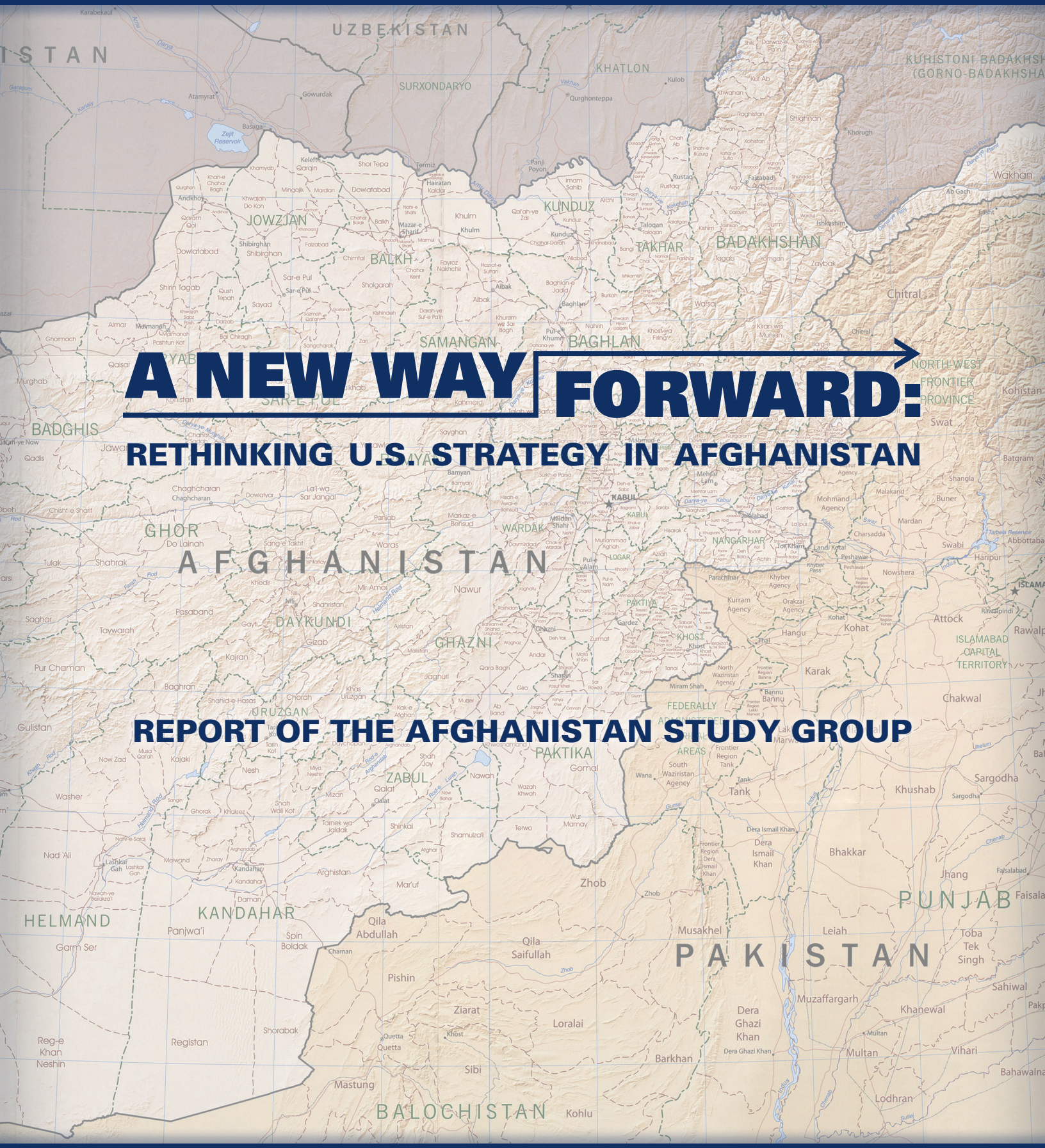


# A NEW WAY FORWARD:

## RETHINKING U.S. STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

## REPORT OF THE AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP

*"I am concerned that we underestimate the risks of this expansion of our mission and that we have not fully studied every alternative…Rather than reducing Afghan dependence, sending more troops, therefore, is likely to deepen it."*

*- U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, November, 2009*

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# SUMMARY


At eight years and counting, the U.S. war in Afghanistan is now the longest in our history, surpassing both Vietnam and the Soviet Union's own extended military campaign there. With the surge, it will cost the U.S. taxpayer nearly $100 billion per year, a sum roughly six times larger than Afghanistan's annual gross national product (GNP) of $14 billion and greater than the total annual cost of the new U.S. health insurance program. Thousands of American and allied personnel have been killed or gravely wounded.

The U.S. interests at stake in Afghanistan do not warrant this level of sacrifice. President Obama justified expanding our commitment by saying the goal was eradicating Al Qaeda. Yet Al Qaeda is no longer a significant presence in Afghanistan, and there are only some 400 hard-core Al Qaeda members remaining in the entire Af/Pak theater, most of them hiding in Pakistan's northwest provinces.

America's armed forces have fought bravely and well, and their dedication is unquestioned. But we should not ask them to make sacrifices unnecessary to our core national interests, particularly when doing so threatens long-term needs and priorities both at home and abroad.

Instead of toppling terrorists, America's Afghan war has become an ambitious and fruitless effort at "nation-building." We are mired in a civil war in Afghanistan and are struggling to establish an effective central government in a country that has long been fragmented and decentralized.

