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U.S. POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN

Changing Strategies, Preserving Gains

Ashley J. Tellis and Jeff Eggers



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Summary

Although considerable security, political, and economic progress has been made in Afghanistan, much remains to be done to attain long-term stability and extinguish the Taliban insurgency. In this respect, while the conflict in Afghanistan is no longer consistently in the public eye, it remains of great importance to the United States. Going forward, U.S. policy should aim to protect the integrity of the Afghan state and, toward that end, attempt to end the conflict in ways that mitigate the threats of terrorism, instability, and conflict in the region.

The Current Situation

- The security environment in Afghanistan is still precarious, evidenced by the uptick in violence in 2016 and the diminishing government control in rural areas.
- Factions of the Government of National Unity remain divided, and a corrupt patronage system continues to impede reform.
- Economic growth has shrunk since the drawdown of international forces, while the government remains heavily dependent on foreign aid.
- Afghan-Pakistani relations have frayed due to widening differences on security at a time when regional competition in and over Afghanistan persists.
- The United States' willingness to indefinitely subsidize Afghanistan with some \$23 billion per year is uncertain, especially when al-Qaeda's core has been reduced to incoherence.
- However, the combination of a weakening Afghan regime and an unchecked Taliban resurgence could lead to the catastrophic collapse of the Afghan government and state, resulting in either a return to anarchy or the recrudescence of terrorist groups.

The Paths Ahead

- The United States needs to develop a strategy that protects the gains in Afghanistan while terminating the conflict.
- Regional options—resolving the India-Pakistan conflict, creating a neutral Afghanistan, or squeezing Pakistan—are too difficult to rely on alone.

- Unilateral options—either pursuing major escalation or a complete disengagement—are equally implausible because of their high costs and risks, respectively.
- Only limited approaches—moderately expanding the current commitment, seeking a political settlement, or fostering a long-term counterterrorism partnership—are left. Since a counterterrorism-only solution is unlikely to be efficacious, the United States should prioritize reaching a political settlement with the Taliban while continuing to bolster the Afghan state and its security forces.
- To be successful, Washington will need to empower the U.S. ambassador in Kabul to oversee the administration's entire strategy in Afghanistan; persuade the Afghan government to begin a serious national dialogue on political reconciliation; engage in direct talks with the Taliban; target the Taliban shura, if necessary, while inducing Rawalpindi to constrain the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan; and secure regional support for a political settlement in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The conflict in Afghanistan is the United States' longest-running war by nearly six years. Approximately 10,000 U.S. troops, and more than twice as many U.S. contractors, remain deployed in this war-torn state.¹ Despite all the burdens borne, the United States and its allies have made considerable progress. The two-decades-long war that followed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had resulted in the comprehensive destruction of its state institutions, armed forces, and national economy. Today, the Afghan state has been reconstituted, Afghan security forces have once again become a national institution, and the economy continues to enable human development improvements while experiencing slow but positive growth. Further, fifteen years after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, U.S. and allied (including Afghan) forces have dismantled, for the most part, the terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan that attacked the U.S. homeland on that fateful day.

However, significant barriers remain to securing long-term stability and prosperity in the country: the political system is marked by deep cleavages; governance is handicapped by corruption and an inability to deliver law, order, and justice across the entire territory; the Afghan military as a whole is still not effective enough against a resilient Taliban insurgency; and the economy remains dependent on large infusions of foreign aid rather than indigenous sources of growth. These internal challenges, coupled with external pressures—the persistence of deepening Afghan-Pakistani animosity, the prevalence of ongoing regional rivalries in and over Afghanistan, and the potential for donor fatigue as the Afghan conflict continues interminably—could each and together lead to the unraveling of the security, political, and economic gains chalked up since 2001. Should such reversals lead to a tipping point, the survival of the Kabul government, if not the Afghan state itself, could be at serious risk.

This precarious state of affairs suggests that the United States and its allies—who together contribute more than \$5 billion annually in civilian assistance to Kabul²—have to make important decisions on how best to support Afghanistan going forward. In fact, U.S. choices about its future involvement in the country remain arguably the most crucial external factor in the evolution of both the conflict and the Afghan state. Based on an internal assessment that his strategy was slow in generating progress, if not altogether faltering, former president Barack Obama jettisoned his long-standing goal of ending the

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U.S. intervention in Afghanistan during his tenure and chose instead to leave crucial decisions about future U.S. aims and the means for achieving them up to his successor. Donald Trump's administration is undertaking a review of these issues, and it is likely that policy decisions regarding troop levels and the course of future U.S. involvement in Afghanistan will be announced soon. However, given the challenges facing this White House's national security team and the time pressures of announcing a decision at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) summit in Brussels on May 25, 2017, it is unclear whether the present audit will be comprehensive enough.

An independent effort to assess U.S. strategy in Afghanistan could accordingly prove useful, and this paper is intended to explore the fundamental strategic choices facing the United States. While the issues related to troop levels and the character of military operations are undoubtedly important, these are properly the province of government. Thus, the focus here is on scrutinizing the larger aims of future U.S. and allied involvement in Afghanistan and the policy approaches that could achieve them—not on the minutiae entailed by the alternatives.

Afghanistan's Continuing Travails

The future of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan cannot be effectively assessed without a closer examination of Afghanistan's current and evolving security, political, and economic landscapes—and their impact on U.S. strategic aims. There is a broad consensus among observers of Afghanistan today that (1) the security environment in rural areas is deteriorating while the urban areas and their lines of communication remain secure despite a growing Taliban threat; (2) the political situation at the national level is poor but relatively stable, although the pervasive corruption in governmental institutions continues to take a toll on the regime's effectiveness and legitimacy; and (3) economic conditions are difficult—with growth rates contracting as a result of the reduced foreign troop levels in country—and are unlikely to substantially or rapidly improve.

