

Creating New Facts on the Ground

Why the Diplomatic Surge Cannot Yet Produce a Regional Solution in Afghanistan

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SUMMARY

- Although meaningful cooperation in the region surrounding Afghanistan is of vital importance, it has been elusive because Afghanistan's key neighbors have significantly divergent aims. Engineering a successful regional solution would require the United States to fundamentally transform either these actors' objectives or their dominant strategies. Achieving the latter may prove more feasible, most crucially vis-à-vis Pakistan.
- The region's history of discord is mainly rooted in the troubled relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan is colored by its rivalry with India, its relations with Afghanistan are a geopolitical challenge independent of India because of its fears of disorder along its western borders, the unwelcome idea of "Pashtunistan," and a related long-standing border dispute.
- Pakistan's reaction to these problems has only exacerbated them. As Islamabad, by supporting the Taliban insurgency, has sought to exercise preponderant, if not overweening, influence over Kabul's strategic choices, it has earned Kabul's distrust, deepened the Kabul–New Delhi partnership, and increased the risk to its relations with Washington—not to mention threatening the lives of U.S. and other coalition forces operating in Afghanistan.
- Despite widespread support in Afghanistan for ending the war through a negotiated settlement if possible, the Afghan Taliban leadership is unlikely to consider reconciliation unless it is faced with the prospect of continued losses of the kind sustained as a result of coalition military operations in 2010. A regional solution is similarly unlikely as long as Afghanistan and its neighbors, including India, perceive Islamabad as bent on holding Kabul in a choking embrace.
- Solving these problems lies beyond the capability of American diplomacy, and right now even of the promised diplomatic surge. The best hope for progress lies in continuing military action to alter the realities on the ground—thereby inducing the Taliban to consider reconciliation, while simultaneously neutralizing the Pakistani strategy that is currently preventing a regional solution.
- To increase the probability of military success, however, President Obama will need to forgo the politically calculated drawdown of combat troops this summer and instead accept the advice of his field commanders to maintain the largest possible contingent necessary for the coming campaign in eastern Afghanistan. Hard and unpalatable as it might be for the president, this course alone offers a solution that will protect the recent gains in Afghanistan and advance American interests over the long term.

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U.S. policymakers generally agree that a “regional solution” is essential for a successful security transition in Afghanistan. Yet there is considerable doubt about what such a solution would entail, its priority relative to other instruments, and whether it could even be viable. Despite these uncertainties, there is strong conviction that Washington’s transfer of defense responsibilities to Kabul will require its key neighbors to support an internal reconciliation with the Taliban so as to “enable a political process to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan,” as the administration’s 2010 review phrased it.

Viewed in retrospect, the administration’s yearning for a regional solution to the Afghan war has been enduring—but has also subtly mutated. When President Barack Obama took office, the quest for securing neighborly cooperation to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban was driven by his goal of getting Afghanistan right or, in other words, of winning this “right war” in the American struggle against terrorism. His March 2009 “AfPak” review clearly emphasized this objective. Two years later, he is still seeking a regional compact. But now, driven by the conviction that American involvement cannot be open-ended, he is hoping to avoid getting Afghanistan wrong or, in other words, to avert catastrophic disorder as U.S. military forces begin to leave the country.

Although the regional approach has thus survived as a permanent component of the administration’s strategy, the political imperatives driving it have changed radically. This raises a critical question: Can the regional approach deliver cooperation now—when all the neighboring states anticipate America’s exit—if it could not produce genuine collaboration earlier—when America’s commitment seemed more enduring? Understanding this issue is critical—before the administration embarks on more energetic diplomacy

intended to produce the regional settlement that will avoid failure in Afghanistan.

WHY HAS A REGIONAL SOLUTION BEEN SO ELUSIVE?

There is little doubt that meaningful regional cooperation would enhance the prospects for American success in Afghanistan. Regional cooperation may even be imperative for an effective transfer of security responsibilities to Kabul. As the administration envisages it, the war in Afghanistan will end not through a military victory but only a political settlement, which would promise reduced violence in Afghanistan and thereby ease the task facing Afghan forces slated to take progressively greater responsibility for ensuring domestic order. The prospects for such an agreement would depend on first achieving reconciliation among the Afghans themselves—including the Taliban leadership and its many confederates, the larger Pashtun population, other ethnic groups, and, of course, the national government itself.