No matter how desirable this objective might be in the abstract, it is not essential to U.S. security and it is not a goal for which the U.S. military is well suited. There is no clear definition of what would comprise "success" in this endeavor, and creating a unified Afghan state would require committing many more American lives and hundreds of billions of additional U.S. dollars for many years to come.


## THE SITUATION

The U.S. war in Afghanistan is now the longest in our history, and is costing the U.S. taxpayer nearly $100 billion per year, roughly six times more than Afghanistan's annual gross national product (GNP) of $14 billion.

Prosecuting the war in Afghanistan is not essential to U.S. security.

We have justified expanding our commitment by saying the goal was eradicating Al Qaeda. Yet Al Qaeda is no longer a significant presence in Afghanistan, and there are only some 400 hard-core Al Qaeda members remaining in the entire Af/Pak theatre.

The conflict in Afghanistan is commonly perceived as a struggle between the Karzai government and an insurgent Taliban movement, allied with international terrorists, that is seeking to overthrow that government. In fact, the conflict is a civil war about power-sharing with lines of contention that are 1) partly ethnic, chiefly, but not exclusively, between Pashtuns who dominate the south and other ethnicities such as Tajiks and Uzbeks who are more prevalent in the north, 2) partly rural-vs.-urban, particularly within the Pashtun community, and 3) partly sectarian. With the U.S. intervention in force, the conflict has also come to include resistance to what is seen as foreign military occupation.

Resolving the conflict in Afghanistan has primarily to do with resolving the distribution of power among these factions and between the central government and the provinces, and with appropriately decentralizing authority.

Negotiated resolution of these conflicts will reduce the influence of extremists more readily than military action will. The Taliban itself is not a unified movement but instead a label that is applied to many armed groups and individuals that are only loosely aligned and do not necessarily have a fondness for the fundamentalist ideology of the most prominent Taliban leaders.


As the WikiLeaks war diary comprised of more than 91,000 secret reports on the Afghanistan War makes clear, any sense of American and allied progress in the conflict has been undermined by revelations that many more civilian deaths have occurred than have been officially acknowledged as the result of U.S. and allied strike accidents, the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence continued to provide logistics and financial support to the Afghan Taliban even as U.S. units were fighting these units, and that Karzai-government affiliates and appointees in rural Afghanistan have often proven to be more corrupt and ruthless than the Taliban.

Prospects for success are dim. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recently warned, "Afghanistan has never been pacified by foreign forces."[1] The 2010 spring offensive in Marjah was inconclusive, and a supposedly "decisive" summer offensive in Kandahar has been delayed and the expectations downgraded. U.S. and allied casualties reached an all-time high in July, and several NATO allies have announced plans to withdraw their own forces.


[1]Henry A. Kissinger, "America Needs an Afghan Strategy, Not an Alibi," *Washington Post*, June 24, 2010.

## THE RIGHT WAY FORWARD

Our proposal will improve security for Americans and reduce annual costs by over $60 billion per year.

1. **Emphasize power-sharing and political inclusion**. The U.S. should fast-track a peace process designed to decentralize power within Afghanistan and encourage a power-sharing balance among the principal parties.
2. **Downsize and eventually end military operations in southern Afghanistan, and reduce the U.S. military footprint.** The U.S. should draw down its military presence, which radicalizes many Pashtuns and is an important aid to Taliban recruitment.
3. **Focus security efforts on Al Qaeda and Domestic Security**. Special forces, intelligence assets, and other U.S. capabilities should continue to seek out and target known Al Qaeda cells in the region and be ready to go after them should they attempt to relocate elsewhere or build new training facilities. In addition, part of the savings from our drawdown should be reallocated to bolster U.S. domestic security efforts and to track nuclear weapons globally.
4. **Encourage economic development.** Because destitute states can become incubators for terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and other illicit activities, efforts at reconciliation should be paired with an internationally-led effort to develop Afghanistan's economy.
5. **Engage regional and global stakeholders** in a diplomatic effort designed to guarantee Afghan neutrality and foster regional stability. Despite their considerable differences, neighboring states such as India, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia share a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from being dominated by any single power or being a permanently failed state that exports instability to others.

The conflict in Afghanistan is commonly perceived as a struggle between the Karzai government and an insurgent Taliban movement, allied with international terrorists, that is seeking to overthrow that government. In fact, the conflict is a civil war about power-sharing with lines of contention that are 1) partly ethnic, chiefly, but not exclusively, between Pashtuns who dominate the south and other ethnicities such as Tajiks and Uzbeks who are more prevalent in the north, 2) partly rural-vs.-urban, particularly within the Pashtun community, and 3) partly sectarian. The Afghanistan conflict also includes the influence of surrounding nations with a desire to advance their own interests – including India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others. And with the U.S. intervention in force, the conflict includes resistance to what is seen as foreign military occupation.

Resolving the conflict in Afghanistan has primarily to do with resolving the distribution of power among these factions and between the central government and the provinces, and with appropriately decentralizing authority.

Negotiated resolution of these conflicts will reduce the influence of extremists more readily than military action will. The Taliban itself is not a unified movement but instead a label that is applied to many armed groups and individuals that are only loosely aligned and do not necessarily have a fondness for the fundamentalist ideology of the most prominent Taliban leaders.

