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Bridging Ends to Means

Achieving a Viable Peace in Afghanistan

by

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Abstract

With a viable state of peace remaining an elusive outcome after eight years in Afghanistan, reappraising the American strategy is now an utmost priority. Adopting the “ends” — “ways” — “means” construct from Operational Design, this paper proposes a revised set of end states and strategy recommendations commensurate with the resources at hand. To begin, an evaluation of the “means” at hand reveals a number of hard truths. First, from both operational sustainability and fiscal perspectives, open-ended military escalation is no longer a feasible option. Second, even with the drawdown of Iraqi forces underway, bolstering counterinsurgency forces in Afghanistan will require substantial additional investments in terms of training and equipment, and take more time than anticipated. Last, civilian capacity—a crucial component of nation building—will be lacking, at least in the short term.

Constrained by limited resources, U.S. ambitions must be adjusted without compromising the vision of enduring peace in Afghanistan and the larger goal of combating terrorism. Annihilating the Taliban may no longer be a tenable option—in all likelihood, the resilience of the opponent suggests that a low-level insurgency will persist for the foreseeable future. Instead, the U.S. should seek to contain their influence while concurrently stepping up efforts to develop core governance functions. In addition, engagement with regional partners is key. Pakistan, in particular, should be leveraged upon to weaken the Taliban, and possibly to drive a wedge between local insurgents and al-Qaeda. These efforts should set the stage for the most crucial mission—pursuing an enduring political system acceptable to Afghans. Only with functional governance can the U.S. set the trajectory for enduring peace and sustained development in Afghanistan. In essence, political legitimacy—not destruction of the Taliban—must be the principal measure of success.

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I. Introduction

America's journey in Afghanistan has reached strategic crossroads. Eight years into the conflict, resurgence of the Taliban threatens to derail the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan. In the past year, a number of options have been put forward to resolve this crisis. Vice President Biden prefers a surgical approach to tackle the Al-Qaeda by relying on unmanned air raids and assassinations; on the other hand, General Stanley McChrystal, the American commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, favors a surge to regain the initiative in the long-drawn counter-insurgency campaign. President Obama's recent announcement to send 30,000 troops indicates his preference for the latter. The strategy proposed, however, fails to articulate a clear envisioned end state.¹ While arguably useful as a measure to limit U.S. involvement, the proposed 18 month timeline to commence withdrawal of U.S. forces masks crucial, and more pertinent, questions. What can America really afford to achieve? What should be the key measure of success in Afghanistan? What should be the exit criteria for U.S. forces? This paper attempts a systematic inquiry to provide answers to these questions.

“Means” — “Ends” — “Ways”

Given the absence of a clearly articulated end state and exit strategy, a critical first step is to understand what the U.S. can afford—across military, economic, and political realms—in Afghanistan. To borrow a fundamental principle from operational art, the formulation of end states (and correspondingly, strategy) *must* take into account the resources available. This paper thus deviates slightly from the traditional “ends”—“means”—“ways” methodology commonly espoused in Joint doctrine. Instead, emphasis is placed on evaluating “means” to inject greater clarity and realism into “ends” and “ways”. Framed otherwise, U.S. ambitions must

commensurate with the capabilities at hand; with resources capped at fixed values, the American leadership must scale back their strategic goals or face a higher risk of failure.

Assessing “means”, however, is not possible without an understanding of the problem at hand. Therefore, a natural start point therefore lies in analyzing the strategic context of the conflict. Factors of strategic importance necessarily include the historical and cultural background of the region, the disposition of the Taliban, as well as the influence of key regional nations such as Pakistan. Equally pertinent is the need to examine the reasons behind the resurgence of the Taliban and the challenges in setting up a workable political system in Afghanistan.

With a well-grounded understanding of the conflict in Afghanistan, the “means” available to the U.S. can be accurately gauged. First, and most crucial, is the military instrument. To be sure, military prowess cannot be defined by troop levels (a perception routinely imposed by the media) alone; a true measure of capability must take into account the mission and operating environment in question. For example, urban warfare capabilities that proved indispensable in Iraq would invariably provide less utility in rural Afghanistan. A second critical resource lies in civilian capacity to support the counterinsurgency mission. The “civilian surge”, designed to kick-start reconstruction and build up political and economic capacity in the immediate aftermath of the renewed military offensive, constitutes the second pillar of President Obama’s strategy and a critical element of General McChrystal’s “Clear—Hold—Build” tactic. This section concludes with an analysis of two key sources of power—financial and public support—that underlie American involvement in Afghanistan. Understanding the economic dimension of the war and its impact on an economy recovering from a global recession, as well as support from both the American public and international partners, will provide a more accurate gauge of the true costs of American intervention in Afghanistan.

