

# Afghanistan & the Neglected Commander

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*After more than a decade of fighting, the U.S. is developing a withdrawal plan that will have troops redeployed home from Afghanistan before December 2014. Up to this point in the conflict, key decision-makers have sought to harmonize the policy initiatives of senior government and military officials. It is imperative to pay more attention to the recommendations of military leaders on the ground in order to ensure a successful and peaceful transition of power in Afghanistan. By incorporating the advice of commanders in the field, we can develop a withdrawal plan that achieves the President's goals and reduces violence while protecting American servicemen and the Afghan people.*

In October 2001, in response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan in an effort to dismantle the al-Qaeda terrorist network that had been harbored by the Taliban-led Afghan government. In the course of the military operation known as Operation Enduring Freedom, the United States has sought to create a stable Afghan government that will be a reliable partner in the war on terror. Under the current coalition partnership, NATO heads the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)<sup>1</sup>; the U.S. military continues to focus its efforts on locating and destroying insurgents and terrorists operating in Afghanistan.

Despite the success of the initial military operation and the formation of a new, democratically-elected Afghan government, many provinces in Afghanistan remain subject to Taliban control and corruption. Insurgent activity continues to grow and evolve into complex and targeted global attacks on coalition forces and the Afghan government. As American forces have continued to suffer casualties, popular support for the Afghanistan war here at home is continuing declining to a staggering 39 percent of Americans who approve of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan (Wilson, Cohen 2011)<sup>2</sup>. In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced that the United States will withdraw from combat operations in Afghanistan before December 2014. According to the President, the Afghan government has the resources and the knowledge that it needs to be a self-stabilizing state.

With the U.S. now publically committed to withdrawal, Afghanistan faces an uncertain future. One of the chief matters of concern for U.S. and NATO commanders is to provide sufficient resources to ensure that the Afghan National Army<sup>3</sup> (ANA) has a sufficient number of troops

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<sup>1</sup> The International Security Assistance Force was established in December 2001 and led by several European countries that were part of the NATO alliance. As of August 2003, the NATO Alliance took command of ISAF rather than a cycle of generals from different countries.

<sup>2</sup> 2011 marks a decade since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Since 2001, the cost of the war and number of casualties has steadily increased, while support for U.S. involvement has rapidly decreased. In 2001, CBS News reported 90 percent of all Americans approved of U.S. military attacks. Now, ten years later, a CNN national poll revealed two-thirds of Americans believe the U.S. should not be involved in Afghanistan and the mission there is not working.

trained and in place to ensure the country remains secure after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Although the 2002 Bonn Conference<sup>4</sup> estimated that Afghan forces would need 70,000 troops in place in order to successfully repel a resurgence of Taliban forces, U.S. officials and the Afghan government under Hamid Karzai have been unable to agree on the number of troops that will be necessary to ensure the stability of the Afghan government (Feickert 2006, 12). For his part, Afghan Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak contends that the ANA needs at least 200,000 troops to secure the country and defend against its enemies, trained by U.S. and NATO security forces and 70,000 troops are not enough put a stop to Taliban violence and protect the country from outside threats (The Associated Press 2006). Mr. Wardak maintains that ANA forces must be well-trained and equipped with sufficient mobility and firepower as well as logistical and training support structures; a request that the U.S. has been fulfilling for the last decade (Pellerindate 2011).

The future of Afghanistan depends on a smooth transfer of power. Presently, Afghanistan is unable to stabilize itself or provide for its own self-defense needs. As such, U.S. and NATO forces have become responsible for equipping, training, and subsequently building the ANA, a commitment which has led to increasing economic tensions and a desire of political leaders in the coalition to speed-up the timetable for withdrawal (Roggio 2010). Despite the pressure for a quick withdrawal, commanders in the field have stated that Afghanistan requires full and consistent sourcing. Military progress in Afghanistan has come at a high cost; to pull out before the job is finished would deny the United States the benefits of an additional ally in the region, as well as the loss of a base of operations for continued anti-terrorism initiatives in the Middle-East. President Obama and the NATO heads of state should heed the advice of military commanders and ensure that the United States devotes sufficient resources to ensure a successful transfer of power in Afghanistan. In the long run, the investment of troops and financial support will ensure that the U.S. achieves its objectives while reducing the influence of insurgents and minimizing coalition casualties.

