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## The Way Forward in Afghanistan: Three Views

Barnett R. Rubin; Amin Saikal; Julian Lindley-French

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## Forum

# The Way Forward in Afghanistan: Three Views

## End the War on Terror

Barnett R. Rubin

The situation in Afghanistan has turned so far against the United States, NATO, the international community, and those Afghans who originally hoped that the post-11 September 2001 intervention would finally bring them a chance for normal lives, that it will be very difficult to salvage. Al-Qaeda has established a new safe haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, from which it supports insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan and continues its global planning against the United States and its allies. Its press releases are so frequent that they are hardly newsworthy unless they feature video of Osama bin Laden himself. Negative trends in Afghanistan include the deterioration of security, Afghan governance and regional stability. The stability of Pakistan, a nuclear-weapons state that has been the main source of proliferation over the past two decades, is now at serious risk. Rising India–Pakistan tensions further exacerbate the regional risk, as do tensions over Iran’s nuclear programme and its relations with Hizbullah and Hamas.

The task in Afghanistan would have been difficult under any circumstances. The Bush administration’s unique record of incompetence, fecklessness and criminality has assured that the Obama administration

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**Barnett R. Rubin** is Director of Studies and a Senior Fellow at New York University’s Center on International Cooperation and the author of *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2002). He served as an adviser to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General at the UN Talks on Afghanistan in Bonn in 2001.

inherits its responsibilities under the worst possible circumstances, not only in the region, but globally as well. Still, as President Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emanuel said of the economic situation, 'You never want a serious crisis to go to waste'.

This serious crisis may finally force equally serious thinking about the goals of the international intervention in Afghanistan and the means required to have any serious hope of attaining or approaching them. Rather than proclaim objectives limited only by the audacity of our imaginations (an Islamic democratic, stable, gender-sensitive and prosperous Afghanistan) and the paucity of our means (fewer resources per capita than any other such operation), we need to align objectives with reality, and means with objectives.

The most important change in the definition of US objectives is to explicitly renounce the 'war on terror'. Instead the United States is engaged in a war against al-Qaeda, which attacked America and its allies. Al-Qaeda, a non-territorial transnational network, can obtain a safe haven only through alliance with groups such as the Taliban, which have a national or ethnic base connected to a territory and population. Such alliances are inherently unstable, however, in so far as any territorialised political movement has objectives related to the territory and population where it is based, objectives which are necessarily different from al-Qaeda's global goals of re-establishing the Islamic caliphate throughout Muslim territory.

The 'war on terror', which amalgamated all Islamist groups that used violence into a common threat, strengthened its primary target, al-Qaeda, by creating incentives for local groups treated as 'terrorists' to ally themselves with al-Qaeda. All handbooks of war, dating back at least to Sun Tzu, have recommended dividing the enemy. The 'war on terror' did the opposite.

While counter-terrorism requires military and intelligence tools, only a drastic strategic reorientation can provide those with their required political complement. In the Afghan context, such a clear, public reorientation of counter-terrorism policies should lead the United States and its partners in Afghanistan to offer political negotiations to any Taliban and other insurgents who are willing to separate themselves from al-Qaeda. Such a policy has been in effect formally for several years, but related policies on sanctions, detention and reintegration have not been restructured to reflect that

stance. Political accommodation with groups that accept effective guarantees against the creation or protection of terrorist sanctuaries will require reciprocal US guarantees against detention or sanctions for any leader willing to enter into such an agreement. Thus far the United States has no mechanism to assure that such a guarantee is observed by the multitude of agencies involved in the counter-terrorism effort.

The same shift in counter-terrorism policy should apply to Pakistan, though it will take a different form. The United States should support efforts by the elected government of Pakistan to separate Pakistani insurgents from al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters, in particular by supporting programmes to reform the status of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas to address the grievances and isolation of the population there.

Separating Afghan or Pakistani Islamic insurgents from al-Qaeda would constitute a serious political setback for the latter that would damage its claims to legitimacy and its recruitment capacity in the Islamic world. Much of the diffuse international sympathy for al-Qaeda (now on the decline) derives from resistance to 'occupations' of Afghanistan and Iraq. Any political settlement with Afghan insurgents, especially the Taliban leadership, would deprive al-Qaeda of that claim.

