



FIXING A FAILED STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

GILLES DORRONSORO

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Afghanistan Provincial Map



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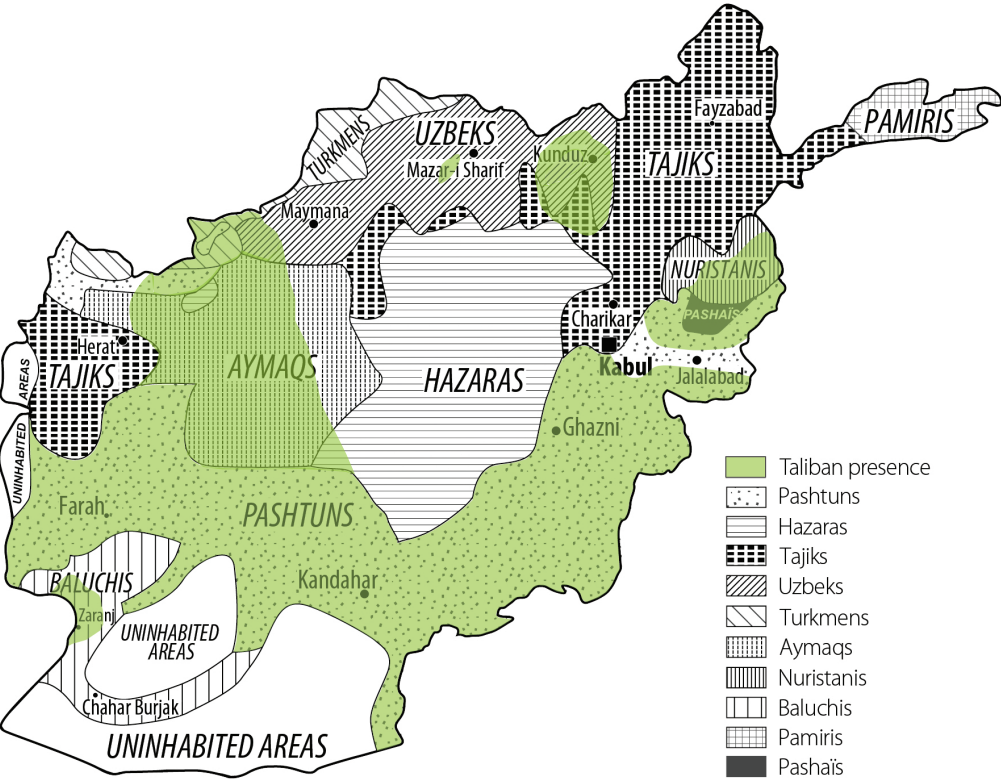
Acknowledgments

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Summary

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.

Ethnicities and Taliban Presence in Afghanistan



Introduction

On its current trajectory, how is the Afghan war likely to play out? Within a few years, mounting casualties will likely turn public opinion against the war and force a European, then an American, withdrawal; the Karzai regime—illegitimate and too weak to combat a nationwide insurgency alone—will collapse, and the Taliban will resume power following civil war in the North. This worst-case scenario is more likely than ever, given the accelerated deterioration of the country's security situation. The window of opportunity for a radical shift in International Coalition policy to avoid defeat has been seriously shortened by the loss of the Pashtun belt, the mounting insurgency in the North, and the penetration of the insurgency into most of the towns in the South and East.

More resources will not shift the momentum, and one should not confuse a flawed strategy with a lack of troops. The failure of the U.S.–British operations in Helmand province (July–August 2009) is a clear indication that the new population-centric counterinsurgency strategy of “shape, clear, hold, and build” does not work; it is unrealistic to assume that the Coalition will be able to regain ground against the insurgency in the Pashtun countryside. More resources cannot rectify a wrong strategy. While there are calls to double the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, that would not be enough to take back the rural districts from the Taliban and seal the border (a precondition for success).¹

Without a different strategy, reinforcements would be not only useless, but also counterproductive. An increase in the number of troops would fuel the opposition of the Afghan population, which would likely view the presence of more foreign troops as a military occupation. Spiraling

violence and casualty rates are already encouraging polarization and exacerbating violence. Comparisons with the Iraqi surge are simply wrong, mostly because there can be no “surge” when troops are deployed in an open-ended way. The Coalition’s communiqués stating that the foreign presence will go on for two generations—intended to reassure the Afghan partner—are massive diplomatic blunders in a country where feelings toward outsiders are ambivalent at best. In addition, more troops mean more casualties, and more casualties would further alienate public opinion in the United States and Europe. After the Canadians and the Dutch, who will soon withdraw from fighting, it is clear that some European countries are looking for a way out. At the same time, it is increasingly difficult to publicly support the discredited Karzai regime and the rationale for the war, especially because al-Qaeda is no longer in Afghanistan. The current strategy, which is based on expecting quick results, especially with regard to the Afghan National Army, is unrealistic and self-defeating. It is simply not feasible to transform a (mostly illiterate) force of 60,000² into a well-functioning army of 250,000 in only a few years, regardless of outside assistance. Afghanization—enabling Afghans to take primary responsibility for their security—could potentially take a decade. Lower casualties should be a recognized objective of a new strategy, and the debate should be more about the assessment of the current strategy than about troop numbers. The United States must reallocate its limited resources to correspond with its interests.

What exactly are the U.S. interests in this war? The Taliban are not threatening Western countries. The war in Afghanistan does not make the United States safer; on the contrary, the current conflict is strengthening radical networks that have a global agenda. The only logical link between fighting al-Qaeda and fighting the Taliban is that, if the insurgency takes the cities, al-Qaeda could have a sanctuary and shift part of its operations from Pakistan to Afghanistan. To avoid that situation, the Coalition needs to secure the urban centers in the East and South and help build an Afghan partner that is capable of fighting and containing the insurgency. It does not mean that the control of the border will be perfect or that the Taliban will be defeated.

