



Realignment: Managing a Stable Transition to Afghan Responsibility

Recommendations for the United States and Its Allies

Caroline Wadhams, Colin Cookman, Brian Katulis, and Lawrence Korb November 2010



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Introduction and summary

Current U.S. efforts in Afghanistan are fundamentally out of balance, and they are not advancing U.S. interests and stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region. Military operations drive our strategy while the political and diplomatic framework essential for long-term stability in Afghanistan remains undeveloped.

Further, this overinvestment of resources and attention in Afghanistan is out of alignment with core U.S. security interests in the region. Those interests center on reducing the risk of terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda and its affiliated networks against the United States and its allies. They also include increasing the political stability of the Pakistani state, a country of 170 million people with nuclear weapons.

Preventing state collapse in Afghanistan and managing a stable and enduring transition of responsibility to Afghan leaders would enable the United States to best meet these core security objectives in the region and over the long term support a peaceful, economically integrated region. A smaller U.S. and NATO-ISAF military footprint with a more robust political and diplomatic effort has a greater chance of reaching this desirable end state of stability than a full-blown counterinsurgency effort to extend the government of Kabul throughout the country and defeat the Taliban insurgency.

The Obama administration should use its upcoming year-end policy review to refocus on the political and diplomatic components of its strategy while it transitions out of Afghanistan. This will entail building an inclusive settlement to the country's conflict, developing an Afghan state that is increasingly less dependent on external support, and facilitating an international diplomatic agreement among Afghanistan's neighbors and regional partners.

The administration must commit to transferring responsibility to Afghan leaders in the near future, as agreed to by the Afghan government, the United States, and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF. We should reduce our military footprint at a steady pace beginning now with full transfer to Afghan

control by 2014 at the latest. A reduction in troop levels and assistance should occur more rapidly, however, if Afghanistan's government does not begin a serious process of political reform and dialogue with its armed and unarmed opponents.

To be sure, an accelerated withdrawal would have costs—many of which the Afghan people would have to bear. It is not an ideal approach by far. But the United States can protect its core security interests with a reduced military presence in Afghanistan. And without shifts in the current political structure in Afghanistan it will be simply futile for the United States and its NATO allies to wage continued war on behalf of a government that cannot consolidate domestic political support without indefinite massive international assistance.

Transitioning to a viable end state in Afghanistan

The United States, with its NATO-ISAF partners, must prioritize measures that can induce political and economic reforms on the part of the Afghan government in order to manage a measured drawdown in Afghanistan over the next three years. Beyond 2014, the United States may offer Afghanistan financial support and maintain a small military force to undertake targeted attacks against terrorist groups, conduct intelligence gathering, and provide training of Afghan National Security Forces.

The task for the Obama administration through the remainder of its first term in office is redirecting its diplomatic, financial, and military resources toward a sustainable settlement in Afghanistan in which the United States can transition responsibility to Afghan leaders without sparking an expanded round of conflict. But a self-sustaining state in Afghanistan capable of surviving a drawdown in large-scale international assistance requires a political system that offers the diverse factions in Afghanistan's society—including those backing the current government, those taking part in armed insurgency, and those sitting on the fence—an opportunity to participate in their country's future.

The United States and its partners in NATO, Kabul, and the region should work toward the following goals in order to achieve a stable, increasingly self-reliant Afghan state:

- An Afghan state that delegates more power, resources, appointments, and justice to the local level and to other centers of power such as the parliament and judiciary in order to create a more balanced power dynamic than what currently exists

The task for the Obama administration through the remainder of its first term in office is redirecting its diplomatic, financial, and military resources toward a sustainable settlement in Afghanistan.

- A more inclusive process for addressing the grievances of both armed government opponents who are willing to enter into a political dialogue and unarmed Afghan citizens whose lives have also been adversely affected by government impunity and conflict
- Afghan National Security Forces that can provide security against internal and external threats and that operate under the Afghan central government's control
- A regional strategic framework in which neighboring countries agree to recognize the sovereignty of the Afghan government while providing constructive support for its reintegration into the region
- No safe haven for terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan to attack either country, the United States, or other countries in the region or around the world

U.S. government agencies and the White House should immediately undertake the following actions to accomplish these goals:

- Create a political strategy with deadlines and benchmarks to create greater checks and balances, broaden the base of support for Afghanistan's government, and develop Afghan government revenue sources while conditioning further assistance on progress in meeting those goals.
- Encourage inclusive reconciliation among fighting parties and unarmed actors in Afghanistan and insist on baseline requirements of renunciation of violence, protecting basic human rights, and preventing terrorist safe havens.
- Undertake an aggressive international diplomatic initiative that brings in all of Afghanistan's neighbors into a dialogue, including Pakistan, India, Iran, and other regional players.
- Reduce the U.S. military footprint, realigning U.S. and NATO military strategy with political end goals and core security interests.

In the pages that follow this report will analyze the principal obstacles that stand in the way of an effective Afghan government that can survive a significant draw-down of U.S. and NATO forces. It will then outline the actions that the United States and its allies in NATO and Kabul should take to overcome these obstacles through a refocus on political reform, a political settlement among Afghans, and a diplomatic agreement with international players.

But we must acknowledge at the outset that a durable resolution of Afghanistan's conflict is an extremely daunting challenge given the mistrust on all sides and the degree to which different actors in the contest for power are motivated by their own short-term interests rather than the long-term stability of the country. The suffering of the Afghan people from 30 years of war and the regional and global spillover effects from the country's instability should serve as an impetus to our allies in Afghanistan and their international backers to work for a more sustainable political arrangement. Doing so will require difficult compromises on all sides that the United States can push for but cannot dictate.