Inclusion of the Taliban leadership and other insurgents in a political settlement does not mean returning Afghanistan to Taliban rule or abandoning the broad portion of the Afghan political spectrum that has worked with the international community and welcomed liberation from Taliban rule. Nor is it meant as a quick fix to replace policies aimed at the regional factors behind the insurgency or the corruption and abuse that have so weakened the Afghan government. A political settlement cannot succeed without policy changes by the Taliban's regional sponsors, and insurgents cannot be reintegrated unless the government becomes more credible.

What the United States should ask of its Afghan partners is that any political agreement be based on recognising the authority of the Afghan government and its security forces throughout the territory of Afghanistan. Participation in power among (more or less) disarmed political groups through coalition or cooptation is acceptable; division of the country into spheres of influence under the control of multiple authorities or security

forces is not. Power sharing in the latter sense permits formation of safe havens.

This is what the US and Afghan governments should mean when they state that negotiating partners must accept the Afghan constitution. This should not mean passage of an ideological test requiring agreement with every article but recognition of the sovereignty of the government established by the constitution. Many issues dealt with (often ambiguously) by the constitution will remain contentious for a long time, and not only to insurgents. Insurgents who lay down arms will have the same rights as other Afghans to disagree with and seek to change the constitution through peaceful means.

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## *Closing Guantanamo is a first step*

Such a declaratory policy is already in effect, but no one takes it seriously, since the existing policies on detention and sanctions send the other message. Taliban and al-Qaeda are detained together in Guantanamo and sanctioned together by the UN Security Council. Closing Guantanamo is a first step. Afghan and Pakistani detainees (except for those closely linked to the al-Qaeda leadership, a category which includes no Afghans) should be transferred to national custody or released. The international community will have to fund generous reintegration packages in both countries.

Both national and international sanctions regimes should be changed to guarantee security and integration of insurgents who join the political process. Russia has thus far opposed removal of anyone from the sanctions list for reasons that should be explored further. The main reason is probably its concern that the purpose of integrating former Taliban is to consolidate a NATO base in its near abroad. Diplomatic efforts to overcome these objectives could serve common Russian and Western interests in the elimination of the threat from al-Qaeda.

Such a policy change will not work by itself. To succeed it must be accompanied by military, security and governance efforts that enable the Afghan government to present a more credible alternative than it has. The Afghan Taliban leaders are dependent on their Pakistani sponsors and supporters, including in the country's military and security apparatus, for their safe haven, and regional diplomacy aimed at changing Pakistan's security

calculus remains essential. The core of such a policy is firm support for the efforts of the elected government of Pakistan to gain control of the country's security policy and define the national interest as the welfare of the citizens of Pakistan.

Within Pakistan, integrating the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into what Pakistanis call the 'mainstream' is also not a quick fix. It will require a strategy that will take many years. There will be armed resistance by al-Qaeda and many other groups whose existence depends on the isolated nature of these areas. But gaining control of national territory in order to protect the rights of Pakistani citizens will certainly provide a more legitimate mission for the country's security forces than assisting the United States in its 'war on terror'.

No single policy change can solve any problem, let alone a set of problems so complex and interdependent as those of this region. But such a bold, clear announcement, followed by concrete public steps can go a long way toward transforming the poisonous environment we all have inherited.

## What Future for Afghanistan?

Amin Saikal

Afghanistan is in the grip of long-term, violent, structural disorder and insecurity. Senior NATO political and military figures have voiced strong scepticism about winning against the Taliban and their supporters, and have intimated that the United States and its allies should focus more on generating the necessary conditions for security than on democracy. Some have supported Afghan President Hamid Karzai in his efforts to negotiate with the Taliban to produce a viable settlement. The Karzai government and its international backers are not as yet in a position to bargain for such a settlement. They must first not only impress upon the Taliban that the insur-

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**Amin Saikal** is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (the Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University, and author of *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (2006) and *The Rise and Fall of the Shah: Iran from Autocracy to Religious Rule* (2009).

gency cannot succeed militarily, but also address the political and strategic vacuum their own failures created and the Taliban have exploited.

The strong presidential system established under Karzai has not worked and is in urgent need of restructuring. It has proven unsuitable for a traditional, conflict-ridden Muslim country with myriad ethnic, tribal, linguistic and sectarian divisions. Such a system typically produces a single winner and many disgruntled losers capable of challenging and undermining the victor. It places too much responsibility with one person, leaving the president highly vulnerable to unrealistic public expectations and discontent, especially when things go wrong. Yet, paradoxically, the actual powers of the president are often less than they appear on paper. To manage the affairs of the state the president may find it tempting to engage in a politics of patronage and nepotism. This is what has happened in Afghanistan.