The alternative strategy I suggest is based on protection of urban centers, reallocation of aid to urban centers and relatively peaceful districts, and more aggressive counterinsurgency in the northern provinces. This strategy does not require more resources. It lowers the level of casualties and gives the Coalition more time to Afghanize the war. In addition,

the focus on cities and the end of large-scale offensives, like the one in Helmand province, would mean more acceptance from the population. If the Afghan government is able to keep the major cities and towns in the South and East, al-Qaeda will not consider Afghanistan as a sanctuary, first because al-Qaeda requires modern communication technology and infrastructure of urban areas to prepare international operations, and second because of the threat of counterterrorism operations. This new direction lays the groundwork for de-escalation of the conflict in Afghanistan and allows the United States to focus its resources on the real threat, al-Qaeda.

Two questions arise from recent developments. First, is the current counterinsurgency strategy adapted to the Afghan context considering the failure in Helmand? Second, how can the Coalition's objectives be redefined when the war in Afghanistan is becoming a threat to the Coalition's most vital interests?

The Failure of the Counterinsurgency Strategy and the Loss of the Pashtun Belt

The balance of power has markedly shifted in favor of the Taliban in 2009. The International Coalition has lost the strategic initiative, and its soldiers are more hunted than hunters. With the exception of a few districts, the countryside of the Pashtun belt is now totally lost. The Taliban have achieved a slow entanglement of the urban areas and are now preparing the next stage of the insurgency: destabilization of the cities and towns to break any attempt at reconstituting a functioning administration. The attacks against the cities of Kandahar, Khost, Ghazni, and Pul-i Alam (Logar province) are part of this strategy, as is the takeover of numerous district centers. In addition, the Taliban are systematically targeting police chiefs and secret services cadres.

The Taliban are now sufficiently strong to hope for tactical victories against the Coalition. In some cases, the balance of power makes the evacuation of outposts the only solution; some outposts are so isolated that they have no military value. In Nuristan and Kunar, the U.S. Army is evacuating small outposts that are under constant fire from the local population. In July 2008, the insurgent assault on Wanat, in Nuristan's Waygal district, killed nine men; eight U.S. soldiers were killed in a similar operation in Kamdesh (Nuristan) in October 2009. In both cases, the bases were abandoned. In Panjway (Kandahar province), the Canadians evacuated all but two of their outposts in the past few months, basically leaving the district to the Taliban.

Comparison and Its Limits

Three comparisons have been made recently with the Coalition's efforts in Afghanistan: the Soviet occupation and the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Except for Iraq, these comparisons are instructive with the usual caveats.

Comparisons between the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are too often made as if the two situations were similar. They are not. There are *no* lessons to draw from the success of the surge in Iraq, which itself is more debatable than Washington conventional wisdom recognizes. First, the Iraqi insurgency is extremely fragmented and fraught with infighting. The Taliban, however, are a much more cohesive movement with central leadership and little internal strife. Second, part of the Iraqi insurgency was a frontal attack on the old Iraqi social order, namely the tribal system. In Afghanistan, tensions between the insurgency and local tribes are limited. The Taliban have managed to make the eastern tribes politically irrelevant without much overt violence; no tribes are available to build the kind of Awakening movement that had been instrumental in Iraq. Third, fighting in Iraq has always been geographically limited (mostly to Anbar province and Baghdad), and the insurgency is primarily urban; in Afghanistan, the situation is the opposite. Fourth, the Iraqi insurgency has no sanctuary in neighboring Syria or Iran, while Pakistan offers the Taliban a sanctuary. Finally, state institutions were ready to be reactivated in Iraq; in Afghanistan, where a "dis-institutionalization" process is occurring, the re-creation of the army in a few years is just not doable the same way as it was in Iraq.

The comparison with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan is more fruitful. First, there is the question of the cost of the occupation. Contrary to romantic perceptions, the "graveyard of empires" is essentially so because Afghanistan's geography and social structures have never justified the huge costs of occupying it. Because of that, it became a buffer state between empires in the nineteenth century and, after failing to control it in the twentieth century, the Soviets finally evacuated. The comparison with the current war is relevant because the question of cost is affecting decision making today as it influenced past actors in Afghanistan. Second, the Coalition very often has the same local allies that the Soviets had in Afghanistan and, to a certain extent, the same project of modernization. This project supported by the Coalition is perceived as (and is) a variation of the communist one: women's rights, economic development, rejection of Islam as a legal and comprehensive system, for example. The minorities (Uzbeks, Hazaras, Tajiks) are more willing than the Pashtuns to accept the presence of foreign forces.

Finally, the Vietnam War offers three grounds for understanding the political processes around Afghanistan. First, the relationship between the U.S. military and the administration is tense. The military tends to be somewhat autonomous, including the way it shapes public opinion via leaks to the media. Second, a lack of clear objectives and an overemphasis on the threat explain the never-ending demand for more resources, much as the domino theory and the fear that defeat in Vietnam would end U.S. influence in the world motivate the doubling of bets in Afghanistan. Finally, the logic of geographically expanding a conflict that is difficult to solve (bombing Laos or Pakistan), operated in Vietnam as it does now in Af-Pak.

The Flaws in the Counterinsurgency Strategy

In 2009, the Coalition has tried to define a new strategy—aiming to marginalize the insurgency by regaining control of the countryside in the provinces most affected by the insurgency. With the Iraq war, the U.S. Army has rediscovered classic counterinsurgency theory. The current “shape, clear, hold, and build” strategy requires control of territory and a separation of insurgents from the population. Troops clear an area, remain there, and implement an ambitious development program intended to gain the support of the population. The central concept is to stop thinking about territory—a mistake made during the first years of the war—and focus instead on the population.³ Yet the context in which these theories were created is quite specific: First, there was a state, albeit a colonial one; second, the insurgency was initiated by a group of nationalist intellectuals who, as far as the rural population was concerned, were outsiders. The failure of the current policy stems from the underestimation of the Taliban and the impossibility of “clearing” an area of insurgents.