The Study Group believes the war in Afghanistan has reached a critical crossroads. Our current path promises to have limited impact on the civil war while taking more American lives and contributing to skyrocketing taxpayer debt. We conclude that a fundamentally new direction is needed, one that recognizes the United States' legitimate interests in Central Asia and is fashioned to advance them. Far from admitting "defeat," the way forward acknowledges the manifold limitations of a military solution in a region where our interests lie in political stability, and it shifts our resources to focus on U.S. foreign policy strengths in concert with the international community to promote reconciliation among the warring parties, advance economic development, and encourage region-wide diplomatic engagement.

We base these conclusions on the following key points raised in the Study Group's research and discussions:

- *The United States has only two vital interests in the Af/Pak region: 1) preventing Afghanistan from being a "safe haven" from which Al Qaeda or other extremists can organize more effective attacks on the U.S. homeland; and 2) ensuring that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal does not fall into hostile hands.*
- *Protecting our interests does not require a U.S. military victory over the Taliban. A Taliban takeover is unlikely even if the United States reduces its military commitment. The Taliban is a rural insurgency rooted primarily in Afghanistan's Pashtun population, and succeeded due in some part to the disenfranchisment of rural Pashtuns. The Taliban's seizure of power in the 1990s was due to an unusual set of circumstances that no longer exists and are unlikely to be repeated.*
- *There is no significant Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan today, and the risk of a new "safe haven" there under more "friendly" Taliban rule is overstated. Should an Al Qaeda cell regroup in Afghanistan, the U.S. would have residual military capability in the region sufficient to track and destroy it.*

- *Al Qaeda sympathizers are now present in many locations globally, and defeating the Taliban will have little effect on Al Qaeda's global reach. The ongoing threat from Al Qaeda is better met via specific counter-terrorism measures, a reduced U.S. military "footprint" in the Islamic world, and diplomatic efforts to improve America's overall image and undermine international support for militant extremism.*
- *Given our present economic circumstances, reducing the staggering costs of the Afghan war is an urgent priority. Maintaining the long-term health of the U.S. economy is just as important to American strength and security as protecting U.S. soil from enemy (including terrorist) attacks.*
- *The continuation of an ambitious U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan will likely work against U.S. interests. A large U.S. presence fosters local (especially Pashtun) resentment and aids Taliban recruiting. It also fosters dependence on the part of our Afghan partners and encourages closer cooperation among a disparate array of extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan alike.*
- *Past efforts to centralize power in Afghanistan have provoked the same sort of local resistance that is convulsing Afghanistan today. There is ample evidence that this effort will join others in a long line of failed incursions.*
- *Although the United States should support democratic rule, human rights and economic development, its capacity to mold other societies is inherently limited and the costs of trying should be weighed against our need to counter global terrorist threats directly, reduce America's $1.4 trillion budget deficit, repair eroding U.S. infrastructure, and other critical national purposes. Our support of these things will be better achieved as part of a coordinated international group with which expenses and burdens can be shared.*

The bottom line is clear: Our vital interests in Afghanistan are limited and military victory is not the key to achieving them. On the contrary: Waging a lengthy counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan may well do more to aid Taliban recruiting than to dismantle the group, help spread conflict further into Pakistan, unify radical groups that might otherwise be quarreling amongst themselves, threaten the long-term health of the U.S. economy, and prevent the U.S. government from turning its full attention to other pressing problems.

The more promising path for the U.S. in the Af/Pak region would reverse the recent escalation and move away from a counterinsurgency effort that is neither necessary nor likely to succeed. Instead, the U.S. should:

1. **Emphasize power-sharing and political inclusion.** The U.S. should fast-track a peace process designed to decentralize power within Afghanistan and encourage a power-sharing balance among the principal parties.
2. **Downsize and eventually end military operations in southern Afghanistan, and reduce the U.S. military footprint.** The U.S. should draw down its military presence, which radicalizes many Pashtuns and is an important aid to Taliban recruitment.
3. **Focus security efforts on Al Qaeda and Domestic Security.** Special forces, intelligence assets, and other U.S. capabilities should continue to seek out and target known Al Qaeda cells in the region and be ready to go after them should they attempt to relocate elsewhere or build new training facilities. In addition, part of the savings from our drawdown should be reallocated to bolster U.S. domestic security efforts and to track nuclear weapons globally.
4. **Encourage economic development.** Because destitute states can become incubators for terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and other illicit activities, efforts at reconciliation should be paired with an internationally-led effort to develop Afghanistan's economy.
5. **Engage regional and global stakeholders** in a diplomatic effort designed to guarantee Afghan neutrality and foster regional stability. Despite their considerable differences, neighboring states such as India, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia share a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from being dominated by any single power or being a permanently failed state that exports instability to others.

We believe this strategy will best serve the interests of women in Afghanistan as well. The worst thing for women is for Afghanistan to remain paralyzed in a civil war in which there evolves no organically rooted support for their social advancement.

The remainder of this report elaborates the logic behind these recommendations. It begins by summarizing U.S. vital interests, including our limited interests in Afghanistan itself and in the region more broadly. It then considers why the current strategy is failing and why the situation is unlikely to improve even under a new commander. The final section outlines "The Way Forward" and explains how a radically different approach can achieve core U.S. goals at an acceptable cost.

# AMERICA'S INTERESTS

The central goal of U.S. foreign and defense policy is to ensure the safety and prosperity of the American people. In practical terms, this means deterring or thwarting direct attacks on the U.S. homeland, while at the same time maintaining the long-term health of the U.S. economy. A sound economy is the foundation of all national power, and it is critical to our ability to shape the global order and preserve our core values and independence over the long-term. The United States must therefore avoid an open-ended commitment in Afghanistan, especially when the costs of military engagement exceed the likely benefits.