This process, though difficult, would be eased considerably if Kabul’s neighbors were to, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it, “respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty, which means agreeing not to play out their rivalries within its borders, and to support reconciliation and efforts to ensure that al-Qaeda and the syndicate of terrorism is denied safe haven everywhere.” In support of this vision, Clinton declared that the United States would mount “a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome that shatters the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, ends the insurgency, and helps to produce not only a more stable Afghanistan but a more stable region.”

Whatever the merits of this hope for regional cooperation, they do not ensure that it will eventually materialize—even if the United States invests great diplomatic

capital as it is now preparing to do. To believe otherwise is to fall victim to a voluntarist fallacy that presumes that successful collaboration will occur merely because there will be joint benefits for all. The history of international politics regularly attests to the failures of collective action, and if success in the coming Afghan transition is premised on the belief that Kabul's neighbors will cooperate now because of Washington's effective diplomacy—when they have not for at least the last decade—Washington's hopes could be quickly dashed.

The real reason the regional approach in Afghanistan has failed is not because Kabul's neighbors are oblivious to the benefits of cooperation or because Washington's diplomacy has been inadequate. Rather, it has been unsuccessful thus far mainly because the key involved states—Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also secondarily, India and Iran—have sufficiently divergent aims to prevent any effective collaboration. Therefore, for America to engineer successful regionalism, it needs to fundamentally transform either these states' objectives or their dominant current strategies. Achieving the former is likely to prove impossible, because their incompatible national aims have been shaped by long, painful histories that transcend America's recent appearance in the region. Achieving the latter may prove more feasible because their present strategies are arguably more susceptible to being shaped by American actions. Paradoxically, however, this susceptibility may hinge more on the effectiveness of America's military instruments than on its diplomatic tools.

THE WORM IN THE APPLE

The regional conundrum in Afghanistan is mainly rooted in the deeply troubled relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ever since 1893, when the British Indian Empire muscled the amir of Afghanistan into

accepting the Durand Line—which split the native Pashtun populations and absorbed parts of Waziristan into the Raj—successive regimes in Kabul have rejected what eventually became the inherited border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This dispute poisoned Afghanistan–Pakistan relations from

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the very moment of the latter's founding and resulted in Afghanistan casting the only vote opposing Pakistan's admittance to the United Nations. From 1947 to 1963 and then again from 1973 to 1976, nationalist governments in Kabul consistently challenged Pakistan over the Durand Line through diplomatic pressure, tribal incursions, and support for secessionist movements—all premised on the hope that the Pashtun discontent with Pakistan would force the creation of a "Pashtunistan" that would return naturally to its historical roots within the Afghan nation.

Pakistan's position, in these circumstances, was not enviable: the prospect of conceding Afghan claims in its west when its own demands over Jammu and Kashmir in its east were rejected by India left the new state with unsettled borders in both directions. To Islamabad's acute discomfiture, even the Taliban—the most reliable proxies Pakistan has ever had in Afghanistan—declined to disavow Kabul's historical rejection of the Durand Line during their years in power. Until the last years of the Taliban regime, therefore, the troubled state of Afghan–Pakistani relations remained a serious problem independent of India.

For most of the Cold War, Afghan–Indian relations were proper but never particularly close. During the 1965 and 1971

Indo-Pakistani conflicts, for example—and contrary to the expectations of classical realpolitik—Afghanistan supported Pakistan as a fellow Muslim nation both materially and morally, despite their strong emotional differences over their common border. Only since Pakistan attempted to physically dominate Afghanistan—through its support for the Taliban since the mid-1990s—have some Afghans attempted to consummate a strategic partnership with India. This affiliation, which initially materialized through India’s

the Taliban and support the military takeover of Afghanistan. Fears about Indian subversion from Afghanistan appeared much later, and, although this Pakistani charge has been dismissed by New Delhi and remains uncorroborated by Washington, Rawalpindi’s obsession with defeating this perceived threat has led it to tightly embrace the Taliban and their confederates as a means of inflicting costs on both Afghanistan and India.

