be incapable of independently conducting the most complex clearing operations for some years to come although they do lead more than 50 percent of the total combat missions nationally, coalition troops—operating under

American commanders in RC-S and RC-E—will have to “take the point” in prosecuting the initial cleansing phase of the “clear, hold, and build” sequence prescribed in the U.S. Army’s counterinsurgency manual. In this effort, coalition forces ought to integrate Afghan National Army units to the maximum extent possible. These combined clearing operations will inevitably entail repeated contact with the Taliban, and any increased encounters with the enemy will produce more violence and greater casualties. This is to be expected in the clearing phase of the counterinsurgency effort, and it ought not to provoke alarm in either Kabul or Washington. Attacking concentrations of Taliban irregulars assembling for attacks outside Afghan villages through conventional military power, targeting rebels living within local habitations through police or combat actions, and interdicting infiltrators crossing the Afghan–Pakistani frontier through standoff attacks and small-unit engagements will produce body counts that may appear alarming, but these are in fact the first fruits of the *military* component of the larger counterinsurgency campaign.

Assuming that the secure areas of Afghanistan are concomitantly buttressed by Western and Afghan security forces, the heart of the rejuvenated U.S. counterinsurgency operation must focus eventually on those southern and eastern districts that are either contested or occupied by the Taliban. In these districts, American commanders ought to pursue a variation of the same area ownership strategy that Lieutenant General Barno pioneered with great success from late 2003 until 2005: utilizing a combination of Afghan security forces and a more novel instrument, namely, district- and village-level self-defense units formed under the aegis of the Afghan government, U.S. troops must maintain a resident presence in “a defined area, [confront] clear sets of challenges, and [assume] direct responsibility for long-term outcomes.”<sup>103</sup> Operating on the principle that the center of gravity is not targeting the Taliban as much as protecting the population with a view to securing its support for the legitimate government, U.S. military forces and their indigenous allies must deploy within the troubled regions for extended periods of time. Working with the tribal chiefs and local elders in situ, they should develop the requisite local intelligence; provide the population with essential security; aid the state institutions tasked with discharging law, order, and justice and the delivery of social services (while supporting the creation of such institutions where none exist); and safeguard the reconstruction and development efforts made by Afghanistan’s foreign partners within the boundaries of their assigned tasking.

Although the force-to-space ratios will usually be large in most cases in RC-S and RC-E, the key difference is that the reinforcing U.S. military units present in these sectors would *not* be employed primarily for episodic raids conducted—on the strength of some fragmentary intelligence collected by standoff means—by small-to-large patrols deploying from some distant and well-guarded rearward bases; instead, they would be durably ensconced within the troubled habitations themselves. Thus, as an alternative to occasionally appearing on the scene of trouble and disrupting the life of the entire hamlet through the use of overwhelming force or the conduct

of cordon-and-search operations, both of which alienate the population, they would live and be immersed within the districts and villages threatened by Taliban presence, in order to better understand the local realities, as they conduct the entire range of stabilization operations necessary to win popular support. This implies that the residing U.S. forces would certainly undertake kinetic operations as required by the evolving tactical situation, but the employment of firepower aimed at destroying the adversary would in every instance be subordinated to the larger strategic goal of preserving the loyalty of the population.

Although maintaining such fire discipline will increase the risk of coalition casualties, this is necessarily the price that must be paid for the success of the larger counterinsurgency campaign: the expanded U.S. force presence, in combination with their Afghan counterparts, in the south and east, however, will not only permit commanders to accept such hazards more flexibly (even if always reluctantly), but the tactical missions themselves will expand to include a mixture of combat operations (fighting the insurgents, for example), local peacekeeping (brokering agreements between competing tribes and clans), aiding civil authority (protecting officials tasked with providing law and order and delivering services), and humanitarian relief (involvement in local reconstruction activities and supporting relief organizations).<sup>104</sup>

The experience of the 2003–2005 period in Afghanistan suggests not only that such counterinsurgency operations are valuable for increasing state penetration in areas initially devoid of governmental presence or opposed to Kabul but also that they help wean popular support away from the rebels and toward the regime. With the gradual shift in loyalties toward the government, because the state aided by U.S. and Afghan forces is now capable of providing both increased personal security and greater economic opportunity, the hard-core Taliban operatives residing in the area or regularly operating within it can be isolated, marginalized, or targeted as appropriate. These rebels, who owe their ideological loyalty to the *rahbari shura* or its confederates, would undoubtedly be threatened by the success of state penetration and effective delivery of social services; but the vast remainder of the opposition, namely, the tribal chiefs and village elders as well as the poor rent-a-Taliban street fighters who support the insurgency either because it appears to be winning, because it is profitable to do so, or because they resent corrupt or overbearing government officials can be induced to shift against the uncompromising core as they begin to enjoy the benefits of order over those secured by fighting the regime in Kabul.

As this process slowly gathers momentum throughout the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, the transition to the holding and building phases of the counterinsurgency campaign can occur more and more exclusively on the strength of the indigenous national and local security forces. During this time, U.S. troops will remain available for any residual clearing operations as may be required, but the reconstruction and

development tasks can be expanded with local security resources backed by U.S. strength to the further, and hopefully continual, detriment of the insurgency.

Resuscitating such an effort over large areas of RC-S and RC-E will be manpower intensive, as all counterinsurgency operations invariably are. Consequently, the 21,000 U.S. troops committed by President Obama to Afghanistan must be viewed as merely the early wave of a larger force that will become necessary if the stabilization effort is to succeed. Using the troops available right now at least allows the process of arresting the slide to begin in certain limited areas. But expanding this remediation to the country at large will require the full complement of the nine or so brigade combat teams that are identified by many analysts as necessary for success in Afghanistan.<sup>105</sup>

Even when these forces are fully committed, however, reversing the deterioration in security will not be straightforward. Considerable uncertainty will hang over the entire enterprise for quite some time, and occasionally there will be sharp setbacks; but if the overall trends are in the right direction over the next three to five years, the initial successes will help to create an “inkblot effect,” whereby successively larger areas of territory in RC-S and RC-E can be slowly cleared of insurgents and restored to government control. If this effort is successful—and there is no reason a priori to believe that it cannot be so, given the abundant evidence that most Afghans do not wish to see the Taliban return to power—the progressive defeat of the insurgency in the outlying areas of the country will actually end up easing the pressure on Kabul, other key habitations, and the lines of communications that connect them.

Although a slow process—but with lasting consequences—the steady outward expansion of counterinsurgency operations will also have demonstrated the wisdom of the current U.S. military approach in Afghanistan. Based on the evidence available, this strategy consists of aiming to keep up the pressure on the Taliban by transforming their southern and eastern bastions when the appropriate military resources become available, while doing whatever is necessary to improve security in the other areas of the country in the interim. By rejecting the notion, suggested by some critics, of focusing exclusively on the major population centers and ceding the periphery to the insurgents, from which they can mount dangerous threats to the supposedly secure core, General McKiernan’s strategy of synchronizing the stabilization of the capital and key population centers with the progressive pacification of the turbulent fringes will, if successful, not only enhance the security of the urban terrain but also set the stage for decisively undermining the insurgency within its rural base. If this advance continues inexorably into all the forty-nine districts currently identified by NATO commanders as the most trouble-ridden centers of the insurgency, there will come a point when the Afghan nation, and the United States operating as part of a larger coalition, will be able to truthfully claim that the strategic objectives of the conflict have been realized insofar as the Taliban have been marginalized as an armed opposition in domestic politics.

Framing the analysis of military operations in this way highlights the second important operational-level change that the Obama administration has recognized and should implement with alacrity: accelerating the expansion of the Afghan security forces.<sup>106</sup> The experience with counterinsurgency operations in other parts of the world suggests that organized uprisings of the kind represented by the Taliban are defeated finally not by foreign advisers or alien troops but rather by the security instruments deployed by the threatened state itself.<sup>107</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, these are the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP) that, in turn, consists of the Afghan Uniform Police (AUP), the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), the Afghan Border Police (ABP), the Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), and other specialized units focused on criminal investigation, counterterrorism, and customs.

The raising of the ANA has thus far been an improbable success. Although the ANA is not yet able to independently prosecute the most demanding clearing operations necessary for counterinsurgency success—a fact made much of by its critics—that may not be the right yardstick by which to judge this fledgling institution. What the ANA has demonstrated thus far is that, despite Afghanistan being cleaved by tribal, regional, and ethnic differences, it is possible to build a professional, competent, and apolitical military force that owes its loyalty to the nation as a whole. Despite being a relatively young body, its capabilities have been increasing steadily: by 2008, it had taken the lead in more than thirty significant military operations, and, although it is likely that its current capabilities will make it more suitable for implementing the hold phase of counterinsurgency operations, the evidence suggests that ANA troops perform creditably in clearing actions as well when partnering with allied forces and aided by their supporting arms.

The importance of incorporating the ANA in the prospective area ownership approach to counterinsurgency cannot be underestimated. Not only does it present an Afghan face on what is likely to be a burdensome and long-lasting mission—not to mention one that requires constant interaction with the local population—but it also frees up U.S. forces for those more complex, long-range, kinetic operations in which they have distinct advantages.

Over a period of time, the ANA will acquire proficiency in conducting these missions as well because, above all else, it has the one necessary—and irreplaceable—attribute for success: the ANA is both willing to defend its country and is highly motivated to do so. All it needs are the resources, the training, and the equipment. It is in these latter areas that the international coalition traditionally failed the force. A fragmented training regime and a lack of resources have been more responsible for the ANA's diminished capacity than any want of ability or enthusiasm.