*What is at Stake in Afghanistan?*

The United States has only two vital strategic interests in Afghanistan. Its first strategic interest is to reduce the threat of successful terrorist attacks against the United States. In operational terms, the goal is to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a "safe haven" that could significantly enhance Al Qaeda's ability to organize and conduct attacks on the United States.

The United States drove Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan in 2002, and its presence in Afghanistan is now negligible.[2] Al Qaeda's remaining founders are believed to be in hiding in northwest Pakistan, though affiliated cells are now active in Somalia, Yemen, and several other countries. These developments suggest that even a successful counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan would have only a limited effect on Al Qaeda's ability to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies. To the extent that it facilitates jihadi recruitment and draws resources away from focused counter-terror efforts, it may even be counterproductive.

The second vital U.S. interest is to keep the conflict in Afghanistan from sowing instability elsewhere in Central Asia, which might one day threaten the stability of the Pakistani state and the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. If the Pakistani government were to fall to radical extremists, or if terrorists were able to steal or seize either a weapon or sufficient nuclear material, then the danger of a nuclear terrorist incident would increase significantly. It is therefore important that our strategy in Afghanistan avoids making the situation in Pakistan worse.

Fortunately, the danger of a radical takeover of the Pakistani government is small. Islamist extremism in Pakistan is concentrated within the tribal areas in its northwest frontier, and largely confined to its Pashtun minority (which comprises about 15 percent of the population). The Pakistani army is primarily Punjabi (roughly 44 percent of the population) and remains loyal. At present, therefore, this second strategic interest is not seriously threatened.

Beyond these vital strategic interests, the United States also favors democratic rule, human rights, and economic development. These goals are consistent with traditional U.S. values and reflect a longstanding belief that democracy and the rule of law are preferable to authoritarianism, and that stable and prosperous democracies are less likely to threaten their neighbors or to challenge core U.S. interests. Helping the Afghan people rebuild after decades of war is also appealing on purely moral grounds.

Yet these latter goals, however worthy in themselves, do not justify a costly and open-ended commitment to war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world and is of little intrinsic strategic value to the United States. (Recent reports of sizeable mineral resources do not alter this basic reality.)[3] Afghan society is divided into several distinct ethnic groups with a long history of conflict, it lacks strong democratic traditions, and there is a deeply rooted suspicion of foreign interference.

It follows that a strategy for Afghanistan must rest on a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests and a realistic appraisal of what outside help can and cannot accomplish. It must also take care to ensure that specific policy actions do not undermine the vital interests identified above. The current U.S. strategy has lost sight of these considerations, which is why our war effort there is faltering.

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[2]According to Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, there are only 50-100 Al Qaeda members currently in Afghanistan, and roughly 300 more in neighboring Pakistan. If we are in Afghanistan to eradicate Al Qaeda, therefore, it is costing about $250 million per year for each Al Qaeda operative. See Michael Isikoff, "U.S. Counterterror Chief: We Need Debate on CIA Terror Targets," *Newsweek*, July 2, 2010 at http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/declassified/2010/07/02/u-s-counterterror-chief-we-need-debate-on-civil-liberties.html

[3]It will be many years and require considerable investment before Afghan's mineral potential is fully exploited. More importantly, the United States does not need to control Afghanistan in order to gain access to whatever minerals do exist, because whoever is in charge will have sell them to someone, thereby increasing the total amount available on world markets

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT U.S. STRATEGY?

President Obama has repeatedly said that we are fighting in Afghanistan in order to prevent the country "from becoming an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans." Since taking office, Obama has committed nearly 50,000 additional troops to an ambitious counterinsurgency campaign designed to oust the Taliban from the areas it controls, win the confidence of the local population, train effective Afghan security forces, and help create a competent, legitimate, and effective central government.

Unfortunately, this counterinsurgency-based nation-building strategy rests on a flawed understanding of the strategic stakes, and it undercuts our broader strategic goals.

First, the decision to escalate the U.S. effort in Afghanistan rests on the mistaken belief that victory there will have a major impact on Al Qaeda's ability to attack the United States. Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan today is very small, and even a decisive victory there would do little to undermine its capabilities elsewhere. Victory would not even prevent small Al Qaeda cells from relocating in Afghanistan, just as they have in a wide array of countries (including Europe).

### THE COST OF THE AFGHANISTAN WAR

With the Afghanistan Surge, the U.S. will be spending almost $100 billion per year in Afghanistan, with a stated primary purpose of eradicating just 20 to 30 Al Qaeda leaders, and in a country whose total GDP is only $14 billion per annum. This is a serious imbalance of expenses to benefit.

* $100 billion per year is more than the entire annual cost of the Obama administration's new health care plan and is money that could be used to better counter global terrorist threats, reduce the $1.4 trillion annual deficit, repair and modernize a large portion of U.S. infrastructure, radically enhance American educational investment, launch a massive new Manhattan Project-like effort on energy alternatives research, or be used for other critical purposes.

*The U.S. military budget has grown from $370 billion in 2000 to $707 billion in 2011, and the current Middle East war is now the second most expensive war in U.S. history, behind only World War II, and is more expensive than the Vietnam and Korean Wars combined. It is now also the longest war in U.S. history.

