CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

FOREIGN POLICY for the Next President

JANUARY 2009

Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War

GILLES DORRONSORO
Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SUMMARY

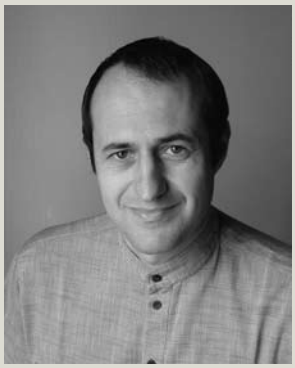
- Objectives in Afghanistan must be reconciled with the resources available to pursue them.
- The mere presence of foreign soldiers fighting a war in Afghanistan is probably the single most important factor in the resurgence of the Taliban.
- The best way to weaken, and perhaps divide, the armed opposition is to reduce military confrontations.
- The main policy objective should be to leave an Afghan government that is able to survive a U.S. withdrawal.
- Strategy should differentiate three areas and allocate resources accordingly: strategic cities and transportation routes that must be under total Afghan/alliance control; buffers around strategic areas, where NATO and the Afghan army would focus their struggle against insurgents; and opposition territory, where NATO and Afghan forces would not expend effort or resources.
- Withdrawal will allow the United States to focus on the central security problem in the region: al-Qaeda and the instability in Pakistan.

Key Recommendations

After seven years of war, the international community has failed to create the conditions for a sustainable Afghan state. The reality is that the international coalition now has limited resources and a narrow political time frame to create lasting Afghan institutions. Yet, building such institutions is our only realistic exit strategy.

The debate in Washington and European capitals has recently centered on how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan in 2009 as part of a *military* surge. Such a tactical adjustment is unlikely to make much of a difference in a country where the basic population-to-troops ratio is estimated at approximately 430 people per foreign soldier. Every year, we have seen small-scale surges of troops and resources, only to have more violence, growing casualties, and an ever-stronger insurgency. Meanwhile, the Afghan and Western publics are losing patience.

The real question is how combat troops should be used. The two choices we face are whether to continue playing offense by going after the Taliban, especially in the south and the east, and spreading troops thin; or whether to adopt a new strategy focusing on protecting strategic sites, namely, urban centers and key



Gilles Dorronsoro, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment, is an expert on Afghanistan, Turkey, and South Asia. His research focuses on security and political development in Afghanistan, particularly the role of the International Security Assistance Force, the necessary steps for a viable government in Kabul, and the conditions necessary for withdrawal scenarios. Previously, Dorronsoro was a professor of political science at the Sorbonne, Paris and the Institute of Political Studies of Rennes. He also served as the scientific coordinator at the French Institute of Anatolian Studies in Istanbul, Turkey. He is the co-founder and editor of the *South Asian Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* and the *European Journal of Turkish Studies*. He is the author of *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (Columbia University Press, 2005), and *La révolution afghane, des communistes aux Taleban* (Karthala Publishers 2000), and editor of *La Turquie conteste. Régime sécuritaire et mobilisations sociales* (Editions du CNRS, 2005).

roads, to allow for the development of a strong core of Afghan institutions.

The latter strategy consists of de-escalating a war that has become a Jihad and building enough Afghan military capacity to maintain relative stability in these key areas. To accomplish that, we have one major political weapon: a progressive and focused scaling-down of combat troops on our own terms. This would neutralize the Taliban's appeals for Jihad against unbelieving foreign invaders, open up space for Afghan institutions and political solutions, and allow us to focus our efforts on areas where we can still make a difference. This strategy brings its own risks, but the risks are far smaller than continuing with more of the same policies and reaching a point where we are left with no choice but to leave in chaos.

This analysis offers five main recommendations that I here refer to as a "focus and exit strategy."

1) Available resources must shape the strategy, not the other way around. The United States and its allies have nearly reached their maximum level of commitment. The more military resources the allies put into Afghanistan, the less time they have to succeed. The reason is that the financial and human costs of maintaining a high-level military presence become political liabilities.

2) Due to limited resources, the objectives have to be clear and limited. The main objective is to leave an Afghan government that can survive a U.S. and NATO withdrawal. Policies that are not part of the general strategy should not be priorities. For example, it is not possible to have an effective counternarcotics policy or to impose Western values on Afghan society.

3) The key idea is to lower the level of conflict (i.e., to reverse the current trend of ever-increasing violence). The only way to weaken, and perhaps divide, the armed opposition is to reduce military confrontations. The United States must define three areas: strategic zones (under total allied control), buffer areas (around the strategic ones), and opposition territory. Policies would be very different in each area; the resources allocated to institution building would be mostly concentrated in the strategic areas.

4) The only meaningful way to halt the insurgency's momentum is to start withdrawing troops. The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban. Combat troop reduction should not be a consequence of an elusive "stabilization"; rather, it should constitute an essential part of a political-military strategy. The withdrawal must be conducted on U.S. terms only, not through negotiations, because negotiations with the armed opposition would weaken the Afghan government. Negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban cannot bring positive results until the Taliban recognize that the government in Kabul is going to survive after the withdrawal.

5) Withdrawal would allow the United States to focus on the central security problems in the region: al-Qaeda and the instability in Pakistan. The withdrawal would allow Pakistan to define common interests with the United States instead of playing the constant double game we have witnessed in recent decades.

