



Sustainable Security in Afghanistan

Crafting an Effective and Responsible Strategy for the Forgotten Front

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Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The Obama administration inherits a rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. In fact, both President Obama and General David McKiernan, who commands all U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, agree that we are not winning the war against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.¹ Facing facts on the ground is a prerequisite to responding to this challenge, which will require a comprehensive and long-term approach that uses all elements of U.S. national power.

Ever since the United States began planning to invade Iraq in early 2002, Afghanistan became the “Forgotten Front” for U.S. policymakers—an under-resourced, under-manned, and under-analyzed “economy of force” operation that was limited to seeking out and killing surviving Taliban, Al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups. As a result, critical political and economic reforms to ensure the country recovered from the extremist Taliban regime and decades of war were neglected. This chronic and unacceptable neglect has led to a resurgent Taliban, a fierce insurgency, a weak Afghan government tainted by corruption and incompetence, a booming opium trade, and an increasingly disillusioned Afghan people.

Despite some initial success by the United States and its coalition partners after the 2001 invasion, the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups are now stronger than at any time since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, operating out of neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan and making key inroads in both countries. From both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, these extremist groups continue to threaten the safety of the United States, its allies, and the stability of South Asia.

Responding to this challenge will require a comprehensive, sustainable approach that uses all elements of U.S. national power—military, economic, and diplomatic. Given declining American and European support for the war in Afghanistan, the strategy must be not only effective but convincing, too. In a U.S. poll taken in mid-March, 42 percent of the respondents said the United States made a mistake in sending military forces to Afghanistan, up from 30 percent just a month before and from 6 percent in January 2002.² Europeans are even more skeptical, with majorities in Germany, Britain, France, and Italy opposing increased troop commitments to the conflict.³

We are not winning the war against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

During the presidential campaign and since taking office, President Obama and top administration officials have signaled that Afghanistan is a top foreign policy priority. Now, after years of policy drift in Afghanistan under the Bush administration, President Obama is in the process of conducting a comprehensive review of its policies toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, the results of which are expected to be released in time for the 60th anniversary NATO summit in Strasbourg, France, on April 4, 2009. In the meantime, the president in February decided to deploy an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan by the summer, bringing the total number of U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan to 55,000, or about one-third the level in Iraq.⁴ This early decision was required for the additional troops to deploy in time for the country's presidential elections in August and the beginning of Afghanistan's fighting season.

Absent that comprehensive strategy from the Obama administration on how to reverse the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, political analysts and organizations from across the political spectrum are concerned that the decision to send more troops could ensnare the United States and its allies in a quagmire akin to the experience of the Soviet Union in the 20th century and the British the century before. Some of these analysts question the need for further troop deployments to Afghanistan, calling for more limited goals in the country, with a few recommending that the United States and its allies bypass the national government in Kabul entirely for more direct relationships with local, provincial, and tribal elements. Facing an economic crisis at home and other global challenges, some members of the Obama administration have signaled that they might aim for limited goals as well.⁵

Indeed, any strategy to recapture the initiative in Afghanistan must be acutely aware of Afghanistan's long history of fragmentation and armed resistance to outside powers who seek to influence its political makeup. U.S. goals and strategy must proceed with a sense of humility and recognition that even our best efforts may not succeed. This is why we at the Center for American Progress recommend that the Obama administration's strategic review answer five fundamental questions:

- What is the scale of our objectives in Afghanistan?
- What is the time frame for U.S. engagement?
- What is the right balance of civilian and military assets to be sent to the country?
- How do we increase the capacity and willingness of the government of Pakistan to prevent their country from being used as a staging ground for attacks against our forces in Afghanistan?
- And most fundamentally, is a sustained military, political, and economic effort in Afghanistan still in our national interest?