Second, a U.S. drawdown would not make Al Qaeda substantially more lethal. In order for events in Afghanistan to enhance Al Qaeda's ability to threaten the U.S. homeland, three separate steps must occur: 1) the Taliban must seize control of a substantial portion of the country, 2) Al Qaeda must relocate there in strength, and 3) it must build facilities in this new "safe haven" that will allow it to plan and train more effectively than it can today.

Each of these three steps is unlikely, however, and the chances of all three together are very remote. For starters, a Taliban victory is unlikely even if the United States reduces its military commitment. The Taliban is a rural insurgency rooted primarily in Afghanistan's Pashtun population, and its seizure of power in the 1990s was due to unusual circumstances that no longer exist and are unlikely to be repeated. Non-Pashtun Afghans now have ample experience with Taliban rule, and they are bound to resist any Taliban efforts to regain control in Kabul. Moreover, the U.S. military presence has helped the Taliban rally its forces, meaning that the group may well fragment and suffer a loss of momentum in the face of a U.S. drawdown. Surveys suggest that popular support for the Taliban among Afghans is in the single digits.

Even with significantly reduced troop levels, we can build a credible defense against a Taliban takeover through support for local security forces, strategic use of airpower, and deployment in key cities without committing ourselves to a costly and counterproductive COIN (counterinsurgency) campaign in the south. And if power-sharing and political inclusion is negotiated, the relevance of the Taliban as an alternative to Kabul is likely to decline.

And even if the Taliban were to regain power in some of Afghanistan, it would likely not invite Al Qaeda to re-establish a significant presence there. The Taliban may be reluctant to risk renewed U.S. attacks by welcoming Al Qaeda onto Afghan soil, and Bin Laden and his associates may well prefer to remain in Pakistan, which is both safer and a better base from which to operate than isolated and land-locked Afghanistan.

Most importantly, no matter what happens in Afghanistan in the future, Al Qaeda will not be able to build large training camps of the sort it employed prior to the 9/11 attacks; simply put, the U.S. would remain vigilant and could use air power to eliminate any Al Qaeda facility that the group might attempt to establish. Bin Laden and his associates will likely have to remain in hiding for the rest of their lives, and Al Qaeda will have to rely on clandestine cells instead of large encampments. Covert cells can be located virtually anywhere, however, which is why the outcome in Afghanistan is not critical to addressing the threat from Al Qaeda.

In short, a complete (and unlikely) victory in Afghanistan and the dismantling of the Taliban would not make Al Qaeda disappear; indeed, it would probably have no appreciable effect on Al Qaeda. At the same time, dramatically scaling back U.S. military engagement will not significantly increase the threat from Al Qaeda.

Third, the current U.S. military effort is helping fuel the very insurgency we are attempting to defeat. An expanded U.S. presence has reinforced perceptions of the United States as a foreign occupier, and religious extremists have used the U.S. presence as an effective recruiting tool for their cause. Efforts to limit civilian casualties and other forms of collateral damage have been only partially successful, leading additional Afghans to take up arms against us.

Fourth, the expanded U.S. presence and a more energetic counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan have reinforced a tacit alliance among different extremist groups whose agendas are not identical. The Taliban is itself a loose coalition of Pashtuns, many of whom are motivated by local concerns rather than by any deep commitment to global jihad. Al Qaeda, by contrast, is a global network of radical Islamists seeking to topple governments throughout the Middle East. The "Pakistani Taliban" are a separate alliance of different Islamist groups challenging the authority of the Pakistani state, and the Haqqani network in Waziristan is led by a local warlord who is strongly opposed to foreign interference but reportedly also a sometime ally of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI).

Although cooperation among these disparate groups has increased in recent years, this development is largely a reaction to the increased foreign presence in the region and our efforts to convince the Pakistani government to take more aggressive action against these groups. Thus, our current strategy is helping drive these groups together, when our real aim should be to drive wedges between as many of them as possible and to win over those who do not share Al Qaeda's anti-Western agenda or its commitment to global jihad.

Fifth, keeping 100,000-plus U.S. troops in yet another Muslim country lends credence to jihadi propaganda about America's alleged hostility to Islam, and may actually be increasing the overall danger that we face back home. Anger at U.S. military action in the Af/Pak theater inspired Faisal Shahzad, a U.S citizen, to attempt an unsuccessful car bomb attack in Times Square, and other home-grown terrorists appear to have been inspired by similar motivations.

Sixth, our military strategy is failing because the prerequisites for success do not exist. We have no way of forcing the Taliban to sit still and fight us out in the open—where they would be easy to defeat—because they can melt away into the countryside or withdraw across the Pakistani border whenever they are confronted by superior force. Adding still more troops will not solve this problem, as it would require a much larger force than the United States has available and would generate even more local resentment.

Successful counterinsurgency efforts also require an effective local partner, and the Karzai governent in Kabul is anything but. President Karzai has had nearly six years to build a legitimate and minimally effective government, and he has manifestly failed to do so. His re-election last year was marred by widespread fraud, and Karzai has been unable or unwilling to crack down on corruption or rein in the warlords on whom his government still depends. The Afghan army and police remain unreliable, and the large security forces we are trying to stand up will cost more to maintain than the Afghan government can afford.

Finally, the rising costs of the war in Afghanistan also include opportunity costs. The war in Afghanistan has already consumed a considerable amount of President Obama's time and attention, at a time when the United States faces many domestic and international challenges. If the United States remains bogged down there, other challenges will receive inadequate attention and could easily get worse. We have an interest in approaching these challenges in a manner that does not encumber our ability to deal with other states in the region – like Iran.