Challenges to creating a sustainable Afghan state

The Obama administration inherited a forgotten and failing situation in Afghanistan that was the result of its predecessor's seven years of mismanagement and neglect. The administration has intensified U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan by tripling U.S. troops to more than 100,000 and civilian personnel to 1,000 in order to reverse the deteriorating situation. NATO-ISAF forces have also increased to 40,400 from 28,250 during this time.¹

The administration has also added funding for training Afghanistan's security forces and for nonmilitary assistance, which in combination with the increased pace of operations comes out to a monthly bill exceeding \$8 billion. All told, more than \$350 billion has been spent by the United States in Afghanistan since 2001.²

But despite this infusion of resources and personnel an assessment of the past year's operations in Afghanistan finds serious concerns about the gains achieved, and unresolved challenges remain. This section examines challenges that will need to be overcome to create an increasingly self-sustaining Afghan state. These include:

- The need for an alignment of U.S. and NATO political, diplomatic, and military strategies
- A resilient insurgency
- The Afghan government's legitimacy and capability gap
- Regional players' pursuit of their own diplomatic ends in Afghanistan

Need for an alignment of U.S. and NATO political, diplomatic, and military strategies

The Obama administration came into office seeking to correct the strategic drift that characterized the Bush administration's approach to Afghanistan. In its two policy reviews in March 2009 and December 2009 it decided that the ultimate

objectives for the United States in Afghanistan and Pakistan are to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan and Afghanistan.”³

While these are important objectives, they are disconnected from Afghanistan’s political and strategic realities. Intelligence assessments judge Al Qaeda’s presence to be minimal but many other conflict actors could potentially undermine state and regional stability. What’s more, the administration’s stated goal defines strategic success solely in the negative and it does not clarify what positive end state the administration either hopes to achieve or assesses to be realistically achievable.

The United States is currently pursuing an expansive, expensive undertaking that seeks to reverse the momentum of the Taliban insurgency—identified as the primary vector for Al Qaeda to return to strength in the country—through military operations in specific insurgent strongholds in the southern and eastern parts of the country. These operations aim to deny the Taliban access to and control of key population and production centers and lines of communication, and degrade their command and control to the point where the insurgency is judged manageable by the Afghan National Security Forces, or ANSF.

In addition to these clearing operations the United States and NATO-ISAF increasingly rely on covert special operations strikes against midlevel insurgent commanders in an attempt to degrade insurgent capabilities and create more space for the government. According to military officials nearly 368 of these leaders have been killed in a three-month time period ending mid-November, with special forces alone averaging 17 missions a night.⁴

Administration officials argue that military operations are necessary to establish a baseline of security in order to provide space for the political situation to improve. But if these operations support a political structure and internal balance of power that cannot be sustained independent of large-scale international military investments it is unclear how an enduring and stable transition can occur without first undertaking reforms. Military efforts do little to address the Afghan people’s grievances over political exclusion or governmental impunity, consolidate Afghan government political support over the long term, or strengthen a government plagued by its own disconnection from Afghan communities and suffering from a legitimacy deficit. Nor do they stop the Pakistani military’s support for insurgents. The tactical victories achieved are therefore ephemeral.

Moreover, these military operations contribute to negative sociopolitical dynamics that can counteract temporary security gains. The United States and NATO-ISAF have significantly distorted local economies by providing large contracts to provide protection to security convoys, construct bases, and transport supplies to troops to support the military presence and conduct its operations. These funds have empowered new actors in Afghanistan and strengthened predatory government officials, creating resentment in localities around Afghanistan as well as opposition to foreign forces.

The Obama administration and its allies focused on the transition of security responsibilities to the Afghan government at the November 2010 Lisbon conference of the NATO alliance. They also underscored a commitment to longer-term partnership. But the criteria required for transition remain ill defined, and the commitments appear to be principally one-way, with few concrete reciprocal pledges of reform on the part of the Afghan government itself.⁵

Without clarity on these issues the transition is likely to remain elusive and forever on the horizon. Thus far, out of the 83 “key terrain” districts identified by NATO-ISAF as critical to success against the insurgency only the capital of Kabul and its immediate environs have thus far been transferred to Afghan leadership.⁶

Current military strategy operates on the questionable assumption that the Taliban-led insurgency must be destroyed to advance U.S. national security interests. Al Qaeda and the Taliban insurgency are not one and the same, however. While Al Qaeda serves as an enabler to some elements of the insurgency it is but one of many factors contributing to the insurgency’s strength, as described in the next section. Driving a permanent wedge between these groups is essential for U.S. interests, but our current operations may only be bringing them closer.

Moreover, Afghanistan represents only one piece of a larger range of national security threats and opportunities facing the United States and the international community. Even so, it currently consumes a heavy share of American resources and attention. Total U.S. operations and assistance spending in Afghanistan for fiscal year 2010 exceeded \$100 billion—nearly equivalent to total spending on the national nonmilitary intelligence budget and the budget for the entire Department of Homeland Security combined.⁷

Al Qaeda affiliates today are established in several countries in addition to Pakistan’s borderlands along the Afghan border. The recent discovery of explosive

air packages bound for the United States from Yemen—Al Qaeda is most likely responsible—illustrate the terrorist threat’s evolving nature.

Additionally, traditional state powers armed with powerful militaries or nuclear weapons such as China, North Korea, and Pakistan remain part of our strategic environment.

The bottom line is that the international community’s military strategy in Afghanistan is ultimately unsustainable. We are overinvested in Afghanistan relative to the risks at stake and other national priorities. Security gains will be temporary absent substantial governmental reforms in the country and outreach to internal and external actors who serve as spoilers to the status quo. And without a legitimate government and effective internal security forces, the international community is left to clear the insurgency largely on its own and then hold its positions indefinitely.

A resilient insurgency

Insurgent tactics have caused reprehensible losses of Afghan life through suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices, and they were responsible for over three-quarters of recorded civilian deaths in the first half of 2010.⁸ But their primary strengths lie in their ability to capitalize on public discontent—especially in Pashtun areas in the south and east—and mobilize finances and arms through both cooptation and coercion in opposition to the Karzai government’s abusive and exclusionary practices.

The insurgency is comprised of several factions. Each of these factions and their subgroups has different motivations, tactics, and bases of support.⁹ Some elements of the insurgency have links to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba (focused on India and Kashmir), and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (focused against Pakistan). But the majority of the insurgents currently fighting in Afghanistan today are Afghans from the Pashtun ethnic group who are focused on a local agenda and do not have global aspirations or the means to act outside their immediate area.