There is no debate that Afghanistan is experiencing a continuing downturn in security with more than 40 percent of its districts either under Taliban control or influence or in contest.³ In February 2017, General John W. Nicholson, the four-star commander of the U.S.-NATO mission in Afghanistan, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the conflict in Afghanistan reflected a “stalemate.”⁴ The 2016 “fighting season” prevented a repeat of strategic setbacks, such as the Taliban's takeover of Kunduz in 2015. However, the 2017 fighting season began with one of the most lethal attacks in the war, when ten Taliban fighters killed more than 150 Afghan soldiers and civilians after infiltrating an army base near Mazar-e-Sharif.⁵ Pessimists highlight the nonlinear nature of this struggle, the ability of the Taliban to make gains in

areas where they enjoy no ethnic advantages, and the possibility of accelerated deterioration without notice or warning. Optimists point to the Afghan National Army, which has remained engaged in fighting despite suffering heavy losses; the Afghan Special Forces, which have proven themselves to be extraordinarily competent despite suffering from overextension; and widespread support for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in part because of President Ashraf Ghani's tireless efforts to enhance their morale and national standing. In contrast, the Taliban appear to be confident about their military position, yet lack the assurance of being able to secure the victories that permitted them to enjoy the near monopoly of power they had achieved in the 1990s—a consequence of both the complexities of Afghan domestic politics and the continued international support for the ANSF and the Afghan state.⁶

Regardless of how the security situation is assessed, the persistence of the Taliban insurgency is perhaps still the most debilitating challenge facing the country; despite the expensive and concerted efforts of the United States, its international allies, and the Afghans themselves, it is far from being extinguished. According to the United Nations, with more than 11,000 civilians killed or wounded, 2016 was the most violent year in Afghanistan since 2009 when reporting began.⁷ The ANSF, too, suffered extraordinarily high casualties, with 6,785 killed and an additional 11,777 wounded between January and November 2016.⁸ Notwithstanding the valiant efforts represented by such losses, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has reported that the Afghan government today controls less than 60 percent of the country when measured by area and a little more than 60 percent of the country when measured by population.⁹ Although the majority of the population still remains under government control or influence, the Taliban appear to be gaining traction thanks to poor local governance and service provision, an accessible safe haven in Pakistan, continuing weaknesses in the ANSF's combat support capabilities, and the operational limitations of many ANSF components outside of the special forces.

In contrast, the internal political situation in Afghanistan at the highest level of state is generally stable, notwithstanding the disappointing performance of the Government of National Unity (GNU) as the salvaged outcome of the 2014 presidential election. Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah have yet to put aside their rivalry. They remain divided over appointments—often splitting along patronage lines—as well as over electoral and power-sharing issues. However, the two leaders' policy differences—for instance, over support for a continued international presence and engagement with Pakistan—are comparatively few. Whatever its weaknesses, the GNU's endurance has confounded those who predicted its collapse, and it arguably remains preferable to many other alternatives.

Regardless of how the security situation is assessed, the persistence of the Taliban insurgency is perhaps still the most debilitating challenge facing the country.

As a result of lagging reform, the basis for political legitimacy in Afghanistan remains an atavistic patronage system, fueled in large part by U.S. and international funding. In addition, governance remains highly centralized, with district and provincial governors appointed from Kabul. As a result, corruption remains ubiquitous despite Ghani's commitment to an anticorruption agenda. Troublingly, the Taliban have exploited the fragility and ineffectiveness of the GNU, offer-

ing a more agile form of local governance with a reputation, deserved or not, for being less prone to corruption.

Afghanistan's economy has contracted significantly with the reduction in the international presence, resulting in a recession and less than 1 percent economic growth in 2015.¹⁰ While growth is projected to rise to 2.4 percent in 2017 and exceed 3 percent by 2019, such performance hinges on both political stability and an improved security environment.

Even at such levels of accomplishment, however, government spending is deficit-financed despite nearly all security costs and half of the nonsecurity expenditures' being funded by the international community. The longer-term opportunities for sustained growth in Afghanistan have not yet come to fruition. For example, the country is admittedly rich in natural resources—especially metals such as iron, copper, gold, cobalt, rare earth metals, and lithium—but without internal stability and a durable legal regime that effectively regulates mining, the extractive industries that could contribute to the national exchequer have not matured.

Regional trade has been another victim of both the civil war and geopolitics. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA)—vital to Afghanistan as a land-locked country—is still too limited to be transformative. The agreement does not include India, the largest regional market; the administrative barriers to bilateral trade are still extensive; and the new China-Pakistan Economic Corridor potentially weakens the promise of the APTTA even further, leaving Afghanistan with fewer opportunities than is desirable.

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U.S. Interests and Objectives in Afghanistan

The preceding assessment leaves little doubt that Afghanistan confronts serious challenges in all areas of national life. Although the country has been successfully revitalized after decades of war—an outcome aided greatly by more U.S. assistance to Kabul than was extended to Europe under the Marshall Plan after the Second World War—the question of whether such support can be extended on an ongoing basis will depend greatly on the worth of U.S. interests and aims in Afghanistan. Recognizing that the threats emerging from Afghanistan have changed considerably since Congress authorized the use of military force in 2001, it is reasonable to evaluate the extent to which the original objectives have been achieved and, if not, whether these objectives remain valid.