For all these reasons, the Study Group is convinced that current U.S. strategy cannot achieve core U.S. interests at an acceptable cost. Protecting our vital interests requires a fundamentally different approach.

# THE WAY FORWARD: A FIVE-POINT APPROACH

The Study Group believes that the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan should aim at realistic and attainable objectives, and that it should become less reliant on military force in favor of a focus on political inclusion, economic development, and regional diplomacy. The United States and its allies must recognize that they cannot dictate Afghanistan's political future, and—more importantly—that it is not necessary for them to do so to realize their core strategic interests. Accordingly, the Study Group recommends a new strategy comprised of the following five elements:

1. **Emphasize Power-Sharing and Political Reconciliation.** Afghanistan will not achieve a sustainable peace without broader support from the Afghan people themselves. Accordingly, the United States should fast-track a peace process designed to decentralize power within Afghanistan and to encourage a power-sharing arrangement among all parties.

   Under the current Afghanistan Constitution, the President has unchecked authority to appoint provincial governors and hundreds of other positions in government. As David Miliband wrote, in many parts of the country, district governance is almost nonexistent, half the governors do not have an office, fewer than a quarter have electricity, and some receive only six dollars a month in expenses. As an important start to reform, the Afghan Parliament should be given confirmation authority for major appointments, district councils should be elected, budgeting authority decentralized, and elected provincial representatives should be included in the national level council that determines the portion of funds distributed.[4] The ethnic base of the Afghan army should be broadened. More generally, governance should depend more heavily on local, traditional, and community-based structures.

   In contrast to President Karzai's recent and narrowly conceived "peace jirga," political outreach should include leaders selected by key tribal and village leaders in all of Afghanistan's ethnic and regional divisions, including rural Pashtuns. This effort should be open to those among the fragmented Taliban who are willing to engage in genuine reconciliation, a step that can help marginalize those Taliban who remain defiant. Preconditions for negotiations, such as recognizing the existing Afghan Constitution, should not be required.

2. **Scale Back and Eventually Suspend Combat Operations in the South and Reduce the U.S. Military Footprint.** Simultaneous to these efforts at achieving a new, more stable political equilibrium in the country, the U.S. should downsize and eventually discontinue combat operations in southern Afghanistan and draw down its military presence, which radicalizes many Pashtun and often aids the Taliban's recruitment effort.

   The Study Group recommends that President Obama firmly stick to his pledge to begin withdrawing U.S. forces in the summer of 2011—and earlier if possible. U.S. force levels should decline to the minimum level needed to help train Afghan security forces, prevent massive human rights atrocities, resist an expansion of Taliban control beyond the Pashtun south, and engage in robust counter-terrorism operations as needed. We recommend a decrease to 68,000 troops by October 2011, and 30,000 by July 2012. These residual force levels should be reviewed as to whether they are contributing to our broader strategic objectives in the fall of 2012 – and if not, withdrawn in full over time.

   This step would save the U.S. at least $60 billion to $80 billion per year and reduce local resentment at our large and intrusive military presence.

3. **Keep the Focus on Al Qaeda and Domestic Security.** The U.S. should redirect some part of the savings from this troop reduction toward improved counter-terrorism efforts and protecting U.S. citizens from terrorist attacks. Special forces, intelligence assets, and other U.S. capabilities should continue to seek out and target known Al Qaeda cells in the region, and be ready to go after them should they attempt to relocate elsewhere.[5] The Study Group also believes that more effort should be made to exploit potential cleavages among different radical groups in the region, a goal that would be facilitated as the U.S. military presence declines.

[4]For proposals along these lines, See Stephen Biddle, Fotini Christia, and J. Alexander Thier, "Defining Success in Afghanistan: What Can the United States Accept," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July/August 2010); and Robert D. Blackwill, "A De Facto Partion for Afghanistan," *Politico*, July 7, 2010.

[5]For a detailed exposition of what such an effort might entail, see Austin Long, "Small is Beautiful: The Counterterrorism Option in Afghanistan," *Orbis* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2010).

4. **Promote Economic Development.** Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries, and endemic poverty has made some elements of the population susceptible to Taliban overtures. Moreover, failed and destitute states frequently become incubators for terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and other illicit activities. Therefore, efforts at reconciliation should be coupled with a broad internationally-led effort to promote economic development. Potentially useful measures include:

    - Giving Afghanistan preferential trading status with the U.S., Europe, Japan and other leading global economies.
    - Promoting investment in local and national infrastructure by national and international companies.
    - Providing subsidies, loans, and technical assistance to local (non-poppy) agricultural producers, construction companies, and artisans.
    - Promoting "special reconstruction zones" for foreign and domestic companies to produce export goods. Such zones could offer investors preferential tax treatment and access to enhanced security and infrastructure measures, at least initially.
    - Helping Afghan women directly through micro-lending and educational support programs, and by making some portion of U.S. assistance conditional on the protection of basic human rights, especially women's rights.
    - Considering the purchase of Afghanistan's poppy crop, to give Afghan farmers immediate economic gains, reduce Taliban revenues, and reduce the flow of illicit narcotics to the West.

    To the extent possible, external assistance should be channeled through a more decentralized Afghan government, in order to build capacity, give legitimacy to the government itself, enhance transparency, limit corruption, and ensure that aid monies go directly to helping Afghans rather than to consultants, NGOs, and other international agencies.