The relationship between the Taliban and the population is one key element of the new strategy. A common misperception is that the insurgents are terrorizing the Afghan people and that the insurgents’ level of support among the people is marginal. This has led to the objective of “separating the Taliban from the population” or “protecting the population” from the Taliban. Yet at this stage of the war, and specifically in the Pashtun belt, there is no practical way to separate the insurgency from the population in the villages, and furthermore there is no Afghan state structure to replace the Coalition forces once the Taliban have been removed. In fact, this approach reflects a misunderstanding about just who the Taliban are. Even if it is

possible to find examples where the Taliban are not local and oppressive to villagers, the situation in the Pashtun belt is much more complex. The Taliban have successfully exploited local grievances against corrupt officials and the behavior of the foreign forces, framing them as a jihad. Moreover, the Taliban are generally careful not to antagonize the population. They are much more tolerant of music and of beardless men than before 2001, and Mullah Omar has repeatedly made clear that the behavior of the fighters should be respectful (for example, paying for the food they take). Most of the insurgents are local and, especially in case of heavy fighting, the local solidarities tend to work in favor of the Taliban and against foreigners in a mix of religious and nationalist feelings.

How does the Coalition control the supposedly cleared areas? Trust between Coalition forces and the Afghan people (especially the Pashtuns) simply does not exist, and, after eight years in the country, the battle for hearts and minds has been lost. The Coalition forces still have not worked out how to be accepted locally—that it is counterproductive to patrol villages with soldiers who are ill-equipped to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and whose average stay is six months. This miscalculation has been compounded by the past poor behavior of some Coalition forces—the beating of prisoners, arbitrary imprisonment, aggressive behavior on the road—and the unwitting bombing of civilians.

The absence of a state structure in the Pashtun belt means that military operations, other than a token Afghan army presence, are predominantly foreign in composition. Because the police are corrupt or inefficient, there is no one left to secure the area after the “clear” phase. And because the pro-government groups are locally based, they can go outside their area only with great difficulty. The so-called ink spot strategy—subduing a large hostile region with a relatively small military force by establishing a number of small safe areas and then pushing out from each one and extending control until only a few pockets of resistance remain—is not working because of the social and ethnic fragmentation: Stability in one district does not necessarily benefit neighboring ones, since groups and villages are often antagonists and compete for the spoils of a war economy. In this context, securing an area means staying there indefinitely, under constant threat from the insurgency.

Finally, given the complexity of the strategy—one that requires a deep understanding of Pashtun society—one must ask whether the Coalition has the bureaucratic agility and competence to implement it and outsmart the Taliban, who are obviously quite good at playing local politics. There is no reason for confidence in this regard, so the Coalition should pursue a simpler strategy in Afghanistan.

Helmand as a Test Case

Helmand province was a poor choice as a test ground for the Coalition's strategy, given that it was the harshest environment in which to try to succeed and where the consequences of failure would be significant.⁴ Extending an adapted version of the Helmand approach in the South and East, as suggested in the report by General Stanley McChrystal, will most likely encounter the same inability to clear an area and a high number of casualties.

Considering the importance of success to the operation launched in summer 2009, one should ask why the Coalition chose Helmand. Two reasons are cited: First, Helmand is the leading opium-producing province. Yet according a recent CIA report, the Taliban receive much less financial support from opium—only \$70 million a year—than previously thought, and more from other sources. There are no indications that the eradication of opium would slow down the insurgency. Anyway, the insurgency operates on the cheap, mostly receiving donations from individuals in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Gulf states; taxes; and defrauding nongovernmental organizations operating in their areas. In addition, the Taliban have huge stocks of weapons in Helmand. Second, Helmand allows easy and direct access to Pakistan and roads to the western provinces (Ghor, Herat, and Badghis). The Taliban also have easy access via the northern part of the province, which the Coalition cannot occupy (and did not try to) because of the difficult nature of the terrain, despite its being the key route for insurgency into the western provinces. In addition, the Pakistani security forces do not have the means, or the will, to close the border to the insurgents, making control of the southern border impossible. So there was no convincing argument for focusing Coalition

resources on Helmand, especially when the situation in Kunduz province is out of control or when the road between Gardez and Khost (see map) is essentially controlled by the insurgents. Most probably, the real reason to deploy one-fifth of Coalition troops in a marginal area was the previous British failure there, e.g., a case of “path dependence,” in which the Taliban have manipulated our agenda, forcing the Coalition to fight on ground favorable to them.

Indeed, there were at least three reasons *not* to choose Helmand: the high level of public support for the Taliban there; the lack of a local state structure and the marginalization of the local strongmen linked to President Hamid Karzai; and the previous failures of the Coalition in the province.⁵

Although the lack of state structure in Helmand meant that after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, local strongmen⁶—commercially and tribally close to Karzai—were back in power, the return of the Taliban and the presence of the Coalition have successfully marginalized them, prompting many of them to move to Kabul.

Examples include Shir Mohammad Akhunzada,⁷ who is now a senator; Abdul Rahman Jan, whose son is an MP;⁸ and Dad Mohammad Khan and Mir Wali,⁹ both MPs. All belong to the zirak tribes (Alikozai, Barakzai, and Popolzai), which historically have been dominant in Kandahar. The British asked repeatedly for the removal of then-Governor Akhunzada, a major drug dealer, and obtained it in December 2005.¹⁰ The current governor, Gulab Mangal, was chosen by the Coalition and has no support in Helmand or Kabul. Alienated from the Coalition, Dad Mohammad Khan did not fight the Taliban the way he used to and was killed by a roadside bomb in March 2009. The Taliban conducted assassinations to weaken the local militia. The consequence has been to make the political game much more polarized (a national trend): the Coalition versus the insurgency.