The unprecedented trauma of the September 11 attacks prompted the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, which was intended to decimate al-Qaeda and its protectors “in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations, or persons.”¹¹ As a result of unrelenting U.S. and allied military operations since then, the core of al-Qaeda has been dismantled to the point of incoherence. Despite this achievement, however, the extremist ideology embodied by al-Qaeda persists across a more diffuse movement, and there are residual fears that the resurgent Taliban insurgency could reestablish a sanctuary for transnational terrorist successors to al-Qaeda, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, as well as formidable regional terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which could provoke major crises involving local nuclear-armed powers India and Pakistan (or even threaten the United States itself should LeT choose to operate further afield).

Permanently eliminating the possibility of such a sanctuary constituted the core objective of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of September 11. This aim had originally mandated the defeat of the Taliban, but as success on this count proved elusive, U.S. strategy evolved by 2010 to focus on transitioning the conflict’s resolution to be an Afghan responsibility, with Washington underwriting its financial costs. Given Afghanistan’s poor infrastructure, its weaknesses in state capacity, and the intensity of the insurgency, the other initial aim of stabilizing Afghanistan—through robust economic development and transformed governance—was increasingly seen as infeasible by the beginning of Obama’s second term. By the end of his presidency, both the open-ended conflict with the Taliban and Washington’s prolonged financial commitment to Kabul became suspect.

President Donald Trump thus inherited a U.S. policy toward Afghanistan that was focused on building Afghan security forces while maintaining a modest unilateral counterterrorism capability against transnational threats. Obama’s original strategy sought to complete the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces in Afghanistan by 2014. Since it turned out, however, that the ANSF proved incapable of independently holding territory against the Taliban, prolonging the presence of U.S. combat forces in the country was viewed as necessary. Effectively, then, Obama opted to let his successor determine the future of the 9,800-strong U.S. troop contingent in Afghanistan.¹² Whether to build up or further reduce the force fell to the Trump administration, but the viability of Obama’s own temporizing solution was unclear: the deployed U.S. detachment is costly to maintain in absolute terms and is large enough to be perceived by the Taliban as an occupying entity, yet it is insufficient to decisively change the course of the struggle on Afghanistan’s battlefield.

U.S. policy going forward should aim to protect the integrity of the Afghan state and, toward that end, attempt to end the hostilities with the Taliban on acceptable terms and in ways that mitigate the threats of terrorism, instability, and conflict in the region.

Despite these challenges, Afghanistan as a foreign policy issue—or as a national security priority—was seldom raised during the 2016 presidential campaign. Further, in his February 28, 2017, address to a joint session of Congress, Trump mentioned neither the conflict nor the country, and his national security cabinet nominees were scarcely asked about Afghanistan during their confirmation hearings.

Afghanistan's absence from the political center stage obviously reflects the crowded and more complex foreign policy landscape that currently exists—encompassing difficulties that eclipse those faced during the U.S. intervention after September 11, 2001. In this climate, the Trump administration now has the responsibility to reject or modify the view of its predecessor and take a new approach to Afghanistan. Whatever the course of action it chooses to pursue, the worthiness of the strategy will be judged on how well it incorporates the lessons learned from the campaign thus far and whether it stands a reasonable chance of achieving the United States' desired aims.

The challenge facing Washington and its international partners in this context is defining realistic goals for Afghanistan that continue to effectively ward off the worst dangers while permitting the consolidation of gains already achieved. Because much has already been accomplished in Afghanistan—though much also remains at risk—U.S. policy going forward should aim to protect the integrity of the Afghan state and, toward that end, attempt to end the hostilities with the Taliban on acceptable terms and in ways that mitigate the threats of terrorism, instability, and conflict in the region.

Current Regional Perceptions of the Afghan Conflict

Afghanistan: Afghan political elites lament what they see as a dissolving regional consensus on Afghanistan, with powers like China, Iran, and Russia beginning to hedge against perceptions of an ascendant Taliban. By and large, Afghans agree on the need for reconciliation as a consequence of their growing fatigue with conflict. Based on a recent survey, approximately 63 percent of Afghans support a peace process as a means of stabilizing the country—although fewer people report sympathies with the armed opposition groups and more people see them as exploiting power rather than seeking to influence Afghan politics.¹³ The Afghan government continues to hold out hope that reconciliation with the Taliban might be possible, but it perceives Pakistan to be the principal spoiler in this regard. Relations between Kabul and Islamabad have soured since the failure of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group peace process, an effort led by Pakistan to spur talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban and supported by the United States and China as observers.¹⁴ Ghani invested early political capital in this process, against the odds, and his inability to deliver has left him politically exposed and hardened against Islamabad. Given the uncertain future of reconciliation, Afghanistan desperately seeks a resolute U.S. commitment to Afghanistan to provide economic and diplomatic support, as well as assistance for Afghan national security forces through continued training, the supply of more advanced weapons, and the provision of combat support.

Pakistan: Pakistan continues to believe that only a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government will end the war in Afghanistan, since it has no faith that the United States will muster the commitment and resources to defeat the insurgency militarily. Many Pakistani officials, civilian and military, contend that even if Washington were sufficiently resolute, the Taliban are unlikely to be conclusively defeated.¹⁵ In any event, Pakistan appears determined to preserve the sanctuary that the Taliban's leadership—the Quetta Shura—enjoys on its territory, despite the Pakistan Army's continued effort to convince Afghanistan and the international community that it has abandoned its former policy of allowing for a distinction between the “good” and “bad” Taliban. Pakistan's rationale for effectively sheltering the Taliban leadership is complex: whether it seeks to compel an Afghan acceptance of the Durand Line as the permanent Afghan-Pakistani border, whether it desires a hedge against either a too-close Afghan-Indian partnership or an overly hasty U.S. exit from Afghanistan, or whether it strives for influence inside the Afghan government in a postconflict settlement, Rawalpindi seems to believe that protecting the Quetta Shura could advance its interests on all these counts. The Pakistani conviction that India's true objectives in Afghanistan lie in promoting Baluch separatism and anti-Pakistani militancy in the frontier areas only intensifies its resolve to protect what it sees as its core national security interests.