5. **Engage Global and Regional Stakeholders.** The Afghanistan conflict reflects long-standing rivalries among the different ethnic and tribal groups within the country, but it has long been exacerbated by outside powers seeking to protect or advance their own interests.

    The United States now bears a growing share of the costs of this conflict, even though virtually all of Afghanistan's neighbors have larger and more immediate stakes in its resolution. Despite their considerable differences, neighboring states such as India, Pakistan, China, and Iran share a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from either being dominated by any single power or remaining a failed state that exports instability.

    Accordingly, the Study Group recommends that the substantial reduction in the U.S. military role be accompanied by an energetic diplomatic effort, spearheaded by the United Nations and strongly backed by the United States and its allies. This initiative should seek a formal commitment to Afghan neutrality and a resolution of existing border disputes, along with agreements to recognize and support the more inclusive and decentralized Afghan government described above. The United States should also use its influence to reduce tensions among the various regional actors—and especially India and Pakistan—in order to decrease their tendency to see Afghanistan as an arena for conflict or to view the Taliban or other non-state groups as long-term strategic assets.

    The United States should also place greater reliance on allies and partners whose ability to work with Afghans exceeds ours. Non-Arab Muslim states such as Indonesia and Turkey—the latter a NATO ally that is already present on the ground—could play substantial "mentoring" roles in the areas of education, political reform, and human rights, helping Afghanistan conform to international standards as well as their own principles.

Abandoning a predominantly military focus could actually facilitate a more energetic diplomatic effort. As long as the U.S. military is doing the heavy lifting against the Taliban, the Karzai government has no immediate need to broaden its base, other states can free-ride on the U.S. effort, and regional actors can pursue their own agendas

at less risk. Once the U.S. signals that its patience is not infinite and that its military campaign is winding down, then both contenders for power within Afghanistan and Afghanistan's neighbors will have a greater incentives to negotiate agreements designed to stabilize the situation.

Above all, these five broad measures, which can be translated into action through an integrated planning process, must be pursued with a keen eye toward what is possible and with a clear sense of the costs and benefits. The Study Group is under no illusions about the difficulty of this task and urges U.S. policymakers to adopt a realistic sense of what can be achieved. Specifically:

- It is not possible to eliminate all extremist groups from this region, but it is possible to significantly reduce the danger they pose.
- It is beyond our capacity to dictate Afghanistan's political future, but we can help move Afghanistan's leaders toward political arrangements that are consistent with past traditions and with our own minimum goals.
- Afghanistan will not become a stable and flourishing society in short order, but international support can still have positive effects on the lives of its citizens.
- A diplomatic agreement resolving all the tensions and rivalries that currently exist in the region is highly unlikely, but the United States can help negotiate more stable arrangements than presently exist.

## CONCLUSION

The United States should by no means abandon Afghanistan, but it is time to abandon the current strategy that is not working. Trying to pacify Afghanistan by force of arms will not work, and a costly military campaign there is more likely to jeopardize America's vital security interests than to protect them. The Study Group believes that the United States should pursue more modest goals that are both consistent with America's true interests and far more likely to succeed.

*Additional citations, references and information can be found at our website www.afghanistanstudygroup.com.*

## ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP

The Afghanistan Study Group is an ad hoc group of public policy practitioners, former U.S. government officials, academics, business representatives, policy-concerned activists and association leaders concerned with the Obama administration's policy course in Afghanistan and to a more limited degree, Pakistan. The group met several times during the winter of 2009 and spring of 2010 to review and discuss the costs and benefits of the administration's overall strategy and its announced policy goals, and to formulate alternatives to the current U.S. approach.

This project is intended as a serious "Team B" policy effort focused on confronting threats to the national interest from Al Qaeda and affiliates, while remaining mindful of economic realities and the other challenges to U.S. security. The Study Group believes there is a strong possibility the Obama administration's present strategy will fail to stabilize Afghanistan, and that U.S. national interests will be strengthened if alternatives to the current strategy are developed and debated in advance.

# MYTHS AND REALITIES IN THE AFGHAN DEBATE

***Myth #1***

*The United States can afford to stay in Afghanistan for as long it takes to win.*

**Reality:** US national security depends most fundamentally on our economic strength. An open-ended commitment in Afghanistan demands vast resources better used at home and for purposes that contribute effectively to our security. It depletes our military and distracts our political leadership from more pressing challenges. And it adds massively to federal deficits and to the national debt, without building anything of enduring value for future generations.

***Myth #2***

*The Obama administration and the U.S. military have a feasible strategy and a clear timetable to end the war.*

**Reality:** The current strategy is not working, and the administration has not identified the end-state it is seeking to achieve or the circumstances that would make withdrawal possible. The U.S. government emphasizes that withdrawal in summer 2011 will depend on conditions prevailing at the time. The current strategy and the stated timetable are out of synch; objectives need to be updated to realities on the ground to ensure that a drawdown in the summer of 2011 proceeds in a timely and effective manner.

***Myth #3***

*The "surge" in Iraq proves that counterinsurgency strategies can work; all we have to do is stay the course.*

**Reality:** The "surge" in Iraq was only a partial success, predicated as much on a program to pay wages to almost 100,000 Sunni that had been fighting against us as it was on an increase in troops. Conditions in Afghanistan are far more challenging. There was a reduction in violence in Iraq, but the "surge" failed to produce meaningful political reconciliation. Escalation in Afghanistan has achieved few results so far, and there is no reason to think this will change.