After many missteps, increasing the size of the ANA from 82,000 to 134,000 and incorporating a national air corps are now priorities for the United States. The Obama

administration is correctly focused presently on ensuring that these forces are ready and effective at the earliest, and it has declared its willingness to consider the further growth of Afghan military capabilities “as security conditions change.”<sup>108</sup> While such flexibility is welcome, the requirements pertaining to troop levels in stability operations suggest that the president ought to commit right away to expanding the ANA even further because it is unlikely that U.S. and allied military contributions together will suffice to generate the appropriate force-to-population ratios necessary for success in the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the administration should declare in the months ahead a determination to raise ANA strength to at least 250,000 troops, complemented by a reformed training regime that will make it capable of undertaking independent offensive counterinsurgency missions earlier than it might have been otherwise. If an organization of such end strength can be raised over the next four years—and this will require far more U.S. and allied advisers and embedded mentors; a restructuring of the training regime; correcting the pay and retention problems that have stymied the army thus far; strengthening the service’s mobility, combat support, and combat service capabilities; and allocating increased allied resources for force development—the resulting enhancements would go a long way toward correcting the force-to-population imbalances that currently undermine the successful prosecution of the counterinsurgency mission.<sup>109</sup> President Obama’s decision to send additional U.S. troops specifically focused on accelerating ANA training is, therefore, welcome but still incomplete.

The raising of the ANA has been successful despite the lack of resources available at its founding, but the record with respect to the Afghan National Police has with a few exceptions been dispiriting in contrast. Although, for example, the Afghan National Civil Order Police—the mobile, paramilitary component of the force that is nationally recruited and directly controlled by the Ministry of the Interior—has been a remarkable success because it is proficient, incorrupt, and responsive to national need, the largest component of the police force, the Afghan Uniform Police, which focuses on patrols, crime prevention, traffic, and general policing at the regional, provincial, and district levels, has been a troublesome disappointment.<sup>110</sup> The inadequacies of the AUP are particularly consequential because this element represents the front line of the state in regard to the provision of order, personal security, and law enforcement; yet, the constrained resources available to the Afghan government have ensured that the AUP is abysmally paid. Its local recruiting and deployment patterns further guarantee that it reproduces all the narrow tribal and clan rivalries from which its cadre is drawn. As a consequence, the state has been moved from being a disinterested guardian into just another actor involved in the never-ending cycle of societal competition. The resulting corruption and partiality that is endemic to the AUP has done more to discredit the Karzai government in the eyes of the populace and engender sympathy for the Taliban, which, whatever else their outrages, have moved quickly to provide a perceptibly untainted, parallel system of law and order in those districts dominated by their presence.

When most local grievances of the population are rooted in complaints about the pervasive dishonesty of petty officials, including the police, the task of defeating the Taliban will become much harder if, after successful clearing operations by the U.S. military and the ANA, the holding and building components that follow are then subverted on account of the continuing failures of neighborhood law enforcement. At the very least, therefore, the Obama administration must increase the resources committed to the building of an effective uniformed police force because, next to the U.S. and Afghan militaries, the character and effectiveness of the local constable will make the single most important difference to any strategy aimed at marginalizing the Taliban. The administration's White Paper demonstrates that it has recognized the problem accurately. But uncertainties about overall ANP size still persist. Because numbers matter here as well, the ANP, especially its AUP and ANCOP components, ought to be expanded and Marin Strmecki's suggestion that Washington invest in "increase[ing] ANP end strength above 100,000"<sup>111</sup> is eminently sensible.

The third change at the operational level that is long overdue is a revitalization of coalition information operations in Afghanistan. For a group that historically despised the modern media and made its reputation by, among other things, destroying radios and television sets during its five-odd years of rule, the Taliban have displayed a stunning acuity in integrating information warfare with their combat activities. While the techniques used are often coarse and unsophisticated, they are nevertheless effective in advancing the rebels' core objective, which is to convince the Afghan population, especially the tribal elders and the street fighters who are pivotal to the outcome of the current conflict, that the Taliban will survive long after the coalition has departed Afghanistan, which could be quicker than is believed anyway; that the Taliban are the true mujahideen, supported by pious Muslims throughout the world, whereas the coalition represents "crusaders" who will be defeated, just as all their predecessors and their puppets (which include the government in Kabul) have been throughout history; and that the coalition seeks to destroy the Afghan people by subverting their traditional culture and by deliberately killing their women and children.<sup>112</sup>

These powerful, but insidious, messages are repeated frequently and in multiple ways to key audiences with the calculated intention of convincing them that, since an insurgent victory is eventually inevitable, all popular support to the government and the coalition is not only futile to begin with but actually dangerous insofar as it justifies Taliban wrath and retaliation. While the militants frequently use targeted assassinations and, increasingly, deliberate attacks on women to drive home these themes, these atrocities are only part of a larger and more sophisticated menu of carrots and sticks designed to shape popular perceptions about the conflict in Afghanistan.

The necessity for influencing popular opinion in support of the rebels is driven entirely by the *shura's* realization that the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan will be determined ultimately by the way in which millions of ordinary people vote "with their feet."

Precisely because the Taliban have been defeated militarily in their every encounter with coalition forces, the need to assert the inevitability of ultimate victory, discredit the government and its foreign protectors, and capture the hearts and minds of the Afghan population becomes all the more critical to the insurgents' strategy. In fact, Taliban information operations reflect the shrewd realization that no matter how consistent their defeats on the battlefield may be, their survival—and their eventual victory—as a resistance organization depends fundamentally on whether they are able to convince key constituencies in Afghanistan about the justice of their cause and the extent of their popular backing, even if the evidence for such is lacking in reality. Consequently, Taliban operatives in the south and the east propagate the key themes highlighted earlier through propaganda disseminated through radio and leaflets, personal engagement with key local leaders, and the use of night letters to coerce and intimidate specific adversaries. These efforts are complemented at the strategic level by the widespread use of audio tapes, compact discs, videotapes, and digital video discs, which are found widely throughout markets in Afghanistan. In addition, the Taliban have learned to exploit the international media, including satellite, cable television, and the Internet, which hosts many Arabic-, Urdu-, and Pashto-language websites sympathetic to the insurgency.

While the Taliban's information operations thus share some superficial similarities with their coalition counterparts, who also utilize technology-intensive methods to deliver political messages through standoff means, the real distinctiveness of the insurgents' effort derives from the exploitation of their physical presence in key contested areas. The existence of committed Taliban fighters in numerous southern and eastern districts of Afghanistan enables the insurgency to shape the perceptions of important political targets through face-to-face communications that carry focused messages of inducement or intimidation, backed up by the physical delivery of resources valued by ordinary Afghans, namely, law, order, and justice as well as economic benefits, the latter often deriving from the control and regulation of narcotics production within the country.

The failure of the international coalition and the Afghan state to maintain a comparable physical presence in the south and east, besides resulting in an inability to deliver governance and social services, has also produced numerous opportunities for the Taliban to exploit the coalition's military mishaps with great alacrity. In many instances when NATO operations, for example, have produced unintentional civilian casualties, the Taliban's presence in the troubled regions has often permitted them to quickly charge the "infidels" and "crusaders" with the wanton murder of innocent Afghans much faster than the coalition has been able to respond. The use of loaded language to describe foreign troops and their mistakes in circumstances when definitive rebuttals are slow in coming leaves an indelible impression on the minds of many restive Afghans who, either feeling deprived of the benefits of state authority or experiencing abuse at the hands of state officials, are inclined to sympathize with the

Taliban's claims, especially when these are packaged in Islamic locutions and make authoritative reference to the Koran.

The availability of new U.S. reinforcements capable of implementing a strategy of area ownership permits the theater commanders to implement, for the first time, comparable psychological operations; personal engagement with key tribal and local leaders; and presence, posture, and profile activities aimed at combating the insidious Taliban propaganda through the integrated counterinsurgency effort that will be undertaken in many of the most troubled areas of Afghanistan. Indigenous Afghan forces, along with local governmental and societal institutions, must be integral to this effort. In fact, they should be in the lead because there is no better instrument with which to influence the Afghan population than representatives of the Afghan people themselves. The Afghans know their own culture and appreciate their own local sensitivities far better than Western psychological operations specialists ever will. Consequently, integrating them into the information operations that will be conducted directly by troops and civil authorities as part of their peacemaking and humanitarian activities within the disturbed districts offers the coalition the best opportunity of refuting Taliban misinformation directly and in a way that technology either cannot do or can at best do only circuitously.

While the protection and reconstruction activities undertaken within the critical areas will remain the best proof of the coalition's good intentions, they must be embedded nevertheless in a clear master narrative emphasizing three critical themes that will help shift popular support toward the government of Afghanistan. First, the coalition's information campaign must recast the nature of the adversary. Far from being the nationalist patriots that they often portray themselves to be, the Taliban must be shown up as the oppressive enemies of modernity who seek to deny the Afghan people what they truly want for a better future—order, justice, and responsive government; education and health for all, irrespective of class or gender; and the material fruits of economic development.

Second, the information campaign must also recast the nature of conflict. To undermine the notion that the insurgency is a true jihad carried out by good Muslims against the invading infidels, the resistance must be depicted—by reminding the Afghans of what the five or so years of Taliban rule had wrought—as the effort of an antediluvian minority to impose an intolerant brand of Islam on the vast majority of the citizenry that rejects it.

Third, and finally, the renewed information campaign must recast the ultimate goals of the military operation now under way. While continually reiterating what the Afghan people already know—that the Western coalition is not an occupation force like the Red Army—the United States nonetheless ought to affirm clearly that its goals in Afghanistan consist fundamentally of building the kind of polity that the population

seeks for itself, namely, one that provides order and justice based on the rule of law, one that protects individuals against the multiple threats to their security, and one that offers them the prospect of living a decent life—and that, toward achieving these ends, Washington will stay engaged in Afghanistan for the long term so long as this presence represents the wishes of the Afghan people.<sup>113</sup>

If success in a counterinsurgency campaign will ultimately be procured only when the population at large believes that its interests are better served by supporting the government rather than the rebels, both material and ideational elements will have to interact virtuously to produce such a result. Although there can be no substitute for the deeds and actions that engender popular loyalty toward the regime, a conclusive political accomplishment will be harder to obtain if these tangible contributions are not accompanied by a systematic information offensive that highlights what the coalition's activities are about and what they are intended to achieve.