The Prospect of Losing the War

After seven years in Afghanistan, the Western coalition does not have much to show in terms of progress. All available data indicate a general failure in security and state building: increased civilian and military casualties, expansion of the guerillas, unfavorable perceptions of foreign troops by the local population, absence of functioning national institutions, and growing destabilization of the Pakistani border, which threatens NATO's logistical roads, essential for resupplying NATO forces. Most of the two provinces south of Kabul are under the control of the Taliban. Efforts to improve health services and education are undermined by the persistent insecurity. Reasonable expectations for 2009 are that the

number of Western casualties will grow over 300, and the Taliban insurgency will expand. Historically, a guerrilla organization with a sanctuary, relatively good organization and resources, quick recruitment, high levels of commitment, and a foreign enemy far from its base has a strong likelihood of winning in the long run. Canada's plan for military withdrawal after 2011 is a sign that tensions are increasing inside the coalition about sharing the burden of an unpopular war. A long-term presence ("generational commitment") in Afghanistan with 300 allied deaths per year does not seem politically feasible. In other words, the simple continuation of the same policy with an incremental increase of troops is most certainly going to fail to defeat the Taliban militarily.

If a strategy is the matching of ends to means, there has not been a clear U.S. strategy in Afghanistan since the war began in October 2001. Until the arrival of Robert Gates at the Department of Defense, the idea that the Afghan situation had become serious had not even been publicly considered by Western government officials. NATO communiqués ritually forecast the imminent disappearance of the Taliban insurgency. In this war, spin and unrealistic expectations have led to significant self-inflicted wounds, contributing to the belated U.S. response to the worsening situation between 2001 and 2006. Conventional and wishful thinking did a grave disservice to Afghanistan in the years after 2001.

It would be unfair to put all the blame on the Bush administration. Since 2001, the experts have been generally wrong about Afghanistan.[1] Expectations after 2001 were far too optimis tic and based on fallacies, such as the idea that the Taliban were foreign to Afghan society and had no local support. In the words of two widely noted experts, "a residual Taliban insurgency is unlikely," allowing them to predict the "likely disappearance of the radical Islamist movements in Afghanistan."[2] Why worry when the experts in the field are predicting the end of the war and the weakening of the fundamentalist networks? In this sense, many experts contributed to the U.S. attitude of benign neglect toward Afghanistan. The vocabulary of the postwar reports ("reconstruction," "state building," "development") was a sign of a fundamental misunderstanding of local dynamics. For years, the words "war" or "counterinsurgency" were forbidden in the official communications of some Western governments on the assumption that they would frighten their populations.

At present, the only bright spot is that after years of denial, the arrival of Robert Gates at the Pentagon brought a dramatic change in U.S. thinking. The urgency of the Afghan question has been recognized, and officials have begun to mention the prospect that NATO could lose the war. The general review of the Afghan strategy currently underway will contribute to the formulation of an Afghan policy for the Obama administration.

The debate in Washington and European capitals has recently centered on how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan in 2009 as part of a military surge. Such a tactical adjustment is unlikely to make much of a difference.... The real question is how combat troops should be used.

The need for a debate about the Afghan war is obvious. Yet, according to Anthony Cordesman, "the amount of data provided has actually declined as the conflict has grown more serious."[3] Lack of information precludes an honest debate and impairs the gathering of badly needed outside assessments. The experts' access to the Afghan field is far too limited, precluding a sound analysis of counterinsurgency practices at a local level.

Today, the propositions made in defining an *Afghan strategy are generally designed to fix existing policies more than to propose new ones.* For example, building a more favorable regional environment with Afghanistan's neighbors would certainly not be useless,[4] but it would not address the central question of the

counterinsurgency strategy. To ask for more resources, another common feature of most reports, does not *per se* lead to success, and could, on the contrary, aggravate the problem. Troop reinforcement does not represent a new direction. If used with the wrong strategy, the 30,000 troops to be sent in 2009 will seal a Taliban victory. Instead, the United States badly needs a game-changer in Afghanistan, a clear break from existing strategy.

Four Dangerous or Misleading Propositions

"PLAYING LOCAL"

"Playing local" seems to be the new motto in the rediscovery of a counterinsurgency strategy. If the idea is that the local dimension of power is important in Afghanistan, we are on safe ground, but some propositions are potentially misleading. They tend to overemphasize ethnicity to the detriment of the obvious political and religious dimensions of the conflict. If we do not recognize the way Afghans are influenced by political considerations, our analysis and decision making will be flawed. General political dynamics also influence local politics, and this is particularly true since the war is successfully framed by the Taliban as a Jihad.

1) There is an overemphasis on tribes in the current debate. Political actors, not tribes, are the key players. In fact, the majority of the Afghan population is not tribalized. Tribes have been weak or nonexistent institutions in the larger part of Afghanistan for a long time. Moreover, most tribes are not political or military actors, except to a certain extent in the east. Maps showing tribes in control of well-defined territories are generally misleading. For example, the tribes are not fighting units in Kandahar. More generally, *qawms*, networks based on kinship, regional solidarity, or religion, play a role in political mobilization, but the international coalition is primarily fighting political organizations (Taliban, Hezb-i Islami, al-Qaeda), even if some are loosely organized. For example, the common description of Taliban leader Jalaluddin Haqqani found in the literature portrays a very local player concerned mostly with his own economic interests and the status of his extended family. This approach is deeply flawed, because it misses the moral and political stature of the most famous *mujahideen* in eastern Afghanistan.

2) Key international and national events are more powerful in shaping Afghans' perceptions than their personal relationships with foreigners. The general dynamic that explains the success of the Taliban is not local, it is national: namely, the link between Jihad and nationalism. What shapes the perceptions of the Afghan population is thus not necessarily day-to-day interaction with the government or foreign troops. Larger events also resonate in Afghanistan, such as the protests against perceived insults to the Quran in Iraq or in Denmark. When an aerial bombardment by the coalition (unwittingly) killed dozens of civilians in the western part of the country in 2008, the impact of the news was national, not local. These events are not rare occurrences; hundreds of civilians have been killed by bombings in 2008 alone. The Taliban have been skillful at using war propaganda, such as traditional leaflets posted at night on village walls, videos, and Internet news releases.