The effectiveness of the "surge" in Iraq depended heavily on the simultaneous political turn of the Sunnis against the counterinsurgency. Ethnic and sectarian faultlines in Afghanistan are far more complicated and tribal structures are far more fragmented than in Iraq, making a similar political turn among insurgents very remote. Political reconciliation in Afghanistan will have to proceed community by community.

***Myth #4***

*The Taliban is a group of religious fanatics who can never be appeased through negotiations.*

**Reality:** All societies contain some extremists who cannot be appeased, but they usually represent tiny minorities. Many factions within the Taliban have already shown a willingness to negotiate, and may be won over by proposals that will give them a share of political power, greater local autonomy, and the prospect of economic gain. The Taliban is not a unified movement but instead a label that is applied to many armed groups and individuals that are only loosely aligned and do not necessarily have a fondness for the fundamentalist ideology of the most prominent Taliban leaders. Participants also include a long list of tribal chiefs, militia leaders, and warlords, many of whom (including the Haqqani and Hekmatyar organizations) are a living legacy of the insurgency against the Soviets.

***Myth #5***

*There is no meaningful difference between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. They are part of a growing alliance of religious extremists that hate America and must be defeated at all costs.*

**Reality:** Al Qaeda and the Taliban are not the same – and in fact have many differences and disagreements. The Taliban is a coalition of political-military and tribal organizations that seeks power in Afghanistan, while Al Qaeda is a global terrorist organization seeking to end Western influence in the Middle East and overthrow existing Arab governments. Only Al Qaeda threatens the United States directly.

***Myth #6***

*If we leave Afghanistan, the Taliban will take over, Al Qaeda will re-establish itself there, and new and deadly attacks on America will be more likely.*

**Reality:** The Taliban are unpopular in much of Afghanistan and unlikely to take over the country. They might regain power in some areas, but Al Qaeda cannot recreate its former haven because—unlike before 9/11—the United States can easily detect and destroy bases and training sites with air power or special forces. Further, our large-scale military presence there may actually be increasing the overall danger that we face back home. Anger at U.S. military action in Central Asia inspired Faisal Shahzad, a

U.S. citizen, to attempt an unsuccessful car bomb attack in Times Square, and other home-grown terrorists appear to have been inspired by similar motivations.

***Myth #7***

*Our large-scale presence in Afghanistan is the only thing that will ensure women's rights.*

**Reality:** The worst thing for women is for Afghanistan to remain paralyzed in a civil war in which there evolves no organically rooted support for their social advancement. Women's rights are central to the progress of Afghanistan, and the international community should continue to support this progress. While our proposal calls for a greatly reduced military presence, we nevertheless propose an international peacekeeping force that will be sufficient for the continuance of a number of key initiatives, including women's progress.

***Myth #8***

*Withdrawal from Afghanistan will be seen as a great victory for Al Qaeda and enhance its popularity and prestige. If we scale back our engagement in Afghanistan, they will simply follow us home.*

**Reality:** It is our military presence that is actively aiding Taliban recruitment and encouraging disparate extremist groups to back one another. The Afghan mujaheddin did not "follow the Soviets home" after they withdrew, and the same will be true once the United States reduces its military footprint and eventually disengages. In fact, military disengagement will undermine Al Qaeda's claims that the United States is trying to "dominate" the Muslim world. A smaller U.S. footprint in the Muslim world will make Americans safer, not encourage terrorist attacks against American targets at home and abroad.

***Myth #9***

*The U.S. scaling back its military mission in Afghanistan will threaten Pakistan's stability and jeopardize control of its nuclear arsenal.*

**Reality:** A prolonged and unwinnable war is more likely to undermine stability in Pakistan than would the prompt scaling down of the U.S. military mission. There are many other steps that the United States could take to help secure Pakistan's nuclear arsenal that would be far less expensive and more effective than keeping a large military force in Afghanistan.

Fortunately, the danger of a radical takeover of the Pakistani government is small. Islamist extremism in Pakistan is concentrated within the tribal areas in its northwest frontier, and largely confined to its Pashtun minority (which comprises about 15 percent of the population). The Pakistani army is primarily Punjabi (roughly 50 percent of the population) and remains loyal. At present, therefore, this second strategic interest is not seriously threatened.

***Myth #10***

*Reducing the military effort in Afghanistan will cause allies to doubt our credibility and staying power. Some might even be tempted to cut deals with our adversaries.*

**Reality:** Public support for the allied mission in Afghanistan is lagging in almost all partner countries. The United States will strengthen its credibility among allies by coming forward with a realistic and pragmatic strategy for scaling back and eventually ending the mission. With some NATO countries already heading for the exit, a U.S. aimed at eventual departure is more likely to keep the coalition intact than one that aims at unrealizable objectives. In our view, the U.S. will gain the most credibility with our allies from making decisions that are recognized as wise, even if they represent a change in direction.

***Myth #11***

*If the Obama administration scales back the mission in Afghanistan, Republicans will portray it as "soft" and the Democratic Party will pay a big political price in the 2010 and 2012 elections.*

**Reality:** Our strategy in Afghanistan should be based on U.S. national interests, not partisan politics. Moreover, the war is increasingly unpopular with the American people, and voters will support a strategy that reduces costs, emphasizes counter-terrorism, and begins to bring U.S. troops home.

## Members of the Afghanistan Study Group

The individuals listed here have provided the ideas and language used in this report. While many of them would not agree with every detail of the report, they do agree with the overall recommendation and direction put forward here. We are deeply grateful for their leadership, involvement, and support during the process.

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