Information operations, then, become a force multiplier: by discrediting the adversary's counternarrative, they ease the operational tasks facing the coalition while they simultaneously magnify the benefits resulting from alliance actions and increase their credibility. Given this fact, the Obama administration's White Paper correctly emphasizes that "a strategic communications program must be created, made more effective, and resourced."<sup>114</sup> Although the coalition's prospective information campaign will have diverse facets—depending on how different messages are targeted at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels—the campaign must reinforce the central point that the alliance, meaning the Western coalition and the government of Afghanistan, will do whatever is necessary to win the war and win the peace. By leaving critical bystanders in Afghanistan with no doubt about this fundamental proposition, NATO's and Kabul's information operations will contribute toward nudging these constituencies into supporting the government more wholeheartedly than they have done in the past and, in the process, bring the coalition a step closer to victory.

Appreciating just this fact, the Taliban have invested heavily in information warfare, doing far better in this domain than they ever have on the battlefield. It is now time for the alliance to match its successes on the ground by persuading the Afghans that those victories are aimed at protecting both their persons and their interests and, hence, possess strategic value.

## **DOMESTIC CHANGE**

While U.S. and alliance inadequacies at the strategic and operational levels—especially the weaknesses in commitment, command, control and coordination, and counterinsurgency implementation—have all contributed to the deterioration in Afghanistan, perhaps no single factor is more responsible for stimulating the Taliban insurgency than the domestic failures of the Karzai regime. As the administration's White Paper

summarized it succinctly, “the overall legitimacy of the Afghan government [has been] undermined by rampant corruption and a failure to provide basic services to much of the population over the past seven years.”<sup>115</sup> Saying this does not in any way imply that the government of Afghanistan alone bears culpability for the current crisis because the tattered country it inherited in 2002, the disappointing implementation of the aid commitments made by the international community, and the problematic governing structures created by the Bonn Agreement and its aftermath all share in the blame. Yet the government of Hamid Karzai cannot escape responsibility for the deficiencies in governance; the pervasive corruption of state officials at all levels; and the widespread abuses of power, including by the pettiest functionaries, that daily threaten the lives of the citizenry and undermine their confidence in the state.

More than anything else, the resuscitation of the insurgency is owed not to any grand nationalist sentiments about resistance but to the fact that the rebels have been able to convince substantial sections of the population in the south and east that the Taliban could not be any worse than the Karzai government and, when compared along many dimensions, would perhaps be considerably better. Such a message aimed at audiences already skeptical of Kabul to begin with, who were often losers in the competition for provincial and local power and who were repeated targets of state weakness, corruption, and inefficiency, has proved exceptionally attractive as a mobilization device. By exploiting the residual anger that many ordinary citizens feel toward their government for its inability to protect them, provide them with the means of licit livelihood, and, worst of all, for making their already difficult lives even more burdensome due to the unbearable levels of official sleaze that have now become commonplace in Afghanistan, the Taliban have been able to position themselves as an acceptable, even if not entirely welcome, alternative to the Karzai regime.

This constrained willingness to live with the Taliban is a rational response on the part of beleaguered individuals who, having been at the receiving end of interminable national disorder, tend to heavily discount the future. Although they reject the Taliban as the desirable solution to Afghanistan’s problems over the long term, they nevertheless support the movement today because of its ability to assure their personal survival and well-being, even if the order produced thereby actually dims the more hopeful future they crave but that they may not be around to enjoy anyway. Thomas Hobbes would have understood this predicament entirely.

Defeating the Taliban insurgency, therefore, will require deliberate and focused efforts at domestic-level change as a complement to the transformations identified at the strategic and the operational levels. Because internal renewal is by its very nature difficult to realize—since it implicates the hard structures of power that are beyond the easy control of outsiders—all the domestic adjustments necessary to at least turn the tide will have to be those that can make a prompt difference to the lives of the population affected by the insurgency. This, in turn, implies that the domestic changes in Afghanistan,

which ought to be pursued by the administration in the months ahead, will be ones that can be implemented piecemeal while still making a significant difference to the success of the counterinsurgency effort and where the additional resources injected by the United States can be appropriately used. What follows, therefore, is not a survey of all the domestic changes required to transform Afghanistan permanently but only those that will yield quick results, can be integrated into the area ownership strategy implemented by U.S. military commanders, and employ the reinforcing troops provided by Washington in politically worthwhile ways.

**Law and order.** The three principles just enumerated ensure that the first task relating to domestic change should not be trying to engineer a macroscopic transformation of the security situation beginning with central institutions in Kabul. Effecting change on a nationwide scale in short order, however desirable, will be difficult and will not produce results that are helpful to arresting the entrenchment of the insurgency. Instead, U.S. commanders and the Karzai government ought to think microscopically in the months ahead and concentrate their efforts on the key provinces and, even more important, on the critical districts identified by NATO intelligence as those most affected by the insurgency. The primary objective in these areas must be to restore law, order, and justice, with a view to enhancing population security, through the utilization of all instruments of political power.

The area ownership strategy that the coalition should employ lends itself perfectly to such a mission. Utilizing the additional American troops arriving in the south and the east, battalion commanders should focus their clearing operations not simply against the Taliban but against the wider range of miscreants who happen to populate a given district and threaten its inhabitants. This expanded focus is essential because in almost every instance a variety of local predators, not to mention the neighborhood police, threatens the security of ordinary Afghans just as much as the Taliban.

Clearing operations, in this context, will therefore involve more than merely kinetic actions; they will involve marginalizing those elements of the Afghan state that are part of the problem while simultaneously strengthening those district-level components capable of delivering on law, order, and justice when suitably supported against immediate threats. In districts where state organs either do not exist or have been rendered completely irrelevant, improvised substitutes will have to be created until governmental institutions can be erected and are capable of discharging their duties. In all these activities, U.S. commanders cannot act alone but only in collaboration with local allies who, odd as it may seem, actually exist even in the most troubled, opposition-dominated districts. Working with such actors, who include tribal and clan chiefs, village elders, and numerous ordinary Afghans, local self-defense militias operating under the formal aegis of the Afghan government but coordinating closely with American and Afghan troops ought to be created as supplements to existing law enforcement, if the latter is in fact salvageable.

As such formations begin to function, U.S. military forces can intervene more energetically in matters of redressing grievances, which remain the one conspicuous state failure that has energized the Taliban. By creating revitalized local bodies manned by tribal representatives and supported by U.S. military power, these grassroots institutions can arbitrate disputes speedily and discharge justice impartially, thereby undermining one of the most important drivers of support for the insurgency.

**Local reconstruction.** As governance functions are slowly revitalized through such micro innovations, local reconstruction efforts must be accelerated in order to satisfy economic needs. Again, operating within the counterinsurgency framework of area ownership, the development activities associated with the Afghan government's National Solidarity Program, which funds local projects in thousands of villages, must be accelerated.<sup>116</sup> These undertakings must be supplemented as required by other quick-reaction efforts. By using the Commander's Emergency Relief Program (CERP) funds and, where available, the competence of foreign assistance specialists, local labor ought to be gainfully employed in infrastructure projects, food production and distribution, sanitation and irrigation, vehicle maintenance and repair, and other comparable activities based on immediate need. The existing practice of partly disbursing CERP funds through the provincial governor's office ought to be maintained, but whether district governors ought to be allocated some portion in order to support Community Development Council activities should be examined. In either case, the use of these monies ought to be closely tied to the reconstruction priorities in a given district, based on what best conduces to increasing support for the Afghan government.

It is in this context that elements of the "civilian surge"<sup>117</sup> advocated by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman and now approved by the Obama administration would also prove most useful if it resulted in a significant influx of experts who could train local people to acquire the economic skills pertinent to success in contemporary Afghanistan. Such a program would not only offer opportunities for American allies to make genuinely worthwhile contributions in RC-S and RC-E under the overall supervision of the U.S. military, it would also serve as a necessary corrective to any overmilitarization of the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>118</sup>

The need to rely on such improvised solutions at the local level—meaning the districts, villages, and communities—highlights the absence of viable subnational institutions existing uniformly throughout Afghanistan. In fact, the erosion of many traditional community governance institutions, such as the *malik* and the *shura*, and the weaknesses of district-level governance, including the district governor's strong control over public access to the institutions of state, his power over resources and influence, and his indebtedness to the higher executive—particularly the provincial governor who appoints him—rather than to the people he serves, have all contributed to the accelerated growth of the Taliban insurgency.

One of the pernicious consequences of the Bonn conference and subsequent constitutional processes has been the centralization of governmental authority in Kabul, where power theoretically flows from the president, through the ministries, to the provincial and district governors throughout the country. This formal centralization, however, is “combined with actual fragmentation of power among a variety of local and regional actors,”<sup>119</sup> none of whom are necessarily beholden or responsive to the state. The failure to institutionalize an integrated devolution of power through mechanisms that increase the responsiveness of district, provincial, and informal authorities has thus proven costly in that the population at the bottom of the political pyramid often finds itself at the receiving end of decisions made by powerful individuals who invariably neglect popular preferences. The long-term structural solution in Afghanistan, however, cannot consist of weakening executive power in Kabul or of radically concentrating power in subnational institutions; instead, stability and progress in Afghanistan will demand that a judicious balance be continually maintained in center–periphery relations as the country’s political institutions evolve over time.