Karzai has presided over an increasingly corrupt and dysfunctional government. He has not been able to create a united and competent governing elite; and personal friendship, family, tribal, ethnic and factional connections rather than merit have formed the basis for most senior government appointments. He has surrounded himself with many political and ethnic entrepreneurs, most of whom come from the Afghan diaspora and lack the qualifications and experience to serve Afghanistan beyond their individual interests. Nor has Karzai fulfilled the expectations of a majority of the Afghan people for peace, security and improved standards of living.

The opposition elites, most importantly the Taliban and its allies – including the Hizb-e-Islami of the former maverick mujahadeen leader, Gulbuddin Hemyar, as well as foreign intelligence agencies – have penetrated the government and institutions at many levels. This has not only compromised governmental activities, but also held the United States and its allies back from channelling most of their reconstruction aid through the government and coordinating closely with it on major policy and security operations. The result has been a massive political and security vacuum, enabling the Taliban and its supporters increasingly to appear more credible than the government.

Afghanistan needs a diversified, party-based parliamentary system of governance, headed by a prime minister, who would come from the parlia-



ment with a parliamentary majority, under a figurehead president, elected by the parliament and provincial assemblies. Such a system could be more inclusive, providing for a range of influential actors to be locked in positions of national obligation and responsibility. It could also provide more accountability, transparency, efficiency and popular connection to the political system. To achieve this, the Afghan Constitution of 2004 would need to be substantially modified, which in turn requires convening a new Loya Jirga (grand assembly) similar to the one which ratified the present constitution.

The emphasis should not be on democracy, but rather on creating a workable government, with a culturally relevant national manifesto of state building that could help generate good governance as a prelude to democracy. Elections are too often equated with democracy. In a country like Afghanistan, which lacks democratic traditions and has historically been subjected to traditionalist, authoritarian rule, elections have to be, for some time, simply one of many tools for creating legitimate governments, with a gradual approach to fostering manageable political pluralism, civil-society activities and national reconciliation. Only then could the country secure the foundations for the growth of substantive democracy.

Reform of the political order should be accompanied by a sound approach to handling Afghanistan's geopolitical complexities. One factor that had historically helped Afghanistan, especially between formal independence in 1919 and the Soviet invasion in 1979, was its pursuance of neutrality. The Afghan-US strategic partnership, signed in August 2005, together with the elevation of neighbouring Pakistan to the status of a major non-NATO ally of the United States, has complicated Afghanistan's regional position. On the one hand, it has insulated Pakistan from the need to make major structural changes in its long-standing predatory behaviour towards Afghanistan. On the other, it has caused deep concern among other regional actors. The Islamic Republic of Iran views a long-term US presence in Afghanistan as a serious threat and remains highly sensitive to any return of Pakistani influence such as existed during the 1996-2001 Taliban regime. Moscow would

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like to see the end of US and NATO involvement in Afghanistan and Central Asia, which it has historically regarded as vital to its security interests. New Delhi is keen to see Pakistan's regional ambitions curtailed and quietly shares Moscow's opposition to any situation in Afghanistan that could benefit Pakistan. Meanwhile, despite cosy relations with Pakistan and historical differences with India, China shares a common interest with Tehran, Moscow and New Delhi about America's expanding role in the region.

A formal affirmation of Afghanistan's neutrality is needed to reassure Afghanistan's neighbours that the country will not become a long-term base for the United States and its allies, especially Pakistan, to advance their geostrategic interests. This is not a call for Washington to halt assistance for stabilisation and reconstruction, but rather for the activities to be conducted within the framework of UN Security Council resolutions. There is no need for the Afghan-US strategic partnership, which may have stimulated regional actors to remain predatory in their approach to Afghanistan. Nor has the partnership gone down well with most of the Afghan people. Afghans have traditionally seen their country's policy of neutrality as symbolising their devotion to sovereignty and independence.