### **Background**

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists launched attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing 3,000 people. In a September 20, 2001 address by to a joint session of Congress and an international television audience, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would launch a military campaign against the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization and the Taliban government in Afghanistan that provided them with safe harbor.

On October 7, 2001 President Bush deployed naval and ground forces to Afghanistan. U.S. forces conducted airstrikes on Taliban targets and seized major cities throughout Afghanistan. Much of the Taliban leadership fled to the rugged Tora Bora mountain region in eastern Afghanistan. Since, 2001 the United States has remained decisively engaged in operations against the Taliban. According to the United Nations, there has been an increase in insurgent attacks by the Taliban over the last five years, particularly against civilian populations. In 2009, 76 percent of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan were caused by the Taliban (UNAMA 2010).

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<sup>3</sup>The Afghan National Army was established in 1880. However, force size dramatically dropped from nearly 40,000 troops in 1985 to around 2,000 troops in 2003. Following the Taliban regime, the ANA ceased to exist and was essentially built-up from the nearly 2,000 troops who had completed training. Currently, the ANA is funded by the U.S. Department of Defense and is trained and supplied by the U.S. Armed Forces. The ANA is 164,000 strong as of July 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The Bonn Conference was a meeting of top Afghan officials under UN auspices that decided on a plan for governing the re-created state of Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion in October 2001.

<sup>5</sup> The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission is an Afghan organization established at the Bonn Conference in 2001, dedicated to the preservation of human rights and the investigation of human rights abuses.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Right Commission<sup>5</sup> (AIHRC) has called Taliban terrorism a war crime, a violation of the sanctity of decent human rights, and an attack against Islamic ethnics.

On December 1, 2009, President Obama announced that he would deploy an additional 30,000 soldiers over a period of six months. He also set a firm withdrawal date for the year 2014. According to some reports, President Obama's announcement was drafted as a rapid response to comments by General Stanley McChrystal (then commander of ISAF and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan) that additional troops were needed. The comments, characterized by *Policy Magazine* as "the McChrystal risk," boxed the President into a corner (Ranasinghe 2010). The President did devote additional troops to the mission, but also faced pressure to appease anti-war forces in his party by setting a firm withdrawal date. Several Defense Department officials became wary of General McChrystal's request and more so, President Obama's willingness to approve such a surge, given his stance on the Iraq surge in the 2008 Presidential election, prompted questions about President Obama's integrity and loyalty (Personal Interview 2011).

Continued economic problems in the U.S. following the 2008 recession made the cost of the war a major factor for U.S. officials (Cooper 2011). A March 2011 Congressional Research Service report on Operation Enduring Freedom reported:

Following the Afghanistan troop surge announcement in 2009, Defense Department spending on Afghanistan has increased 50%, going from \$4.4 billion to \$6.7 billion a month. During that time, troop strength has gone from 44,000 to 84,000, and it is expected to be at 102,000 for fiscal year 2011. The total operational cost for Afghanistan in fiscal year 2010 was \$93.8 billion compared to the projected total cost in fiscal year 2011 is expected to \$468 billion (Belasco 2011, 36).

On June 22, 2011, less than a year and half after the surge in Afghanistan, President Obama announced that 10,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn by the end of 2011. By the summer of 2012, an additional 23,000 troops will leave the country, with all remaining U.S. troops withdrawn by December 2014.

Despite the plan to withdrawal, there are concerns that U.S. Government officials are ignoring the core purpose of military presence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan continues to face resistance from the Taliban and, without strong military support, there is a risk that reconstruction efforts will collapse into chaos. If the U.S. wants to save international efforts in Afghanistan, it must increase its commitment to the area and rethink its strategy. Paul Poletes, Deputy Director of the Central Asia Office in the South Central Asia Bureau at the Department of State, spoke at a conference to a group of Middle Eastern and European security professionals from the George C. Marshall Center Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Mr. Poletes addressed U.S. strategy in the Middle East, particularly Afghanistan and when asked about the interagency efforts and the reciprocity necessity between the Departments of Defense and State, he answered, "It's vital." Mr. Poletes went on to say that diplomatic efforts can only achieve so much. "States like Afghanistan seek tangible progress that can only come from the physical interaction with the military, training and engaging side by side. It has yet to be seen if the tangible can be taken away with the progress and performance of the Afghan Army still intact," he said (Poletes 2011).