Although the necessity for improving subnational governance has been widely acknowledged, there has been, oddly enough, a proliferation of institutions at all levels between the province and the population, including the Provincial Council, the Provincial Development Committees, the PRTs, the municipalities, NGOs, and Community Development Councils. But these bodies have arisen haphazardly, in response to political necessity, and without due thought being given to how they might either fit together as a coherent whole or become conduits for the transfer of resources and political preferences with accountability. As a result, some of these institutions work effectively in some areas, while their counterparts are moribund in others. The coalition forces, consequently, cannot attempt to fix the structural problems of subnational authority in Afghanistan as a prelude to containing the insurgency. Instead, within the context of the area ownership approach, they must improvise freely. While coordinating to the degree possible with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, they should nonetheless use all institutions that work at a local level, irrespective of what they were originally intended for, while creating other ad hoc arrangements as necessary to deliver the governance required to win the population’s loyalty in the struggle against the Taliban.

**Counternarcotics.** It is in the context of local reconstruction that the counternarcotics campaign in Afghanistan also ought to be revitalized. Although some have argued that the United States ought to forgo this effort because of its costs or because of the difficulties of imposing Western values on Afghan society, the real reason for pursuing an antinarcotics campaign is not ideological, but strategic. As the Congressional Research Service summarized succinctly, an effective counternarcotics strategy is fundamentally essential for the success of the larger counterinsurgency campaign because “militia commanders, criminal organizations, and corrupt officials have [long] exploited narcotics as a reliable source of revenue and patronage, which has perpetuated the threat

these groups pose to the country's fragile internal security and the legitimacy of its embryonic democratic government."<sup>120</sup> The joint United Nations–World Bank study on poppy cultivation in Afghanistan amplified the nature of the problem further when it noted that:

The magnitude and importance of Afghanistan's opium economy are virtually unprecedented and unique in global experience—it has been roughly estimated as equivalent to 36% of licit (i.e., non-drug) GDP in 2004/05, or if drugs are also included in the denominator, 27% of total drug-inclusive GDP. The sheer size and illicit nature of the opium economy mean that not surprisingly, it infiltrates and seriously affects Afghanistan's economy, state, society, and politics. It generates large amounts of effective demand in the economy, provides incomes and employment including in rural areas (even though most of the final "value" from Afghan opium accrues outside the country), and supports the balance of payments and indirectly (through Customs duties on drug-financed imports) government revenues. The opium economy by all accounts is a massive source of corruption and undermines public institutions especially in (but not limited to) the security and justice sectors. There are worrying signs of infiltration by the drug industry into higher levels of government and into the emergent politics of the country. Thus it is widely considered to be one of the greatest threats to state building, reconstruction, and development in Afghanistan.<sup>121</sup>

Although the Taliban are certainly not dependent solely on narcotics to sustain the insurgency, poppy production constitutes a nontrivial source of revenue for their operations. In many areas under their control, the Taliban today actively encourage the cultivation of poppy as a means of either securing resources or enticing otherwise destitute bystanders, all aimed at undermining the legitimate government in Kabul. The good news is that counternarcotics efforts in recent times have produced hopeful results: in 2008, for example, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan actually declined from 193,000 hectares to 157,000 hectares, and the number of provinces declared to be poppy free actually increased from 13 in 2007 to 18 in 2008. A counternarcotics campaign in Afghanistan is, therefore, capable of being successful because it implicates economic decisions made by rational individuals trapped in adverse circumstances. Given this fact, counternarcotics successes *can* be sustained—as the experience in Nangarhar province shows—but only if the larger campaign against poppy cultivation is embedded in the strategy of area ownership. To be sure, some elements of the operation will have to be implemented at the national level: this includes mapping the contours of the overall drug economy, identifying its key nodes and personalities, and interdicting the linkages between Afghanistan's drug czars and their foreign conduits, who either supply the chemical precursors for processing poppy into heroin or export the finished product to a wider international market.

Although these activities will have to be coordinated with the U.S. military and Afghan security forces involved in the area ownership strategy, the fundamental effort against poppy cultivation will have to be local and requires two elements for its accomplishment: the establishment of law and order within the district and the existence of economic alternatives to poppy cultivation for purposes of subsistence. If the counterinsurgency strategy described above evolves in the manner intended by American commanders on the ground, both requirements for success can be realized without great need for highly divisive tactics such as forced crop eradication. While local military and police units will undoubtedly be employed to physically interdict the higher end of the drug value chain, such as precursor stocks, clandestine drug labs, and processed heroin inventories, and will assist eradication operations as required, their principal role in combating poppy production will be to restore the writ of the state within the district and support those aid and reconstruction programs providing alternative crops, such as fruits, edible nuts, and flowers, which Afghanistan has had a long tradition of producing successfully. Inducing farmers to shift toward cultivating such cash crops permanently, however, requires complementary investments in water and power generation, access to credit and markets, and safe and reasonable transportation.<sup>122</sup>

But it is precisely such development activities, supported by the resuscitation of law and order, that the counterinsurgency campaign's strategy of area ownership is supposed to exemplify—so long as it is furnished with sufficient American troops and Afghan security forces as well as allocated the necessary resources. The counternarcotics campaign in Nangarhar was such a success because the governor's demand that farmers terminate poppy production or face jail terms was not only backed up by a strong Afghan army and police presence for security and enforcement but also complemented by myriad state-led improvements, including support for alternative crops and food processing along with construction of new capital assets such as warehouses, roads, schools, bridges, and other infrastructure. In conclusion, the counternarcotics campaign in Afghanistan, as the administration's White Paper recognizes, is both necessary and viable: it is necessary to retard the Taliban's ability to generate additional revenue and to arrest the growing corruption of the Afghan state, and it is viable if, when implemented within an area ownership program, eradicating poppy cultivation becomes part of the growing incentives available to ordinary Afghans to behave licitly and in ways that ultimately strengthen the government rather than the insurgency.

In any event, the success of the larger counterinsurgency effort, which aims to transform the political environment in southern and eastern Afghanistan one district at a time, will be enhanced if local commanders pay constant attention to three principles. First, the purpose of enhancing population security comprehensively, in addition to its own intrinsic worth, is to increase state legitimacy and permit the inhabitants to transfer their allegiance away from the insurgency and toward the government. Consequently, U.S. forces must make every effort to incorporate their Afghan counterparts in their

multifarious activities so as to ensure that the resulting success always redounds to the credit of the Afghan state.

Second, the integration of Afghan and foreign civilian resources and expertise, whether in the areas of law and governance or reconstruction or counternarcotics, will be vital to the success of the strategy of area ownership. Yet, because these are not specifically military missions, the civilian involvement associated with them could quickly become either marginal or even obstructive to the larger enterprise if the local command-and-control arrangements are not specifically designed to seamlessly integrate these contributions into the counterinsurgency operation.

Third, and finally, while the Afghan populations in the targeted districts will undoubtedly become beneficiaries of all the national and allied activities aimed at enhancing population security, the temptation to treat them as objects of the counterinsurgency campaign must be stoutly resisted. Instead, they must be viewed by all assisting components, from the commanders down to the lowliest privates, as full partners in the struggle against the Taliban because victory against the insurgency will not materialize until the average Afghan is fully vested in the alternative and begins to take the lead in supporting the state against the rebels.

**Central initiatives.** While the Karzai government, in cooperation with the United States, ought to concentrate on key districts in southern and eastern Afghanistan as its main domestic task for the success of the counterinsurgency, it also needs to focus on a few endeavors that can be initiated at the central level quite quickly. These initiatives can yield results in short order and involve the integration of allied resources, but they are ultimately aimed, once again, at strengthening the Afghan state.

To begin with, the government of Afghanistan ought to invite the international coalition to extend the collaborative reform undertaken in the Ministry of Defense since 2002 to all other ministries in Kabul, including key institutions such as the ministries of the Interior, Finance, Education, Agriculture, Rural Development, and Health. Although formal power in Afghanistan flows largely from the president's office through the provincial and district governors, the primary service delivery mechanisms are the highly centralized functional ministries in Kabul. The effectiveness of these institutions, and their line-level distributaries in the provinces and districts, determines whether Afghans throughout the country benefit from the state.

Most of the ministries, unfortunately, are still not as effective as they should be, partly owing to the lack of professionalism in the ranks and sometimes owing to corruption at the political level. Addressing corruption requires strong international pressure on Karzai personally—as was necessary, for example, to replace the previous minister of the interior—and on his successor. The lack of professionalism can be redressed through a concerted reform and mentoring effort. The reorganization of the Ministry of Defense,

for example, which included retraining its personnel and rationalizing its organizational structure, was one of the key reasons for the success of the Afghan National Army. A comparable effort directed at other ministries would go a long way toward making these critical service delivery arms more responsive to the needs of the entire Afghan nation, with consequent benefits for the counterinsurgency effort.

Further, and as a complement to this effort, the United States and its partners must begin to invest in national programs that strengthen institutions, build human capital, and sustain the political viability of this emerging country. The experience of the past eight years has shown that Afghanistan is hobbled, unsurprisingly, by a serious shortage of qualified individuals capable of filling a variety of governmental positions ranging from the National Assembly and the judiciary to public administration and service organizations to security and law enforcement agencies. Although international assistance has served as a temporary palliative, an enduring solution is needed as well. Toward this end, the international community in partnership with Kabul ought to commit to a decade-long program in, for example, education: investing in general learning at all levels; vocational training; and specialized technical instruction in certain key sectors such as information technology, medicine, management, and engineering. Such an effort is essential to prepare the next generation of Afghans capable of running their state. The United States should take the lead in funding and establishing a durable exchange program that sends Afghans abroad for education or experience and brings international experts to Afghanistan on a scale similar to that set up in the post-Soviet states.