India: India blames the perpetuation of the Afghan conflict entirely on Pakistan's uncompromising support for the Taliban. In New Delhi's eyes, the Taliban may represent a genuine Afghan protest against the Kabul central government post-September 11, 2001, but its endurance is entirely due to Pakistani support that is intended to coerce Afghanistan even as Rawalpindi plays a double game with the United States—accepting U.S. assistance in targeting transnational terrorism while effectively shielding the Taliban. In these circumstances, India sees its nonsecurity assistance to Afghanistan as helping to stabilize the country, demonstrating solidarity with the larger international effort, and assisting a weaker Kabul in standing up to a stronger Islamabad. Successive Indian governments have encouraged the United States to steadfastly prosecute the military campaign in Afghanistan. India contends that it will support whatever the Afghan government chooses in regard to reconciliation, as long as Kabul is not coerced, the integration of the Taliban takes place through a constitutional process, and all sections of Afghan society are comfortable with the terms of reconciliation. Since New Delhi judges that these conditions do not yet exist, it strongly supports current U.S. and Afghan military operations to prevent the Taliban from being able to negotiate from a position of strength.

China: China stepped up its engagement with Afghanistan in 2011 based on a perception that the United States was likely to leave the country before its situation was stabilized. Nonetheless, China's interests in Afghanistan remain a relatively low priority and are focused mainly on mitigating the risk to stability in western China and to its Belt and Road Initiative. The broader Chinese policy of regional noninterference has resulted in Beijing's taking a hands-off approach to the most difficult problems of peace and order in Afghanistan. It has relied on the United States to manage these challenges, while it focuses on exploiting the modest economic opportunities that Afghanistan may offer over the long term. China's long-standing, all-weather relationship with Pakistan, however, has placed it in a position of opposing any

initiatives that come at the expense of Pakistan's interests. It has, for example, been far more sympathetic to Islamabad's approach to counterterrorism than Afghanistan, India, and the United States have been; and it will continue to promote reconciliation terms that closely mirror Pakistan's own preferences while in the near term encouraging the development of a regional consensus on opposition to the Islamic State.

Russia: Given the perceived failure of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group and the relatively low levels of U.S. engagement in the current reconciliation process, Russia has begun facilitating a significant regional dialogue on Afghanistan. Its April 2017 meeting, which the United States declined to attend, convened eleven nations.¹⁶ Russia has been largely skeptical about the prospects of a U.S. military success in Afghanistan from the very beginning—a view undoubtedly colored by its own experiences in the country. Moscow's current interest in promoting a political dialogue in Afghanistan, however, is shaped by its expectation that the United States will not remain resolute in its commitment to Afghanistan, especially in the face of supposedly rising threats from the Islamic State in the eastern parts of the country.¹⁷ As a consequence, Moscow appears tempted to curry favor with the Taliban, engaging the insurgents as part of its strategy to checkmate the Islamic State and limit the latter's capacity to expand its operations into Central Asia and eventually Russia itself. Other views of recent Russian actions are less forgiving: some see them as consistent with Russia's more assertive strategy in Syria, where Moscow effectively intervened in order to back a preferred proxy and contain U.S. influence. In any event, Afghanistan has evoked relatively good cooperation between Washington and Moscow, despite their bilateral relationship deteriorating over the Ukraine crisis. At the moment, Moscow is likely waiting to see how U.S. policy on Russia might shift under the Trump administration.

Iran: Iranian policy on Afghanistan is principally based on hedging against both the Islamic State and U.S. policy toward Tehran. Because of the latter consideration, Iran tacitly supported the Taliban intermittently during the last decade, despite its distaste for the Taliban's brand of Islam and determined political opposition to them during the late 1990s.¹⁸ Since hurting the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan was viewed—particularly by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—as a means of punishing the United States itself, some factions of the Iranian state provided low levels of support for Taliban operations, even though Tehran itself has been supportive of the Afghan state and its U.S.-led reconstruction after the September 11 attacks. As the vanguard of Shia Islam, the Iranian regime has been only mildly less opposed to the Deobandi-inspired Afghan Taliban than it has been to the ideological extremism of Salafi-based groups such as the Islamic State. The Iranians see the latter as part of a Saudi ideological project to counter Shia influence, so they are extremely resistant to Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council involvement in Afghanistan—although this remains a lower priority issue than other concerns, such as narcotics and water rights. In general, Iran is skeptical about U.S. success in Afghanistan, and while it might be willing to accept reconciliation as a solution in Afghanistan, much will depend on the terms and on the power any agreement may bestow on the Taliban.

U.S. Policy Options Going Forward

Given the continuing difficulties, there are a variety of alternative strategies that the United States could pursue in Afghanistan—some obviously better than others—if Washington is to achieve its minimal goal of protecting the Afghan state so as to mitigate the threats of terrorism, instability, and conflict in the region. The options iterated below, based on what frequently surfaces in public discussions, are summarily assessed and categorized with reference to their effectiveness and feasibility in advancing this objective.

