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# Winning in Afghanistan

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Seven years into the US-led effort to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, the mission is on the verge of failing. This unsettling new reality is the result of key international and Afghan actors having for years pursued a narrow strategy focused almost exclusively on short-term goals at the expense of a broader and more cohesive strategy. Afghanistan, consequently, is now plagued by a threat environment shaped and sustained by an expanding insurgency, widespread criminality, ineffective governance, and the absence of a coordinated response to continuing challenges. Violence inside the country has risen steadily since 2006, and in 2008 levels of violence in Afghanistan exceeded levels of violence in Iraq.

President Barack Obama has announced that Afghanistan will be his Administration's top foreign policy priority, and his advisers are currently reviewing the situation with the objective of developing a strategy that will be successful against the dynamic, highly adaptive insurgency currently ravaging the country. As part of the new strategy, the United States is expected to deploy at least 17,000 additional forces to Afghanistan over the next 12 months in a "surge" designed to regain momentum and provide the breathing room necessary for the development of governance and security capacity in the country. International and domestic actors are also expected to explore peace talks with reconcilable insurgents, engage Afghan tribes and local communities in providing for their own security, and attempt to forge regional cooperation in their pursuit of a new comprehensive strategy.

These approaches will permit international and domestic leaders to begin to address the security decline, but only if they are reinforced by an effective and accountable Afghan government capable of providing the rule

of law and security for its citizens. Such a government will be an effective partner of its neighbors and the international community, and will be in a position to stabilize the region so that it cannot again become a base for regional and global terrorists. The establishment of this type of Afghan government should be at the heart of any new strategy for the country. In formulating a new strategy, international and domestic leaders need to commonly articulate the end-state envisioned in Afghanistan and tailor their preferred means—a “surge,” national reconciliation talks, and regional compromises—to achieving those ends. During the last seven years international actors and the Afghan government have lacked a clear common vision of the Afghanistan they have been striving to build and thus have tended to pursue incremental policies or undertake tactical efforts, undermining long-term priorities.

The absence of a shared vision for Afghanistan has blurred the distinction between means and ends. Means have too often defined goals, tactics too often driven strategy, supply too often determined demands, and short-term necessities too often took precedence over long-term priorities. This failed vision has also led many to question whether the US-led operation is aimed at securing Afghanistan, reshaping the whole of South Asia, or simply setting the conditions for a responsible exit plan. American policymakers have undertaken several assessments of their Afghanistan strategy since last summer, and nearly all have found that the United States and the rest of the international community are guilty of setting unrealistic or shortsighted goals for the nation. In light of the current situation, the United States needs to take the lead in developing policies designed to reinforce any long-term stability in Afghanistan. These policies should be focused, coherent, and shared by all the actors, and they need to be targeted at freeing Afghanistan from the vicious cycle of insecurity, insurgency, impunity, and corruption in which it is trapped. Any continuation of the shortsighted efforts of the past seven years will lead international actors and the Afghan government to certain failure. This article looks at specific strategic challenges facing Afghanistan and presents ways in which leaders might transition to sustainable policies that will make peace and stability realistically obtainable.

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***President Barack Obama said Afghanistan will be his Administration's top foreign policy priority.***

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### ***The Challenge, Vision, and Strategy***

Since 2001 the situation in Afghanistan has evolved from a relatively simple post-conflict setting into a complex threat environment marked by terrorism, insurgency, and the many challenges of nation-building. Its ever-increasing complexity has perplexed the Afghan government and contributing nations and stymied the development of any unified, long-term vision for the nation and its people. All parties have approached the emerging issues in divergent, uncoordinated ways, with operations on every front being fragmented reactions to events rather than strategic undertakings designed to support long-term goals. Militarily, for instance, US troops narrowly focused on fighting terrorists in Afghanistan after the Taliban was removed from power, even though many realized that numerous terrorists had already snuck across the border to Pakistan. Other NATO members restricted their contributions in terms of manpower and resources to peacekeeping operations despite the fact that peace had not yet been achieved. The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, neatly summarized the challenges facing the international community in Afghanistan when he told the US Congress in 2007 that “in Iraq, we do what we must . . . . In Afghanistan, we do what we can.”<sup>1</sup> The Obama Administration is expected to support “what must be done” in Afghanistan, but what will such support look like? Before it can be defined, we must ask what Afghans, the United States, and the international community envision as the end-state in Afghanistan. What are their long-term goals, and how can these goals be achieved in a reasonable timeframe?