Finally, the government of Afghanistan in collaboration with its international partners ought to adjust the Afghan National Development Strategy to include employment generation as part of its larger poverty reduction goals. Although accurate data are difficult to come by, it is believed that some 40 percent of the country's twenty-five million people are currently jobless and that some five million Afghans live under the poverty line. Such deprivation provides ready opportunities for the insurgency. There is abundant anecdotal evidence that large numbers of unemployed youth gravitate toward the Taliban not necessarily out of ideological conviction but merely because they often pay better than what local security and law enforcement jobs offered by the government would offer. Making employment a priority will require the Karzai government to emphasize key sectors such as agriculture, mining, transportation, and rural development within its development strategy; these sectors offer the greatest employment opportunities, despite the overall high rates of illiteracy.

Employment generation through targeted public works can help in the short term, but the permanent solution consists of creating an enabling environment that prices government interventions adequately while it fosters the growth of the private sector. Although governmental involvement is critical and necessary for reconstruction in a conflict-ravaged country such as Afghanistan, excessive state intervention—to the

degree that it also fundamentally banks on international assistance—can engender unhelpful internal and external dependencies that retard the emergence of a viable state. The Afghan experience on this issue has been paradoxical: although the international community has supported state building through various aid programs within Afghanistan, “the bulk of [the] assistance has been delivered outside the control of the Afghan government.”<sup>123</sup> This mode of delivery, although intended to circumvent the problems of official dishonesty, ends up undermining the strategic objective of building an effective Afghan state.

Over the long term, it is far more effective to transfer resources directly to Kabul, which can then distribute them throughout the provinces. Although political sleaze may result in some losses, more resources will likely be saved if targeted governmental programs, using cost-effective local manpower and assets, can obviate the waste and duplication that characterize the disparate foreign efforts now under way in Afghanistan. The resulting increases in state legitimacy, too, would be significant and consequential. This benefit alone warrants shifting the bulk of future international assistance directly to the Afghan government despite all the admitted risks of corruption. If these can be controlled through better oversight—and mentoring within the ministries as suggested earlier—both the state and its foreign donors stand to benefit immensely. Engineering such a transition will require rebalancing the government’s core and external budgets as well as restructuring the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. These issues ought to become the subject of discussion between the next elected president of Afghanistan and the international community, even as all efforts are made in the interim to redress unemployment with an eye to defanging the insurgency.

**Successful elections.** The objective of inhibiting the momentum of Taliban success leads directly to another critical task at the domestic level, namely, assuring a successful Afghan election that serves as a milestone in the ongoing evolution of democracy within the country.<sup>124</sup> After some dithering, officials have decided that the presidential and Provincial Council elections will be held according to their previously agreed schedule in August 2009, followed by elections to the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of Parliament) and District Councils in 2010. Although a constitutional crisis has been averted because the Supreme Court of Afghanistan has now ruled that Karzai can stay in office until August this year—despite the scheduled end of his term in May 2009. The forthcoming presidential election will nonetheless be challenging because voting will occur at a time when the Taliban appear to be in the ascendancy, when Karzai’s leadership seems to be at a nadir, and when U.S. and allied troop reinforcements intended for Afghanistan may not be fully complete.

Although Karzai is seeking reelection as president, international—including American—disenchantment with his candidacy is at an all-time high, as most Western capitals have concluded that his narrow self-interests as a politician are increasingly out of sync with what is required to stabilize Afghanistan. Because Karzai has the greatest

name recognition among all the potential presidential candidates in Afghanistan, it is possible that he will win reelection even though his government is judged by a majority of Afghans to be more corrupt than previous periods of Taliban, mujahideen, and communist rule. The prospect of Karzai's reelection, despite his failure to deliver on security and development, has led to a dangerous fall in the public's confidence in democracy and its ability to produce change—a development that, obviously, has serious implications for the coalition's ability to defeat the Taliban.

The fears that a Karzai reelection might deepen Afghan alienation in the south and east and undermine the counterinsurgency effort now falling in place has given rise to discussion in Washington and elsewhere of whether it might be wise for the West to jettison him in favor of some other candidate. Several prominent Afghan politicians have already made the rounds seeking such anointing in Western capitals, arguing not entirely disingenuously that Karzai's return to office bodes ill for the prospect of turning their country around. The merit of these judgments notwithstanding, the United States should refrain from giving in to what has been a time-honored proclivity to pick winners and losers in the internal politics of other states, especially its clients. Whatever the liabilities of Karzai returning to power in a free and fair election, the dangers of sanctifying an alternative candidate—who would then be pilloried domestically by the Taliban and other opponents precisely because he is Washington's choice—far outweigh any presumed benefits that could accrue to waging the counterinsurgency successfully.<sup>125</sup>

The prospective elections no doubt will be pivotal because, if effectively conducted, they will give ordinary Afghans a stake in national governance and shape political outcomes in a way that has been rare in the country's modern history; permit the disaffected segment of the population to peacefully register their protest against Karzai's political record while simultaneously testing the weight of their own views against larger popular preferences; and, finally, strengthen a tradition of peaceful transitions that not only suggests to the insurgents that governments can be made responsive to popular will through means other than armed struggle but also convinces the citizenry at large that democracy does represent the desirable regime for Afghanistan.

For all these reasons, it is more important for Washington to support a fair, transparent, and credible electoral process that throws up the largest number of competing candidates, engages the electorate across all ethnicities and in every part of the country, and provides genuine alternatives in terms of both personalities and policies. Undertaking this process successfully will require a period of intensive civic education that can help correct the disillusionment characterizing some segments of the electorate, particularly if the resulting efforts reinforce a basic notion that is unfamiliar to many Afghans given their history: that individuals in authority hold power ultimately because it is granted to them by the citizenry through an electoral process in which individuals can vote for whomever they wish.

Deepening this notion in popular consciousness would aid a successful election, but there are other challenges that will also need to be addressed. Many of the most obvious ones pertain to process and include the adequacy of voter registration, the legal framework under which polls will be conducted, the availability of adequate funding, the capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission to effectively organize the elections and assure a fair vote count, the presence and utility of international monitors, and the role of political parties in what is still effectively a single nontransferable vote system.

Although all these issues will have to be addressed before the presidential and the Wolesi Jirga elections, three other matters are placed in sharp relief. The first is President Karzai's power as an incumbent to use his office to the disadvantage of his opponents in blatant to subtle ways; the second is the relative paucity of resources that could hinder other, possibly equally deserving, candidates from becoming serious presidential challengers; and the third is the neutrality of key government institutions such as the Independent Electoral Commission, the Electoral Complaints Commission, and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance in relation to the incumbent seeking reelection.

It is unfortunate that the international community did not focus very much on these issues in the aftermath of the 2005 polls when various irregularities dulled public enthusiasm for the electoral process. It is impossible for the United States to rectify these problems either unilaterally or entirely in time for the presidential election, but it can do a few things to contribute to the success of this event. Toward that end, Washington should publicly and repeatedly announce its neutrality in regard to Karzai's reelection. It should also offer its support to all presidential candidates in Afghanistan by committing to providing security and transportation for every contestant when they campaign outside their native provinces. It should work quickly with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan and especially the United Nations Development Program's Elect project to create an election fund, making good use of international contributions, to support all eligible presidential candidates in order to level the playing field and widen the competition.

While other challenges involving the Electoral Complaints Commission, such as candidate vetting and campaign financing, will also come to the fore when District Council and especially the Wolesi Jirga elections are at issue—because 40 to 80 percent of the representatives elected in 2005 consisted of drug traffickers or militia leaders<sup>126</sup>—the most significant danger facing the entire electoral sequence in 2009–2010 is likely to be the absence of security. The threats posed by the Taliban and other social miscreants together could result in a highly flawed election if the violence resulting from suicide bombings and armed attacks restricts free campaigning, undermines election support programs, prevents polling in certain areas according to schedule, deters popular participation and turnout, and threatens the lives of candidates, election officials, and voters.

Deterring the opposition from undermining the elections should be among the most important immediate objectives of the U.S. troop reinforcement in Afghanistan. Given the election schedule, Washington and other coalition partners should implement a speedy swing of additional troops for security duties because a successful electoral cycle could help—if it provides avenues for peacefully expressing opposition—to take the sting out of the insurgency and, together with the restoration of order and development, become part of the larger process of eroding popular support for the insurgency.

Achieving these goals will require extra troops in a hurry, even if only on a temporary basis: NATO's plans to deploy part of its Rapid Reaction Force to Afghanistan to help with election duties later this year ought to be approved immediately and implemented in synchronization with the election schedule. Ideally, preparing for successful elections in the south and east would have been best done within the context of the area ownership strategy, where the same U.S. and Afghan forces deployed for population security become the core around which election security missions are planned and directed. Because the new counterinsurgency approach centers on managing security within specific districts through the long-term presence of resident military forces, the same intelligence and kinetic capabilities that serve to protect order and development would have supported the elections as a natural extension of their original mission.

The uncertainty about when additional U.S. troops will be available makes this task difficult because it requires theater commanders to commit forces to the south and east on an election schedule rather than on the basis of tactical appropriateness and, by implication, before they might be primed for success. Yet the coalition may have few other choices: using the allied and Afghan security forces currently in country together with those intended to reinforce them, U.S. commanders will have to stitch together an election security plan quickly enough to assure success as they simultaneously plan for how these manpower additions can support the counterinsurgency campaign even as the election cycle is under way.

Above all else, the counterinsurgency operation in the south and east, together with NATO forces operating in other commands elsewhere, must aim to make possible through their own unique and all-important contributions a fair and credible election throughout the country. While the requirements relating to procedures are legion, preserving an environment that permits all regions of the country and all ethnicities within Afghanistan to participate freely in the electoral process, allows all candidates to safely and with equal opportunity campaign for various offices, and ensures that no stakeholder can claim it was denied the chance to get involved in the effort, will be the key to success. These objectives should drive all the military contributions to the political effort.<sup>127</sup> If these elections conclude more or less successfully, they will have not only proved the intentions of the Afghan people toward the insurgency but they will have also paved the way for undermining the Taliban—that is, if the newly

elected officials in Afghanistan take seriously their obligation to restore governance as the security of the country gradually improves thanks to the contributions made by Afghan, ISAF, and U.S. forces.