3) Empowering local players has the downside of weakening central structures. The Soviet strategy of "national reconciliation" based on the empowerment of local militias broke the advance of the *mujahideen* after 1989 but did so at the expense of the central government. Today, the creation of tribal militias would make troop withdrawal more difficult, since the manipulation of tribes by bribes or negotiations makes the United States a necessary long-term element in the balance of power at the local level. When the United States leaves, local disturbances or even a full-scale war could occur. Groups working with the international coalition will be stigmatized as traitors. Moreover, given the weakness of Western intelligence and the past history of failure of propaganda operations against the

Taliban, it is unlikely that the U.S. army can micromanage such an insurgency campaign for more than a few years.

4) There is an interesting bias in Western discourse about the "stabilization" of the balance of power among local actors. This is a highly problematic concept. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is extremely difficult to isolate local politics from more general dynamics, and stabilizing local politics would not result in national stability. The creation of a balance of power among local clans or tribes is especially difficult, since outsiders (for example, Taliban groups coming from Pakistan) can always spoil the game (for example, by killing a local leader or sending arms to a tribe). With foreign troops operating on a large scale and groups of hundreds of Taliban roaming the countryside, isolating the local from the national is especially difficult.

THE SEARCH FOR THE "MODERATE TALIBAN"

Another dimension of the debate is negotiating with the "moderate" Taliban to divide the movement and ultimately win the war. This idea is not new. In 2001–2002, President Hamid Karzai had a very liberal policy of amnesty that was severely criticized by other members of the governing coalition. Karzai also repeatedly tried to speak with the Taliban commanders, using Sibghatullah Mojaddedi (a former party and religious leader of the 1980s) as a go-between. This approach calls for four comments.

1) People tend to confuse two different things: the diversity of views that exists within a movement and a likely political split. Although there are certainly different strategic perspectives within the Taliban (most famously in September 2001, when "moderates" were probably ready to extradite bin Laden), the movement has the means to exert control over its members, and there were no notable defections even after the 2001 defeat. In fact, there have been no splinter groups since its emergence, except locally with no strategic consequences. The Pakistani government, which had a lot to lose in case of a U.S. intervention in 2001, put a great deal of effort into convincing the Taliban to extradite bin Laden in 2001. It did not work. We do not know much about the internal functioning of the Taliban, but we know enough to discern that it is inaccurate to describe it as a network of loose groups. The Taliban are much more organized. The level of complexity in such operations as the attack against the prison of Kandahar, or the strategic move to surround Kabul, shows an impressive capacity for coordination. More importantly, even without clear indications of its internal politics, we can describe *ex post facto* a coherent Taliban strategy (surrounding Kabul, cutting off the key road from Pakistan, targeting nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], and going north).

The two choices we face are whether to continue playing offense by going after the Taliban, especially in the south and the east, and spreading troops thin; or whether to adopt a new strategy focusing on protecting strategic sites, namely, urban centers and key roads, to allow for the development of a strong core of Afghan institutions.

2) A strategy of gaining the support of some elements within the Taliban would be contradicted by targeting senior Taliban commanders. Haqqani, for example, lost part of his family in a U.S. strike and will certainly not support Karzai. Who else has the moral stature or the resources to effectively support the United States? A majority of the Taliban field commanders do not have the personal prestige to confront the leadership of Mullah Omar.

3) Is it possible to play the Taliban against the other groups in the opposition? Besides the Taliban, there are two main forces belonging to the opposition: al-Qaeda and the Hizb-i islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Both, for different reasons, are opposed to negotiations with the United States and are more radical than the Taliban. Here, the so-called

"lessons from Iraq" are quite dubious. The surge worked in Iraq because the more radical groups (notably al-Qaeda) were opposed by other local groups, namely the tribes in the Sunni area. No such situation exists in Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda has a marginal role in combat. In addition, the Taliban are quite careful not to upset local people, as exemplified by their manuals in which they instruct their fighters on appropriate behavior toward the population. Generally, terror is used against the population in contested areas to discourage the population from working with government officials or foreign armies. But in controlled areas, the Taliban are organizing a judicial system along Islamic lines.[5]

The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban.... The only way to weaken, and perhaps divide, the armed opposition is to reduce military confrontations.

To put it differently, the U.S. strategy in Iraq was a (very qualified) success due to infighting among the opposition, a situation that is not seen in Afghanistan today. In addition, as we have since seen, the surge did not create the political conditions for the United States to negotiate a political deal. In fact, the departure of the United States no later than 2011 is now the likely outcome, and there is no clear indication that the United States will maintain influence in Iraq after that point (except with the Kurds). The Iranian and Iraqi Shi'a are, to this day, the major winners of the Iraq war.

4) The timing of this strategy is not in sync with the perceptions of the local people and the dynamic of the war. Why should some Taliban *now* join a central government in Kabul that, according to most Afghans, has irredeemably failed? What is so attractive about working with Kabul when the United States, seen as the real decision maker, does not offer more than an amnesty and marginal or nonexistent participation in the political process? Only when people perceive the central Afghan government as having long-term prospects will they be willing to support it.