President Obama's Administration sees the resurgence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan as “the greatest threat” to US security. It seeks to counter this threat by increasing the force levels in Afghanistan, investing more resources in an effort to revitalize Afghanistan's economic development, and helping Pakistan secure the border region with Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, there are numerous suggestions inside and outside the Obama Administration to scale back US objectives in Afghanistan and begin focusing more narrowly on preventing the nation from being a safe haven for al Qaeda, ensuring regional stability rather than trying to

build a centralized democratic state in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Lessons from the past several years and ground realities, however, indicate that there is not any short cut to achieving strategic goals. Despite the emerging doubts about the feasibility of creating a centralized democratic state, building a legitimate and stable government that can control its territory and command the trust of Afghan citizens is the key to realizing the Obama Administration's vision. Obviously, Afghanistan—a poverty-stricken country which has been devastated and fragmented by a long period of war and violence—cannot be turned into a “Jeffersonian democracy” or a “Central Asian Valhalla” in the foreseeable future. But a minimalist approach narrowly focused on rooting out militant strongholds in Pakistan and gaining short-term local successes in Afghanistan can hardly fulfill the stated vision.<sup>4</sup> During the past seven years, failure to stabilize Afghanistan under a functional government has been rooted in poorly resourced and badly coordinated efforts, not because of the infeasibility of the mission. Long-term stability in Afghanistan can be achieved only through efforts directed toward changing the divisive situation rather than adopting solutions solely to accommodate the existing fragmentation based on temporary gains. Accommodation of traditional power structures and various ethnic groups has to be pursued through democratic participation, political and economic integration, and the development of a civil society and private sector that mitigate the negative impacts of competing group interests.

Afghanistan's complex threat environment has necessitated that Afghan and international forces simultaneously tackle the challenges of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and nation-building. Unfortunately, all countries present in Afghanistan have tended to individually define the parameters of their participation, which has prohibited the development of a unified vision and often set well-intentioned partners at cross purposes. A case-in-point can be seen in the lack of international cooperation in implementing the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and related policy directives. The ANDS, which received international approval at the Paris Conference in June 2008, envisions Afghanistan as “a stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbors” by 2020.<sup>5</sup> An earlier White House paper defined US objectives in Afghanistan in terms of helping “the people of Afghanistan defeat the terrorists, and establish a stable, moderate, and democratic state that respects the rights of its citizens, governs its territory effectively, and is a reliable ally in the War on Terror.”<sup>6</sup> Afghan and international operations have not sufficiently served these visions. Many actors have refused to sufficiently invest in the security, political, and economic institutions that are necessary to underpin

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the objective of a stable democracy toward which they claim to be working. In a state that was decimated by decades of war, merely holding elections will not ensure stability.

Afghanistan is currently at a tipping point where its government's legitimacy (and that of its international backers) is being openly challenged by an array of antigovernment forces. The Taliban has long operated a shadow government in Afghanistan's most dangerous areas, and its power now reaches to Kabul's doorstep. Most Afghans do not view the insurgents as a viable alternative to the current government, but they are reluctant to stand up to them on behalf of a government that can neither protect its citizens nor deliver basic services. As a result, most Afghans are sitting on the fence, waiting to see which side will prevail. Recent polls indicate that Afghans are most affected by insecurity, unemployment, the high price of staple goods, the struggling economy, and corruption,<sup>7</sup> so it is incumbent upon the central government and its international partners to develop a strategic approach that responds to these demands.

