

AFGHANISTAN AT THE BREAKING POINT

Executive Summary

The Paper in a Nutshell

The current strategy of defeating the Taliban militarily is unrealistic. The coalition is on the defensive across much of Afghanistan and can—at most—only contain the insurgency with current troop levels. Rather than committing more troops, the United States should pursue a political solution to the conflict—including a cease-fire and negotiations with the insurgents.

Vital Statistics

- The Afghan central government only controls the cities, and even then its hold in the southern Pashtun belt is tenuous at best.
- The insurgency's growing reach makes it impossible to hand over responsibility for security to the Afghans in the foreseeable future.
- The coalition currently has approximately 150,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan, including around 100,000 American military personnel.
- Precise calculations are difficult, but tens of thousands of additional troops will be required to merely contain the Taliban; many more will be required for the coalition to adopt an offensive stance and win back territory, but this will come with heavy losses.
- U.S. national interests don't justify the financial and human burden of maintaining more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. The ultimate goal of preventing a return of al-Qaeda is best achieved through negotiations and a shift to counterterrorism.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy Makers

Resist the temptation to send more troops: The current military option is swiftly leading to an increase in U.S. troops to counter the insurgency's rise and offset the looming withdrawal of European forces. Such an escalation, however, is politically untenable given dwindling public support for the war at home. Washington must resist the urge to deploy additional troops.

Pursue a political solution: Despite the best efforts of the military, victory on the battlefield is quickly becoming unattainable. Rather than expend more blood and treasure with little prospect of success, the coalition should work toward a cease-fire and enter into negotiations with the insurgents.

Insist on a power-sharing government: The coalition's goal in negotiations should be to strike a political deal robust enough to withstand a slow withdrawal of international forces. To ensure such an outcome, the United States should insist on a power-sharing agreement among the various Afghan factions and the formation of a coalition government.

Reserve the right to intervene militarily: As part of a negotiated settlement, the coalition needs to reserve the right to intervene militarily to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a sanctuary for extremist groups. The coalition can thereby accomplish the more limited, but critical goal of preventing the return of al-Qaeda.

Act quickly: Given the rapidly deteriorating security situation, every passing month strengthens the position of the Taliban. A viable exit strategy is still possible, but time is not on America's side.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gilles Dorransoro is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment and 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 (ISAF), and the necessary steps toward building a viable government in Kabul.

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE: Founded in 1910, the Carnegie Endowment is a leading, nonpartisan think tank specializing in foreign affairs. It is also the world's first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, D.C., Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: A full-length version of this study is available on the web at: www.carnegieendowment.org/dorransoro. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our congressional liaison, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.