"PRESSURE PAKISTAN"

Pressuring Pakistan to attain political objectives in Afghanistan has been U.S. policy since the Clinton administration. Except in times of crisis (2001 and 2002–2003), the results have been extremely limited. Some experts are calling for more pressure, but there is a point at which pressure becomes counterproductive. For the United States, to think of Pakistan only as an instrument in the Afghan war is to forget that Pakistan itself poses serious long-term security concerns. Practically all the major al-Qaeda leaders have been killed or captured in Pakistan, not in Afghanistan. The major strategic challenge is still the Pakistani–Indian conflict, even if its probability is lower than it once was, even after the Mumbai attack. In other words, it is possible that more U.S. pressure on Pakistan could change the situation on the Afghan border, but it is not worth increasing the chances of Pakistan's destabilization. And even in the best-case scenario, we cannot hope for significant results for at least a few years, far too late considering the accelerating deterioration of security in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani army is really in charge of the border with Afghanistan and cross-border issues. The new civilian government is probably not going to change this, at least in the short term, and one should not be too optimistic about the new president, Asif Zardari. Some cadres in the army are probably still thinking about gaining "strategic depth" against India. But their overall objectives are now to safeguard the territorial integrity of Pakistan, avoid confrontation with India, and modernize the army with U.S. aid.

There is still a certain amount of support for the Taliban inside the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), but it is not clear how much support there is in the general headquarters in Islamabad. Active support is not key to the success of the insurgency, since it is relatively

limited (i.e., to small arms that are already easily available). The real issue is the ability of the Pakistani army to prevent the Taliban from using Pakistan as a sanctuary. The Pakistani army is not trained for counterinsurgency and fears losing its already diminished prestige in the operation, which could quickly escalate out of control. The surrounding of Peshawar and the de facto control of Quetta by Taliban and local fundamentalists indicates the limited support the central government has in this area and the cost of a large-scale military operation to regain control of the border areas.

From this perspective, the current U.S. policy of cross-border and targeted attacks on al-Qaeda does not make sense for several reasons. First, the strikes cannot seriously change the military equation. Second, the political costs for Islamabad are enormous in terms of internal credibility. The strikes are (generally) cleared in advance with the Pakistani army, but this does not reduce the political challenge they pose for the civil government. Third, American intervention is probably al-Qaeda's most effective argument to discourage the local tribes from making a deal with the Pakistani government. The different insurgencies (Swat Valley, Balochistan, Waziristan, and others) are very different in nature but tend to align due to U.S. pressure. The spirit of Jihad is kept alive by many things, but U.S. air strikes are instrumental in casting Jihad as the central ideological framework. Finally, U.S. operations in Pakistan have escalated the war in the border area. The latest operations against convoys carrying U.S. equipment en route to Afghanistan show that the border areas are war zones and that the Taliban are able to respond in kind.

More generally, the solution to the Afghan crisis will not come from regional negotiations if there is not a significant change in the dynamic of the war in Afghanistan itself. The failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and the uncertainties of the future put the United States in a weak position when it comes to negotiations involving Pakistan, Iran, and China. Regional negotiations will start with prospects of success only when it is possible for the regional powers to assess more clearly who is going to win in Afghanistan. In any case, the uncertainties of a regional approach prevent the U.S. administration from making it the centerpiece of its Afghanistan strategy, because, in practical terms, the United States would not be in control of the agenda or the time frame of negotiations.

"KARZAI IS THE PROBLEM"

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is heavily criticized in the Western media for his unsavory connections with narcotic dealers and his weak leadership. The upcoming elections in 2009 have brought the question of his replacement to the fore. Yet, the international coalition has to shift away from a focus on Karzai's personality, give attention to more structural issues, and recognize the difficulties in influencing the outcome of the elections.

The problem is not that Karzai is not a good leader; the problem is that the resources required for him to become a national leader do not exist. There is the real, unaddressed question posed by the absence of national political parties able to provide leaders with a national base. The Afghan constitution was hastily written and discourages the emergence of political parties on the national level. Most leaders have local support, and political parties are mostly the expression of regional or ethnic networks. The most direct way to build political legitimacy—elections—is in jeopardy. Karzai's legitimacy is based on elections held in 2004, but the security situation has deteriorated so much that the Taliban may be capable of outlawing elections in large parts of the countryside in the south and the east. Although presidential elections are scheduled for fall 2009, there is no reason to be especially optimistic that they will actually be held throughout the country. How will Karzai or any leader gain legitimacy without nationwide elections?

This analysis clearly suggests that Western countries would be playing a dangerous game

if they supported another candidate. He would almost by definition be a locally based leader or an attractive individual with no political base. In addition, there is a real possibility that the dispersion of votes across a number of candidates would produce an unwelcome outcome. If a non-Pashtun candidate were elected, it would be a political problem of major importance.

Developing a Strategy: From Resources to Objectives

In the case of Afghanistan, we start too often with objectives without taking into account the resources actually available. This explains why the majority of the experts were so wrong after the breakdown of the Taliban in 2001. To avoid this trap, let us begin by assessing resources, before assessing which objectives are actually achievable.

EXPECTED MILITARY RESOURCES

It is already clear, based on counterinsurgency literature, that the number of troops in Afghanistan is far too low to control the territory. There are just not enough troops to fight a serious war in half of the Afghan provinces, and the Taliban presence is growing in the north as well as the south and east. The current level of troop commitment is not enough to seal the border or to control the ground extensively. Hence, it is not reasonable to assume that we can militarily defeat the armed opposition at the current level of engagement.

It is possible to send more troops and money to Afghanistan, but the numbers will still be relatively limited. Resources invested in Afghanistan have grown substantially since 2001 but remain relatively small in comparison with those committed to Iraq. In addition, there is no possibility of transferring all the resources invested in Iraq to Afghanistan. There will never be more than 150,000 international coalition troops in Afghanistan, yet just sealing the Afghan–Pakistani border would necessitate tens of thousands of troops. Without a change in the political dynamics, a surge is not going to be sufficient to defeat the insurgency. In addition, inserting more troops would imply a higher cost in lives and money; as a result, the United States would have less time to achieve its objectives, because the growing human and financial costs would make Congress and the public more impatient for success.