In developing such a strategy, Afghan society needs to be mobilized in pursuit of what its population aspires to instead of what a supply-driven assistance program imposes upon it. Many have debated whether such mobilization should be driven by the central government in a top-down approach or by local organizations in a bottom-up approach. In reality, both approaches have been tested, and both should be utilized as the situation in Afghanistan is moved forward. The Bonn process initiated a bottom-up approach by allowing regional strongmen and warlords to help overthrow the Taliban. The decentralization it created was in turn meant to be checked by the 2004 Afghanistan constitution, a document that empowered the central government to proceed from the top-down. Today, there is a need to balance power harmoniously between the center and the periphery. Ideally, the Afghan central government would take the initiative in fighting insurgents, building critical infrastructure, and reforming corrupt national institutions while community organizations would take the lead in driving local-level economies, delivering services, and conducting dispute resolution. This type of melding of

national and local endeavors would ingratiate the Afghan government to its people and serve as a pillar of human security in Afghanistan.

Establishing the rule of law that serves the Afghans is as important as establishing the roots of individual security and will necessitate the overhauling of a heretofore failed Afghan government. The United States and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan never gave serious attention to making the government work and have repeatedly ignored its inefficiencies and corruption. It is now clear that the government's deficiencies and its over-reliance on foreign support have alienated the Afghan population and undermined Afghanistan's fragile stability. Plans to reform the civilian administration will be difficult to accomplish, as government officials are inadequately trained, poorly paid, and unaccountable to the people they govern. Those in Kabul who are invested in such a dysfunctional system will resist any policies that will allow provinces and local communities to take the initiative in the country's governing.

Governance has to embody the use of institutions, structures of authority, and resources to manage society's problems and affairs. It entails control and coordination of activities. Therefore, effective governance is underpinned by the state's legitimacy and its long-term stability and capacity to deliver. Governance is hampered by its lack of control over resources, institutions, and procedures that facilitate change in the country. Kabul is not in full control of institution-building, security operations, and development choices. The basic functions of governance are performed by an array of state and nonstate actors, including foreign militaries, international bodies, nongovernmental organizations, and informal domestic power holders. The state has even deferred the "monopoly of legitimate use of force" to foreign actors in the hope that under the security cover of foreign militaries they will rebuild the state amid an unstable environment. While such a pattern is not uncommon in post-conflict and developing states, the slow pace of nation-building in Afghanistan inhibits efficiency in governance, security, and economic development. Consequently, without the state playing a central role, public goods contributed by different actors tend to be uncoordinated, unstable, transient, and more supply-driven than demand-driven. This situation perpetuates and compounds the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

The delivery of services and waging effective reconstruction efforts need to aim at reducing poverty and deprivation while at the same time presenting an Afghan government involved in developmental efforts. These efforts should lead to tangible changes in the lives of ordinary Afghans. The peoples' sustainable access to roads, electricity, water, and other services generates a strong political impact that wins support and contributes to the isola-



tion and eventual defeat of the insurgency. Development of agriculture and rural economies should be given top priority in economic reconstruction.<sup>9</sup>

Another key prerequisite for winning over the people is fighting corruption and the illicit drug trade. The weak Afghan government, together with the associated endemic violence and poverty, contributes to the growth of the country's illicit drug industry. Therefore, a solution that brings together the development of security, governance, the rule of law, and the economy—the same elements that comprise a comprehensive strategy for defeating the insurgency—needs to be sought. Massive eradication of opium poppies alone will neither help in reducing the illicit drug industry nor defeating the insurgency.

Counternarcotic efforts are multidimensional challenges that encompass all aspects of nation-building in Afghanistan. The illicit drug industry will disappear only when a functioning, stable, and effective Afghan state emerges. To this end, Afghanistan should focus on development as the way to rid itself of poppy cultivation. There are no quick and simple solutions. Reorienting a full one-third of Afghanistan's economy without destabilizing the nation requires an enormous number of resources, a large administrative capacity, and lots of time. Only a comprehensive and holistic approach will be successful.