Despite a large increase in operations and targeted killings and captures by international military forces the insurgency’s ability to carry out operations does not appear to have been significantly weakened. Intelligence assessments thus far suggest that the Taliban command-and-control structure is resilient enough to replace fallen

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commanders. And pressure on southern sanctuaries appears to be matched by new insurgent attacks in the north where international military presence is still light.¹⁰

Their sanctuary in Pakistan, a steady supply of recruits internally, and significant financial resources from Gulf states, the opium trade, and even U.S. taxpayers (through extorting shares of international aid flows) has thus far enabled the insurgency to continuously regenerate.

Reports of recent talks between the Karzai government and high-level Taliban representatives have caused some optimism that the current strategy is exerting pressure on the insurgency. The lack of transparency surrounding these assertions, however, makes it difficult to assess whether these interlocutors represent significant factions of the insurgency or are in fact amenable to any deal. Public statements by Taliban commanders and spokesmen thus far appear unanimous in their opposition to any rapprochement as long as international forces are present in the country.¹¹

Even if persistent strikes against midlevel commanders do prove effective at breaking organizational cohesion these strikes run the risk of dividing the insurgency to a point where the group's external leadership would be incapable of enforcing any potential settlement agreement. Surviving field commanders, too, have little incentive to give up the fight under persistent threat of death or capture by their enemies and with larger questions of political compromise and reconciliation unresolved. They could continue to carry out local-level attacks against a government still too weak to effectively respond.¹²

Military efforts thus far have failed to decisively affect the insurgency's root strengths or deter its motivations for continued fighting, and U.S. commanders acknowledge that we cannot "kill our way out" of Afghanistan's conflict. As discussed later, a process for creating a more inclusive government and addressing the grievances of armed government opponents who are willing to enter into a political dialogue is necessary to deal with these problems. These efforts should be combined with providing support to strong Afghan national security forces that can defend against internal and external threats.

The Afghan government's legitimacy and capability gap

The Afghan government structure is one of the most highly centralized in the world. President Hamid Karzai and the parliament are democratically elected but the system is fundamentally autocratic in nature. The executive branch controls appointments from provincial governors to district police chiefs to mayors and community leaders.¹³ It operates on a patronage model in which it distributes resources, access to international funding, and power to individuals in return for their loyalty to the Karzai government. The Afghan public's resentment of this imposition from Kabul and the inherent lack of accountability in the system fuels the insurgency and is a chief means of its mobilization.

The international coalition is divided among its members and disagrees with its partner government in Kabul on how best to increase public support for the Afghan government. Increasing the Afghan government's legitimacy and support has not been a priority for the international community, either. Its first-order concerns about international terrorism have led it to rely on many unofficial and official powerbrokers for intelligence and contracts instead of focusing on the political grievances of many individuals and communities who feel helpless to address perceived abuses by government officials and/or powerbrokers.

U.S. policymakers have occasionally pressured the Karzai administration to deal with high-level corruption. But they have not outlined a clear political strategy to address the crisis of confidence in the Afghan government. And Karzai has to date successfully pushed back on the international community's tentative attempts to push political reforms upon him despite his government's high degree of dependence on external support.¹⁴ This is partially due to his belief that we need him more than he needs us.

This dependence on external support will likely continue given the country's poverty and the government's weakness. More than 70 percent of Afghanistan's government-administered budget is financed by international donors and that budget is in turn dwarfed by the wholly donor-managed and donor-funded "external budget."¹⁵

This extensive dependence on international donors has serious implications for coherent planning, coordination of effort between the Afghan government and foreign donors, and government capacity-building. It also prevents the basic connection between the state and the population through taxation. Without that connection the Kabul government, like other rentier states, is able to avoid the hard

choices necessary to mobilize domestic legitimacy. But the reality is that these current levels of assistance are unsustainable over the long term due to domestic political and economic realities within the international coalition financing Afghanistan.

NATO leaders have sought to couple short-term development assistance projects with their military operations as part of a counterinsurgency strategy to increase linkages between the Afghan government and the population in the cleared areas and strengthen the Afghan government's legitimacy. But these programs end up distorting local economies by flooding impoverished areas with poorly accounted-for funds. Their potential to upset local balances of power—particularly when the United States and other donors rely on private armed contractors to provide security for their projects, which has empowered a range of new armed political networks across the country—makes the prospect of building loyalty to the government through development aid an unproven one at best.¹⁶

Regional players' pursuit of their own diplomatic ends in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's neighbors all influence the country's internal political and security dynamics to varying degrees. Its neighbor Pakistan—with whom it shares a large and fluid border and a history of covert action—is the key player in this regard. As mentioned earlier, Pakistan's security services continue to provide some elements of the insurgency sanctuary from which to train, fundraise, recruit, and plan for cross-border operations.

The Pakistani military has escalated attacks over the past year against indigenous Pakistani Taliban militants who directly target the Pakistani state. But it continues to provide shelter and some level of support to the Taliban's Quetta Shura leadership, the Haqqani network, and Hezb-e-Islami as a hedge against an Afghan political settlement that could lead to greater independence or close alliance with India at Pakistan's expense.

Pakistan's intention to retain control over any rapprochement process between the Taliban and the Karzai government was signaled by its arrest of Taliban operational commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in February 2010 and its refusal to turn him over to U.S. and Afghan authorities.¹⁷ More recently Pakistani officials voiced opposition at Pakistan's exclusion from reported talks between the Afghan government and Afghan insurgents.¹⁸

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Pakistan is not the only one with interests in Afghanistan, however. Iran, too, is believed to be playing both sides. It provides some weapons to insurgents while also giving financial assistance to the Afghan government and its allies in Afghanistan.

India, for its part, is one of the largest donors of foreign assistance to Afghanistan. Pakistan's allegations that India has dozens of consulates and is fomenting civil war in Pakistan from their base in Afghanistan are exaggerated. Still, the Indians most likely are gathering some intelligence on Pakistan from Afghanistan and cultivating allies to influence Pakistan if necessary. These are deeply threatening actions for the Pakistanis.¹⁹ Finally, China has invested in some sectors of the Afghan economy but remains reluctant to engage more deeply.