The Taliban insurgency, moreover, is dominated by the tribally divided ethnic Pashtuns, who make up about 42% of the Afghan population, and inhabit the provinces along the border with Pakistan, with extensive shared cross-border ethnic ties. Karzai and a majority of his ministers are from this ethnic group. The current conflict is essentially an intra-Pashtun one, with the majority of the non-Pashtun population remaining largely aloof. But many non-Pashtuns have grown as disillusioned as their Pashtun counter-parts with the Karzai government and international forces. As their territories in northern, central and western Afghanistan have been relatively peaceful, many feel they have not been rewarded for their cooperation. One way to assuage their concerns is to concentrate international reconstruction investment and efforts in their areas until the Taliban insurgency in the Pashtun-dominated provinces is contained and the way is opened for reconstruction efforts there. Otherwise there is a serious risk that many non-Pashtuns could, despite their experiences under Taliban rule before 2001, engage in insurgency, benefitting the Taliban by default.

As soon as a non-corrupt, efficient and effective government with which Washington and its allies can closely coordinate is in place, and the majority of citizens enjoy a more peaceful and secure life, the conditions would be right for a realistic timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces and for a viable settlement to be negotiated with the Taliban from a position of strength. At present, any approach to a negotiated settlement is undermined by the Taliban's demand for the departure of foreign forces as a precondition for peace talks, and the inability of the government and its international supporters to leverage the Taliban to settle for an agreement acceptable to a wide cross-section of Afghanistan's mosaic society. The best way forward would be to reach a settlement with the support of Afghanistan's neighbours, predicated on a US–Iranian rapprochement. Without substantial improvement in governance, however, no matter how much assistance the international community pours into Afghanistan, it is likely to continue to go to waste.

## Plan B for Afghanistan?

Julian Lindley-French

The clammy odour of defeat is in the air. Talk of a new realism abounds in most of the troop-contributing nations in Afghanistan, although for most it is merely a prelude to an early exit. Both President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Gordon Brown paid surprise visits recently to American and British troops in Afghanistan during which one talked of 'hopeful gains', whilst the other mourned British soldiers who had died in 'the front-line of terror'. The Taliban continue to make gains across the country, while the writ of the Afghan government is increasingly ignored even in Kabul. The Afghan people, the 'critical ground' of the operation, whilst fearing the return of the Taliban, are daily more convinced that the coalition will

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**Julian Lindley-French** is Professor of Military Operational Science at the Netherlands Defence Academy and Senior Associate Fellow at the United Kingdom Defence Academy. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any institution.

fail and daily less prepared to offer their support. For them the coalition is simply becoming irrelevant. The next two to three years will thus be critical in the War of the Afghan Succession, if both Afghans and Western publics are to be convinced that something that looks like success can be achieved. Such a goal requires a new mindset in Western capitals.

The arrival of the Barack Obama administration in Washington offers the best chance of such success, not least because a new regime might just be willing to walk away. Indeed, with the appointment of General David Petraeus at US Central Command (CENTCOM) an opportunity now exists for a thoroughgoing review of strategy and an audit of effect across Afghanistan. Only then can a new definition of success be agreed and a shared level of ambition and unity of effort generated across the coalition. What is needed is a Plan B for Afghanistan.

#### *Plan B*

All strategies evolve on contact with reality. The refusal by political leaders of all persuasions to face that reality has given ample grounds for journalists and academics of a more excitable persuasion to paint the picture as unremittingly black, with the word 'failure' bandied around as though it is only a matter of time. Washington is rightly committed to a Petraeus-inspired security and development surge similar to the Iraq surge in 2007

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*Any such surge  
must carry  
allies with it*

and 2008. A particular focus will be the Pashtun heartlands in the south and east of Afghanistan, from which the Taliban draws much of its support, with a renewed focus on pushing and supporting the Pakistanis to deny the Taliban and their foreign associates the safe havens they enjoy in Pakistan's northwest. For all their irresolution, however, European allies afford the Americans

all-important legitimacy and thus any such surge must carry allies with it and emphasise the legitimacy afforded by the United Nations mandate.

Plan B will thus require a mix of modesty and ambition: modesty in fashioning a plan that is achievable, and ambition in that all Coalition partners commit fully over the next two to three years to achieving what is still the vital minimum for success, a belief on the part of the Afghan people

that not only is the coalition committed to success, it is going to stay and do the job.