The planned presidential election in Afghanistan has the ability to produce greater stability or more risk. People in Afghanistan hope that the presidential election might bring positive changes in the direction the nation is transiting, from instability to peace and individual security. If the people perceive the election to be a credible, fair, and free process, the results, whatever they may be, will lead to hope and stability. But if popular perception deems the process not credible, inaccessible to every part of the electorate, and being manipulated by the central government, influential groups, or individuals, it may cause a greater division that will only benefit the Taliban and other insurgent organizations. So there is a need for ensuring a level playing field for this election, with the major candidates having equal access to security, the media, and means to reach out to people in the unstable and remote areas.

Individual security and good governance underpin any vision of a peaceful, democratic Afghanistan. A big challenge remains in setting the conditions for achieving these goals, because as much as they tout them, the Afghan government and its international partners cannot simply will them into being. They can, however, pursue a strategy that will provide an opportunity to forge them into being.



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***Counternarcotic efforts are multidimensional challenges encompassing all aspects of nation-building in Afghanistan.***

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***Military Surge—Opportunities and Challenges***

The United States is planning to increase the size of its force in Afghanistan by deploying at least 17,000 additional personnel over the next 12 months. One US combat brigade already deployed in January 2008, two others are scheduled to deploy in the spring, and one final brigade is slated for the summer. Additionally, a number of NATO countries are expected to provide more forces to support the “surge.” Given the increasing intensity of the Taliban-led insurgency and the current dearth of competent security forces able to counter it, Afghan and international leaders are correct in bolstering the military presence inside Afghanistan. The country, leaders will shortly find, cannot be saved militarily, but can be lost if a lack of security is allowed to flourish. The introduction of additional forces at this time will certainly give leaders the time they need to develop the institutions capable of driving Afghanistan forward.

The introduction of an Iraq-style surge, however, will not on its own significantly change the situation, because Afghanistan is a complex environment in which the challenges have been compounded by years of neglect. Afghanistan is a theme park of problems. Unlike Iraq, it has suffered from expanding militant bases in nearby countries and been hindered by the disjointed nature of the NATO effort. A detailed strategy for the employment of the new military forces is necessary but unlikely before April, when leaders at a NATO summit in France will address the situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. When addressed, US leaders expect that the new strategy and the additional forces will allow them to combat the Taliban and al Qaeda in such a manner as to also facilitate improved governance, while weaning the population from the Taliban’s influence. These future operations will be a struggle for control of territory and the people who live in it. Victories against insurgents are meaningless unless they lead to control of the political and economic environment in which the Afghan government can begin to govern effectively, protect the population, and deliver basic services. If international forces are unable to provide the security necessary for the Afghan government to initiate positive changes, the Afghan population will

come to resent the forces and resist their presence. They will associate the forces, as they currently do, with air strikes and night raids, and will continue to grow skeptical of their ability to provide security, protection from crime, and basic services.

The Taliban and their allies lack the capacity to win militarily, but they have the ability to challenge international forces while at the same time disrupting the Afghan government and turning the Afghans against both. The insurgents will likely fight a protracted war of attrition in an attempt to enhance their political and economic influence in as much of the country as possible. Their strategy is based on a traditional feature of Afghan history that can colloquially be described as “long-termism.” Quite simply, it is an ability to outlast the patience of opposing forces. International forces can best counter such a strategy by declaring their long-term commitment, offering better alternatives to the Afghan people, and aiding the Afghan government in providing security and governance.