In answering these questions, U.S. policymakers must bear in mind the consequences of American disengagement from Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat and the subsequent rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Policymakers also must consider the dangers

still posed by international terrorist organizations based in the region today, the threat posed to neighboring Pakistani by sub-state militant groups, and the risks for the region should the country descend into civil war and warlordism once again. Therefore, the Center for American Progress believes that vital U.S. interests will be served if we can:

- Ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a launching pad for international terrorism
- Prevent a power vacuum in Afghanistan that would further destabilize Pakistan and the region
- Prevent Afghanistan from being ruled by extreme elements of the Taliban and other extremist groups.

Nor are these the national security interests of the United States alone. Speaking at the North Atlantic Council, Vice President Joseph Biden recently noted that “It was from [Afghanistan] that Al Qaeda plotted 9/11. It was from that very same area that extremists planned virtually every major terrorist attack in Europe since 9/11, including the attacks on London and Madrid.”⁶

The Pakistanis also share these interests. While sections of the Pakistani military and political establishment have aided Islamic militant groups based in Afghanistan and its ungoverned border region as a supposed counterweight against its strategic rival India, Pakistan has suffered serious blowback against its own territorial and political integrity as these groups have attacked institutions within Pakistan, sought to establish their own parallel governments within Pakistani territory, and raised the risk of pulling Pakistan into direct conflict with India through repeated terrorist attacks.

While several allied countries have made serious military and economic commitments in Afghanistan to date—among them Great Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands—the shared nature of the threat requires a broader, more intensive, and better-coordinated response from the international community. This increased effort will be required of Pakistan, NATO, and the 15 other countries that currently contribute 32,000 troops to the U.N.-mandated and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. If NATO members are unable or unwilling to contribute more combat troops then the administration should ask them to provide more trainers, aid, and equipment. The Obama administration also must take a regional approach to engage all of Afghanistan’s neighbors, including India, Russia, China, and Iran.

But creating an effective strategy in Afghanistan to achieve U.S. national interests is not just about rallying other nations to the cause. The Obama administration must distinguish between short-term goals to stabilize conditions on the ground in Afghanistan over the next 18 months and sustainable intermediate and long-term goals that will allow the United States and its allies to one day leave Afghanistan as a stable, functioning nation in control of its borders and with a government respected by its people.

Vital U.S. interests
are at stake in
Afghanistan and
the region.

Sustainable security in Afghanistan: The key policy goals

Two paramount national security interests of the United States are to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists and to ensure the deteriorating security situation there does not envelop the surrounding region in a broader power struggle. Doing so will require a prolonged U.S. engagement using all elements of U.S. national power—diplomatic, economic, and military—in a sustained effort that could last as long as another 10 years.

Recognizing that a stable political environment and viable Afghan economy cannot exist in today's chaotic security environment, the United States and its allies must sequence their goals, recognizing that creating a modest level of security will be the linchpin for achieving its intermediate and long-term diplomatic and economic objectives. Specifically:

Short-term goals over the next 18 months

- Prevent Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorist and extremist groups with a global reach to attack the United States, its allies, and its interests
- Prevent a security vacuum in Afghanistan from destabilizing Pakistan and the region
- Couple efforts to stabilize Afghanistan with a parallel, integrated strategy for Pakistan, with a particular focus on helping Pakistanis build a stable civilian government committed to working toward the elimination of terrorist safe havens within its territory

Intermediate policy goals over the next three to five years

- Promote a viable Afghan economy that offers realistic opportunities for the Afghan people
- Sharply curb the poppy trade in Afghanistan and the region
- Promote democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in Afghanistan and the region
- Resolve or at least reduce regional tensions, particularly between Pakistan and its neighbors, which frequently spill over into Afghanistan