Military strategy must be rethought in a practical way using the advice and recommendations of military commanders who understand the situation, its goals, and the resources necessary for success. Changes to military policy are needed in order for the United States to achieve its goals in Afghanistan. Among the changes that are needed:

- 1) The troop withdrawal timeline should be readjusted;

- 2) The United States must reassess its relationship with Pakistan, which continues to give sanctuary to insurgents;
- 3) Additional resources must be devoted to eliminate government corruption so that Afghanistan can look beyond establishing a defense against the Taliban;
- 4) Though controversial, the United States should engage in negotiations and peace talks with Taliban leadership; and
- 5) Focusing military operations on counterinsurgency tactics<sup>6</sup> and Provincial Reconstruction Teams<sup>7</sup> based on the commander's assessment on how to achieve a balanced focus on civilians and the enemy.

Revamping U.S. military policy in Afghanistan requires the assessment of current policy goals and the strategic common sense that will allow permanent progress and ultimate success (Nigro 2011). However, this can only be achieved by applying the same criteria to the reports and updates provided almost daily by combatant commanders and generals to the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs, and ultimately the President. In order to accomplish these goals, we cannot rely on solutions crafted by the two parties in Washington. Rather, success will come from a collaborative effort that reflects the unity of Congress and the White House and an Afghan government that is serious about change, ending corruption, and becoming a stable state that the rest of the free world can take seriously. The U.S. has constantly used history as a lesson moving into the future. Why is Afghanistan any different? Withdrawing too soon from peacekeeping and stability operations will open the door for Taliban resurgence, just as it did after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Most importantly, a U.S. withdrawal would reduce pressure on terrorist groups and make it easier for these groups to plan and execute attacks on the United States, both at home and abroad. For these reasons, withdrawing prematurely from Afghanistan is not a good option.

### **Strategic Necessities**

The first step to ensure strategic success in Afghanistan is changing the time constraints implemented by President Obama on June 22, 2011. The 2014 withdrawal plan is a brash decision that sets the stage for the Taliban's resurgence in the region. Though 2012 is an election year, the long-term interests of the United States argue against withdrawal. The time for withdrawal needs to be after the Afghan government stabilizes and their security apparatus can contain Taliban-led insurgency (Lobe 2011). Neo-conservative military analysts close to the now retired U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, argue that "nothing about conditions on the ground justifies the complete withdrawal of any U.S. or coalition forces" (Kagan 2011). Forces in Afghanistan are continuing forward momentum because of their combat strength, not the Afghan government's impending reconstruction. "The risks of a small withdrawal (5,000) are probably manageable. But any such withdrawal would be driven by politics rather than strategy." Moreover, they warned, if President Obama withdraws all 30,000 "surge" forces by the end of 2012, "the war will likely be lost" (Kagan 2011). Similarly, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called for a "modest" drawdown and made clear that he wanted as few combat troops as possible to leave (Personal Interview 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> Counterinsurgency tactics were advanced in large part by General David Petraeus, previous commander of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. These tactics aimed at "full spectrum operations" in war to include offensive, defensive, and stability operations that commanders combine to achieve the desired end state.

<sup>7</sup> Provincial Reconstruction Teams were introduced by the United States government in 2001. These teams consist of military officers, diplomats, and reconstruction subject matter experts, working to support reconstruction efforts in unstable states. Their common purpose is to empower local governments to govern their constituents more effectively.

The successful transition of power in Afghanistan can only be achieved by listening to those with the best view of the situation. Shinkay Karokhail, 49, a long-time women's activist and member of parliament in Kabul, said, "The withdrawal should depend on the reality on the ground. It should not be done for a political reason. I don't think the international community will make the same mistake again," before adding a more cautionary, "I hope the international community will not make the same mistake again" (France 24 2011). A firm 25,000 force, with the ability to expand if necessary and structured in PRTs and battalion or smaller sized units, has to remain in Afghanistan past 2014 to maintain stability operations of a combat nature. As Shinkay said, "I don't think 2014 is enough time. That's just three years. In three years, you can't make magic."