No amount of international forces, though, will be enough to finish the job. Competent Afghan security forces will be needed in the long-term, so that standing up such forces should be part of any long-term strategy. More sizeable and effective Afghan security forces than those that currently exist will give the Afghan government the ability to consolidate gains that international forces make and to expand the political and economic environment in which it will operate. Currently, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is designed to expand to include 134,000 soldiers, and there are calls to enlarge it even further to 200,000 soldiers or more. There is a need to double the size of the Afghan National Police (ANP). Such goals are commendable but will take a great amount of time and resources. A force as large as the one envisioned must be trained, armed, and transformed into a cohesive national force, which can hardly be done without sufficient numbers of international trainers. Only half of the international trainers currently required have been provided for the ANA and far less for the ANP. Addressing this shortcoming needs to be a priority for policymakers designing the surge.

Military forces alone—whether Afghan or international—are not the panacea to all of Afghanistan’s ills and, in fact, have the potential for worsening the current situation. Air strikes have been more common in Afghanistan than they ever were in Iraq, resulting in numerous civilian casualties, mainly due to the fact that the Taliban embeds itself inside communities. The relative dearth of ground forces makes air support necessary but dangerous, because Afghan and international forces lack the intelligence and support necessary. Surge forces operating with heavy firepower and aggressive tactics also run the risk of killing innocents and spurring greater public animosity in urban

and rural areas. The Afghan government and international leaders need to revitalize a command structure that is fractured, a civil-military interface that is broken down, and a strategic planning operation that is disjointed if they are to minimize potential civilian casualties and the growing animosity of the Afghan public. There is currently no unified military leadership capable of integrating the efforts of 41 international troop-contributing countries with the civilian representative from the United Nations. Unless leaders are capable of streamlining the military command structure and establishing effective leadership over those responsible for civil-military coordination, disjointed efforts will continue to undermine the international community's tactical efforts and the strategic goals they are designed to support.

The military surge increases the need for secure supply routes. In the past, the level of foreign troops in Afghanistan (British forces in the nineteenth century and Soviet forces in the twentieth) was determined by the availability of supply lines. Currently, the strategic route that carries about 75 percent of the supplies required by the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan passes through unstable areas of Pakistan. Recently, the route has come under increased attack by militants between Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, inflicting significant damage to the flow of supplies. Pakistani security forces have mounted several operations in an effort to keep the route open. If the security situation in the area deteriorates further, however, it could significantly impact military operations in Afghanistan. As the United States sends thousands more forces into Afghanistan, the need for securing alternative routes through Russia, Central Asia, and even Iran highlights the importance of engaging regional powers in support of the new strategy.

### ***Tribal Militias and Village Guards***

The surge is likely to be supported by a new counterinsurgency tactic in which Afghan tribes will be armed to fight the Taliban, similar to how Iraqi tribes were armed to fight militants during the "Sunni Awakening." The tactical plan, which is currently in the initial planning phase, is designed to permit Afghan villagers to be proactive in procuring their own security. In December 2008, US Ambassador William Wood explained that the lack of Afghan and international security forces available for deployment in the rural areas necessitated that such a plan be developed. The United States will in all likelihood implement the plan—known to Americans as the *arbakai* system—primarily by means of training local leaders and equipping them with the supplies they need to help the tribes "restore their own capacity to protect themselves."<sup>10</sup>

The *arbakai* system is based on the concept of aiding the tribes in standing up a group of men to function as a temporary police force, capable of enforcing decisions made by the tribal councils, *jirgas*. It is presently only practiced in Loya Paktia, the region that includes the Paktia, Khost, and Paktika provinces. In other areas of Afghanistan, tribes and local communities employ a variety of mechanisms to ensure the implementation of decisions by their *jirgas* or councils, known as *shuras*. Traditionally, Afghan governments have not directly engaged *arbakais* or similar bodies but have instead enlisted the help of tribal or village elders to gain entrée to such groups.