Regional Approaches

A. A Regional Solution to End the Proxy War. If the Afghan conflict is viewed as a consequence of the India-Pakistan rivalry—one that cannot be solved without first engineering a rapprochement between New Delhi and Islamabad (not to mention Rawalpindi)—the United States ought to invest in achieving a permanent South Asian peace (as Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, had originally intended). This solution, however, is misconceived: it fails to account for Afghanistan’s own territorial problem with Pakistan—whose roots predate the latter’s dispute with India—and, in any case, is too difficult to achieve in the short term in ways that would improve the current trajectory of the conflict in Afghanistan. Another version of this option is the concept of regional neutrality, wherein Afghanistan gradually exits its current security-based partnerships in favor of implementing a cooperative security agreement signed by all neighbors and near-neighbors. This solution, however, is more implausible than it initially appears, as Kabul—without assistance from Washington—would have difficulty enforcing such an agreement if it were violated by one or more of Afghanistan’s neighbors.

B. Pressuring of Pakistan to Squeeze the Taliban. This option derives from the view that the war in Afghanistan is perpetuated by the Pakistan Army’s policies—in particular, its search for “strategic depth”—which results in Rawalpindi’s support for a Taliban sanctuary within Pakistan’s borders.¹⁹ A solution aimed at pressuring Pakistan would accordingly require Washington to use all its levers of influence, persuasive and coercive, to compel Pakistan to either give up protecting the Taliban leadership or force it to negotiate with Kabul. The logic underlying this solution is straightforward: the history of counterinsurgency campaigns suggests that the presence of a neighboring sanctuary is one of the key factors accounting for either success or failure. Operationalizing this insight in the case of Pakistan, however, is exceptionally difficult, because it requires Washington to convince Rawalpindi to do something that it judges to be against its own interests, even as the United States—given the absence

of alternatives such as Iran—remains dependent on Pakistan for the security of its ground and air lines of communication to Afghanistan. Consequently, pressuring Pakistan to squeeze the Taliban can only be part of a larger approach rather than an independent strategy for achieving even the current, more limited, U.S. aims in Afghanistan.

Unilateral Approaches

C. Major Military Escalation. Akin to what was favored by many U.S. military officers in 2009 during the first Obama term, returning to a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign that could sufficiently debilitate the Taliban-led insurgency—thus allowing for expanded governmental reach and a security apparatus that could safeguard the state from Taliban remnants—would require a sizeable increase in U.S. and allied military forces deployed to Afghanistan and intensive operations that could last for many more years, if not decades. Such an effort would have to include confronting the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan far more resolutely than has been the case so far. Whatever the merits of such an effort in the abstract may be, its moment has now passed because of the strong American disenchantment with expensive foreign wars. Moreover, the demands of such a strategy are beyond what the international community can currently organize, and its past failures in shaping the sociopolitical environment in Afghanistan, ending local corruption, and revitalizing good governance suggest that the complementary factors for military success may lie beyond reach as well. These impediments may well be endemic and not simply the result of incompetence. At any rate, even the threat of resurgent Islamist terrorism in Afghanistan today is unlikely to motivate the United States to embark on a major escalation of the conflict when the demands of nation building at home are judged to be far more onerous in comparison.

D. Complete Disengagement. A strategy of complete withdrawal of military forces along with a sharp diminution of external assistance—gradually or suddenly—represents the polar opposite of major escalation. Such a strategy could be implemented if the administration were to recast its war aims, declare the primary goal of the original U.S. intervention—the evisceration of al-Qaeda—complete, and announce its intention to concentrate on terrorism at U.S. borders and internally, particularly given the homegrown threat. Such an approach, however, is risky because it could result in the catastrophic collapse of the Afghan government and state, leading to either a return to anarchy or the recrudescence of radical groups within the country. Proponents of this option would rather accept this risk than endure the costs of the status quo, given that the current course could produce eventual failure all the same but at a much higher expense. However, because complete disengagement could produce greater threats

to the U.S. homeland over time and because path dependency often leads to an organic preference for the status quo, the administration is unlikely to countenance this course of action without some assurance of either a prospective political settlement or the option to quickly return to counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan should circumstances demand it.

Limited Approaches

- E. Political Settlement.* A strategy of seeking a political settlement in Afghanistan would require the United States to more concertedly pursue what it has not yet done: protecting the Afghan state and the gains achieved since September 11, 2001, by actively pursuing reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban in order to integrate them into the Afghan political system and thereby end the current civil war. It is conceivable, although it is not yet proven, that this approach could maintain and secure U.S. interests vis-à-vis transnational terrorist groups, whose relationships with the Taliban range from breakable (al-Qaeda) to opposing (Islamic State), as well as other regional terrorist organizations (LeT) that could precipitate major crises. Achieving this objective would require the United States to preserve some means of conducting counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, even as it pursues a political settlement with formidable operational challenges.
- F. Status Quo Plus.* This approach assumes that the current strategy is generally effective but requires more time and some material reinforcement. Pursuing this approach would entail a modest expansion in the U.S. troop presence in terms of both its overall numbers and authorities, especially in regard to permitting greater combat support for the ANSF; increased pressure on Pakistan to eliminate the insurgent sanctuary; continued financial support for the Afghan government and its security forces; ongoing encouragement of the Afghan state's political, governance, and economic reforms; and opportunistic engagement with the Taliban in pursuit of reconciliation if and when conditions prove propitious. The status quo plus approach, in essence, would reinforce all the current international lines of effort vis-à-vis Afghanistan to enable further strengthening of the Afghan state and to allow new opportunities for success as time goes by.
- G. Enduring Counterterrorism Partnership.* The third limited option could be developing a long-term, open-ended partnership with Kabul focused predominantly, if not solely, on the United States' primary issue of concern: counterterrorism. In this scenario, U.S. Special Operations Forces would continue to target global and regional terrorist groups from permanent U.S. bases inside Afghanistan. But, under this strategy, the United States would reduce all its other investments—military, economic, and diplomatic—for

rebuilding the Afghan state, offering to the state only those benefits that arise from either the limited U.S. counterterrorism presence or the efforts aimed at targeting common enemies, including the Taliban. This strategic choice, obviously, would reduce the overall financial burdens of engagement with Afghanistan, except for those costs associated with sustaining the permanent, counterterrorism military presence, most likely at the Bagram air base.