As a predominantly local force, the Taliban have a fair amount of support in the population, making recruitment easy. This has been fostered by a religious-nationalist reaction to the presence of foreign troops, Coalition operations, consequent collateral damage, and the misconduct of officials. So far, the population does not oppose the taxes levied by the Taliban, who are able to prevent crime in places where they are fully in control. And while the organization has been decapitated by targeted Coalition strikes, the deaths of Mullah Akhtar Usmani and other senior Taliban leaders in northern Helmand province have done nothing to

break the insurgency.¹¹ In spite of the Taliban's ideological opposition to the tribal system, their recruitment is partially tribal-based, picking up members from the non-zirak tribes (such as the Ishakzai), among refugees from Faryab fleeing the northern Uzbek commanders, and in the North of the province, from the Alizay tribe. Overall, the rejection of foreign troops is certainly high. Asked to choose between foreign troops and the Taliban during a massive military operation, most noncombatant Afghans will choose the Taliban.

Foreign forces have a bad record in Helmand for two reasons: historical memories and previous failure. First, because of British troops' history in the region, levels of xenophobia and suspicion toward the British are high. (The memory of the Afghan victory following the Battle of Maiwand in 1880 is still vivid.) Second, Coalition military operations have never been successful there. It is striking that the current strategy resembles the British strategy of 2006: to center troops on Lashkar Gah and Girishk and from there slowly attempt to take control of the rest (the ink spot strategy). But the pressure of the Taliban on Musa Qala and Sangin was such that the British troops were diverted there, destroying Sangin (which previously had 30,000 inhabitants) and a lot of villages around it. The population, exasperated by the foreign forces and the local police, welcomed the Taliban. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the huge casualties, the Taliban achieved a political victory. In fall 2006, the British forces were obliged to accept a cease-fire in Musa Qala until February 2007, which was ended by a U.S. strike on commandant Mullah Ghaffur. The next month, Operation Achilles mobilized about 5,500 NATO and Afghan troops in Musa Qala, Washir, and Nawzad districts. But the ability of the Taliban to infiltrate the areas supposedly cleared by the British was essentially unimpaired.

The Helmand offensive was launched July 2, 2009, shortly after U.S. Special Forces (and Afghans under British or American command) began infiltrating the area (the *shape* phase). The plan was to clear the province from Lashkar Gah to Musa Qala and Kajaki in the North and to Dishu to the South. Gaining control of the Garmser and Nawa districts was the main priority, with the objective of decreasing by half the percentage of the population living in Taliban-controlled areas (initially 50 percent, according to the Coalition; in fact, it was probably more). Contrary to previous operations, troops are to remain to secure the most populated parts of central Helmand. The cooperation of the Pakistani border police (and military) was obtained to seal the border. About 10,000 U.S. Marines

had responsibility for the South and West of the province, while 9,000 Coalition troops (of which 6,200 are British) operated in the center and North. In Operation Strike of the Sword, 4,000 U.S. Marines attacked three Taliban-held districts of the lower Helmand River valley. In June and July, Operation Panther's Claw saw thousands of troops pushed north of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah. Another operation, Eastern Resolve 2, was designed to break the insurgency resistance in Naw Zad (Dahaneh).¹²

Once again, the Coalition has underestimated the Taliban's tactical abilities. The insurgents chose not to fight U.S. troops frontally in the South of Helmand. In May 2008, the Taliban suffered heavy casualties there after an operation by U.S. Marines. They escaped Garmser and fled more north than toward the Pakistani border. There they regrouped on terrain that is more favorable to them and fought hard against the British. Insurgent casualties have been relatively low (probably fewer than 200) because of a heavy reliance on improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Thus the Taliban have not been substantially weakened, even in the short term.

The policy of *clearing* is plainly not working. The insurgents are woven into the population, and there is no way to distinguish them from ordinary villagers. As a consequence, the area targeted by the Coalition forces remains unsafe, and because the Afghan National Army is too weak to substitute, the troops can't withdraw without allowing the Taliban to regain control. Indeed, in the North of the province, the British were unable to clear significant areas of a Taliban whose strategy and coordination have improved since 2006, when their strong warrior ethic drove the Taliban to directly confront the Coalition forces with almost a suicidal zeal. Working in small units (usually 10–12 men) and carrying enough ammunition for ten days, they typically stay on the "front line" for a month before returning to their safe areas in Pakistan or north of Helmand. Thus the government is unable to secure entire districts—at best, it can hope to control the centers of these districts.

So, Coalition forces have failed to clear a significant portion of the province of Taliban fighters. The border with Pakistan remains wide open; it cannot be controlled with only U.S. troops. Predictably, the Pakistanis are not helping, allowing Taliban groups sanctuary when they need it. Only one district—Nad Ali—has been secured by a heavy U.S. military presence, and even then, not totally because IEDs are deployed there. There is no guarantee that the Taliban—in the North and South of the province—will not return. On election day (August 20), the provincial center of Lashkar Gah was hit by more than ten rockets, and security

inside the town remains extremely bad. The stated official objective of the operation in Helmand was to clear the area and allow the population to vote in the presidential election. However, as a sign of continuing insecurity, voter turnout was likely below 5 percent in the province.