Today, what Islamabad seeks more than ever is peace along its western frontiers and a nonthreatening regime in Kabul. These entirely understandable aims can easily evoke sympathy. The instruments that Islamabad is using to pursue them, however, are deeply problematic and lie at the root of the current problems in Afghanistan. In its zeal to eradicate all threats from its west—which transcend India because of Pakistan’s own problems with Afghanistan—Islamabad has sought to exercise preponderant, if not overweening, influence over Kabul’s strategic direction. Whether Pakistan ever enjoyed such control, even during the high tide of Taliban rule, is questionable, but this has not prevented Islamabad from trying. This, at any rate, is the view of most Afghans, who perceive Pakistan’s cultural condescension, its strident opposition to the creation of a robust Afghan military, and its continuing support of the Quetta Shura (the Afghan Taliban leadership resident in Pakistan) as means of shaping, if not dictating, Afghanistan’s national choices.

Even if the most extreme Afghan assessments of Pakistani intentions are disregarded, the fact remains that Pakistan has stayed loyal to the Afghan Taliban and their affiliates because they serve critical Pakistani national interests. At the very least, these insurgents provide Islamabad with influence over Afghanistan’s domestic politics. If they are integrated into the Afghan government through a power-sharing arrangement in the

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support for the Northern Alliance during the late 1990s, has now extended to sustaining the Afghan government in Kabul. Although in this respect India closely follows the international community, its contributions have deeply unnerved the Pakistani military establishment headquartered in Rawalpindi.

These fears have given rise to the misleading claim that the regional discord surrounding Afghanistan centers on the long-standing Indo-Pakistani rivalry. And this misconception has led to the quixotic recommendation that the problems between New Delhi and Islamabad—which are far more nettlesome and tenacious—ought to first be resolved as a means of combating the currently unhelpful Pakistani policies in Afghanistan. This recommendation is fallacious; Pakistan’s imperial adventure in Afghanistan during the late 1990s was not precipitated by any Indian penetration to its west. Rather, the immediate dangers posed by disorder along the Afghan border, which if uncontrolled could arouse the restive Pashtuns and over time resuscitate the dangerous idea of “Pashtunistan,” motivated the Pakistani leadership to underwrite

future—an ardent objective of Pakistan in its vision of reconciliation—Pakistan could influence Kabul’s decisions in regard to both Islamabad and New Delhi. Pakistan’s continued protection of the Taliban thus can potentially yield great benefits if its favored transition scenario materializes.

However, even if a disorderly transition—marked by civil strife amid the continuing exit of coalition forces—were to emerge, the Taliban could still prove to be just as important. At the very least, they could function as instruments for controlling the southern and eastern Afghan provinces adjacent to Pakistan. Although this domination would not provide any immediate satisfaction on contentious issues like the Durand Line—and could actually result in the de facto unification of a large, radicalized Pashtun belt that extends deep into Pakistan—Rawalpindi believes that this is an acceptable risk compared with the alternative of sacrificing the Taliban without securing any political gains vis-à-vis Kabul, New Delhi, and Washington.

On all these matters, it is the Pakistani military leaders in Rawalpindi—not the civilian government officials in Islamabad—who call the shots. Consequently, regardless of which scenario unfolds, the military has good reason to hold on to the Taliban, protect their leadership, and aid their operations. Despite the pressures emanating from Washington and Kabul, Rawalpindi’s paranoia about “encirclement” ensures that it will not surrender its Taliban proxies without getting something substantial in return. Unfortunately for the international community, however, the compensations that Pakistan seeks are exactly those that Afghanistan would find most difficult.

No government in Kabul today can concede the legitimacy of the Durand Line—and thereby accept Pakistan’s inherited territorial claims—without a wider and more permanent normalization of bilateral ties

with Pakistan. For a weaker state with little else to bargain with, Kabul can acquiesce to Islamabad’s demands for a stable frontier only after Islamabad demonstrates its friendly intentions, not before, and certainly not in exchange for mere promises of noninterference. The longer Pakistani support for the

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Taliban continues, the deeper will be the suspicions among Afghan elites (both Pashtun and non-Pashtun) about Islamabad’s enduring interest in limiting Kabul’s autonomy—and the greater will be the resistance to accommodating Pakistan.