The 2001 Plan A was always ambitious, given Afghanistan's history. The aim was nothing less than a functioning democratic state in which the central authority was recognised by all and corruption was no greater than that with which any functioning state can cope. Whilst all coalition members mouthed their support, only the Americans seemed to believe in such an end. The result was a sovereignty trap by which the coalition pretended the Afghan government was the sovereign body, even though the government has been as much part of the problem as part of the solution. Moreover, the main motivation of many NATO Allies was apparently to do the minimum commensurate with supporting the United States and just enough to keep the Americans interested in the defence of Europe. Very few of the European Allies ever believed in Plan A and it was only at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit that an Afghan-wide strategic campaign plan of a sort was fashioned. Even with such a plan it is evident from the lack of concrete support that many NATO allies still regard Plan A as unachievable. Both Afghans and members of the coalition need a plan that is believable.

So what would Plan B look like? First and foremost would be the preservation of an Afghanistan that poses no threat to its neighbours, its own people or the wider world. Realistically, such a goal would require a much looser confederation between Kabul and the tribes. In such circumstances the coalition would then move more into the business of balancing power among the main tribal groups: Pashtun, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Under Plan B reduced Western troop levels would be offset by an over-watch strategy using air assets and special forces backed up by the reinforcing of what passes for pro-coalition elements in the country. Such a shift in force posture would have the added benefit of rescuing many European militaries from the attrition they are suffering from extended and under-resourced stabilisation and reconstruction operations. This would enable the West to re-constitute its armed forces for other possible emergencies. Presentation of such a strategy would of course be vital, to avoid any sense that a shift represents failure (which it would not). The all-important narrative would

be self-explanatory: conditions for reconciliation and outreach have been created by the security effort since November 2001 and are thus reflective of a new situation in-country.

Even Plan B would need to see much more commitment by all parties to effective governance capacity-building, establishment of a basic but robust system of rule of law, and a meaningful Afghan national development strategy (reinforced by much greater effort and coordination to ensure Afghanistan can properly absorb aid and development). The lack of credibility now associated with the effort is partly due to unrealistically optimistic forecasts of the time and effort needed to realise something like a stable Afghanistan. The lack of realism at the outset has been reinforced by the hitherto lamentable coalition performance in stabilisation and reconstruction. Indeed, synergy between the various national-led provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) is frankly awful and this, more than any other factor, has led the coalition to the brink of self-defeat.

Plan B would also see an extension of a regional process with reconciliation front and centre. Maintaining pressure on the Taliban while seeking a dialogue with those elements who are seeking a return would mark a new approach. Indeed, outside the hardcore leadership in Quetta and Peshawar there is evidence that significant numbers of tier-two and -three Taliban could be enticed if property and other rights were restored. At the very least, Plan B would need to reassure the Afghan people that the return of the Taliban to power is not an option.

#### *A regional strategy*

Stabilising Pakistan is a prerequisite for stabilising Afghanistan. Thus a far more coherent strategy towards Pakistan is needed. It would at the very least include a coherent package of economic assistance that might require talking to the Chinese and Russians, and possibly even the Iranians. A failing Pakistan will be unable to sustain a campaign against the insurgents in the largely ungoverned tribal areas that border Afghanistan. Pakistan's state institutions must be reinforced, not undermined by coalition action. The commitment of several Western governments to increase aid to Islamabad is to be welcomed, as is a more tailored approach to counter-

insurgency operations and a focus on generating effective police forces, vital in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

India–Pakistan relations are in many ways key to peace in the region, which will prove difficult after the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai. The struggle in Afghanistan has become linked in the official Pakistani mind with the conflict with India over Kashmir. The appearance of several Indian ‘consulates’ in the south of Afghanistan has only fuelled Pakistani concerns. For the Pakistanis Afghanistan represents strategic depth in the event of a conflict with India. Plan B will demand new strategic partnerships with both Islamabad and New Delhi aimed at de-conflicting Kashmir and Afghanistan. This will not be easy, as the Pakistanis are deeply suspicious of the new US–India agreement over nuclear technology. Europeans would have an important role to play in helping to craft such a strategy.

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Western leaders must come clean with their publics – whilst their armed forces will not stay in strength in Afghanistan indefinitely, the commitment to a stable Afghanistan is a long-term commitment. The Taliban have not defeated the West, but they are doing a pretty good job convincing the West that it has defeated itself. Some places forgive mediocrity. Afghanistan is no such place.