In addition, the United States will have no choice but to act more unilaterally than has been the case since 2003 in devising and implementing a new strategy. Proportionally, non-U.S. military forces, apart from British troops, will become marginal. There will be no significant increase in the participation of U.S. allies in the Afghan conflict, both for political and technical reasons. The European countries have committed as much as they can in terms of capacities (at least in the case of the French and the British), and public opinion is strongly opposed to the war. The Czechs are probably leaving Afghanistan, and more small countries could do the same in the next few years. An "Obama factor" cannot be totally ruled out, but the effect would be marginal.

There are other limitations. The numerous problems making cooperation between countries difficult are not going to disappear. The Afghan war did not create a European momentum; on the contrary, each country is based in a different part of Afghanistan, without much coordination on a military or political level. The most the United States can hope for is that European countries share the financial cost of an expanded operation. For a better allocation of resources and better conduct of the war, the European allies should concentrate on training the Afghan army and on institution building rather than fighting. Some European troops are probably not capable of effectively fighting an insurgency and should stop trying to do so. Also, the regionally based organization of the allies is counterproductive and should be reassessed.

THREE ZONES AND A DEFENSIVE STRATEGY

Today, the U.S. strategy is to polarize the conflict, drawing clearcut boundaries between

allies and enemies. The United States and its allies apply military force to put pressure on the insurgents to join the government side or die. This cost-benefit analysis is fundamentally flawed, because it does not take into account the effect of growing violence on Afghan society. Historically, the more military pressure is put on a fragmented society like Afghanistan, the more a coalition against the invader becomes the likely outcome. This is what happened in the 1980s with the Soviet occupation and against the British in the nineteenth century. The polarization strategy has historically failed, and the advance of the Taliban proves its inadequacy.

Instead, the key idea should be to lower the level of conflict and so reverse the current trend of ever-growing violence. Everything that can create intermediaries, local deals, and ambiguity in political loyalties is welcome, because it creates a space for politics in which the Afghan state can become relevant and legitimate, which is not the case when the situation is polarized between foreign powers and the Taliban. NGOs must be encouraged to make local deals with the armed opposition to be able to operate in insurgent-controlled areas. Prisoners must be treated according to the Geneva Conventions, and Taliban as wartime enemies, not criminals.

To do this, it is first necessary to define which areas must be under allied control, since the allies do not have enough resources to control the whole country.[6] In these terms, the British army has made a classic mistake in Helmand Province. Instead of defining places of strategic interest that had to be brought under control (mostly the larger roads, the towns, and the Kajakai dam), the British aimed to eradicate the Taliban throughout the province. With fewer than 10,000 troops, this was not possible, hence the current dilemma. On the one hand, the British troops were able to conquer part of the province, even if at times, the Taliban were strong enough to hold their positions, at least intermittently. On the other hand, holding the mountains and the desert does not make sense; the Taliban are largely free to move through the north to penetrate the western part of Afghanistan. So, 8,000 British soldiers are in Helmand—accomplishing no clear result and certainly nothing in the way of institution building. The Taliban remain in control of most of the countryside.

The central challenge for the allies is to transform the political game by defining what types of areas are important in the long term. The United States should define three areas: strategic (under total control), buffers (around the strategic areas), and opposition territory. Policies should be distinctly different among these areas.

The main objective is to leave an Afghan government that can survive a U.S. and NATO withdrawal. Policies that are not part of the general strategy—such as counternarcotics operations—should not be priorities.

1) The strategic zone comprises urban centers (cities, towns, and administrative posts) and territories linked economically to them (such as oases), as well as main roads and provinces in which the Taliban opposition is minimal or nonexistent (essentially the central provinces and part of the northwest). This comprises around one–fifth of Afghan territory and a quarter of the population. In these areas, military control should be total or nearly so. Here it is worth examining the Soviet strategy, which was reasonably efficient in securing the cities between 1984 and 1986. Institution building should be focused on strategic areas, mostly the cities, where the population is partially opposed to the Taliban. This is where the national institutions such as schools, police, and the army must be reinforced. Control by the Afghan National Army (ANA) must be reinforced in the cities, even if there is no short-term threat from the Taliban.

2) In the opposition zone, the use of force should be limited to preventing Taliban troops from concentrating and doing anything that could threaten the strategic zone. In the opposition areas, mostly in the southern and eastern

parts of the country, the strategy should be defensive, in the sense that these areas will not be put under international coalition military control. At the same time, it must be proactive in the sense that U.S. forces must deter the opposition from launching operations outside these places against the strategic zones.

3) The buffer zone is a gray one, where regular military operations should be limited to protecting the strategic area from Taliban infiltrations. In all probability, the war will be decided in these buffer zones. Militias (groups armed by the government) are one possible means of protecting the strategic zones, but this must be initiated in a limited number of places and very carefully managed. Three points are important. First, contrary to some thinking, the use of a tribe (or, more exactly, a subtribe) to form a militia is generally not a good idea. Once arms are provided to them, there is no easy way to control a subtribe that is in opposition to other ones. Among tribes, double crossing is the rule, not the exception, and the Taliban are mentally better equipped to deal with tribal politics. If militias are to be organized, it would best be done in regions with non-tribal organization and relatively low levels of intergroup conflict. Second, the militias must be territorially linked to the strategic zones, because they must be militarily under the protection of the army (ANA or foreign). The use of an isolated militia in opposition territory is a poor idea. Last, and most important, militias must be defensive and never allowed to fight in (or even to cross) territory other than their own to avoid destabilizing the local balance of power. Afghanistan's southern population still deeply resents the use of Rashid Dostum's militia by the Kabul regime in the 1990s. Militias must thus be strictly territorial, small in size (no more than a few hundred men), and non-tribal.