Assessing the Strategies

No extended analysis is required to conclude that neither regional nor unilateral approaches alone would satisfy U.S. strategic interests at this juncture. No regional or unilateral strategy by itself would be sufficient to protect and strengthen the Afghan state either through conflict termination or a successful counterinsurgency effort.

The regional strategies are simply too difficult, too lengthy, too indirect, and too unpredictable, even if Washington were to invest heavily in them. For example, Islamabad has strong incentives to protect the Taliban in order to secure leverage over Kabul while simultaneously having the capacity to resist U.S. pressure as a result of Washington's dependence on Islamabad for connectivity to Afghanistan. The only solutions that potentially could sever this Gordian Knot are a U.S. surrender to Pakistan, permitting its proxies free rein in Afghanistan at Kabul's expense, or a confrontation with Pakistan by all means necessary, including military force. The former remedy would likely provoke a major regional crisis involving many of Afghanistan's neighbors, whereas the latter would involve armed clashes between the United States and Pakistan. The different risks inherent in each solution, therefore, make them unlikely to be the preferred courses of action in Washington.

The unilateral approaches are just as problematic for other reasons. Today, there is little appetite in the United States for a major escalation in Afghanistan when it appears that much of the transnational threat from within the country has been diminished or displaced by homegrown dangers. The Taliban is undoubtedly viewed as a distasteful force, but summoning the will and the resources to defeat it militarily through a long, high-intensity counterinsurgency campaign seems beyond what the political climate in the United States can currently bear. Completely disengaging from Afghanistan, however, is equally problematic because it foregoes an opportunity to manage the risks to the homeland, however small they might appear today.

There is, however, an influential group of senior policymakers in the Trump administration who, despite the president's highly publicized concerns about radical Islam, are inclined toward disengagement because the costs of the Afghan conflict are viewed as prohibitive at a time when the terrorist groups

capable of targeting the United States have been marginalized. President Trump himself likely holds such views, if his 2012 remarks about Afghanistan being “a complete and total disaster” are any indication.²⁰ Obviously, it is well recognized that the Taliban’s return to dominance might provide new opportunities for resuscitating inveterate enemies of the United States, but the issue boils down to the high costs of sustaining a campaign against a political foe that is unlikely to directly target the U.S. homeland and whether a more effective—and cheaper—strategy for protecting the nation can be identified. Because the latter cannot be guaranteed, and also due to the momentum of previous policy choices, those in the administration advocating for continued involvement could carry the day for now, but the larger trend is clear: the United States seems increasingly uncomfortable with spending approximately \$23 billion annually—more than \$5 billion in aid to Kabul with the remainder in support of U.S. military operations—to support an open-ended conflict.²¹ Consequently, the search for limited approaches will only grow in intensity over time.

The simplest of the more limited approaches is shifting toward a long-term presence in Afghanistan—one centered on counterterrorism. The advantages of such a posture to the United States are self-evident. Washington would enjoy an enduring presence in Afghanistan, which could be used for continuous targeting of current (and any future) militant groups that might threaten U.S. interests while advancing other U.S. regional objectives in an unsettled part of the world. And it would provide the Afghan state with the psychological benefits of a durable U.S. commitment, which could dissuade the Taliban from believing that they could wait out the U.S. and international presence that justifies spurning current Afghan offers of reconciliation. Moreover, such a posture would be much less costly and perhaps acceptable to those who chafe at the current burdens imposed by the Afghan war on Washington.

However, the disadvantages of this limited strategy are significant. For starters, the narrow focus would mean a sharp reduction in U.S. economic and political assistance, which would further weaken the Afghan government’s capacity to cope with the insurgency—thus making the objective of containing the Taliban even more difficult to achieve. The prospect of a near-permanent U.S. presence in the country, moreover, could further perpetuate the conflict at varying levels of intensity rather than work toward its resolution. These consequences would make a U.S. strategy anchored on pure counterterrorism unappealing for any Afghan government, which would perceive it as bringing major disadvantages for Kabul, whatever the benefits may be for Washington. The fact that a lighter counterterrorism footprint would not suffice to limit any serious Taliban advances—because the Americans committed to this mission would likely remain more focused on force protection rather than concerted terrorism targeting—would only intensify Afghan disenchantment with such an approach. Finally, although a counterterrorism-centered strategy is indeed

cheaper than any other limited option, it would not be long before the U.S. political system tired of even such a moderately burdensome commitment if it neither protected the Afghan state effectively nor coped adequately with the terrorist threats in the region. The initial attractiveness of the counterterrorism strategy, therefore, evaporates when tested against the twin demands of credibility and feasibility.

If the foregoing arguments are persuasive, the limited approaches left for the United States in Afghanistan are some modified version of the status quo or a more concerted effort at securing a political settlement. Both strategies have important similarities but also significant differences. The status quo plus approach—which could turn out to be the default approach for the Trump administration if the president sticks to his campaign commitment to keep American troops in Afghanistan even though he would “hate doing it”²²—requires a modest injection of additional troops into Afghanistan for an indeterminate duration. The principal mission of all U.S. forces would remain the training of their Afghan counterparts, but the provision of additional authorities would permit U.S. commanders to offer specific assistance in combat support, medical evacuation, and surveillance and targeting when required by Afghan contingents to arrest the loss of territorial control to insurgents.