As this process gathers steam, the government of Afghanistan, in collaboration with its international partners, ought to reexamine some of the constitutional arrangements bequeathed by the Bonn Agreement and its successors: specifically, the value of a nominally all-powerful presidency, the need for a more robust system of checks and balances, the necessity for introducing a certain measure of federalism, and the powers of provincial governors in relation to the budget and expenditure process. Weaknesses in these areas have encouraged the Taliban insurgency, and defeating the same will require attending to issues of structural reform at some point. But these are matters for the long term; and, although they bear significantly on the ability of Afghan democracy to become more responsive to its people, they will of necessity have to wait until the worst threats posed by the Taliban can be arrested in the interim.

## **EXTERNAL CHANGE**

The strategic, operational, and domestic changes suggested above are intended to strengthen the writ of the government within Afghanistan and to bolster support for the state among the populace, two crucial requirements for the success of any counterinsurgency effort. Based on an assessment of some ninety insurgencies since World War II, research conducted at the RAND Corporation has demonstrated that states with high levels of popular support prevailed in two-thirds of all completed insurgencies, whereas that same outcome obtained in fewer than one-third of the cases when states had medium or low levels of support. The importance of strengthening governance, to include upholding law, order, and justice; delivering services; and increasing state legitimacy, as a means of garnering public assistance to defeat the Taliban should, therefore, be obvious. The same body of research also suggests that insurgent groups enjoying support from foreign states won their struggles in more than 50 percent of the cases, those with support from nonstate actors and the diaspora won in a little over 30 percent of the cases, and those with no external support whatsoever won in only 17 percent of the cases.<sup>128</sup>

This evidence highlights the second important reason for success in counterinsurgency campaigns, namely, the ability of the defender to deny the rebels various forms of external sustenance, especially sanctuaries, whence they can conduct their operations unmolested. The implications of this result for the counterinsurgency mission in Afghanistan lead immediately to Pakistan because it is here that the Afghan Taliban draw, at least partly, the resources, recruits, and shelter that enable them to confront Kabul.

The nature of the sanctuary offered by Pakistan is a complex matter. Clearly, a large number of hard-core and ordinary Taliban foot soldiers cross the Afghan–Pakistan

border, particularly along the tribal belt encompassing the North West Frontier Province. These elements belonging to the Pashtun tribes, which exist on both sides of the Durand Line separating the two countries, find it easy to travel across the mountainous boundary through the numerous trails and passes that are often difficult to patrol in either Pakistani or Afghan territory. Because these movements exploit favorable geography and the consanguineal ties characterizing tribal relations on both sides of the frontier, interdicting cross-border traffic involving small groups of individuals, who often may not carry any firearms and use ordinary modes of local transport, can be rather difficult. Although armed infiltrations are also commonplace and are known to occur sometimes with the connivance of Pakistani border patrols, the weaknesses of state authority within the tribal belt make it impossible for Islamabad to either flush these fighters out entirely or prevent them from crossing the frontier in areas where state control is minimal.<sup>129</sup>

The leadership of the Afghan Taliban, in contrast, rarely travels outside its hideouts. Operating entirely from within Pakistan, and based moreover not in the troubled frontiers of the tribal belt but in the more placid environs of Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Balochistan, the survival of the *rahbari shura* is owed not to its ability to dissolve into a hospitable environment but ultimately to the protection of Pakistani state organs, such as the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It is widely believed—and accurately—that the *madaris*, private businesses, Islamic charities, and NGOs in Pakistan and the Middle East, as well as ISI sources, provide the *rahbari shura* with the financial and material wherewithal necessary for their operations.<sup>130</sup>

The problem of the sanctuaries in Pakistan, therefore, boils down to two categories of threat: the dedicated and petty foot soldiers who live in and move out of areas not under the control of the Pakistani state, and the Afghan Taliban leadership that inhabits the governed spaces of the country and survives because the most important elements of the Pakistani government protect it and its operations as a *raison d'état*. Although Islamabad's inability or unwillingness to interdict the foot soldiers necessitates increased coalition counterinfiltration operations on the Afghan side of the border, it is worth remembering that even a hermetic closure of the frontier would not extinguish the Taliban insurgency because it has grown domestic roots within Afghanistan's southern and eastern provinces. Defeating this internal menace will require all the improvements in governance identified earlier, although the effect of these efforts would certainly be amplified if Pakistan were to apprehend the infiltrating fighters and, most important, the bivouacked Taliban leadership that resides and operates on its territory.

Why Pakistan does not do so is a source of great conjecture.<sup>131</sup> Predictably, the government in Islamabad cites inability, on those occasions when it is not actually denying the presence of Mullah Omar and his coterie within the country. It is likely, however, that the civilian regime would gladly surrender both the Taliban's *rahbari shura* and their foot soldiers if it could easily do so or if it knew how. The government of Asif Ali Zardari, at

least, finds Taliban ideology odious and views the insurgency at large as a threat to the kind of Pakistan it seeks to build. The Pakistani military and security services, which hold power in Islamabad even when they do not govern, have other ideas: although their current leadership arguably recognizes that Islamist extremism of all stripes, including the Taliban, represents a mortal danger to Pakistan, they appear to be insufficiently motivated to withdraw their long-standing support to these clients. The conventional wisdom explains this reticence as being linked largely to Pakistan's rivalry with India: the stresses of security competition with a larger and more powerful neighbor and the presence of outstanding disputes, such as over Kashmir, have compelled the Pakistani military to raise various terrorist groups as a so-called strategic reserve to be employed in the low-intensity conflict aimed at enervating India. New Delhi's growth in power, its dramatically improved relations with the United States in recent years, and its growing influence in Afghanistan only deepen Pakistani fears about marginalization in this analysis and, accordingly, strengthen its conviction to hold onto the Taliban and other similar groups for geostrategic reasons.

The upshot of this line of reasoning usually leads to arguments urging Washington to assuage Islamabad's fears, intervene in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, and offer Islamabad a new grand bargain that would make it more cooperative in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations within the region.<sup>132</sup> Irrespective of the validity of these conclusions, the fact remains that they represent an inordinately circuitous approach to neutralizing the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan—and one that is, in any case, not assured of success. They also overlook the equally important reality that, having been involved in a security dilemma with Kabul from the very moment of its founding, Pakistan has critical interests in Afghanistan outside of India. Finally, even if all the disputes with India were to be resolved satisfactorily, the problem of the Pakistan Army's need for an external adversary to justify its continued, and self-interested, lock on power within its country would still remain an issue that defies resolution.

When all these realities are considered on balance, it becomes obvious that convincing Islamabad to help the Western coalition prosecute the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan—through cooperative actions within Pakistan—will be a long and arduous enterprise because neither Washington nor Kabul can concoct any magic solutions that will quickly transform the Pakistani military's and ISI's longstanding diffidence to target the Afghan Taliban. Washington's policy choices for improving Pakistani counterterrorism collaboration, then, usually end up in some combination of the following three dead ends: paying Islamabad more indefinitely in the hope of speedily changing its currently unhelpful behaviors; satisfying Pakistan's (or more precisely, the Pakistan Army's) political interests at the expense of either India or Afghanistan; or ignoring the internal and self-interested drivers underlying much of Islamabad's ambivalence on counterterrorism because they are too difficult to assess and even harder to remedy. Continuing to pursue policies that embody one or more of these courses of action is unlikely to prove any more successful in the future than it has been in the past. To be

sure, Washington ought to keep up some of what it has been doing already. It should encourage the Pakistan Army to recognize that the internal terrorism facing Pakistan is a pernicious form of blowback that has emerged from its long-standing support for terrorism abroad and, consequently, warrants a retrenchment of the military's backing for various terrorist groups. The Obama administration should also do whatever is possible to foster a change in the perceived character of Pakistan's security *problematique* by supporting the civilian government in its efforts to take control of the country's foreign and national security policy and reform the security establishment, even as American officials encourage the military to refocus its attention on counterinsurgency and away from a conventional conflict with India.

Both these elements are necessary, but it is important to realize that they cannot produce results either immediately or in the short term. The problems of national security policy in Pakistan are too deeply entwined with narrow military interests and ambitions as well as ideological corruption, all of which are now viciously self-reinforcing.<sup>133</sup> This does not imply that enlightened change in Islamabad is not possible, only that it will be very slow and evolutionary. As a result, unless some catastrophe jump-starts a radical change in national course, the success of the coalition's counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan cannot come to depend on the fundamental transformation of Pakistan or its behaviors in the near term.

Given this fact, a strategy for victory must entail hardening Afghanistan in a way that increases the probability of success within the country, irrespective of what choices Pakistan makes in regard to confronting the Afghan Taliban sanctuary on its territory. As Marin Strmecki noted in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee,

If all elements in Pakistan fully cooperate to eliminate extremist sanctuaries, the task of hardening Afghanistan against the residual insurgency would be an order of magnitude less difficult than the challenges we face today. *Yet, even if the Pakistan-based insurgency remains at current levels, it can be done.* The principal reason for my conviction is that the legitimacy of the Afghan government can be renewed.<sup>134</sup>

This approach, which concentrates on strengthening the state from the inside out through an area ownership effort, is feasible because the most serious problems pertaining to the insurgency today do not arise from outside Afghanistan—despite these being consequential in their own right—but from inside it. Consequently, the United States ought to focus on implementing a strategy for defeating the Taliban that, while welcoming Pakistani contributions and soliciting their increase, still operates on the presumption that Islamabad's choices will be conflicted and its remedial efforts insufficient and possibly even dangerous. The first order of business in this regard must, therefore, be to communicate by word and deed to the Pakistan Army, the Afghan people,

Afghanistan's neighbors, and the international community at large that the United States and its allies will absolutely refuse to countenance any return to power by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Credibly satisfying this commitment will require Washington not to ever mention the phrase "exit strategy" but rather to continually affirm its determination to stay involved in assuring Afghan security over the long run.