REDEFINE INSTITUTION BUILDING

The Afghan state was built with external help: British support, development aid from the 1950s to the 1970s, Soviet support to the communist regime, and, today, assistance from Western countries. The Afghan state is thus a particular case of a "rentier state," with foreign help playing the role of natural resources elsewhere. The need for allied financial and technical support will most probably be open-ended.

A reasonable goal for the international coalition is to be able to withdraw from Afghanistan with an Afghan government that can survive on its own. This is why power should be concentrated in limited areas and a few institutions. One of the major problems we face now is that the institutions built in the last seven years are ineffective in delivering services but are sometimes strong enough to oppose foreign interference (the resistance of the Afghan Supreme Court to reform is a good example). Since security should be the main NATO objective and the only basis on which withdrawal can occur, the ANA, the police, and the judicial system must be the priorities for institution building. Resources should be further concentrated by geographically limiting the effort to strategic areas.

ABANDON FAILED POLICIES, FOCUS ON REALISTIC GOALS

Given the international coalition's limited resources, there are several otherwise important aims that should *not* be priorities, given their costs and their being distractions from the central objectives.

We do not have the resources to fight drug production. The social and political costs would be too high. Opium crop eradication in Afghanistan has never worked except when the Taliban have undertaken it, and even then, while production was stopped in 2000, trafficking continued, generating important revenues for the Taliban and traffickers. The reason for this relative success is that the Taliban had reasonable control over the rural areas and were sufficiently organized, permitting them to carry out a policy that ended up proving very costly for them. For instance, tribes with economic interests in drugs betrayed the Taliban

in 2001 to join U.S. forces and immediately planted opium poppies, even before the end of the fighting. Local programs can only change the organization of the production, not eradicate it. Second, the drug economy is probably the most important source of personal income in Afghanistan today (in cash at least). Farmers are dependent on the revenues. Government officials at the highest level and the Taliban alike benefit as well. Other than fighting on a small scale against trafficking and laboratories, it would be politically difficult to eradicate or even seriously limit drug production in Afghanistan. Drug eradication undermines the main objective and must be avoided, because it diverts resources, produces uncontrollable social tensions, could weaken or alienate local allies of the coalition, and is not an effective strategy against the Taliban.

Development is not the key in Afghanistan. Development has been a failure to a large extent, but the Afghan population does not choose political allegiances based on the level of aid. Economic aid is not a practical way to gain control of a territory and plays a marginal role in the war. Rather, who controls the territory is the most important factor in Afghans' political allegiance. In other words, development comes after military control (in the buffer areas defined above) as a consolidating process. Aid and development are not instrumental in addressing the central issues faced by an exit strategy. Development should be territorially concentrated in the strategic areas, where it can reinforce the institutions.

If this analysis is correct, the role of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) should be reconsidered. What is supposed to be the strategic impact of the PRTs? I would argue that PRTs are ineffective in state building or to prepare for withdrawal, hence they are not a priority. The PRT concept is technically useful in some cases, less in others, but more importantly, it is a long-term liability for Western forces, because it takes the place of the Afghan state, *de facto* marginalizing the Afghan players. If Western troops are in charge, there is no reason not to give civil operations to real NGOs or to Afghan institutions. Moreover, the PRTs are unable to significantly change the perceptions of the Afghan population. Local populations are essentially dependent on whoever is in control of the territory in which they live. The PRTs do not make up for civilian casualties caused by allied bombings, search operations, and other actions.

HOW CENTRALIZED A STATE?

It has been argued that the nature of Afghan society, notably its multi-ethnic composition, calls for more decentralized institutions, perhaps a federal system. Some political forces, notably the Hezb-i Wahdat and the Jumbesh, both ethnic-based, have been arguing since the 1990s for a weak central government and some reorganization of the existing provincial framework.

This strategy is potentially dangerous. The multi-ethnic nature of Afghan society does not mean that ethnic groups are settled in distinct territories. On the contrary, northern Afghanistan is a complex mix of different ethnic groups. To redefine the boundaries of Afghan provinces would provoke a widespread feeling of insecurity among groups who are minorities locally. Pashtun groups in the north and the west would be at risk, and ethnic cleansing would, for the first time, be a likely outcome. Serious tensions already occurred in the 1990s when the Taliban went north. Also, federalism would make regional powers (for example, in the Hazarajat in the center of the country) even more autonomous from Kabul. On a strategic level, this would be contrary to the state-building strategy that is central to the withdrawal of Western troops. Everything must be done to avoid a perception of ethnicization of the war.

I argue instead for a limited and strongly centralized state, limited, at least in the short term, in the sense that it would not have enough resources to implement complex policies or to carry out functions throughout the country. It must be centralized in the sense

that the center (Kabul) must be in control of some specific policies and build support in the strategic areas.

Another key question that has been insufficiently addressed is the lack of political institutions that can represent the different interests in Afghan society. The electoral system used in the 2004 and 2005 elections was so badly designed that not only did it fail to encourage the formation of political parties, it actually discouraged their formation. As a result, the parliament did not create a national political elite, and political leaders have not emerged. The 2009 elections must be an opportunity to change the electoral system and to make political parties the central element of political representation. Instead of focusing on the personalities of contenders, it would be more effective in the long term to use the coming elections as a way to change the electoral rules.

THE SECURITY APPARATUS

The focus on external resources is misleading in the sense that the real test of a counterinsurgency strategy is the ability to build an indigenous force that will operate alone in the long run. The pertinent question is not the adaptation of the U.S. army to counterinsurgency, but the use of these resources to build an Afghan partner. There has been an excessive focus on the number of the international coalition's troops, instead of on how they are used, and not enough attention given to the Afghan army. It is more efficient to cap the overall costs of the war and to progressively redirect resources to an Afghan partner. More money will certainly help, at least to ensure that soldiers are not paid less than the Taliban, as is the case now.