Similarly, no government in Kabul today—not even a purely Pashtun regime that might be imagined as dominant in the future—would accept Pakistan’s demand that India’s influence in Afghanistan be eradicated as the price of Afghan–Pakistani rapprochement. Neither the ethnic “minorities,” who spearheaded the rollback of Taliban rule and who constitute 58 percent of Afghanistan’s population, nor the Pashtuns, who have enjoyed long historical links with India, would readily concede to such a demand. Of all the neighboring states currently involved in Afghanistan, India consistently enjoys the highest approval ratings because of both its reconstruction assistance and its good relations with all Afghan ethnicities. Furthermore, most Afghans seek to maintain robust relations with India as a hedge against the threats posed by Pakistan, which is seen as the greater danger to Afghanistan’s national interests. India, for its part, has two goals in Afghanistan: ensuring that the

country never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists, and maintaining Afghanistan's strategic autonomy and political independence. Because these goals are exactly those that most Afghans seek as well, Kabul—unless ruled by direct Pakistani proxies—can never accede to the Pakistani military's demands.

Even President Hamid Karzai, who has mulled the idea of making a deal with Pakistan

over power as a dispute over alternative visions of political order. The Taliban insurgents who were defeated by the United States and its allies in 2001 and 2002, are, to put it plainly, trying to make a comeback. They are seeking to restore the rule they enjoyed in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, when they imposed order through force legitimated by a harsh conservatism that recognized neither universal rights nor equality of treatment.

This political system is rejected by most Afghans today and, though there is wide support for ending the war through a negotiated settlement if possible, neither the Pashtuns nor those minorities who support the Afghan government would countenance any accord that would give the insurgents direct access to power unless they first renounced violence, were willing to be tested by an electoral process, and demonstrated some commitment to the Constitution. Because the Taliban have neither any use for such niceties nor a burning desire to integrate with the regime on the latter's terms, a compromise has proven beyond reach. Furthermore, as long as the Quetta Shura remains convinced that the international coalition is headed for an irrevocable exit, the necessity for compromise becomes less urgent because total victory seems inevitable once the "puppet" regime in Kabul is deprived of its foreign protectors. Finally, the sanctuaries offered by Pakistan to the Taliban—where their key cadres can hide, plan, organize, and refit—provide lucrative disincentives to compromise. And as long as Rawalpindi protects the key Taliban leaders from allied military forces, there is no reason why they should be interested in any conciliation when, by any objective assessment, they have been seriously damaged but not yet conclusively defeated (see table 1).

This last component brings the regional approach and reconciliation—the twin pillars of the Obama administration's transition

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that induces Islamabad to press the Taliban into reconciliation with Kabul (and toward that end, has formally accepted Islamabad as a partner in a joint reconciliation commission), has been unable to find the magic formula that would achieve this aim without either dangerously exposing Afghanistan to Pakistan's future machinations or increasing his own personal vulnerability to its extremist proxies. His problems here have been multiplied by Iran's recent decisions to support the Taliban—mainly out of spite for the United States—but, thankfully, these actions are not yet militarily significant.

Although the poisoned relations between Kabul and Islamabad thus remain a critical impediment to the regional solution that the U.S. administration seeks, they only mirror the problems facing "reconciliation"—another Obama priority—as a device for ending the war. Reuniting the Quetta Shura with the Afghan government has thus far proven impossible simply because the contest between them is as much a struggle over who rules in Kabul as what kind of regime prevails in Afghanistan—in other words, it is as much a competition

TABLE 1

WHEN WOULD THE TALIBAN CONSIDER RECONCILIATION?

The Quetta Shura is likely to consider reconciling with the Afghan government when the following nine variables in their totality alter sufficiently to its disadvantage. Although the coalition has disrupted the insurgency considerably—as the analysis here suggests—the Taliban are not yet sufficiently failing to make reconciliation a particularly attractive exit strategy.

1. The declining effectiveness of population intimidation

ASSESSMENT: The greatest gains in reducing Taliban intimidation have been witnessed in Kandahar; until these extend more broadly to the 80 “key terrain districts” in Afghanistan, the Shura will resist the conclusion that its military campaign is failing.