Since taking office Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke has regularly convened an International Contact Group of regional and international diplomatic representatives on Afghanistan.²⁰ These meetings, though, have often been eclipsed by discussions among NATO-contributing countries and Afghanistan's immediate neighbors have often felt marginalized. Many of these regional players are suspicious of long-term American strategic intentions in Afghanistan and toward its neighbors. But they also worry about a new power vacuum following a U.S. withdrawal.

A stable, peaceful Afghanistan will depend on the support of other countries in the region. These countries' conflicting interests, however, and the priority given to military operations thus far makes it extremely challenging to achieve anything close to a diplomatic consensus.

Building a stable Afghan state to survive a U.S. drawdown

Over the next three years the United States, with its NATO-ISAF partners, should aim to significantly reduce its troop presence and financial burden with the goal of transitioning authority and responsibility to an Afghan state that is largely stable, capable of defending itself from internal and external threats with international financial support, unfriendly to terrorist groups in the region and beyond, and serving as a neutral country without allegiance to any one neighboring country.

Managing the challenges outlined above and ensuring that the transition is lasting and enduring will require realigning U.S. policy toward Afghanistan around the following priorities:

- Creation of a political strategy to increase government representation and accountability with clear deadlines and benchmarks
- Facilitation of internal peace talks
- Increase in international diplomatic efforts
- Reduction of the U.S. military footprint and alignment of military strategy with political and diplomatic objectives

Create a political strategy with deadlines and benchmarks

A durable political settlement in Afghanistan won't happen unless substantial progress is made on securing the Afghan public's support for their government. A viable and self-sustaining state in Afghanistan requires a political system that offers the diverse factions in Afghanistan's society—including those backing the current government, those taking part in armed insurgency, and those sitting on the fence—an opportunity to participate in their country's future, have basic justice, and live in peace. The measured withdrawal of U.S. forces should signal to Afghan leaders that they must gain greater Afghan buy-in from various factions—including nonarmed actors and even some insurgents—if they hope to avoid collapse or perpetual dependency on the international community for their survival.

The Afghan government has promised to undertake many reforms in several documents and pledges—including Karzai’s 2009 inaugural address, the January 2010 London Conference, the March 2010 subnational governance policy, and the Kabul Conference communiqué of July 2010. But the international community rarely if ever speaks with one voice and often allows many past promises to slip by unmet. As long as this trend continues Afghanistan will move no closer to an inclusive model for government and the international community’s investment will deepen without results.

The absence of internal checks and balances within the Afghan political system means that international donors are one of the few actors capable of holding the Afghan executive branch accountable for its activities. The international community cannot dictate the behavior of a sovereign Afghan government, but when it presents clear and uniform conditions for its continued assistance President Karzai has occasionally shown some willingness to compromise. The appointment of two international commissioners to the Electoral Complaints Commission and the delay on a ban on all private security contractor activity are two recent examples.

The degree to which these compromises can be exacted will depend upon the international community and the United States’ ability to focus on reforms and back up their requests with serious consequences.

The United States and its allies must therefore use what leverage they have to push the Afghan executive branch to relinquish some of its concentrated power with the goal of increasing internal checks and balances and broadening the governing coalition within a national government framework still led by the president of Afghanistan.

Following the Lisbon conference in November 2010 and the completion of the Obama administration’s Afghanistan policy review in January 2011 policymakers in U.S. agencies and across the international community should create a clear set of expectations to be delivered to the Afghan government. Significant portions of U.S. and allied financial and military assistance to Afghanistan must be conditioned on the Afghan government addressing specific political grievances and undertaking reforms that can increase its long-term political and financial self-sustainability.

International funding going outside of the Afghan-government-managed budget currently comprises the vast majority of international funding for Afghanistan. This should also be used as leverage. An understanding of who is receiving money

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from international donors countrywide and an individual's relationship to the central government should enable foreign donors to determine leverage points and cease funding for certain individuals and their networks. This may require the cessation of military contracts to individuals associated with the Karzai political network in order to exercise influence on the Afghan government's calculations.

At the same time, incentives can be offered for improvements on a political reform agenda. Delivering money to the government through an international trust fund like the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund offers greater control of aid as well as a potential mechanism for oversight and reporting.

Quarterly assessments should follow the communication of these reform expectations, beginning with the Afghan fiscal year in March 2011. These assessments should track the government's progress at both the national and local levels in implementing these and other changes designed to increase the government's representativeness, inclusion, and financial sustainability. These commitments and progress assessments must focus on measures of increasing Afghan political participation—not delivering dollars and development assistance as an attempted substitute.

The international community should begin withdrawing funding at the start of the 2012 Afghan fiscal year in areas where progress is not being made. This could be done either programmatically (withholding operating funds to the Independent Election Commission if its directors do not receive parliamentary confirmation, for example) or by area (withdrawing Provincial Reconstruction Teams and canceling projects in provinces where provincial budgeting procedures are not being implemented, for example) depending on the issue in question.

The strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Afghanistan currently being sought by President Karzai and ongoing multilateral discussions between Afghanistan and NATO over the transition to Afghan leadership by 2014 offer a potential framework for formalizing commitments and expectations.

The quarterly assessments should also dictate military deployments and transfer plans in July 2011 and beyond. Areas that show progress can be bolstered by reinvested training and quick-reaction forces. A lack of meaningful progress, by contrast, indicates resources may not be well spent in these areas and international troops should be withdrawn more quickly.

Specific political reform agenda items that the United States and its allies should push for include but are not limited to:

Promoting greater representation and accountability mechanisms

The Afghan government's March 2010 subnational governance policy is far from a perfect document but it sets guidelines for district- and municipal-level elections and promises greater powers of oversight and budgeting to the provincial, district, and municipal levels of government. Preparations for and implementation of these efforts—particularly the devolution of local input into how development projects are budgeted, selected, and prioritized—should be a central priority for the government and its international backers over the next year.

