

# Fixing a Failed Strategy in Afghanistan

## Synopsis

The failure of the U.S. and British strategy as demonstrated by the summer 2009 offensive in Helmand province is accelerating the development of two potentially disastrous scenarios in Afghanistan. First, the war is spreading to the North, which had been relatively quiet beforehand. Second, the Afghan government continues to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the population, especially among Pashtuns. As a result, even if the right number of Afghan forces existed, a quick “Afghanization” of the war is not a realistic goal. Given that the Taliban are woven into the fabric of the Pashtun countryside in the South and East and therefore cannot be removed, the current U.S. strategy inevitably involves high casualties for few results. Instead, the International Coalition, with its limited resources and diminishing popular support, should focus on its core interests: preventing the Taliban from retaking Afghan cities, avoiding the risk that al-Qaeda would try to reestablish sanctuaries there, pursue a more aggressive counterinsurgency strategy in the North, and reallocate its civilian aid resources to places where the insurgency is still weak. That way they can make a difference.



## Policy Recommendations

The United States and its partners should:

- Stop insisting that the Coalition forces will stay indefinitely; it reinforces the (now widely held) belief in Afghanistan that the Coalition is an occupation force and negatively influences public opinion.
- Shift Coalition resources from the Pashtun belt; the situation in the countryside is not reversible there. More troops there mean more resistance and more casualties. With Western public opinion increasingly turning against the war, this strategy is self-defeating.
- Secure the urban centers as a priority. If a state can be rebuilt in Afghanistan, it will start in the cities. This strategy will result in fewer casualties and increased local participation.
- Stop the Taliban in the North with a more aggressive counterinsurgency, especially where their progress threatens North–South communications.
- Allocate resources where they can make a difference (urban centers, peaceful districts), instead of fueling a war economy and the insurgency itself.

The Coalition badly needs a success in the next few months to counter the widely held perception that defeat is the likely outcome. The current strategy could very well fail and result in yet another demand for reinforcements next year. A vigorous debate—more about strategy than resources—is needed.