2. Deteriorating organizational cohesion

ASSESSMENT: There is evidence that coalition military operations in 2010 have created fear, dismay, and vacillation among Taliban foot soldiers and commanders in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. A much sharper acceleration of this trend will be essential before the Shura concludes that continuing resistance is unsustainable.

3. Diminishing war-fighting stockpiles

ASSESSMENT: Although coalition military operations have interdicted substantial war-fighting materials in 2010, the primary combat materials—small arms, ammunition, and explosives—are still freely available inside Afghanistan or in Pakistan.

4. Depleting access to financial resources

ASSESSMENT: The primary sources of Taliban finance remain foreign contributions, narcotics, and local “taxes”; none of these sources has yet been substantially undermined by coalition operations.

5. Losing territorial control in the Pashtun areas

ASSESSMENT: Although the Taliban control less than a quarter of Afghanistan’s districts (and an even smaller fraction of its population), the Taliban presence in the Pashtun heartland has been significant. Recent coalition operations have slowly begun reversing Taliban control, but the still-limited number of troops available implies that a sharp—sustained—reversal is still far away.

6. Plummeting operational effectiveness

ASSESSMENT: While the Taliban’s operational effectiveness has dramatically decreased in some parts of Afghanistan—in Kabul and its environs, for example—its ability to conduct assassinations, improvised explosive device attacks, and suicide bombings has not decreased—and will increasingly become a substitute for territorial control.

7. Increasing personal dangers to Shura leaders

ASSESSMENT: Key leaders of the Taliban Rahbari Shura (leadership council) who control the functional committees or the regional Shura operations rarely travel to or inside Afghanistan; as long as they remain safe under protection by Inter-Services Intelligence inside Pakistan, they face few personal dangers that would motivate exploring reconciliation.

8. Losing political relevance both inside and outside Afghanistan

ASSESSMENT: The prospective loss of political salience would be the strongest possible motivation for Taliban reconciliation. Although weakened by coalition military operations, the absence of an alternative Pashtun leadership to the Taliban and the increasing importance accorded to the Taliban by discussions about reconciliation have bequeathed it with continuing relevance, despite the Taliban being the most important cause of Pashtun casualties today.

9. Growing expectations of a coalition exit from Afghanistan

ASSESSMENT: The stronger the Taliban belief that the coalition will depart Afghanistan, the stronger its disincentives to considering reconciliation; although the presence of foreign troops does motivate resistance in some districts, the perception that the coalition will “exit” Afghanistan in 2014 creates great incentives to eschew reconciliation and outlast International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the quest to recover control in Kabul.

strategy—into vicious collision. Pakistan’s reasons for protecting the Taliban may be rational in terms of its own self-interest, but the net effect is to strengthen Kabul’s conviction that Rawalpindi only seeks to further weaken the Afghans and secure their subordination by dividing them. Most Afghan elites believe that if the insurgency were to be deprived of its Pakistani sanctuary, it would either rapidly dissipate or end in a negotiated settlement on

surge—will not bridge this divide, because leaning on Afghanistan to accept subordination vis-à-vis Pakistan is untenable, while the Pakistani military cannot be persuaded to sacrifice the Taliban as long as its paranoia forces it to hold fast to that option.

In principle, however, there is a way out: U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. General David Petraeus’ current campaign offers the opportunity to neutralize the most destabilizing elements of Pakistan’s current strategy and, by extension, to aid the process of internal reconciliation—which, if successful, could create the preconditions for a future Afghan–Pakistan rapprochement and greater regional stability. For this prospect to have any chance of success, however, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan must be able to complete what it has impressively begun: decimating the Taliban and their operational capability inside Afghanistan.

Although Petraeus has wisely declined to succumb to the temptations of triumphalism—he has stated, for example, that “the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country and reversed in a number of important areas,” but “while the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible”—the truth of the matter is that his forces, in the words of Frederick Kagan and Kimberly Kagan, did “unprecedented damage to the insurgency within Afghanistan in 2010.” Thus American forces have inflicted pain at levels that the Quetta Shura and its Pakistani protectors do not yet fully comprehend—ranging from clearing territories physically controlled by the Taliban, to erasing internal safe havens and support zones, to destroying enormous arms caches and factories manufacturing improvised explosive devices, to decimating the insurgency’s midlevel command element (which functions as the lynchpin between the Taliban’s “shadow governors”

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the regime’s terms; that it has not thus far done so, despite the coalition’s superior resources, only suggests to them the depths to which Pakistan will go to obstruct Afghan unity and leave Kabul prostrate. In such circumstances, Afghan leaders have even weaker impetus to placate Islamabad and stronger reasons to rely on others, such as New Delhi and Washington, to neutralize what are seen as Pakistan’s mala fide intentions toward their country.