Official appointments will need to be more representative of community desires whether they are determined by elections in areas where security allows or through consultation with the local shura councils where those bodies exist. As a general rule, resources should be prioritized for areas where security permits local elections and a regular interaction between the government and the community rather than the most difficult regions of the country.

The Independent Directorate of Local Governance, which is charged with managing the appointment of a wide range of local government officials, is too critical a body to operate solely at the discretion of the president. International donor support for its operations should be conditional at the very least on parliamentary confirmation for its leadership and ideally by some formalized process for inclusive consultation in the areas where appointments are made.

NATO-ISAF has had some success encouraging and facilitating discussions between President Karzai and community leaders in Marjah and Kandahar. These types of visits and consultations must be increased dramatically as a first step in learning and addressing public grievances and establishing a more formal representation. A commission of independent actors including individuals from the religious, business, and civil society communities could also be established to assess grievances and to make recommendations.

Finally, the Afghan government needs to increase its release of its budgets, projects, and government decisions to the public in order to increase transparency of government decision-making.

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Reforming and implementing the electoral law

The Karzai government has promised to initiate a “strategy for long-term electoral reform that addresses in particular the sustainability of the electoral process.” It has done little, though, to implement significant changes. Local district council and municipal elections have yet to be held years after the constitution’s passage. As noted above, preparations for and the conduct of these elections wherever possible should be a top priority.

Electoral reforms need to include provisions giving the parliament power to name some Electoral Complaints Commission members and to confirm the Independent Election Commission director rather than acceding to the executive branch’s total control over both bodies. And reforms should strengthen political parties and reconsider using the Single Non-Transferable Vote system, which impedes the development of political parties, weakens the parliament, and distorts outcomes in which small minorities of the voting public elect winning candidates for parliament and the majority of voters are not represented.²¹

Focusing on increasing domestic revenue generation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan’s needs will remain great for the foreseeable future but the Afghan state’s sustainability and international donors’ limited patience for indefinite large-scale expenditures requires the government to begin collecting its own revenue and reducing its dependence on foreign aid.

Donors do help address immediate humanitarian needs and pay for the security forces needed to ensure the government’s survival. The problem is that they also help the government avoid the hard task of mobilizing domestic support and revenue to sustain itself over the long term. The international community, therefore, should match its contributions over a multiyear time period to the Afghan government’s own domestic revenue-generation capabilities. Such an approach should be managed through an international framework like the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund.

This approach offers an incentive for the government to improve revenue-generation capabilities, creates greater predictability in external funding for government budget projections and planning, and establishes a clear link between Afghan public contributions toward their government’s efforts and the international community’s own.

The United States can also support international efforts to responsibly develop a mineral framework law for the development of Afghanistan's mineral resources—a source of potential long-term wealth that could aid state consolidation and reduce Afghanistan's dependency on international aid. In addition, the United States should work with other international players in creating substantial infrastructure development that links Afghan minerals to regional and global markets. Given the high security risks this will likely require government underwriting.

But to attract the confidence of international investors, the Karzai government will need to commit to greater transparency and revenue-sharing with the communities where resources are found as part of a larger commitment to local government. It will need to work with local communities to avoid exacerbating resistance to the central government as seen in other cases like Pakistan's Balochistan or the Nigerian delta.

Facilitate internal peace talks

The political reforms by the Afghan government discussed above are a first but incomplete step toward resolving Afghanistan's internal conflict. More than three decades of war and the continued immunity of many conflict actors from any form of justice for their crimes and abuse have contributed to pervasive mistrust between rival communities both inside and outside the government. This makes prospects for peaceful power-sharing agreements extremely daunting.

Reconciliation will take more than bilateral discussions between the Karzai government and some select Taliban leaders amenable to talks. What's needed is a broader, more transparent process between the government and the entire Afghan public.

American officials embrace the prospect of reintegration efforts for select low-level Taliban fighters but they publicly cede the issue of talks with high-level officials to the Karzai government. The Afghan government's most recent formal peace program, the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, continues previous attempts of providing monetary incentives in return for quitting the fight, and undertaking high-level efforts to co-opt specific insurgent commanders into the central government camp.²² Moreover, officials have not achieved commitments from the Karzai government to engage in more discussions with nonarmed factions within Afghan society who fear where President Karzai is taking the country.

Reconciliation will take more than bilateral discussions between the Karzai government and some select Taliban leaders amenable to talks.

U.S. officials are right that any settlement in the conflict must be Afghan-led and Afghan-accepted. American diplomats, however, have a responsibility to engage in the discussion as the most powerful armed party to the conflict, and they should publicly affirm and support inclusive talks. The United States and the Taliban have thus far both stood publicly firm in their respective “red line” preconditions for negotiations. Any progress will ultimately require concessions from all sides.

The administration should aim to support formal preliminary talks by the August 2011 Ramadan holiday period. American troops will have begun a partial withdrawal from Afghanistan by August 2011 according to the administration’s plans. This withdrawal will clearly indicate to all Afghan parties that they cannot count on indefinite international resources to freeze the balance of power in place. At the same time, the pace and scope of the withdrawal will remain subject to U.S. control.

Specific steps the United States should take to promote reconciliation among the Afghan government and armed and unarmed citizens include:

Supporting community consultation as a mechanism to address grievances

The United States should support a consultation process to address grievances and increase contacts between the Karzai government and civil society representatives and political opponents regardless of whether discussions lead to any form of power-sharing agreement with Taliban leaders. This process should take place in tandem and in conjunction with government reforms discussed previously in this report.

Some communities in addition to insurgent groups have legitimate grievances that will need to be addressed. These include exclusion from the political process and resources, predatory government officials, a lack of justice, and abuses by foreign forces.

The United States and its international partners should push for talks that include a commitment to a broader truth and reconciliation process rather than ceding to President Karzai exclusive control over the structure of discussions. These conversations can begin to address issues of justice and impunity on the part of both government and insurgent figures even if prosecution or removal from public office is not immediately possible.