There are major consequences of the Helmand failure. First, most of the Afghans perceive the Taliban as victorious; despite the deployment of thousands of Coalition troops, the area cannot be secured. In McChrystal's own words:

The reason I believe we need to be successful is as we have come in and talked about fighting this war with a more coin [counterinsurgency]—focused strategy. (...) I think it is important that everybody's watching. I don't mean just in the United States or Europe—the Taliban is watching, the people of Afghanistan are watching. If we make a public commitment to effective [counterinsurgency] ops ... it is important we be true to what we said in the first most visible example of that.¹³

Second, the fight for Helmand has motivated others to join the Taliban both there and in other provinces. Their foreign status does not rile the local population because they target foreign troops. Meanwhile, mounting Coalition casualties continue to turn Western public opinion against the war—a trend that seems difficult to reverse. One hundred and thirty-two soldiers died in Helmand in 2009 (from January 1 to October 19), almost a third of the total.

Resources: The Coalition Is Near the Breaking Point

Every year since 2002, the typical response to a growing insurgency has been to send more troops. Yet the gradual increase of Coalition forces has not stopped the insurgency; on the contrary, it has had a negative impact on Afghan and Western public opinion as well as on the number of casualties. Moreover, the focus on resources continues to prevent proper debate on strategy and objectives. However, the costs—human and financial—have brought the Coalition close to the breaking point in political and social terms. Sending more troops without questioning the strategy is the quickest way to lose the war in Afghanistan; it would be both inefficient and politically unacceptable. The burden of finding new resources will increasingly fall to the United States, especially if some European countries withdraw their forces.¹⁴

The level of troops at the end of 2009 will exceed 100,000. In addition, 75,000 military contractors—one-third of them non-Afghan—are in Afghanistan.¹⁵ The companies are recruiting untrained Afghans, some of whom belong to armed groups, many of which are corrupt and extremely unpopular. The cost of these nonmilitary forces is huge for the U.S. taxpayer, and casualties among them are not included in the official records.¹⁶

Casualty statistics tend to focus on those who are killed, but large numbers of troops have been wounded, and one-third return home suffering from serious post-traumatic stress disorder, with resultant social costs. Coalition casualties are near 1,500 and rapidly growing. In addition, according to U.S. Army data, only 1,355 of 3,613 service members wounded in action since 2001 have returned to duty.¹⁷ The

British Ministry of Defence does not publish comparable statistics. Since the conflict began, more than 800 British troops have been wounded in action.¹⁸ For the first nine months of 2009, casualties average a little over one per day, and the trend is indicating a total number near 500 for the year. Moreover, the current tactics leave Coalition soldiers more exposed (less air support, more patrols), making it likely that (even without reinforcements) if the tactics do not change, casualties will be higher in 2010.

Casualties in Afghanistan (October 19, 2009)

YEAR	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTAL
2001	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	5	4	12
2002	10	3	14	10	1	3	0	3	0	1	1	8	54
2003	4	7	11	2	2	6	1	4	2	5	8	0	52
2004	11	2	3	1	9	4	2	4	4	8	7	1	56
2005	2	3	5	19	4	29	2	33	12	7	6	4	126
2006	1	7	13	5	17	22	19	29	38	17	9	4	181
2007	2	17	8	20	25	24	28	34	24	14	22	9	227
2008	14	7	18	14	22	46	30	46	37	19	12	27	292
2009	24	24	28	14	27	37	76	76	67	39	0	0	412

Source: <http://icasualties.org/oef>.

In addition to the military costs, the financial impact of the war is growing exponentially. According to the Center for Defense Information, the cost multiplied tenfold from 2004 to 2009. The estimated cost to the United States of the war in Afghanistan will reach \$173 billion for fiscal 2009; for the whole Coalition, the cost will rise above \$200 billion.

In billions of budgeted dollars

OPERATION	FY 2001 + 2002	FY 2003 ¹⁹	FY 2004 ²⁰	FY 2005 ²¹	FY 2006	FY 2007	FY 2008	FY 2009	TOTAL
120 Iraq		53.0	75.9	84.9	101.9	133.2	526	657	\$1,631.6
Afghanistan	20.8	14.7	14.5	20.9	19.1	36.8	140	173	\$439.8
Enhanced security	13.0	8.0	3.7	2.1	0.8	0.4	28	5	\$61.0
Unable to allocate		5.5					5	5	\$15.5
Totals	\$33.8	\$81.1	\$94.1	\$107.6	\$121.8	\$170.4	\$700	\$864	\$2,172.8

Source: "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Amy Belasco, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, RL33110, May 15, 2009, p. 6.

The level of reinforcements that the Pentagon will ask for will likely be around 45,000 troops, putting the Coalition strength near 150,000 next year. Even that number, however, will not be able to shift the momentum of the war. History shows without much ambiguity that it is impossible to succeed with this level of troops against a well-organized insurgency that is benefiting from a sanctuary. Reinforcements cannot secure the border or even a sufficient number of districts to make a difference. The argument that reinforcements will allow U.S. troops to operate more safely is misleading. If the tactics do not change—if the main strategy continues to be patrols and the control of the countryside—then the number of casualties will only increase. As a Taliban fighter put it: “We don’t worry about reinforcements; they are just more targets.” In addition, it is not possible, for technical reasons, to quickly send massive reinforcements (more than 50,000 troops). A gradual buildup will leave time for the insurgency to adapt. Finally, private security contractors, now a part of all U.S. wars and whose ranks are expected to be further increased in 2010 by the Department of Defense, are *not* an answer.²² These companies have repeatedly been accused of corruption, inefficiency, and brutality against the local population. No one should be reassured by the fact that the former Blackwater (now Xe Services LLC) has had contracts in Afghanistan since 2002.