Tribes and local communities in Afghanistan, whether as part of their *arbakai* system or a similar mechanism, have long complemented the central government's efforts to enhance security. They have taken an active role in policing in peacetime and a military function in repelling foreign invasions and quelling domestic uprisings during times of conflict. Such collaboration has been possible, however, only when tribes and local communities believed in the central government's legitimacy and felt confident that it could deliver the services required. When such confidence has been lacking, tribes and local communities have relied on their traditional structures to survive, lending support to the groups that appeared to be politically and militarily ascendant. In this respect, Afghanistan has historically been no different than any other tribal society with its tribes and the government playing the roles of the two mutually influential elements of a single system. Violence has ravaged the Afghan system, however, and as a result the tribes are no longer as willing to support the central government because it has proven itself largely incapable of supporting the tribes.

Afghan and international leaders will find tribal engagement difficult to reinstate because many Afghan tribes have been restructured or wholly transformed during the last 30 years. Many traditional tribal leaders were sidelined during the previous conflicts and replaced by men with money, guns, and links to extremist groups outside of Afghanistan. As discontent has spread inside the country, many of these men have forged alliances with the Taliban, criminal opportunists, and corrupt politicians, all of whom have begun to play a role in the growing insurgency. Thus, engaging and providing arms to the tribes with such individuals in positions of influence would be counterproductive. Recent attempts have aided the rise of warlords who use their militias to exacerbate ethnic tensions, carry out criminal activities, and terrorize local populations. In 2006, for example, the international community criticized the Afghan government's effort to recruit militias to secure the country's border with Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> The United States later rejected such a plan outright because the move was seen as detrimental to nation-

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building and the continuing effort to disarm the militias and warlords.<sup>12</sup>

Support for, or opposition to, engaging and arming local tribes or communities is inherently grounded in the short-term interests of the parties involved. This reality carries serious long-term consequences. For instance, in late 2007 the Afghan government began to arm two militias of Barakzai tribesmen in Farah province, with the intention of countering the Taliban presence that was ravaging the area. The Barakzai, however, began to fight their Noorzai rivals in the province, allowing the Taliban to continue to operate freely and expand its influence.<sup>13</sup> In order to avoid such future mistakes, the Afghan government and its international partners need to refrain from implementing an all-inclusive tribal engagement policy, proceeding instead on a case-by-case basis. They should introduce the program only in those areas where traditional tribal structures are firmly intact and where tribes can employ their own methods for denying insurgents access and enhancing security. Both the Afghan government and its international partners should be willing and ready to reinforce the tribes with political and military force if necessary. In every case it needs to be an Afghan-led effort engaging the tribes, providing incentives, and utilizing the traditional tribal authorities to assist with community security and assistance. Arming the wrong tribe or group could lead to the warlords returning to power.

***Talking to the Taliban***

The government of Afghanistan and its international partners largely agree on the need to talk to the Taliban and other insurgent groups in an effort to achieve a lasting peace. They disagree, however, on exactly whom they should talk to, the political costs acceptable in any negotiation, and a vision of an integrated end-state. Talks that have been held thus far have been fragmented and uncoordinated, lacking the transparency needed to ensure future success.

The Afghan government, for example, sought Saudi Arabia’s help in mediating talks with the Taliban leadership in pursuit of a peace agreement. President Hamid Karzai’s delegation and a group that included former Tal-

iban officials met with Saudi King Abdallah in September 2008, but immediately following the meeting concluded that the Taliban's senior leadership signaled it was not interested in listening to what the leadership in Kabul was offering until all foreign military forces left Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> President Karzai's later outreach to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's insurgent group was similarly unsuccessful. In both cases, the absence of a clear Afghan government policy and transparency in the negotiating processes sowed suspicion and skepticism in the public consciousness.

One other reconciliation program, *Program-e Tahkim-e Solh*, or the "peace-building program," has proven largely ineffective because it failed to engage legitimate opposition leaders and groups that can deliver on the promises they make. The program claims to have reconciled 6,000 Taliban commanders and combatants but has led to no tangible improvement in the nation's security situation. The program is said to be fraught with corruption and to have engaged many insurgents who are only interested in the financial benefits of cooperating, not in long-term reconciliation.