Such a pledge would have consequential implications for Pakistan. Because the Pakistani military continues to retain links with various terrorist groups and the *rahbari shura* in particular, and because it is fearful that Washington will depart Afghanistan soon enough and thereby leave the field open to its rivals, any credible pledge by the United States to stay the course in Afghanistan weakens Islamabad's incentives to hold on to these assets in order to protect its interests. Further, if Washington is seen as being absolutely committed to stabilizing Afghanistan, no matter how subversive Pakistan's actions may be, the Pakistani military's strategy of relying on antigovernmental terrorist groups quickly moves into the zone of diminishing returns. Finally, when Islamabad comes to the realization that a long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan better protects Pakistan's western frontier compared with the alternative of its neighbors continually jostling for influence in Kabul, the wisdom of sustaining its current investments in the Taliban, and especially the exiled leadership in Quetta, will begin to look more and more questionable.

To reinforce this objective of convincing Pakistan that any regional quest for domination in Afghanistan, including its own, is unlikely to succeed—and that aiding Kabul to defeat the insurgency is therefore a better strategy for securing influence there than undermining Afghanistan—Washington should make erasing the Taliban sanctuaries in the tribal belt and apprehending the multiple Taliban *shuras* resident in Pakistan the principal objectives of its counterterrorism engagement with Islamabad. This, in effect, implies that, far from expanding the scope of U.S. attention from Pakistan to India–Pakistan and beyond, policy makers ought to narrow their concentration to the key external problems that undermine success in Afghanistan—the sanctuaries and the *shuras*—and focus on how to induce the Pakistani military and intelligence services to give up on their strategy of preserving the Taliban as a force in being in order to protect Islamabad's interests in Kabul.

President Obama has boldly declared "that Pakistan needs to root out the terrorists. And after years of mixed results, we will not, and cannot, provide a blank check. Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders. And we will insist that action be taken—one way or another—when we have intelligence about high-level terrorist targets."<sup>135</sup> But even these words cannot obscure the painful reality that Washington has few real levers with which to coerce Islamabad at a time when the United States itself depends heavily on Pakistani cooperation for success in both its counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and its counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. Consequently, progress on this

central issue—namely Islamabad’s willingness to target the Taliban—will be slow in coming because, even if all the other entanglements involving India are resolved, there is simply no *deus ex machina* that resolves the twin challenges of state incapacity and conflicted motivations in Pakistan. Moreover, Washington cannot succumb to the temptations of trying to purchase Pakistani cooperation indefinitely or to muscle India or Afghanistan to surrender to Islamabad’s demands without threatening other important U.S. equities in the region.

As a result, the United States has no choice but to try and engage Pakistan through a long-term commitment built upon two important parallel but complementary pillars without in any way expecting that such dedication will yield quick results in Islamabad.<sup>136</sup> The first pillar is strengthening civilian rule, by treating civilian politicians as serious interlocutors on all issues, including those pertaining to national security; assisting the civilians in slowly gaining control of national security decision making; and aiding the civil sector in slowly developing institutions as well as competence to manage the state over time. This shift in emphasis must be sustained, despite the fact that Pakistan’s civilian political class will frequently prove ineffective and disappointing. The second pillar involves building the Pakistani military’s counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capacity by providing it with the necessary equipment required for such missions rather than for conventional wars with India; increasing the training offered to the paramilitary and military components allocated for the low-intensity conflict mission; restructuring the financial incentives to compensate the Pakistani armed forces for real contributions as opposed to merely a presence in the field; and offering the Pakistani military support for its long-term modernization efforts *if* the right behaviors vis-à-vis terrorism and its neighbors are forthcoming. While these initiatives should be implemented without formal conditions, it should be made clear that committed Pakistani counterterrorism performance will beget increasing U.S. support.<sup>137</sup>

If this process succeeds over time, the U.S.–Pakistan relationship will slowly become something other than transactional and Islamabad’s counterterrorism cooperation may steadily improve. Cementing this shift, however, requires Washington to move in three other directions simultaneously. To begin with, the Obama administration ought to engage both Afghan and Pakistani leaders to reinvest in building the kind of bilateral relationship that serves their common interests, which includes strengthening border security, fully manning the border coordination centers, strengthening the Pashtun communities in both states, and, eventually, resolving the dispute over the Durand Line. In this context, the United States should also encourage India and Pakistan to reignite their bilateral peace process, conducted through both the back channel and the composite dialogue, if Islamabad demonstrates good faith in suppressing the terrorist groups now attacking India.

Further, Washington ought to take the lead in shaping a common vision to unify Central and South Asia with a stable Afghanistan as its fulcrum. This implies not simply

endorsing Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's vision for a unified southern Asian economic zone but also focusing on how an expanded infrastructure network that includes roads, rail, air links, gas pipelines, and other communications can connect Central Asia through Afghanistan to the Indian subcontinent. Resuscitating the old trade links between the two regions, which promise increased prosperity to the states at either end as well as to those along the way, remains the best financial inducement for Pakistan to shift toward greater regional cooperation.

Finally, to underscore this objective arrestingly, the United States should commit to a long-term assistance package for Islamabad. This aid should be oriented toward supporting economic and social development in Pakistan. The size of the package, however, should not be based on the optics of what looks substantial in a congressional debate, but rather on what is genuinely required to spur Pakistan's transformation. This, in turn, necessitates both a detailed empirical analysis of Pakistan's unmet needs, a task not yet carried out, and the establishment of effective monitoring mechanisms within Pakistan, which do not yet exist. All such aid, in any event, ought to be oriented toward demonstrating that "the United States values a long-term relationship with Pakistan for its own sake [and] not just as a tactical necessity in the war on terror."<sup>138</sup> The Kerry–Lugar bill does just that and, therefore, should be supported so long as it is focused on the right targets and incorporates the necessary oversight mechanisms.

If these initiatives bear fruit, it is possible that Pakistani behaviors will slowly drift toward authentic cooperation with the United States, Afghanistan, and India in regard to combating terrorism. Even if this process begins right away, however, it will be a while before Islamabad's actions in regard to erasing the Taliban sanctuaries and their *shuras* within Pakistan become helpful. Because this is in any case the eventual objective, but one that is unlikely to pay dividends immediately while the coalition effort against the Taliban gathers steam, Washington will have no alternative but to persist with its larger strategy of hardening Afghanistan. This will require embarking on the reinvigorated counterinsurgency strategy advocated in this report while developing the requisite military solutions necessary to combat the insurgents as they flow out of their sanctuaries into Afghanistan. To the degree that Pakistan can aid in this latter mission more purposefully than it has done in the past, it would be all to the good—but Washington, Kabul, and other allied capitals ought not to count on such cooperation as a prerequisite for success or else they will hold at risk the entire operation in Afghanistan without having anything to show in terms of improving Pakistan either.

This approach to dealing with the so-called "Af-Pak" problem offers Washington the best hope of success because it deploys U.S. energies to shape changes that can be affected by America's own power rather than simply dissipating U.S. resources on quandaries lying outside its control. In effect, the solution advocated in this report transforms the character of the challenge itself: by shifting from a strategy of fixing-Pakistan-in-order-to-fix-Afghanistan to an approach centered on fixing Afghanistan itself in a concentrated

fashion (while simultaneously engaging Pakistan in parallel), the United States will have not only rendered Islamabad's subversive choices progressively inutile but also moved directly to win the war against the Taliban—which, in turn, cannot but mitigate many of the problems within Pakistan itself. ■

# GRAND STRATEGY REDUX

The notion of reconciling with the Taliban has proved to be a hardy perennial because it serves multiple interests at a time when great uncertainty exists about the success accruing to the evolving allied strategy in Afghanistan. For President Hamid Karzai, the idea of a formal rapprochement with his Pashtun adversaries appears appealing because of the benefits it promises for his reelection. Moreover, the indecision in the United States and among the Western alliance partners about prosecuting the war resolutely—a problem now being addressed by President Obama—only induces Karzai to accentuate reconciliation because of his calculation that if Western retrenchment is inevitable, he is probably better off making a separate peace with the Taliban while he still can. This calculus was only reinforced by what appeared to be vacillation in Washington about U.S. war aims in Afghanistan: loose talk by senior American officials about the “ultimate” need for reconciliation, the “insufficiency” of the military instrument for defeating the Taliban, the need to pursue “achievable” rather than comprehensive goals, and the need for an “exit strategy” in order to avoid “perpetual drift.” All embodied a sliver of truth but gave rise regrettably to a pervasive defeatism that sways Karzai further in the direction of trumpeting reconciliation with his challengers.

If conciliation offered an honorable exit from the conflict, it would be one thing. But it does not. As the analysis in this report has corroborated, Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership have decisively rejected any reconciliation with the government of Afghanistan. And the tribal chiefs, village elders, and street fighters, who either support the insurgency or are sitting on the sidelines currently but are susceptible to being reconciled in principle, certainly will not take any steps in that direction so long as the Karzai regime, and its Western supporters, are not seen to be *winning* in their long-running battle against the Taliban. The coalition, therefore, is confronted by an inescapable paradox: any meaningful accommodation with those reconcilable segments of the rebellion will only come at the tail end of political-military success in

Afghanistan and not as a precursor to it; yet, if such success is attained, reconciliation will become possible but, ironically, when it is least necessary. As Joseph J. Collins summarized it succinctly, “to further Afghan reconciliation,” the coalition must “fight harder”<sup>139</sup> and—as this report argues—win.