Reallocating the Resources for a New Strategy

Most of the confusion about the U.S. objectives in Afghanistan arises from the fact that the fight is a triangular one—a rare situation, not easy to conceptualize. There are three actors with different characteristics: a transnational network, a large-scale insurgency, and an International Coalition; and with different objectives, resources, and repertoires. Al-Qaeda has political, global, and nonnegotiable objectives: the end of the West's influence in the Muslim world and the demise of the West's local allies. The organization is a network and does not try to gain political control of a given territory. Al-Qaeda is not an insurgency and does not aim to mobilize large numbers of militants (currently al-Qaeda has between 1,000 and 2,000 militants). But the organization needs sanctuaries to survive. Currently, Pakistan is the main base, and limited sanctuaries exist in Yemen, East Africa, and Afghanistan. Considering that al-Qaeda strikes directly against Western countries (or their interests), its operatives need access to training facilities, cities, international connections, and the media. Even if the initial decision to carry out the September 11 attacks was made in Afghanistan, planning for the operation took place more in Europe than in Afghanistan. Moreover, some neighboring states, notably Pakistan, have more vital interests in Afghanistan than the United States and are prepared accordingly to defend them.

What is the importance of Afghanistan for al-Qaeda? The Taliban's significance for al-Qaeda tends to be overstated. The Taliban are not key to the survival of al-Qaeda. Its sanctuary is in Pakistan, and the security of al-Qaeda is linked to its relationship with Pakistani radical movements and tribes. So beating the Taliban does not mean beating al-Qaeda. Even if

the Taliban are marginalized in Afghanistan, that would not signify a clear victory against al-Qaeda because it is a network that can easily move to another place or be quickly reorganized. The argument that the presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan keeps al-Qaeda at bay in Pakistan and that a withdrawal would enlarge al-Qaeda's sanctuary is weak for two reasons. First, the Taliban are in control of large areas of the Afghan countryside, but al-Qaeda has chosen not to be there. As an international network, it needs cities and access to modern communication technologies—neither of which the Taliban offer. Second, the social, political, and security situation of Pakistan's border area makes it a safer haven for al-Qaeda.

The Taliban, in contrast, are a local movement whose main objective is the political control of territory and the (re)building of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. One can argue that the Taliban are more radical now than in the past, but there is nothing to indicate that they intend to or are ready to fight a war outside Afghanistan. But the Taliban are also not ready to sever their links with al-Qaeda. A Taliban victory would allow al-Qaeda to use Afghan cities as a base, posing a likely threat to Western countries.

The Coalition's main objective is to protect its members from another attack on home soil. Yet, in taking on the Taliban, with which it has no direct conflict of interest, the Coalition has been diverted from fighting its main enemy. What should have been essentially a policing operation, albeit on a large scale, became a major counterinsurgency war, the main mistake being fighting the Taliban as if they were an arm of al-Qaeda. The United States expends far more blood and treasure fighting the Taliban than it does al-Qaeda. In reassessing the implicit and therefore dangerous idea that putting down the Taliban is necessary to fight al-Qaeda, two important points must be made.

First, the Afghan war does not make the United States safer. On the contrary, the war is not an answer to the al-Qaeda threat, and it does not diminish the risk of another attack on Western countries. The relationship between fighting local insurgents and a potential Coalition fight against al-Qaeda is very much disconnected from the war in Afghanistan. Coalition strikes against al-Qaeda are not connected to the war in Afghanistan, and cooperation with Pakistan is the major explanation for the success (or failure) of such operations. The continuing war in Afghanistan, in fact, is a major asset for al-Qaeda, which is not engaged there (indeed, no important al-Qaeda members have been killed recently in Afghanistan); its fighters stay in Pakistan. The Coalition could continue to do exactly what it is doing now against al-Qaeda without the distracting war against

the Taliban in Afghanistan. That is why disconnecting the two strategic issues must be the Coalition's major objective. The Coalition presence in Afghanistan is not actually helping in the fight against al-Qaeda and is, in fact, protecting its sanctuary in Pakistan from local tribal backlash and from the Pakistani army and intelligence agencies. Without the war in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda would be under much more pressure from Pakistani and local forces. The Coalition presence in Afghanistan is the major element driving hitherto limited cohesiveness between the very different insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, the war is an impediment to constructing a clear and efficient policy regarding Iran, because it would put the United States in a potentially weak position should Iran decide to support the Taliban.

The Coalition's rationale for fighting the Taliban is to deny al-Qaeda the opportunity to create operational bases in Afghan cities. The Coalition's strategy should start from that clearly defined interest. A more cautious strategy in Afghanistan, aimed at securing the urban centers in the Pashtun belt and Afghanizing the war, would allow the Coalition to fulfill its main objectives. First, it would deny al-Qaeda access to cities, a key point considering al-Qaeda's operating methods. Second, it would lead to the Afghan war's losing its appeal, making it more difficult for al-Qaeda to recruit volunteers. Third, the enormous resources devoted to this war could be directed toward what is known to be central to Coalition success: human intelligence and a focus on Pakistan. A defensive approach in the South and East has no negative impact on operations against al-Qaeda, but it would allow the Coalition to invest more resources into directly fighting its enemy.

Secure, Reallocate, and Reorganize

Fighting the Taliban in the villages of the Pashtun belt is costly and largely untenable. The Coalition should instead focus on two key points: securing the cities and towns and stopping the progress of the Taliban in the North. These objectives may seem modest, but carrying out these tasks properly would require an overall reallocation of resources and a Coalition capable of functioning at its best in the coming years.