A favorable political-strategic environment in and around Afghanistan is a prerequisite for initiating reconciliation processes with local insurgents. The creation of such an environment will require the strengthening of the central government's influence in insurgency-ridden areas, the integrating of the reconciliation process into Afghanistan's counterinsurgency strategy, and coordinating the efforts of all actors toward implementation. It will require that leading actors remove the incentives for insurgent groups throughout the whole of South Asia. To this end, Afghanistan and Pakistan need to work together in harmony and with the international community in support of local initiatives designed to enhance peace and minimize the emergence of future disagreements.

Afghans and their international partners have unfortunately missed a number of opportunities to create a favorable political-strategic environment and forge a grand peace with the opposition. They failed during the Bonn process to address the root causes of the war and mistakenly excluded the Taliban and other insurgent groups from talks. In fact, the Taliban and other insurgent groups were defeated and demoralized during the 2001 and 2002 timeframe, and many of their leaders were ready to join the political process in exchange for protection. The Afghan government and its international partners, however, did not present a coordinated political and security strategy for ensuring such protection. As a result, many former Taliban combatants who chose to live peacefully were reported and imprisoned by Coalition forces. Many of these combatants then saw little alternative to joining the armed opposition.



A strategy of talking to the Taliban and other insurgent groups is fraught with risk and will only prolong the violence unless both the Afghan government and the opposition demonstrate that they are willing to negotiate in good faith. In addition, the central government and its international partners need to develop a unified and comprehensive strategy that defines the goals of negotiations in the larger context of Afghanistan's counterinsurgency strategy.

### ***Regional Issues***

Afghanistan's geography has made the country vulnerable to the spillover from various conflicts waged outside its borders. It has suffered from others' imperial ambitions and today suffers from regional powers fighting their battles on Afghanistan's soil. Many regional conflicts are currently playing themselves out in Afghanistan, including tensions and disputes between Pakistan and India, Iran and the United States, and Russia and NATO. Today, these opposing sides need to forego their animosities and redouble efforts to forge a comprehensive and sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Among all of South Asia's challenges, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan requires the most urgent attention. The unstable area between the two countries' border is dominated by the Pashtuns. Traditionally a moderate society, the Pashtuns have more than once been influenced by outside actors. Recently, some Pakistani military and intelligence services have thrown their support behind the Taliban operating in the Pashtun belt and have marginalized the area's moderate tribal chiefs and political leaders. This has permitted the Taliban to establish bases in the area from which they can operate with impunity. Other groups, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hizb-e Islami*, the Haqqani network, and assorted drug traffickers, criminal organizations, and al Qaeda-linked foreign fighters, have also exploited the region. The failure of the Pakistani government to address extremism in its Pashtun tribal areas and of the Afghan government to exert a presence in its Pashtun-dominated south and east have allowed extremists to further destabilize both nations and the whole of South Asia.

Afghanistan and Pakistan will only succeed in eradicating their insurgencies if they work together, but unfortunately to this point the two countries have approached the shared challenge from differing perspectives. Afghanistan sees a national insurgency that is challenging the legitimacy of the US-backed government in Kabul. Pakistan, on the other hand, sees a local insurgency that can be managed with a combination of military, political, and developmental approaches. Afghanistan believes that the presence of insurgent bases in Pakistan's tribal areas, links that exist between insurgent



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groups based there, and some Pakistani intelligence agencies drive the insurgency in Afghanistan. Pakistan, conversely, believes that the insurgency is driven by public opposition to covert US air strikes and the ongoing offensive against the Taliban in the tribal areas. Peace will not come to either nation unless they work together to counter the insurgency that threatens them both. Pakistan's long-standing conflict with India related to Kashmir is fueling Islamabad's suspicion of Indian influence in Afghanistan and driving it to seek ways to maintain influence in Afghanistan by exploiting the presence of the Taliban in the tribal areas.