THE ONLY—HARD—WAY OUT: GIVE WAR A CHANCE

Cutting through the Gordian knot intertwining reconciliation and the regional solution has thus far proved beyond the capability of American diplomacy—for good reason. Whether through persuasion or even generous inducements, Washington simply cannot ensure either an Afghan accommodation to Pakistani interests (namely, accepting the Durand Line and ejecting India from Afghanistan) or a Pakistani renunciation of its most effective bargaining chip (the Taliban insurgents)—because each solution undermines either Kabul’s or Rawalpindi’s core interests. More dialogues, international conferences, and mediation efforts—even a diplomatic

and the fighting rank and file). The leadership in Quetta has responded to these losses by pressing its fighters to return to Afghanistan earlier in the year than usual and by demanding more suicide bombings, targeted assassinations, and efforts to intimidate the population, collaborators, and government officials. And the Pakistani military has reacted to ISAF successes by admonishing the government of Afghanistan to contemplate reconciliation on its terms because of the certainty of eventual American failure.

Despite these understandable reactions, the best measure of ISAF's success remains neither the gains made by the U.S. military through its unilateral operations—however impressive—nor the disarray and rebelliousness now visible inside Taliban ranks but rather the numerous leads being provided by ordinary Afghans to the security forces, which in every case have resulted in successfully targeting insurgent commanders, their accomplices, and their war matériel. If turning the tide in an insurgency is best presaged by the local population's changing loyalties, then ISAF's 2010 operations in Kandahar and its environs provide the best hope. This is just as well, because if Petraeus fails in Afghanistan, a reconciliation will indeed end the conflict, but it will be the coalition that reconciles with the Taliban rather than the other way around. A military stalemate will only be marginally better, because although it may compel negotiations to begin, these parleys are unlikely to end successfully—the usual outcome in most internal wars—given the persistent fear on both sides about how any agreed-on settlement would be enforced when neither one enjoys a monopoly of force.

The successful extension of ISAF operations to Loya Paktia—planned for later in 2011 or 2012—would, in contrast, provide further reason for Pakistan to review the wisdom of persisting with its current gambit of

supporting the Taliban confederacy against the Afghan state. This strategy remains sensible only as long as it is successful. But if ISAF is able to undermine it not by overtly attacking the sanctuaries in Pakistan but rather by

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eliminating the midlevel commanders and their acolytes who fight within walking distance of their homes—while the government of Afghanistan weans the lumpen “rent-a-Taliban” off the battlefield through a vigorous reintegration program, reaches out to as many senior and regional elements of the Quetta Shura as it can either independently or through the good offices of other states (thus sowing discord in Taliban ranks while increasing the dissonance between the Taliban and Pakistan), and congeals the emerging split between the Hezb-i-Islami (Gulbuddin) and the Taliban—Rawalpindi could be forced to reassess the worth of holding on to what is not only a wasting asset but also one that ends up strengthening the Afghan–Indian association while fraying Pakistan's own ties with the United States.

Right now, Washington is admittedly far from this happy juncture. But successful ISAF military operations—not diplomacy—still hold the best promise of success for both the reconciliation and the regional solution for which the Obama administration yearns. Only effective military action can create new facts on the ground. And reconciliation and regional cooperation will only be possible

when the opposition's strategies change in response to these facts. This proposition would not be true if the Taliban leadership were to suddenly and unilaterally cease its insurgency, if the Afghan government were to unexpectedly acquiesce to Pakistani interests, or if the Pakistani military were to abruptly relinquish its desire to control Kabul's choices. However, these outcomes are all implausible and incapa-