A redirection of resources toward the Afghan security apparatus is needed, because both the police and the army are poorly functioning institutions. The ANA is weak, and increasing the number of troops does not address the central questions of its efficiency and commitment. After seven years of building the Afghan military, the ANA is still unable to fight the Taliban alone, and the desertion rate is still extremely high. More to the point, the ANA will progress only when it has more responsibilities in the field.

In addition, the failure of the German forces in charge of establishing a police force has had far-reaching consequences: In the cities, where rebuilding institutions is most critical, the basic security of citizens is sometimes threatened by the police more than by the Taliban. Indeed, the police are now the main source of insecurity in Kabul. The formation of the Afghan police force is now in the hands of the European Union and the United States, but it will take years to see results on this front.

The Afghan army should not be sent to fight in the far countryside, since its level of professionalism is still extremely weak. The army should be designed as a defensive force, able to secure strategic areas. ANA operations should be limited to the strategic zones and, to a certain extent, to the buffer zones. Air power can be used to maintain the general balance of power, notably to avoid a concentration of Taliban forces.

An important dimension of this strategy is to build an army that is under the control of the national government. In this sense, the integration of militia forces in the Afghan army has been a failure and needs to be rethought. In the north, militias are theoretically part of the Afghan army but are *de facto* under the control of local leaders (Dostum, for example). In the long term, the central government must directly address this challenge and take control of at least the military infrastructure in the north. Cities are the key to state building and must be put under central control, including areas where there is no immediate Taliban threat. In this respect, the major failure at present is the inability to take control of the security apparatus in such places as Kunduz, Mazar-i Sharif, and Maimana. If the state is going to survive in Afghanistan, it must secure a solid base in the north.

Beginning the Withdrawal of Combat Troops

This three-zone strategy is not, *per se,* a game-changer, and it must be accompanied by an incremental, phased withdrawal. The withdrawal would not be a consequence of "stabilization," but rather an essential part of the process. Since the presence of foreign troops is the most important factor in mobilizing support for the Taliban, the beginning of the withdrawal would change the political game on two levels. First, Jihad would become a motivation for fewer Afghans; instead, the conflict would be mostly seen as a civil war. Second, the pro-government population (or, more exactly, the anti-Taliban one) would rally together because of fear of a Taliban victory.

WHY WITHDRAW THE COMBAT TROOPS?

REFRAMING THE WAR

There is an argument against withdrawing combat troops: namely, that al-Qaeda would retain its sanctuary in Afghanistan because the Afghan state would not have control of some parts of the country, especially in the east. Though superficially compelling, this argument is weak for two reasons. First, the international coalition lacks the resources to control the periphery of the Afghan territory anyway. Second, the withdrawal of combat troops does not preclude targeted operations with the agreement of the Kabul government. So, in terms of physical security, the withdrawal of combat troops does not bring clear gains for al-Qaeda.

There are two important reasons for withdrawal.

First, the mere presence of foreign soldiers fighting a war in Afghanistan is probably the single most important factor in the resurgence of the Taliban. The convergence of nationalism and Jihad has aided the Taliban in extending its influence. It is sometimes frightening to see how similar NATO military operations are to Soviet ones in the 1980s and how the similarities could affect the perceptions of the population. The majority of Afghans are now deeply opposed to the foreign troops on their soil. The idea that one can "stabilize" Afghanistan with more troops goes against all that one should have learned from the Soviet war. The real issue is not to "stabilize" but to create a new dynamic. The Taliban have successfully framed the war as a Jihad and a liberation war against (non-Muslim) foreign armies. The concrete consequence of this moral victory is that the movement has been able to gain ground in non-Pashtun areas. The situations in Badghris Province (northwest) and in Badakhshan Province (northeast) are extremely worrisome, because the Taliban have been able to attract the support of some Pashtun tribes and fundamentalist networks. A province like Wardak, initially opposed to the Taliban in the 1990s, is now one of its strongholds. Insecurity bred by the narcotics trade and the infighting of local groups in the north also provides the Taliban opportunities to find new allies on a more practical, rather than ideological, ground. This trend is extraordinarily dangerous, since the spread of the war geographically would put Western countries in an untenable position.

The real test of a counterinsurgency strategy is the ability to build an indigenous force that will operate alone in the long run. The pertinent issue is not the adaptation of the U.S. army to counterinsurgency, but the use of these resources to build an Afghan partner.

Second, withdrawal would create a new dynamic in the country, providing two main benefits. The momentum of the Taliban would slow or stop altogether, because without a foreign occupier the Jihadist and nationalist feelings of the population would be much more difficult to mobilize. Furthermore, the Karzai regime would gain legitimacy. If Karzai (or his successor) receives enough help from the international coalition, he would be able to develop more centralized institutions in the

strategic areas or at least keep local actors under control. The regime would remain corrupt but would appear more legitimate if it succeeded in bringing security to the population in the strategic zones without the help of foreign troops. The support of the urban population, which opposes the Taliban, is a critical issue. Corruption is a problem primarily if it accelerates the independence of Afghanistan's peripheral regions.

WHY KEEP WITHDRAWAL OUT OF NEGOTIATIONS?

The withdrawal must not be negotiated, and no timetable should be given. Negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban cannot occur with any sort of positive outcome until the Taliban recognize that the government in Kabul is going to survive long term, i.e., for at least a few years after the withdrawal is complete. In any serious negotiations now with the leadership of the Taliban, the question of a withdrawal would be central. This would be a serious risk, since Karzai would be marginalized. Negotiations would occur over his head between the United States and the Taliban. Another issue could be the loss of control of the process: Regional *shura* (council) or powerful leaders (such as Ismail Khan in Herat) could directly engage in their own negotiations with the Taliban.