The second strategic objective that ensures success in Afghanistan focuses on relations between the U.S. and Pakistan<sup>8</sup>. This relationship is, to say the least, complex. Although the U.S. continues to provide aid to Pakistan, much of it in the form of military assistance, Pakistan has not supported U.S. military action. Pakistan has long faced problems domestically, and there is continued tension because the Pakistani civilian government is often out-ranked in power and authority by a strong--and some would say oppressive--Pakistani military (Ziadi 2011).

To move forward in Afghanistan, the U.S. need to think globally and ally with a democratic Pakistan based on security and stabilization. The short-term military alliance and convenience of Pakistan's border with Afghanistan proves increasingly risky as the U.S. strives to look long-term in the Middle East. The relationship is strained because of a lack of great trust between the two governments. U.S. aid to the Pakistani military is double or triple the level of economic aid provided to the civilian leadership. This imbalance strengthens the hand of the Pakistani military and sends the civilian leadership in Pakistan the message that the U.S. does not take them seriously (Ziadi 2011). The U.S. needs to give the Pakistani government more civil and economic support, which will strengthen our ability to press for reforms within Pakistan. With the U.S. serving as a democratic example, Pakistan can learn to balance a strong military with a stable and prosperous civilian government, denying insurgents a safe haven. By doing this, regional, nonmilitary relationships can begin to improve stability the region, particular in Afghanistan.

Another strategic objective comes at the alliance of the U.S. and NATO combating Afghan government corruption. In 2009, much of the \$14 billion issued last year in NATO contracts was funneled to favored companies run by corrupt executives who enriched themselves at the expense of the fight against the Taliban insurgency (Nakamura 2010). During General Petraeus' tenure as top military commander in Afghanistan, he signed new rules governing the distribution of NATO contracts. The new rules stipulate that NATO should first seek Afghan contractors. If it is unable to find contractors that are qualified, NATO must require that international firms hire local staff to carry out the terms of the contract (Nakamura 2010). However, the fault lies in the quick spending and insufficient oversight of funds by Afghan contractors and NATO. In addition, there is a need for stronger leadership to enhance efforts to combat corruption. The U.S. diplomatic mission and parallel government relations with Afghanistan should focus its goals on dissolving monopolistic industries that deny many Afghan companies patronage. Government corruption has resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians when contractors act recklessly or indiscriminately. Elements of this nature endanger the lives of soldiers and civilians alike and required the diligence of U.S. military attention.

The final strategic objective requires fostering negotiations and peace talks with Taliban leadership. In June 2011, then-Secretary Gates confirmed the U.S. was actively seeking direct

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<sup>8</sup> U.S.-Pakistan relations. Numerous allegations were made that the government of Pakistan had shielded Osama bin Laden. U.S. government files, leaked by Wikileaks, disclosed that American diplomats had been told that Pakistani security services were tipping off bin Laden every time U.S. forces approached.

talks alongside President Karzai with Taliban leadership. However, complications with credible interlocutors<sup>9</sup> who can speak as the voice of the Taliban have stalled efforts to negotiate. Yet, the largest obstacle came after the announcement of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces by 2014. The Taliban, having demonstrated its resilience, may be inclined to drive a harder bargain in any discussions, conscious that Western resolve is weakening (Rubin 2007). The diminished U.S. leverage is directly related to the decision to set a withdrawal plan before all the pieces were in place to ensure a stable transition. While the U.S. and other Western states have put faith in the negotiations to ensure a measure of stability in Afghanistan, the idea of leaving a combat force to enforce the result of those negotiations is absent. At a minimum, maintaining 25,000 troops is needed to stabilize the country and provide a foundation for dialogue that does not put U.S. interests at a disadvantage.

### **Common Sense in Combat**

The tactical and operational aspects of success in Afghanistan will require downsizing brigade and larger unit operations and increasing the reliance on PRT leadership while continuing to execute counterinsurgency tactics based on a military commander's assessment of the battlefield. PRTs weave expertise on diplomacy and reconstruction from every contributing agency that makes up the unit. Therefore, it is only fitting that military operators contribute and practice their expertise to prevent loss of defense progress and ensure future progress. For the most part, large Taliban resistance operations have ceased in Afghanistan. Much of the opposition that remains is a result of corrupt village and provincial leaders who have become subject to Taliban influence. Although the attacks are small-scale, the casualty count is far too high and has resulted in weakened support for the mission among members of the American public and public officials in Washington.