Overall, this strategy would involve maintaining U.S. commitment to the transition plans agreed to at the 2016 Warsaw NATO Summit: the United States would provide military and economic assistance to Kabul through 2020, after which both its assistance funding and its troop presence would presumably decline. The key distinguishing feature of the status quo plus approach is that even if the current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has not been entirely successful in defeating the insurgency and building a robust Afghan state, suitably bolstering the current course of action offers opportunities to repair present deficiencies and exploit new opportunities for political and military success. The risks associated with this approach are that the United States could be plowing more resources into a strategy that has not yet borne, and may never bear, full fruit.

The status quo plus approach includes space for seeking a widely acceptable political settlement that might end the conflict with the Taliban. It does not, however, prioritize reconciliation because of the expectation that a negotiated suspension of hostilities is currently implausible. The reluctance to emphasize peace talks is also colored by the fear that an early negotiation will redound to Kabul’s disadvantage if it is undertaken at a time when the current stalemate hurts the Afghan state more than it burdens the Taliban. The format of the existing reconciliation process does not serve to advance the effort either. To begin with, the Afghan government is formally the sole interlocutor with the Taliban, but the latter are contemptuous of Kabul and seek to negotiate only with Washington. Furthermore, Kabul has little incentive to seriously negotiate with the Taliban as long as it is assured continued U.S. economic, political,

and military support; this support permits Afghan leaders to delay any efforts at rapprochement in the expectation that prospective military success will strengthen their negotiating hand. Finally, the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan has made Rawalpindi—backed by Chinese support—a critical intermediary in the reconciliation process, and Pakistani objectives here are far from benign: rather than compelling the Taliban to seek peace with Kabul, thereby bringing the conflict to an end, the Pakistan Army seeks to use the insurgents to extort concessions from the Afghan government to include limitations on cooperation with India and acceptance of what Pakistan sees as its legitimate security interests in Afghanistan.²³

Some of these handicaps could be mitigated by making a political settlement a critical line of effort for the first time in U.S. strategy, especially if the Afghan conflict could be resolved in a manner that also secures U.S. counterterrorism interests. A political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan has been discussed for more than a decade, but it has only gained momentum in recent years due to the international community and Afghans becoming increasingly tired of the conflict. In the past, reconciliation suffered because it was an ancillary element of allied strategy, not a purposeful goal. Making it the targeted, rather than incidental, objective of policy going forward may offer promise; the Afghan government's recent deal with the Hezb-e-Islami militant group provides small but meaningful confidence that a political dialogue is possible.²⁴

A widespread desire to end the war in Afghanistan, however, does not automatically guarantee an acceptable settlement. Success in this regard will require many elements of the status quo plus approach, including continued economic, political, and military assistance to the Afghan government; but these investments must be shaped by the ultimate objective of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table and achieving a political settlement that is acceptable to all sides in order to protect the Afghan state. This strategy is plausible insofar as the Taliban are already in conflict with the Islamic State, have claimed a willingness to break formally with al-Qaeda, and appear interested in exploring reconciliation on the condition that it eventually results in the exit of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. The obstacles to any meaningful accomplishment, however, cannot be overstated. For starters, it remains to be confirmed that the Taliban's strategic aims are focused merely on ending the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan as a prelude to peaceful integration into the Afghan polity. If they are, a feasible deal involving the Afghan government, the United States, and the international community could be crafted to allow for the eventual departure of foreign forces after the requirements of counterterrorism and enforcing a peace agreement are satisfied. If not, and the Taliban's actual aim is to forcibly secure political control in the south and east or undermine or take over the Afghan state writ large, the prospects for

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a negotiated settlement are dim. Obviously, there is no way to confirm the Taliban's intentions outside of negotiations, and in this sense, a deliberately targeted process—as an activity alongside strengthening the Afghan state—emerges as a sensible path.

If the U.S. administration chooses to reorient its strategy to prioritize a settlement, five specific actions should be undertaken. First, the U.S. government should revamp its decisionmaking processes to ensure that the totality of U.S. investments in Afghanistan—to include military operations—are oriented toward bringing the Taliban into the negotiating process. This will require the closest political coordination with the Afghan government as well as with the senior U.S. and NATO military commander in Afghanistan—a task that should be the formal responsibility of an empowered U.S. ambassador in Kabul enjoying all the appropriate authorities, resources, and staff necessary for success. Because accomplishing the goal of protecting the Afghan state by ending the conflict will require “high degrees of agility, nuance, and local understanding in a dynamic, complex, and competitive environment,”²⁵ Kabul, rather than Washington, should become the locus for policy implementation, and the ambassador, as the “czar” overseeing all U.S. activity in Afghanistan, must enjoy the autonomy to make the decisions necessary to realize the administration's objectives without micromanagement by Washington.

Second, Washington should press Kabul to begin a broad intra-Afghan dialogue on the aims and terms of political reconciliation with the Taliban. Although most Afghans seek some sort of settlement to end the current conflict, there are deep divisions among them about the stipulations that would govern reconciliation. Creating a consensus will be critical if a sustainable political settlement is to be achieved. This will require bringing together not only all the various ethnic groups represented in the polity but also key societal constituencies, such as women, ideally in a consultation process that encompasses the provincial, regional, and national levels. Such a conversation will provide an opportunity for ordinary Afghans to define the kind of peace they seek, clarify the kind of compromises they are willing to accept in any negotiation with the Taliban, and develop strategies to ensure that the reconciliation process actually delivers on its promises. Involving the entire range of stakeholders in multiple consultations that would eventually lead up to a *loya jirga* (grand assembly) that ratifies the consensus is essential to ensure the sustainability of any negotiated peace with the Taliban.