Historically, the more military pressure is put on a fragmented society like Afghanistan, the more a coalition against the invader becomes the likely outcome—as happened in the 1980s with the Soviet occupation and against the British in the nineteenth century.

Withdrawal would call into question the will of the Western countries. There is no easy answer to the crisis of confidence that would probably occur in the first steps of the withdrawal except to show by experience that help would indeed come and the regime would survive. The continuation or, better, increase of civilian and military aid would be a clear sign of a long-term commitment to the survival of the Afghan state. Withdrawal, however, could initially result in some territorial losses, including military posts defended by the ANA.

Despite these losses of territory, the situation would have a more favorable outcome after some years and reverse the current situation in which short-term military successes are creating a long-term dead end. This is why the withdrawal has to start in 2010 and proceed slowly, with potential stopping or cooling-down phases to make sure it does not have too deep a destabilizing effect. The withdrawal also needs to occur from province to province on a case-by-case basis, depending on the context specific to each province rather than as a comprehensive move.

REGIONAL STRATEGY: ABANDON PRESSURE AND DEFINE COMMON INTERESTS WITH PAKISTAN

Coalition withdrawal would be seen as a major victory in Pakistan, but it would soon create significant security problems for Islamabad. The Pakistani government would lose its automatic leverage over Western countries. It would be confronted with its likely inability to control the Taliban. It would face significant internal problems from radical groups fired up by the withdrawal, and from the disorder on its border. However, these internal problems would represent potentially common interests with the United States. At that point, it would be possible for the United States to build a better relationship with Pakistan around the shared goals of weakening al-Qaeda and improving the economic and political stabilization of Pakistan.

Conclusions: How to Measure Success?

The first priority, then, is to limit U.S. objectives to what is possible and useful from the

perspective of a focus and exit strategy. All tactical moves must be assessed with this question in mind: Is it useful to prepare the withdrawal?

It is important to define new indicators according to the new objectives. The usual metrics of progress are not useful, at least in the way they are currently used. What should be the new indicators of success in the Afghan war?

1) Fewer battles as measured by civilian, Western, and insurgent casualties. A decline in the number of casualties gives Western countries more room to maneuver and to adapt their strategy with less pressure from public opinion;

2) The ability to secure strategic areas as completely as possible, without Taliban infiltration;

3) Institution building in these areas (the number of ANA-controlled positions, and ANA's ability to defend schools and medical services by itself).

Since 2002, the Taliban have been able to adapt very quickly to allied tactics. Their learning curve is good, and they have the psychological momentum. The situation in 2009 is probably going to deteriorate, but the results of any increase in troop numbers will be difficult to assess before the summer of 2010. In the event of failure, the U.S. administration will have very few options left, because sending another 30,000 troops would present a political challenge. This is why it is especially important to concentrate attention on areas where the troops can make a real difference (i.e., Kabul and not Helmand), allowing the allies to build sustainable Afghan institutions and eventually withdraw their military forces. The immediate issue is the amount of pressure the Taliban will be able to put on the international coalition in 2009, forcing it into tactical fights instead of focusing on strategic goals. ■

The Carnegie Endowment normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its officers, staff, or trustees.

This analysis benefited from various comments by Amélie Blom, Etienne de Gonneville, Frédéric Grare, Jessica Mathews, George Perkovich, Fabrice Pothier, Ashesh Prasann, Nicole Watts, and Jasmine Zerinini. These conversations helped me to clarify and sometimes change my argument. Needless to say, the result of these fruitful exchanges is my sole responsibility.

1 I addressed this question in an earlier article: Gilles Dorronsoro, "Afghanistan: le probable réalisé ou de l'inutilité des sciences sociales en temps de crise," in Aminah Mohammad-Arif et Jean Schmitt, eds., *Figures d'islam après le 11 septembre: disciples et martyrs, réfugiés et migrants* (Paris, Karthala, 2006).

2 "Il est peu probable qu'une résistance résiduelle taliban s'installe" (p. 70), "la disparition probable des mouvements islamistes radicaux en Afghanistan," (p. 68) Maryam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Réseaux islamiques* (Autrement, 2002).

3 Anthony Cordesman, *The Afghan-Pakistan War: A Status Report,* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), p. 19.

4 Ahmed Rashid and Rubin Barnett, "Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West," *Foreign Affairs,* November/December 2008.

5 Peter Harling, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge,* Middle East Report no. 72, February 7, 2008, International Crisis Group.

6 This question will be addressed in a forthcoming Carnegie Paper, *The Soviet and the U.S. Wars in Afghanistan: Uses and Limits of Comparison,* 2009.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, Carnegie is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results. Building on the successful establishment of the Carnegie Moscow Center, the Endowment has added operations in Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels to its existing offices in Washington and Moscow.

RESOURCES

Visit **www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs** for these and other publications.

The Afghan-Pakistan War: A Status Report, Anthony Cordesman (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008).

Counter-insurgency in Afghanistan, Seth G. Jones (Rand Corporation, 2008).

After the Taliban, James Dobbins (Potomac Books, 2008).

Afghanistan: Revolution Unending, Gilles Dorronsoro (New York: Columbia University Press, Hurst and Company, 2005).

Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, Antonio Giustozzi (London: Hurst and Company, 2007).

Rescuing Afghanistan, William Maley (London: Hurst and Company, 2006).

Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West, Ahmed Rashid and Rubin Barnett, *Foreign Affairs,* November/December 2008.

Pakistan and the War on Terror, Ashley J. Tellis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

FOREIGN POLICY
for the Next President