PRTs provide the imperative military monitoring that is necessary for maintaining stability and pushing forward with development initiatives that will provide Afghanistan with the ability to become self sufficient while repelling Taliban insurgents. The primary reason for combining military efforts with developmental efforts comes as a part of the broader strategy to "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people while ensuring security and defense progress has not been lost. Yes, while the goal of PRTs is developmental reconstruction and governance building, military involvement ensures that known insurgent-oriented areas remain secure and if need be, defended, while Afghanistan rebuilds. Allowing PRTs to operate with military support is ludicrous because it continuously widens the door for resurgence. Allowing diplomatic factions the responsible to implement the transitional aspects of PRTs is without a doubt a no-brainer. However, it is a trip over common sense to not arm these teams with military entities that are conscious of the real and present danger that still exists throughout the region. It is the reliance on these political-military teams that will foster an honest future for Afghanistan.

Success in Afghanistan also requires that the mission have the support of Afghan citizens. As a result, coercion and domination are not an effective means of achieving our goals. Instead, our focus needs to be on living, working, teaching, and securing villages in a manner that creates a shared understanding of an alternative future for Afghanistan. Already, U.S. forces are making this possible by working closely with NGOs in unstable areas. The military has taken the advice of the aid community and shifted away from the quick enemy-oriented impact projects that were

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<sup>9</sup> An interlocutor is someone who formally explains the views of a government from an informal position within the government. He can also relay messages back to a government. In recent months, Washington has disclosed that senior State Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials have had secret 'exploratory conversations' with a Taliban interlocutor in Qatar and Germany. The talks broke down following the disclosure of Taliban negotiator's identity.

the subject of our initial focus to devote attention to larger projects beyond the capacity of the NGO's (Borders 2008). Since PRTs combine military, diplomatic, and humanitarian elements, there will be a balance of security while Afghanistan rebuilds into the democracy it desires. As U.S. forces become integrated with PRTs, the implementation of COIN tactics will produce valuable information on insurgents and terrorists. Yet, this can only be given by a population that feels secure and bonded to the government; another facilitation of PRTs. Commanders must remain vigilant of the impending security risks involved in PRT operations as the larger response force is absent. There is greater opportunity to move forward productively in Afghanistan by using U.S. forces as members of PRT operations.

### **Conclusion**

The war in Afghanistan has been a roller coaster of policy changes, resurgences, and increased uncertainty. Since the beginning of the Obama Administration, the spotlight has been focused on the speedy drawdown of U.S. involvement rather than the achievement of US goals and ensuring the stability of the Afghan government and security in the region. U.S. commanders' concerns about force strength have been ignored in a conflict that is critically important to the national security interests of the United States. Unless the U.S. becomes fully committed to the creation of a secure, democratic Afghanistan, the Taliban will return. By taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of military commanders on the ground, the U.S. can build on the gains that have been made and ensure the stability and success of the Afghan government. In the end, the U.S. has more to gain than it does to lose.

Remaining in Afghanistan militarily will give the U.S. a continued base of operations from which to fight terrorism, improving relations with Pakistan is also needed to help stabilize the region. Keeping U.S. forces in Afghanistan will make it easier to fight the spread of corruption that strengthens the Taliban and undermines the long-term stability of the Afghan government. Lastly, U.S. forces will ultimately end the war of terrorism in Afghanistan by securing the state and eliminating a once open-border safe haven for terrorists to network. Once success is achieved, the Afghan people will have the benefit of a government that is less corrupt and able to resist the influence of the Taliban and other sponsors of terror.

Success in Afghanistan will not only benefit the United States, but the people of Afghanistan as well. However, none of these benefits can be achieved if the United States withdraws before the mission is complete. The U.S. military provides a stabilizing force unlike any other in the world and removing it from an unstable region that is critical to our long-term interests is a mistake. Military commanders, who know the fight, know the region, and know the Afghan people must be taken seriously to ensure effective use of military strength that facilitates the successful transfer of power and the diminished influence of insurgents.

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