The ongoing US-Iranian antagonism casts a shadow on American policies in Afghanistan. Tehran would like to have a tactic capable of causing problems for the United States in Afghanistan if Washington continues to assail Iran. Iran is troubled by the increasing influence of the United States in the region. Similarly, Russia and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors have their own concerns stemming from instability in Afghanistan, drug trafficking, and the presence of NATO in the region. While a return of the Taliban is not seen as in the interests of Iran or its northern neighbors, a series of confidence-building measures aimed at removing suspicions could go a long way in securing greater regional cooperation. For example, Iran will be interested to see Washington drop its opposition to a nonaggression pact between Kabul and Tehran, as well as making clear it does not intend to establish long-term bases in Afghanistan.

Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid recently suggested that "the crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan is beyond the point where more troops will help. US strategy must be to seek compromise with insurgents while addressing regional rivalries and insecurities."<sup>15</sup> They write that a United Nations-led, multilateral diplomatic initiative designed to resolve the array of issues currently hindering the development of peace and security in Afghanistan should be initiated as the first step toward a "grand deal." The issues to be addressed, they believe, should include solutions to the Kashmir dispute, integration of Federally Administered Tribal Areas into the Pakistani political system, addressing the Afghanistan-Pakistan border dispute, and easing the

mutual distrust between the United States, NATO, Russia, China, and Iran.

The potential that such a “grand deal” has to reduce the level of violence in South Asia makes it attractive, but not all the issues related to the deal’s practicality and timeframe have been addressed. One key issue remaining is that of Afghanistan paying a considerable price for the transgressions of other nations. Afghans lost during the “Great Game,” and they suffered immensely while ejecting the Soviets from their land. Any future deal in which Afghans will be expected to again pay such a price will be the source of new problems. Unless the legitimate interests of the Afghan people are guaranteed, no peace agreement will be obtainable and no stable relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors will be possible. The whole process has a better chance of success if Afghanistan is aided in stabilizing its government, while at the same time contributing to regional security rather than being a source of trouble for its neighbors.

### ***Conclusion***

Afghanistan is currently at a tipping point where the government’s legitimacy and that of its international backers is being openly challenged. The presence of al Qaeda bases in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, combined with the rise of militancy in Pakistan, are sources of increased instability, posing a security threat to the region and beyond.

President Obama has announced that Afghanistan will be his Administration’s top foreign policy priority. If that is true, the situation requires a fundamental change in US policy and strategy to achieve any long-term stability in Afghanistan. In contrast to the unrealistic and short-term approach of the past, the new strategy, based on a clearly defined vision, needs to include a focused, coherent, and long-term strategy to assist Afghanistan in transiting from a cycle of violence to one of peace by way of a deliberate and comprehensive nation-building effort. Lessons from the past and the realities of the present indicate that there is no short cut to achieving the desired strategic goals. Despite emerging doubts regarding the feasibility of creating the previously advertised democratic state in Afghanistan, building a legitimate and stable government that can control its territory and command the trust of the Afghan people is a more realistic objective in realizing the US Administration’s vision. A minimalist approach narrowly focused on rooting out militant strongholds in Pakistan and achieving short-term gains in Afghanistan can hardly fulfill the new vision.

During the past seven years, failure to stabilize Afghanistan under a functional government has been rooted in poorly resourced and badly co-

ordinated efforts, not solely because of the infeasibility of the announced mission. Long-term stability in Afghanistan can only be achieved through efforts directed at changing the divisive situation rather than adopting solutions at the local level solely to accommodate the existing fragmentation for temporary gains. Accommodation of traditional power structures and different ethnic groups will need to be sought through democratic participation, political and economic integration, and the development of a society and private sector capable of mitigating the negative impacts of competing groups. Increased military forces should be used only to create the breathing space required for building Afghanistan's indigenous capacity for governance, the rule of law, individual security, and the economic empowerment of the Afghan people. Meanwhile, the new strategy needs to seek ways to lower the threat of violence by addressing the drivers of insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while at the same time securing the legitimate interests of all regional and global parties.

#### NOTES

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