Why are the cities a major stake? First, the pro-Western population lives there. This is a key political stake, for if the Coalition is not able to protect these people, there will be no social base left for an Afghan partner. The June killing of at least ten Afghan translators who were apparently targeted by the Taliban is an indication of how difficult it is nowadays to work safely for the Coalition. Second, it is not only the cities that are threatened, but also the major means of communication that are indispensable for the flow of people and goods. Most of the roads outside the largest cities (Kandahar, Herat, Kabul to the South, among others) are not safe. The level of penetration of the insurgency in the cities is becoming a threat. In the South, the Taliban have a constant presence in the cities and in some neighborhoods have even attacked police stations at night. Kabul is more and more populous, with large areas of migrants or refugees and little, if any, state presence. The Taliban and Hezb-i islami penetration south of Kabul, in the Musahi and Chahar Asyab districts, is growing despite some police operations. The deterioration of the security in Herat, and more generally in the West, will pose an acute security threat over the next few months. The Herat urban area's geography makes it extremely difficult to secure the city, and the insurgents could easily

penetrate the suburbs. In the 1980s, despite a major effort by the Soviets and the Afghan army to secure the city, the Mujahideen were fighting very close to the city center.

In a previous paper,²³ I discussed how to secure the cities. Each city is a different problem, and the strategy should be adapted to the local conditions. A few points bear repeating. First, the cities must be defined in a broad sense, especially where there is a continuum between the city per se and the adjacent countryside. Herat and Kandahar, for example, are very extended urban centers, and their security depends on a large area. (The situation is quite different in Ghazni and Gardez.) Second, near the urban centers, local militia can be established with two conditions. They must be strictly defensive and not be allowed to operate outside their base (a village in general). They must be limited in number (for example, no more than 100 men) and supervised by the Afghan National Army. Third, the protection of urban centers implies the building of more small defensive outposts, which could be managed by the Afghan army in the future.

Contrary to popular belief, the war in Afghanistan suffers not from a lack of resources, but from a strikingly bad allocation of them. First, aid is going mostly to areas where the level of control is generally nonexistent and where integrity is largely recognized to be lacking. Second, troops are not efficiently distributed: 20,000 troops are mobilized in Helmand province to no effect, when they are needed elsewhere (in Kunduz, for example) to fight or to protect cities. The troops currently deployed in the North are neither trained nor motivated to fight a counterinsurgency war, a priority now, since some governments are implicitly demanding zero-casualty tactics.

Development Resources

Is there already enough money for reconstruction and development, or is a civilian surge needed? Before any more resources are allocated, the priority must be to fix the current system, which is deeply flawed because of a serious lack of accountability and wrong geographical focus.

In addition to the military costs, the Coalition has given billions for development in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan Ministry of Finance, more than 60 multilateral donors have spent about \$36 billion on development, reconstruction, and humanitarian projects in the country since 2002, with little accountability or integrity.

Since 2001, some \$25 billion has been spent on security-related assistance to Afghanistan, such as building up the Afghan security forces. Donors have committed the same amount on reconstruction and development, yet some leading donors have fulfilled little more than half of their aid commitments. Only \$15 billion in aid has been spent so far, of which it is estimated a staggering 40 percent has returned to donor countries in the form of corporate profits and consultant salaries.²⁴

Clearly, there are limitations on the amount of money that can be spent, especially because the territory under government control is rapidly shrinking. Second, any investment made in the countryside controlled by the Taliban will simply help finance the insurgency. Third, there is no easy and simple relationship between development and violence. As seen in other cases, such as the Kurdish insurgency, more development and improved economic conditions do not necessarily translate into an improved political situation. Finally, a civilian surge would not address the heart of the problem: huge corruption and inefficiency in Kabul and a war economy. In addition, the current allocation of resources is flawed.

If it were a state, Helmand alone would be the world's fifth largest recipient of funds from USAID, the US Agency for International Development. These disparities are also reflected in the pattern of combined government and donor spending: for 2007–2008 the most insecure provinces of Nimroz, Helmand, Zabul, Kandahar and Uruzgan have been allocated more than \$200 per person, whereas many other provinces are due to receive less than half this amount, and some, such as Sari Pul or Takhar, are allocated less than one third.²⁵

This irrational distribution of resources is partially due to the fact that part of the aid is coming from the 26 NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Each PRT is headed by the largest troop-contributing nation in a given province, according to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Thus the U.S. and UK PRTs are investing in the most contested areas, with few significant results. The aid is part of the war economy, especially in the South, with insurgents taking a cut of almost every project implemented in the rural areas. The Coalition

must stop rewarding the most dangerous areas and focus on those where success is attainable. In addition, whatever the official line, the current policy is resulting in the transfer of increasing levels of responsibility from the Afghans to the Coalition, resulting in Afghan officials appearing powerless vis-à-vis the local PRT, especially in places where the Taliban dominate. Increasing levels of aid could backfire and accelerate the disintegration of local institutions.

The Coalition then has to shift the focus of investment from war-torn areas to more peaceful localities where there is more accountability. Aid must go where there is control on the ground: cities, towns, and districts with local support for the Coalition. The current system of cascading contractors and subcontractors is resulting in—if not technically corruption—inefficiency and dishonesty. The focus on narcotics should not distract the United States from its main responsibility: reforming the system, starting with USAID, toward more transparency. Reducing the number of overpaid experts and consultants and limiting the subcontractor system would be a start.

Conclusion: Reorganizing the Coalition

The new strategy I suggest requires a redistribution of troops. Two elements are critically wrong at present: the overemphasis on the South and the lack of sufficient troops in the North. The Coalition is fighting where it is losing (in the South) and has no counterinsurgency troops where the Taliban could be beaten (in the North). This misallocation of resources is both the result of a flawed strategy and of NATO's approach. Some 20,000 troops should be mobilized where there is a real need and a real prospect of success—not in the rural Pashtun belt or in Helmand, where Coalition troops are fighting a losing battle with high casualties. In the North, the Taliban are locally strong in Kunduz, Badghis, and Faryab, but in most places the situation is still reversible. The problem here is that the main contingents, beginning with the Germans, are not able to fight the Taliban and protect the population. The only solution to this problem is a political negotiation and the awareness of what is really at stake here: the credibility of NATO as a military alliance. Countries that are not ready to accept a minimum level of casualties and whose armies are not trained for counterinsurgency operations should step away from the fight and focus on training. In addition, the Coalition is wasting its resources on the construction of huge bases, which often upset the local population and, because of their size and associated maintenance costs, cannot be handed over to the Afghan National Army at a later date. Bagram Air Base near Kabul is becoming a miniature American town, further alienating the Afghans. Smaller bases should be the rule, and more effort put into the relationship with the local population.

