



# Realignment: Managing a Stable Transition to Afghan Responsibility

Recommendations for the United States and Its Allies

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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.

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### 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

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- 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.

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