Achieving victory in Afghanistan, therefore, is imperative. And victory, understood as defeating al-Qaeda and its allies by, *inter alia*, standing up a minimally efficient Afghan state that can control its territory and deliver responsive governance to its people through a combination of political and military actions, is not merely essential but eminently possible. As Senator John McCain has pointed out,

The situation in Afghanistan is nowhere near as dire as it was in Iraq just two years ago—to cite one example, civilian fatalities at their peak in Iraq were ten times higher than civilian deaths at their peak in Afghanistan last year. But the same truth that was apparent three years ago in Iraq is apparent today in Afghanistan: when you aren’t winning in this kind of war, you are losing. And, in Afghanistan today, we are not winning. Let us not shy from the truth, but let us not be paralyzed by it either.<sup>140</sup>

Escaping paralysis in this context requires the coalition, first and foremost, to believe that while the deterioration in Afghanistan is serious, it is by no means irremediable.

In this context, no single idea has done more damage to the alliance’s ability to muster renewed purpose than the notion that Afghanistan has always been the “graveyard of empires.” President Obama alluded to this fear when he noted that “we do have to be mindful of the history of Afghanistan. It is tough territory. And there’s a fierce independence in Afghanistan, and if the perception is that we are there simply to impose ourselves in a long-term occupation, that’s not going to work in Afghanistan.”<sup>141</sup> General Petraeus, too, repeated this notion in his otherwise impressive presentation at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009. This is especially ironic because the thesis is false. That Afghanistan is the place where empires go to die derives from some streams of populist British Indian historiography in the aftermath of the First Anglo–Afghan War; it grew largely from images associated with the sacking of the British residency in Kabul in 1842 and the systematic slaughter that accompanied the retreating column of 12,000 civilians and 4,000 British-Indian troops. This tragic incident, which colored many subsequent beliefs about the Pashtuns as hardy and invincible warriors who cannot be subjugated, obscures the critical fact that the Raj not only defeated the Afghans subsequently during the Second and Third Anglo–Afghan Wars (successfully occupying Kabul at various points during that process) but also that it did so despite vast and enervating distractions within its Indian empire.

The Soviet defeat in the late twentieth century, another exhibit used in supporting the canard that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, also represents specious evidence

because the real conflict in this case involved the Soviet Union and another superpower, the United States, and not the Red Army versus the supposedly redoubtable Afghan warrior. In fact, during those early phases of the conflict when the struggle was primarily in the hands of the Afghans, the Soviet Union invariably came out ahead. It failed only when its occupation began to confront Washington, which used the Afghan people as a proxy for what was in effect a larger bipolar war.

Neither the British nor the Soviet experience in Afghanistan mimics the situation that the United States and its allies find themselves in currently. Unlike the Raj, which was militarily stressed and internally enervated, or the Soviets, who were tactically capable but were actually confronting a peer competitor that was far more powerful and fighting securely from beyond the theater, the United States today has global military superiority; can bring it to bear with relative ease in Afghanistan; confronts no adversary comparable to itself; and, most important, is present in Kabul not as an occupier but as a supporter of the Afghan people—and, to its advantage, is largely recognized as such. Consequently, the circumstances that made Afghanistan the graveyard in these earlier instances—and it was certainly not so in the case of the Raj and whether it was in respect to the Soviet Union is at least arguable—plainly do not carry over to the current American involvement within the country.<sup>142</sup>

Even apart from these specifics, however, the larger historical record simply does not bear out the claim that Afghanistan has always been an imperial necropolis. From the beginning of recorded history, the country has been conquered by at least sixteen distinct empires. Although local revolts made life difficult during some interregnums, most conspicuously during the early Muslim dynasties, the Hotaki period, and in the formative years of modern Afghanistan, extensive periods of successful foreign dominance including by the Achaemenids, Mauryas, Kushans, Ghaznavids, Timurids, and even the Sikhs decisively undermine the notion that Afghanistan is some destined burial ground because its inhabitants have never subjected themselves to outside rule.

Although these examples are drawn from the premodern era, they are useful because they illustrate the singular principle that carries over even in the age of nationalism: in every case when the domination of Afghanistan has been successful, it has been so for one reason alone—the difference in relative power. Consequently, whether the allies are victorious today will depend simply on whether they can raise an Afghan state that is more powerful than those who challenge it. It is this raw fact of politics—which, in turn, implicates power, resources, force, coercion, governance, and legitimacy—that will make more of a difference to whether coalition aims in Kabul are successful than any spurious mythology about Afghanistan being the destined humbler of hegemony.

As Ahmed Rashid has noted trenchantly, Afghanistan is less the “graveyard of empires” than the “graveyard of analogies”—one that has been constructed by a “cottage industry of doomsayers [that] has arisen among academics and journalists” who are in

the lucrative business of “warning that the U[nited] S[tates] will fail in the so-called ‘graveyard of empires’ just as the Soviets did.” As Washington now turns toward the challenge of fighting the war in Afghanistan correctly—as it should have done the first time around—Rashid pungently observes that “such prophecies have returned anew, insisting that Afghanistan is a cesspool of ungovernable tribes, unscaleable terrain and unwinnable wars.” Far from being such, however, Rashid argues—consistent with the analysis in this report—that America’s “failures in Afghanistan were not foreordained by Afghanistan’s unyielding terrain or fractious tribal politics: [rather,] they were failures of decision-making and commitment in an attempt to achieve ambitious goals with minimal resources.” He concludes sadly, “George W. Bush, who disdained ‘nation-building’ as he ran for president in 2000, had no plans to do it in Afghanistan.”<sup>143</sup>

President Obama should not repeat this mistake. Although he has clearly stated that, along with U.S. friends and allies, he “will forge a new and comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to defeat Al Qaeda and combat extremism,” in order to protect the American people against terrorists’ plots “from safe havens half a world away,”<sup>144</sup> there is a danger that despite his bold new policy pronouncement on Afghanistan (and Pakistan) his administration will falter either by failing to commit the resources required to produce success over the long term or by lapsing into an accentuation of the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions to the detriment of a concerted state-building effort in Afghanistan (and, in different ways, in Pakistan as well).

The analysis in this report emphasizes the need to get the focus right: even if American goals in Afghanistan are defined in the most minimalist fashion imaginable, namely, the need “to disrupt, dismantle, and eventually destroy extremists and their safe havens”<sup>145</sup> alone, this objective cannot be achieved without a durable commitment to that country, a substantial dedication of resources, and the effective implementation of a classic counterinsurgency strategy. Taken together, these three components will be necessary to rebuild Afghan state capacity and increase its legitimacy. The Obama administration, refreshingly, acknowledges this when it notes that “immediate action, sustained commitment, and substantial resources” will be required to reach these goals. If these tasks can be completed successfully, the transfer of popular allegiance from the insurgency to the government will then become possible and with it the eventual defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Any attempt to artificially separate these two groups as targets of American attention will simply not succeed: after eight years of war in Afghanistan, neither can al-Qaeda be defeated without success against the Taliban nor can the Taliban be treated as if they have only local interests completely divorced from the global jihad. Defeating both—to include their worst constituent groups—accordingly becomes necessary, and this task cannot be achieved without an integrated counterinsurgency effort centered on state building in partnership with the Afghan people.

What will make the greatest difference on this issue, and to the eventual outcome in Afghanistan more generally, is the durability of the U.S. commitment to that country. Simply put, an ironclad determination is required to stay involved in assuring Afghanistan's security over the long term. Entertaining the notion of an exit strategy, as President Obama unfortunately did earlier, is particularly dangerous because, by signaling American impatience in regard to the mission in Afghanistan, it will have exactly the effect of spurring the insurgents to outlast the international coalition; encouraging important Afghan bystanders, whose cooperation is necessary to defeat the Taliban, to persist in their prevailing ambivalence because the current dispensation in Kabul will be quickly assessed as perishable and hence unworthy of their enduring support; and inducing Islamabad to eschew relinquishing its support for the Taliban because of its expectation that the insurgents may once again be required to protect Pakistan's interests in the regional security competition that will ensue after the United States departs.

Attempting to mitigate these problems by transiently accelerating American support to Afghanistan, merely in order to permit "us and our partners to wind down our combat operations,"<sup>146</sup> as the administration's White Paper phrased it, will not work either. Whether through reconciliation with the Taliban, or through a predominant concentration on counterterrorism, or through a passing increase in American investments in Kabul, such an approach would betray all the indicators that motivate the insurgents, the bystanders, and the regional states, such as Iran and Pakistan, to simply wait Washington out as they protect their own interests in the interim through means that will ultimately undermine the professed American intention "to defeat Al Qaeda and combat extremism." Success in Afghanistan, therefore, cannot be achieved through any cheap solutions focused on delivering temporary amelioration—an "improve and exit" strategy—but only by a serious commitment to building an effective Afghan state, which, in turn, will require a decision to "invest and endure" over the long haul. Although this latter approach undoubtedly adds to America's current economic and political burdens, the importance of the national security objectives implicated in Afghanistan demands no less of the Obama administration "through deeds as well as words" if it is to faithfully discharge its obligation of protecting the American people. ■

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ashley J. Tellis** is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, specializing in international security, defense, and Asian strategic issues. While on assignment to the U.S. Department of State as senior adviser to the undersecretary of state for political affairs, he was intimately involved in negotiating the civil nuclear agreement with India. Previously he was commissioned into the Foreign Service and served as senior adviser to the ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. He also served on the National Security Council staff as special assistant to the president and senior director for Strategic Planning and Southwest Asia. Prior to his government service, Tellis was senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation and professor of Policy Analysis at the RAND Graduate School. He is the author of *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture* (2001) and co-author of *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (2000). He is the Research Director of the Strategic Asia program at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and co-editor of the five most recent annual volumes, including this year's *Strategic Asia 2008–09: Challenges and Choices*. ■

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