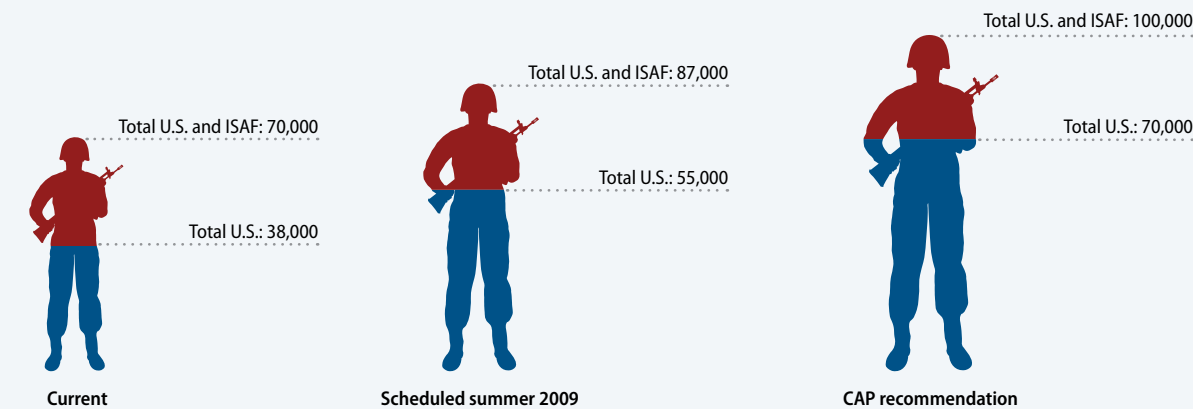
Long-term policy goals over the next 10 years

- Assist in creating an Afghan state that is able to defend itself internally and externally, and that can provide for the basic needs of its own people
- Prepare for the full military withdrawal from Afghanistan alongside continued diplomatic and economic measures to promote the sustainable security of Afghanistan

These goals cannot be achieved with the current level of resources and lack of coordination. The Bush administration attempted to fight and build Afghanistan on the cheap and committed too few troops and resources to it from the beginning. The problem is not that the Bush administration's effort in Afghanistan failed. The problem is that it was never given a chance to succeed.

Troop commitments

Numbers of U.S. and ISAF troops in Afghanistan



Military commitment

The addition of 17,000 U.S. combat troops and military support personnel by summer 2009—bringing U.S. troops to 55,000, their highest level to date—may be sufficient to freeze the security situation in Afghanistan for a while, but it is surely not enough to turn the tide. The United States must fulfill the request of General David McKiernan, the commander of the allied International Security Assistance Force, for an additional 15,000 U.S. troops, bringing the number of U.S. forces to 70,000, or about half the level in Iraq. This increase must include troops for combat as well as mentor teams for the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police to fill critical gaps in the training effort. (See chart, opposite, for numbers of U.S. and ISAF forces in Afghanistan.)

Together with the 32,000 coalition troops already there, this increase will bring international forces to about 100,000—a nearly 300 percent increase over the average force level for the period from 2002 to 2007. This force level will most probably need to be sustained in the short-term to intermediate term as Afghanistan’s army and police forces become more capable and ready.

Economic commitment

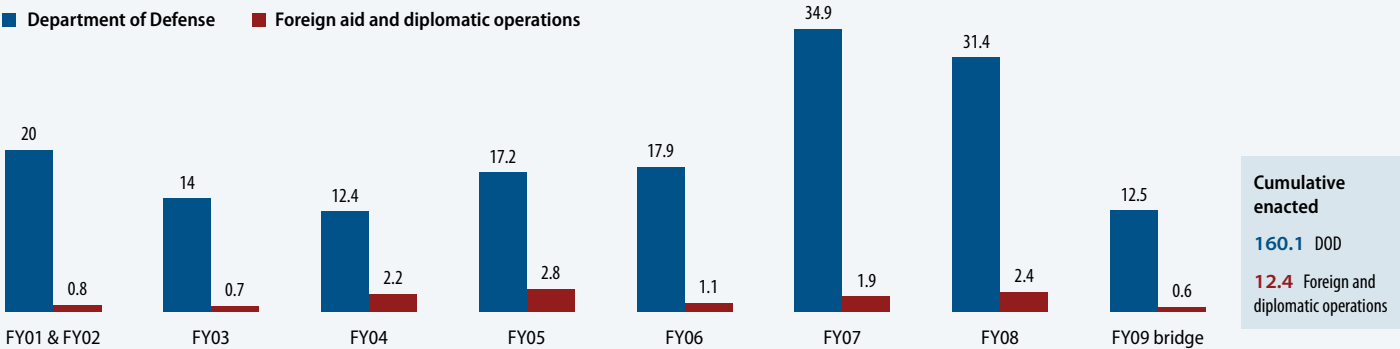
From 2002 through the first half of fiscal year 2009, which ends in September, the United States has committed a little over \$170 billion dollars to the effort in Afghanistan. But only 7 percent of these funds were committed to foreign aid and diplomatic operations, with the remaining 93 percent allotted to Department of Defense operations. (See chart below.)