Establishing a neutral mediator for discussions

The United States, the Karzai government, Pakistan, and the insurgent commanders are all deeply involved in Afghanistan's conflict. This makes them poorly positioned to serve as honest brokers in mediating disputes or adjudicating past crimes in ways that their rivals will accept. The United States and its NATO-ISAF allies, along with the Afghan government and others, should instead attempt to find a neutral mediator and location to facilitate talks.

The Taliban publicly rejects the United Nations as a neutral actor in the conflict so discussions will most likely need to be held under the auspices of an Islamic country such as Turkey, or a forum such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The Maldives has hosted in 2009 and 2010 a series of talks between Afghan parliamentary leaders and the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin. Saudi Arabia has also facilitated informal backchannel discussions between the Karzai government and some Taliban interlocutors.

As discussed in the next section, international buy-in, particularly from Pakistan, will be a necessary condition for any talks. But their presence should be restricted to observers rather than actively dictating the scope of any agreement.

Pushing for an inclusive negotiation process in which Afghanistan's various factions are represented

President Karzai recently established a 72-member High Peace Council under the leadership of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani. But its actual power to enforce that mandate is unclear and reports suggest that the presidential office continues to conduct its own parallel private negotiations with individual Taliban representatives. The council's membership is, in any case, handpicked by the president without consultation from parliament or other representative bodies, which has led opposition politicians to complain about its independence and lack of transparency and the Taliban to denounce it.

The lack of clarity about minimum conditions on all sides for any agreement means the above concerns cannot be assuaged without guarantees of representation in the discussions. Any sustainable peace agreement will need the participation of a broader range of community leaders—including women's groups and other civil society organizations—as well as members of the former Northern Alliance who

are most skeptical about any rapprochement with the Taliban, and from those close to the insurgency itself. The international community should push for their inclusion while also clearly conveying that the process should be transparent and that they will not support irreconcilables trying to undermine any talks.

The United States should express its support publicly for these peace talks. It will also need to consider supporting specific confidence-building measures such as a withdrawal of U.N. sanctions on Taliban leadership, a release of selected prisoners, a negotiated halt to assassination campaigns against Afghan government officials by insurgents, or ceasing targeted killings of insurgents by U.S. and NATO-ISAF forces.

Increase international diplomatic efforts

The Afghan government and its armed and unarmed political opponents will ultimately dictate the outcome of their country's conflict. Still, the United States, NATO members, and Afghanistan's neighbors can all play facilitator or spoiler roles in any potential settlement, making an external diplomatic track a necessary if not essential condition for progress. Afghanistan, as a landlocked country, requires its neighbors' cooperation, economic investment, and long-term security guarantees in order to develop a viable and sustainable economy and state—further underscoring the importance of these discussions.

As part of the internal Afghan political reconciliation efforts described above the U.S. secretary of state needs to push the International Contact Group on Afghanistan—an existing forum for bringing together the Afghan government and numerous other countries as well as NATO-ISAF, the European Union, and the United Nations—toward a broad-based regional dialogue.

The goal should be achieving acceptance from Afghanistan's neighbors to invest in Afghanistan's reintegration into the region but not to seek control of its internal politics, and to relinquish support for spoiler groups. Diplomatic progress will require clearly conveying that the costs for its neighbors of intervening to exploit Afghanistan's internal divisions are much higher than the potential benefits gained from working collectively to contain, manage, and ultimately resolve Afghanistan's internal conflict.

The administration should focus its diplomatic efforts over the coming year on accelerating an international diplomatic process to prepare for formal talks by internal Afghan actors during the August 2011 Ramadan holiday period. At that

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time, representatives from NATO-ISAF, the Karzai government's High Peace Council, the Afghan parliament, Afghan women's groups and other civil society groups, and Taliban commanders authorized to speak for the movement should all be included in the talks. Neighbors Pakistan, India, Iran, China, and Russia should all take part as observers.

In the lead-up, working groups could be established from the International Contact Group and/or other regional forums to focus on regional economic development, border security, regional transportation, drug trafficking, and other cross-border issues.

Address geopolitical interests of neighboring countries and regional powers

Afghanistan's neighbors and regional powers have asserted their desire for the creation of a stable, peaceful Afghanistan. Yet each country has respective security and economic concerns and interests in Afghanistan that will have to be understood, addressed, and safeguarded in any negotiated settlement among Afghanistan's warring sides.

Pakistan is clearly the biggest challenge and the most likely of Afghanistan's neighbors to serve as a spoiler for a peace settlement. The Obama administration's vigorous engagement efforts since taking office have strengthened the partnership between the United States and Pakistan. But Pakistan's dangerous strategic calculation remains unchanged. The Afghan insurgency—including the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani network, and the Hezb-e-Islami—currently finds sanctuary in Pakistan from which they are able to launch attacks, recruit, and fundraise.

Pakistan's exact intentions toward its neighbor remain unclear, given its unwillingness to publicly acknowledge support for insurgent proxies, and the fact that its civilian and military leadership are not monolithic in their attitudes toward Afghanistan. But the Pakistani security establishment remains concerned with the current government in Afghanistan and its perceived alignment to India. It believes that India is attempting to increase its influence in Afghanistan and is using its presence there to gather intelligence on Pakistan and to support the Baloch separatist movement in Pakistan.²³

Moreover, the Afghan government's refusal to recognize the Durand Line, the border separating Afghanistan and Pakistan, feeds deeper Pakistani insecurities over its hold on Pashtun-dominated territories in its western border. As long as

Pakistan feels underrepresented or outmaneuvered in Afghanistan—particularly when it comes to India—it will continue to support proxies and crack down on Taliban representatives who seek to negotiate independently.

Pakistani leadership—civilian and military—must be a party to talks even if the need to support Afghan sovereignty and neutrality means they cannot be allowed to dictate the full scope of an agreement. The Pakistani military’s ability to direct and control the Afghan insurgency should not be assumed either by its detractors or proponents. Insurgent groups possess their own indigenous bases of support and their own motivations for halting or continuing conflict.