Third, Washington should acknowledge that it is an active participant in the conflict with the Taliban and, as such, prepare to enter into direct talks with the insurgent leadership for the purposes of ending the war and ensuring the success of the broader intra-Afghan dialogue. Engaging in direct parleys with the Taliban allows the United States to minimize the importance of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group's efforts, which have diminished considerably in importance, while simultaneously driving a deeper wedge between the

Quetta Shura and Rawalpindi to exploit their different interests.²⁶ Any direct U.S. conversations with the Taliban, however, will require Washington and Kabul to coordinate much more closely to prevent their own differences, if any, from stymieing any genuine opportunities for progress. Moreover, given that the reconciliation dialogue should remain formally Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, continual negotiations between Kabul and Washington on the aims, terms, and limits of the settlement process will be necessary. Although the United States and Afghanistan are allies in the conflict with the Taliban, it is surprising how uncoordinated the two nations' strategies have been thus far. If reconciliation is to offer a viable exit from the war, the chasm between Washington and Kabul will have to be bridged with alacrity.

Fourth, the United States will have to make difficult decisions about whether to target the Taliban leadership in Pakistan, even while engaged in a political dialogue. There are compelling arguments on both sides of the issue. Thus far, the United States has resisted interdicting the Quetta Shura, except for former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was seen as implacably opposed to negotiations. Because there is no assurance that direct discussions with the Taliban will bear fruit, Washington should remain willing to target their leadership whenever required, thereby undermining the protection of their sanctuary to either push them to the negotiating table or compel them to stay there. The imperative of targeting the shura may in fact increase in urgency if the Taliban leadership concludes that their current military successes on the battlefield liberate them from the alternative of having to explore any reconciliation that may end up in a compromise with the Afghan state.

Fifth, any effort at seeking a political settlement in Afghanistan will require soliciting regional cooperation for success. All of Afghanistan's immediate and extended neighbors will be content to support a U.S. effort at pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban so long as their own particular interests are protected. Thus, for example, Iran, Russia, and China would support a negotiated settlement with the Taliban as long as the ensuing agreement contributes toward both defeating the threat posed by the Islamic state and ensuring that the Taliban would not support (or offer succor to) radical Sunni groups intent on destabilizing their own countries. Even India could support reconciliation under such conditions, but because it is unclear how such restraint would be enforced, New Delhi would prefer that Afghan moderates control the process of Taliban reintegration (or, at the very least, that it occur through a constitutional process that most Afghans are comfortable with).

The main challenge to successful reconciliation, other than the Taliban's preferences itself, will continue to be Pakistan. Rawalpindi would obviously support reconciliation in principle, but it desires an outcome that guarantees

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to its Taliban clients a share of national power through negotiation in the hope that this result would protect its strategic interests vis-à-vis both Afghanistan and India. Because this result is not at all guaranteed, persuading Pakistan to lean on the Quetta Shura to participate in reconciliation will prove to be an uphill task. While Washington should use more coercion to supplement the inducements long offered toward this end, U.S. leverage on Rawalpindi in actuality is quite limited. The only strategy that stands some chance of success in these circumstances is appealing to Rawalpindi's self-interest: should the United States fail to secure a political settlement in Afghanistan with Pakistani cooperation, the possible U.S. exit from the country would further exacerbate the conflict in Afghanistan. This, in turn, would only deepen Afghan-Indian cooperation to Pakistan's even greater disadvantage; further secure the Afghan sanctuary for extremist groups attacking Pakistan; and, by creating stronger incentives for all the regional powers to meddle in Afghan politics in order to protect their own interests, guarantee a much more turbulent western frontier—all with added burdens for Pakistan's security. Since there is no assurance that Rawalpindi will be moved by even the threat of such outcomes—given that Pakistan can confidently count on China's assistance for larger geopolitical reasons—Washington can only hope to mitigate Rawalpindi's obduracy as best it can while it continues to pursue a political settlement in Afghanistan.

All these considerations collectively illuminate how difficult the path to political reconciliation with the Taliban will be. Furthermore, even if the strategy of prioritizing a political settlement is ultimately successful, it is unlikely to

The status quo plus approach thus provides a critical backstop to the political settlement process as well as a safety net should the attempts at dialogue fail.

produce meaningful results in the near term. The process itself could go on for years and will experience considerable vicissitudes along the way. Significant oscillations are in fact inevitable because of the deep chasms that currently exist on many substantive issues. For example, can the Taliban's insistence on the exit of all foreign forces be reconciled with the Afghan government's desire for some long-term U.S. military presence to ensure Afghanistan's geopolitical independence and to hedge against a resurgence of terrorism and a renewed Taliban insurgency? Can the Taliban's vision of an Islamic emirate be subordinated to the Afghan polity's desire to preserve an Islamic republic? Can the Pakistani desire for integrating the Taliban into the Afghan government as insurance for protecting its interests be reconciled with the Afghan determination to avoid strategic subordination to Pakistan at all costs?

These and many more substantive issues are certain to bedevil any reconciliation initiative. Some issues could be resolved by procedural solutions such as the proper sequencing of political commitments, the incorporation of conditional reciprocity, and even possibly the introduction of third-party mediation at the appropriate juncture. But the very real obstacles to success cannot be overlooked at a time when many states in the region have not only

different views about what a successful political settlement should look like but also the capability to impede the outcomes desired by various factions within Afghanistan. For all these reasons, any approach centered on reconciliation cannot be pursued in isolation; a parallel effort to strengthen the Afghan state, especially its military capabilities, and to press Pakistan to change its current strategic behavior, will be essential. The status quo plus approach thus provides a critical backstop to the political settlement process as well as a safety net should the attempts at dialogue fail.

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