This imbalance must be corrected. According to the Obama administration’s fiscal year 2010 budget, the United States will save approximately \$330 billion from reduced combat missions in Iraq over the next five fiscal years.⁷ About \$25 billion of this savings should be redirected each year to pay for the increased U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan, and up to \$5 billion per year should be redirected to increase U.S. foreign aid and diplomatic operations—roughly twice as much as the amount of foreign and diplomatic aid that has been provided to Afghanistan in any year since 2002.

Strict oversight and Afghan government accountability is fundamental to improving the effectiveness of this increased aid (see page 26 for more on anti-corruption efforts).

Misaligned spending

The war in Afghanistan is overwhelmingly a Department of Defense operation, to the detriment of our economic and diplomatic efforts



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Military force alone
is not sufficient to
create the conditions
necessary to achieve
sustainable security
for Afghanistan.

Over the next 18 months, reversing the deteriorating security situation throughout the country, particularly in the south and east of Afghanistan, will require increasing the total number of U.S. troops to 70,000 from 55,000 while maintaining the number of international troops at around 32,000. U.S. policymakers and military leaders must be aware that throughout their history Afghans have resisted large numbers of foreign forces on their soil, but today the situation is different. Nearly two-thirds of Afghans still support U.S. forces throughout the country. Moreover, support for the Taliban in the east and central parts of the country—where the U.S. presence is the largest—is only 6 percent and 17 percent, respectively, indicating that additional troops alongside better economic development aid and reconstruction can win further support among the Afghan people.⁸

These additional troops will help address the short-term security needs of combating the Taliban and other irreconcilable terrorist and militant groups in cooperation with Afghan forces, which at the same time will need more and better training. Fully capable Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army forces will be instrumental in creating the security conditions needed for Afghan security and political institutions to assume their responsibilities. A minimalist effort that seeks only to target identifiable terrorist figures through military or covert operations—the Bush administration’s approach—will fail without doing more to build more sustainable long-term security for the country, and thus will fail to make Afghanistan, the region, and the United States more secure in the long run.

But military force alone is not sufficient to create the conditions necessary to achieve sustainable security for Afghanistan. As President Obama said when he ordered the 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, “I am absolutely convinced that you cannot solve the problem of Afghanistan, the Taliban, the spread of extremism in that region solely through military means.”⁹ The insurgency in Afghanistan is a political, social, economic as well as a military problem, and ultimately, all the elements of U.S. national power—diplomatic, economic, and military—must be brought to bear in a comprehensive manner in order to achieve the long-term U.S. goal of an Afghanistan that is able to govern, defend, and sustain itself.

Effectively employing all elements of U.S. national power will require a restructuring of the U.S. national security apparatus and a renewed focus on our diplomatic and economic assets that have been allowed to atrophy in favor of more direct but ultimately unsustainable military-centric policy responses. Ultimately, eradicating the “infrastructure of jihad” and bringing an end to the chronic cycles of conflict that have made Afghanistan a regional powder keg and a haven for international criminal and terrorist networks will require working in partnership with a national representative Afghan government.

In the pages that follow, we will detail how we believe the United States can achieve these ends over the next 10 years (see box on page 4–5 for a brief summary of the recommendations in this report). We hope that President Obama’s internal review of his administration’s strategic plans for Afghanistan in prelude to the upcoming NATO summit in Strasbourg, France, next month will incorporate some of these recommendations.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