The United States should accelerate both its efforts to assuage Pakistani concerns through existing trilateral (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States), bilateral, and multilateral frameworks and to increase pressure on the Pakistanis through enlisting the assistance of China and Saudi Arabia.²⁴

The United States should also undertake a parallel and overlapping effort simultaneously with other countries in the region that have deep reservations about a negotiated settlement with any element of the insurgency. Iran, India, China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and others fear that any agreement with insurgents would provide a sanctuary for affiliated extremist groups. Drug trafficking, refugee flows, growing influence of a rival in Afghanistan, and competition over resources and trade are also major considerations for countries in the region.

India, for example, fears that reconciliation with insurgent elements in Afghanistan would amount to ceding control and power to militants such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani Network. Supported by the Pakistani security establishment, each has conducted deadly attacks on India, including the Mumbai attacks and the Indian embassy bombing in Kabul in 2008.

Iran, too, opposes the return of the Taliban, with whom it almost went to war in 1998 after the Taliban killed nine of its diplomats. Major Iranian interests include ensuring that anti-Shiite militant groups do not strengthen, that Iran’s allies in Afghanistan including the Hazara and Tajik communities are protected, and that their influence in western Afghanistan is maintained. Moreover, Iran and Russia both have serious concerns about Afghanistan’s drug trade, which takes the lives of thousands of their citizens annually and worsens internal security.

Facilitating discussions on these concerns and interests should be a top priority for U.S. policymakers and elevated within the strategy. The United States should utilize existing forums such as the International Contact Group; multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference; and key allies such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to undertake a comprehensive diplomatic approach.

Separately, the United States should formalize and expand existing information-sharing networks and forums between neighboring government security forces to combat global terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and others. The United States should encourage regular meetings between defense and interior ministers of countries in the region, and establish a system for direct communication, coordination, and intelligence sharing.

Reduce the U.S. military footprint and align military strategy with political objectives

NATO-ISAF needs to refocus its military strategy on a sustainable political end state that can survive the eventual drawdown of foreign forces. This report has argued that high-level military operations may bring some insurgents to the negotiating table in the short term but they cannot address the core factors contributing to Afghanistan's instability and therefore will not lead to a sustainable outcome without significant changes in the political arena and on the diplomatic stage.

Further, U.S. policymakers must acknowledge the unintended impacts that our military presence has on local Afghan societies—both through the introduction of powerful foreign combatants that can upset balances of power and also through the distortionary economic impacts of our bases, logistics networks, and other infusions of money into a very poor and fragmented society. In order to supply our military in Afghanistan, we have often relied on individuals in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who not only have links to drug trafficking networks, but who also must pay off insurgent groups to allow safe passage of goods going to the U.S. military and NATO-ISAF. Insurgents exploit suspicions of and disillusionment with the international forces and their allies to unify their movement and recruit individuals to their cause. And Afghan leaders have few incentives to compromise and to exert leadership as long as a large foreign military presence remains, freezing an unsustainable dynamic in place.

A large and indefinite U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is ultimately not a realistic option and it will not effectively advance U.S. national security interests the longer it remains. It radicalizes individuals in the region, serves as a magnet for extremists around the world, and complicates our relationships with other important countries in the region who resent our presence in Afghanistan, including China, India, and Russia. It will continue to strain our military force and the U.S. economy and it will limit our ability to respond to other crises and threats globally.

Here are specific steps the United States and its allies can take to make sure their military strategy is aligned with their renewed focus on political goals.

Increase oversight of contracts and international funding

The vast majority of international aid is not given to the Afghan government but rather to private contractors and nongovernmental organizations that provide support to NATO-ISAF for logistics and protection, and undertake development assistance. It also goes directly to the Afghan population from NATO-ISAF and the militaries and civilian agencies of individual countries through mechanisms such as the Commander Emergency Response Fund and/or Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Gen. Petraeus recently recognized in his new contracting guidelines that this money has frequently empowered warlords, commanders, and criminals either associated with the government or outside of government networks who are as despised by their communities as insurgent groups.²⁵ The money generates opposition to foreign forces and the Afghan partner government. Moreover, it is believed that our funding—which is channeled through a series of subcontractors—frequently ends up in the hands of insurgents who demand protection money from convoys to allow goods to pass and who have linkages with individuals receiving our money.²⁶

The international community—and especially the United States as the largest donor—must increase oversight of its spending in Afghanistan.²⁷ This means channeling more money through international financial institutions such as the World Bank for reconstruction assistance instead of U.S. government agencies and/or the NATO-ISAF coalition. And it may require a reduction in funding—including both development assistance and military contracts—if this funding cannot be monitored more extensively.

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Allocating more assistance to peaceful areas where it can be monitored rather than allocating the vast majority to the most insecure areas of Afghanistan would also increase the effectiveness of foreign assistance and make it less likely to fuel corruption and empower unpopular and dangerous figures.

Rebalance allocation of military forces to halt deteriorating security situation in once stable provinces

Almost one-half of all NATO-ISAF troops are currently assigned to Regional Commands South and Southwest in Kandahar and Helmand provinces—62,000 soldiers in all. Another 32,000 forces plus Special Forces are deployed to Regional Command East along the border with Pakistan, leaving approximately 11,000 NATO-ISAF troops in Regional Command North and 6,000 in Regional Command West.²⁸

This allocation of resources has resulted in the lightest NATO-ISAF presence in areas more amenable to supporting the central government in Kabul and local authorities. In the last 18 months northern areas that were once relatively secure—such as the population centers in Kunduz, Balkh, and even Herat—have experienced greater violence than ever before.²⁹ Frustration with the central government is certainly a contributing factor to the increasing insurgent activity. But so, too, is the lack of sufficient forces to buttress stability.

NATO-ISAF forces should be rotated into areas where government support and control is strongest and where a small insertion of troops can have a large impact on the overall security situation even if it means redirecting some troops allocated for operations in the south. A more stable security environment in these areas can provide a solid foundation for a renewed political strategy focusing on addressing genuine local grievances.

Insurgent groups in the north and west certainly pose a meaningful threat. But they do not possess the same capabilities, level of support, or easy access to a safe haven as those in the south and east. The objective for these areas should be to achieve the relative stability that existed in the 2004 to 2008 period.