In sum, 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.

Notes

1. One has to remember, for example, that the “Challe Plan,” which resulted in the (military) victory of the French army in Algeria, necessitated successfully sealing borders.
2. Officially a little over 90,000, but only two-thirds have an (even minimal) operational value, and more than 90 percent are illiterate.
3. See Gilles Dorransoro, *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, January 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/afghan_war-strategy.pdf.
4. Other provinces with a better chance of success, such as Paktya or Paktika, could have been chosen. The choice of Helmand can be understood if one examines the internal dynamics of the coalition. The previous failure of the British to control Musa Qala is the key to understanding the new operations. It reinforces the point about the lack of expertise within in the coalition. Helmand is Afghanistan’s largest province, with a surface area of almost 60,000 square kilometers (23,000 square miles)—roughly the size of Ireland. The mountains in the North provide a perfect sanctuary for the insurgency, and the southern desert allows easy smuggling routes to Pakistan. The province is also the main opium producer in the country. So in Helmand, in addition to the Taliban, the coalition fights the drug dealers and potentially the farmers as well.
5. See, for example, Tom Coghlan, “The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral History,” in Antonio Guisozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban*, New York: Columbia/Hurst 2009.
6. In the northern part of the province, Raïs-i Baghlan has an autonomous and somewhat ambiguous position. He came to Kabul at Karzai’s demand, but one of his sons is a Taliban commander. (The other was recently killed in a coalition bombing.)
7. Shir Mohammad Akhunzada from the Alizai tribe in Musa Qala is from a well-known drug dealing family and was a governor before becoming senator.

8. Jan, from the Noorzai tribe, is a local chief of police.
9. Wali was the leader of a militia, which became, in principle, part of the army.
10. But Akhundzada's brother, Amir Mohammed, became a deputy of the new governor, Mohammad Daud (who was removed by Karzai at the end of 2006). The Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police was formed with men from Akhunzada and other local strongmen militias.
11. Bill Roggio, "Operation Achilles: NATO's Offensive in Helmand Province," *Long War Journal*, March 6, 2007, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/03/operation_achilles_n.php#ixzz0NxvOKMMK. Usmani was a member of the Taliban Shura, Mullah Omar's former deputy, the former foreign minister for the Taliban, and the operational military commander in Uruzgan, Nimroz, Kandahar, Farah, Herat, and Helmand provinces.
12. The offensive Eastern Resolve 1 was the Marines' initial push out of Naw Zad in early spring. This first move had a limited effect, because U.S. troops were too thinly spread at the time to control the areas they managed to claim from insurgents.
13. Julian E. Barnes, "Q&A with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fgw-qa-mcchrystal28-2009jul28,0,4220955.story>.
14. According to the Center for Defense Information, the estimated cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will reach \$864 billion by the end of fiscal 2009. See <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0933935.html>; and Center for Defense Information, "Defense Budget Tutorial: So, You Think You Know the Cost of the Wars?" <http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=3601>.
15. David Zucchino, "Deadly Contractor Incident Sours Afghans," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghan-contractors13-2009aug13,0,4756623.story?page=1&track=rss>. The cost is huge for the coalition's taxpayers, but the exact costs are not made public (casualties are not even recorded), so the public is not really aware of them.
16. See Zucchino, "Deadly Contractor Incident Sours Afghans."
17. DefenseLink Casualty Report, <http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:QXs7w7JZbwAJ:www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf+statistics+wounded+in+Afghanistan&hl=fr>.
18. Michael Settle, "Number of Troops Wounded in Afghanistan Reaches Record High," *Herald Scotland*, August 18, 2009, http://www.theherald.co.uk/news/foreign/display.var.2526017.0.Number_of_troops_wounded_in_Afghanistan_reaches_record_high.php.

19. This includes \$5.5 billion of the \$7.1 billion appropriated in DOD's fiscal 2003 Appropriations Act (P.L. 107-48) for the global war on terror that CRS cannot account for and that DOD cannot track.

20. Of the \$25 billion provided in Title IX of the fiscal 2005 DOD appropriation bill, CRS includes \$2 billion in fiscal 2004 when it was obligated, and the remaining \$23 billion in fiscal 2005. Because Congress made the funds available in fiscal 2004, CBO and OMB scored all \$25 billion in fiscal 2004.

21. Includes funds in the fiscal 2007 Supplemental (H.R. 2206/P.L. 110-28), Title IX, P.L. 109-289, fiscal 2007 DOD Appropriations Act (H.R. 5631) designated for war and funds for other agencies in H.J. Res 20, P.L. 110-50, the year-long Continuing Resolution. Veterans Affairs medical estimates reflect VA fiscal 2008 budget materials and CRS estimates. Amounts for foreign and diplomatic operations reflect State Department figures.

22. August Cole, "Afghanistan Contractors Outnumber Troops," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125089638739950599.html>.

23. Dorronsoro, *Focus and Exit*, op. cit.

24. Matt Waldman, *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, ACBAR report, March 2008, p. 1, [http://acbar.org/ACBAR%20Publications/ACBAR%20Aid%20Effectiveness%20\(25%20Mar%2008\).pdf](http://acbar.org/ACBAR%20Publications/ACBAR%20Aid%20Effectiveness%20(25%20Mar%2008).pdf).

25. Waldman, op. cit.: p. 3.

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