conversation—talking, not negotiating—beyond the government in Kabul to include the Pashtuns at large, as well as minorities and civil society groups. Once a potential consensus is discerned—assuming there is one—American diplomats ought to help the government to reform the current Afghan political system and to craft policies that can support reconciliation, even as they engage the region's states to support these Afghan goals. But what the U.S. administration should not be doing now is making independent overtures to the Taliban, which would not only be rebuffed by the Quetta Shura's senior members but also, more dangerously, deepen the split with President Karzai; demoralize the Afghan state just when counterinsurgency successes are becoming visible; reinforce Pakistan's impetus to hold on even more tightly to its proxies; and rattle other regional actors, like India, whose cooperation is necessary for final success—all while making the United States look more desperately frantic than is warranted. Because attempts to force either reconciliation or a regional solution through diplomacy are now likely to fail, they could make achieving these outcomes even harder later on.

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ble of being engendered through diplomacy.

American diplomats must therefore be patient. They must persist but be content with small gains in the interim, while preparing for the moment when reconciliation and a regional solution might become truly viable. (Figure 1 lays out a notional road map illustrating this process.) Toward this end, Washington's policymakers should first focus on repairing their relationship with President Karzai and on negotiating a meaningful strategic partnership agreement with Kabul. The former will be essential for the success of all coalition endeavors in Afghanistan during the next few years. And the latter is necessary both to neutralize Taliban and Pakistani expectations of U.S. abandonment, which justify their continuing efforts to control Kabul, and to reassure Karzai of continued U.S. support, which would empower him to invest in good governance throughout Afghanistan rather than concentrating merely on surviving.

Beyond these immediate, critical goals, however, U.S. diplomacy should concentrate on understanding what the Afghans truly want. And this means expanding the

Despite the Obama administration's current inclinations, the diplomatic surge therefore should still take second place to the military effort—at least for a while longer. Because the painful road to reconciliation can be found only through successful military action, the administration's main task ought to be resolutely supporting Petraeus and his fighting cohort so that they can sufficiently alter the realities on the ground in Afghanistan to make a negotiated peace possible. This means that Obama should forgo the politically calculated drawdown of combat troops this summer and instead accept the advice of his field commanders to maintain the largest possible contingent necessary for the coming campaign in eastern Afghanistan. Hard and unpalatable as

this course might be for the president, it alone offers a solution that protects the recent gains in Afghanistan and advances American interests over the long term. ■

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FIGURE 1
A NOTIONAL ROAD MAP FOR RECONCILIATION AND REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Phase	Afghanistan	Pakistan	India	Iran	Others
Aggressive ISAF Military Operations Continue U.S. Leads Regional Discussions I	Repair U.S.-Karzai relationship and negotiate U.S.-AF Strategic Framework Agreement Develop internal consensus on reconciliation (goals) · Intra-Pashtun, minorities, and civil society discussion Accelerate reintegration Aid splits among Taliban confederates	U.S.-PK engagement intended to shape PK's goals and strategy in AF	U.S.-IN-GIROA engagement		U.S.-AF Contact Group engagement
	Implement internal consensus on reconciliation (means) · Political Reform, Amnesty, DDR · Reform AF Assistance · Develop AF Econ Strategy Initiate key discussions · GIROA-Taliban · GIROA-PK	U.S.-PK-GIROA discussion	Independent GIROA-IN discussions U.S.-IN discussion U.S.-IN-GIROA discussion	Independent GIROA-IR discussions U.S.-IN discussion through AF Contact Group	Independent GIROA-KSA discussions U.S. consultation with CARs, Russia, KSA
ISAF Military Operations Yield Sufficient Operational Success in Afghanistan					
Possible ISAF Ceasefire UN Oversees Regional Discussions III	Reconciliation between GIROA-Taliban Outlined Implementation of Amnesty & DDR begins	U.S.-PK discussion to support GIROA-Taliban agreement	U.S.-IN discussion to support GIROA-Taliban agreement UN-IN discussion	UN-IR discussions	UN-Regional discussions
	U.S.-GIROA-PK-IN-IR-CARs Guarantee Reconciliation Agreement between GIROA and Taliban under UN Auspices/Conference				

KEY: AF, Afghanistan; CARs, Central Asian Republics; DDR, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; GIROA, government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; IN, India; IR, Iran; ISAF, International Security Assistance Force; KSA, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; PK, Pakistan; UN, United Nations; U.S., United States.

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