President Obama's instructions not to clear areas that cannot be transferred and the concerns over these operations radicalizing the insurgency and bringing violence to Afghan communities for no real benefit are good reasons to reconsider heavy deployments in the south.³⁰ A rebalancing of security forces in which more troops are deployed to the north and the west of the country has potential risks—mainly that the insurgency will be under less pressure in the south and east of the country where it is strongest.

These current operations, however, do not appear to be creating conditions for long-term stability. In an environment where difficult choices are required over troop deployments, consolidating gains versus opening up new, unsustainable fronts is preferable.

— Lawrence Korb

Continue training for Afghan national army and police

The United States and NATO-ISAF should continue training the Afghan National Security Forces so that the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police reach their respective 2011 goals of 171,600 and 134,000 by 2011. Training the army and police is critical to transferring responsibility to an Afghan government capable of providing for its own defense. Provided the Afghan government is willing to hold to political reform commitments discussed earlier this should be part of a longer-term strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Afghanistan.

This training should not, however, be solely a U.S. responsibility. As numerous countries transition out or plan to leave in the near future—such as the Netherlands, Canada, Italy, France, and Sweden—they should be asked to take a greater role in the training mission. Sharing this burden should free up some U.S. troops and a commensurate number of support soldiers for counterterrorism and stability operations.³¹

The administration should also halt or heavily increase oversight of current plans by U.S. special forces to train and expand irregular local defense militias meant to provide a stopgap security measure against insurgent infiltration. The administration believes these forces will ensure a more sustainable security situation in Afghanistan. But these forces, currently operating under the moniker of the Afghan Local Police after several earlier ill-fated iterations, undermine previous efforts to disarm and demobilize Afghan militia groups, reduce weapons throughout society, and strengthen Afghan state security forces.

Long-term security in Afghanistan will depend on an effective Afghan police force and army as well as political reforms that channel conflict within communities. Adding more independent armed actors to divided, impoverished, and embattled communities has the potential to ignite a combustible and dangerous mix.³²

The orderly drawdown of forces to reach 40,000 troops by the end of 2012 should begin now

U.S. forces should begin repositioning within Afghanistan in January 2011 to reflect a renewed emphasis on stability operations in parts of the north and west. The forces should commence an orderly withdrawal beginning now consistent

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with providing enough manpower to perform counterterrorism operations and training, as well as to contain insurgent growth. By the end of 2012 the U.S. military should have no more than 40,000 troops in Afghanistan.

The United States should aim to reduce its total force to no more than 15,000 troops or less by 2014 at the latest as part of its long-term strategic partnership agreement with the Afghan government. The drawdown should pause through the next presidential election in 2014 to provide a baseline of security during the first post-Karzai presidential election campaign. Once that process is complete U.S. forces can resume their drawdown to reach a residual level of 10,000 to 15,000 troops as part of the formal handover of responsibility to the new Afghan administration.

The U.S. reserve force could be based in Bagram, Jalalabad, and/or Kandahar in Afghanistan, or in the region. These forces would be responsible for intelligence collection, security force training, and targeted strikes against terrorist groups including Al Qaeda that threaten the U.S. homeland and our allies.

Accelerate drawdown of forces if political reforms do not occur

The withdrawal's pace should depend in part on the Afghan government's progress regarding political reforms mentioned earlier in this report. The size of the July 2011 troop withdrawal should be informed by the June 2011 quarterly review. If the Karzai government shows no signs of progress a withdrawal schedule should be accelerated.

A more rapid withdrawal—drawing down to a force of 15,000 or less U.S. troops—would entail significant risks. The broader range of U.S. covert and overt policy tools means those risks could be mitigated in terms of American national security. But they still would be borne much more heavily by the Afghan people and potentially their neighbors.

Absent meaningful progress on political reforms, however, the United States will never be able to consolidate security in Afghanistan and committing resources indefinitely would be irresponsible and unsustainable.

Conclusion

Our current strategy in Afghanistan will not lead to a stable outcome where the Afghan government is increasingly able to manage its internal and external threats as foreign forces reduce their commitments. It is not advancing U.S. national security interests in the region at a sustainable cost and over a realistic time frame. We need to change course in Afghanistan now so that the United States and its NATO partners can focus more attention and resources on political and diplomatic strategies that address the primary causes of the country's instability.

At the same time, the United States should rebalance its foreign policy portfolio to reduce its overinvestment in Afghanistan and allocate more attention and resources to other policy priorities, including Pakistan, terrorism, and the United States' economic competitiveness.

The United States, NATO-ISAF partners, and the Afghan government have all committed to transfer control of Afghanistan to Afghan authorities by 2014. In the interim the United States and NATO-ISAF should use existing leverage to motivate Afghan and Pakistani leaders as well as regional players to make the difficult choices essential to creating peace.

We should clearly convey our expectations that the Karzai government must commit to undertake political reforms that relinquish some of its concentrated power with the goal of increasing internal checks and balances and broadening the governing coalition. We should also encourage the Karzai government to undertake inclusive talks with both nonarmed factions within Afghanistan and armed insurgents.

These efforts should be complemented by an international diplomatic track in which the United States and NATO-ISAF support the creation of a framework that establishes Afghanistan as a sovereign country increasingly integrated into the region and unfriendly to terrorist groups.

Fighting the insurgency on behalf of a government that is unwilling to reform will lead to elusive gains and unfulfilled sacrifices for our brave American and NATO men and women serving in Afghanistan, and will not advance the U.S. security interests.

Further, the United States and NATO-ISAF must align the military component of their strategy with political and diplomatic objectives. This would involve supporting and advancing the strategy's nonmilitary components by creating a political and diplomatic process to drive military operations and not the reverse.

If the Afghan leadership seriously fails to tackle issues central to creating peace the United States and NATO-ISAF have no choice but to accelerate their draw-down before 2014. Fighting the insurgency on behalf of a government that is unwilling to reform will lead to elusive gains and unfulfilled sacrifices for our brave American and NATO men and women serving in Afghanistan, and will not advance the security interests of the United States or of our allies.

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