Having established the “means”, realistic “ends”—together with appropriate “ways”—can be devised. The search for an effective strategy continues with a re-evaluation of Afghanistan as a strategic interest. To do this, the paper compares the motives for intervention between now and 2001. This sets the stage for defining the key end states that will permit a viable peace. Finally, a set of recommendations are put forth to shape a new strategy in Afghanistan.

II. Framing the Afghanistan Predicament

Historical Overview of Political, Societal and Cultural Influences

“The main scourge of our country is perennial foreign intervention. Only final cessation of foreign aggression will allow us to start all other problems of Afghanistan, economic and political.”—Ahmad Shah Massoud, Northern Alliance senior military leader assassinated on 10 September 2001. ²

Since 9-11, the geographical and infrastructural impediments to the nation-building efforts in Afghanistan have been well-documented. Less well-understood, however, are the political, societal and cultural factors that underlie Afghanistan’s chronic vulnerability to domestic instability and ideological extremism. Indeed, since the inception of Afghanistan as a political entity in 1747, the country has experienced numerous wars and invasions. In the past 30 years alone, Afghanistan has endured the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Pakistan-backed internal conflict which culminated in the violent rule of the Taliban, and most recently, the U.S.-led intervention in 2002 which continues to this present day. Two recurrent themes feature prominently in the state’s turbulent history: first, the lack of political legitimacy in ruling entities; and second, perpetual foreign intervention that has contributed more to volatility than towards progress and stability.

The difficulty of establishing a legitimate government in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. To begin with, Afghanistan is essentially a nation of tribes and clans—an oddity in today's inter-connected global order. For the large part of the last two centuries, rivalries within successive royal families have prevented Afghans from developing solid structures of statehood and stability. Instability was further perpetuated by polygamous unions in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, where rulers took on an excessive number of wives from different tribes to consolidate their status. The resulting feuds between rival branches of the royal family prevented political stability and undermined any efforts to forge a sense of national unity.³ In fact, with the exception of the Mujahedeen movement which arose in response to Soviet-sponsored regimes, no ruling entity in Afghanistan has succeeded in harnessing support from the majority of the populace.

The second cause of political instability lies in foreign intervention. Without a strong, functional government, foreign nations have intervened in Afghanistan to advance their private agendas, and more often than not, with scant regard for the long term stability of the country. Here, Afghanistan's location in the heart of Central Asia is pivotal in the foreign policy calculus of great powers. Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s provides a useful case study. Given the importance of Afghanistan as a "buffer" state in the Cold War, the Soviet Union propped up a communist government to consolidate its influence in the region. However, with Marxism-Leninism being repugnant to Islam, the pro-Soviet government resorted to coercion to maintain order, eventually culminating in the 1979 invasion. The Soviets soon found themselves in a costly and unwinnable war against the Mujahedeen, and the subject of international condemnation. More critically for Afghanistan, the conflict resulted in 1.24 million casualties and 5 million refugees.⁴ Foreign patronage would ultimately result in further disintegration of the Afghan state.

The inability to establish political legitimacy, combined with foreign intervention, would eventually propel a new brand of extremist Islamic rule to the fore. Following the dissolution of the pro-Soviet government in 1992, in-fighting—a result of fragmentation along tribal and sectarian lines—within the Mujahedeen would once again prevent a sustainable form of political settlement.⁵ The ensuing Islamist government, led by President Burhanuddin Rabbini, was prone to manipulation by foreign powers. Notably, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran each backed separate factions of the Mujahedeen to advance their individual interests. Pakistan, in particular, played an influential role in shaping Afghan politics. Islamabad was both eager to ensure a receptive government in Kabul and to transform Afghanistan in a Pashtun-ruled state. These ambitions resulted in the birth of the Taliban—a militia of young Pashtun students borne from the *madrasahs* (religious schools) created by Pakistan along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The Taliban, initially led by Pakistan's then Minister of the Interior, was designed as a surrogate force to battle the Mujahedeen elements which constituted Afghanistan's embryonic moderate Islamic government. With generous assistance by Pakistan, the Taliban gained control over 27 out of 32 provinces within months of its emergence in 1994. Inevitably, Kabul would fall and in late 1996, Afghanistan began another chapter its tumultuous history.

Although Pakistan was a key base of the Taliban's power, a second, and more enduring, lifeline stemmed from al-Qaeda. Osama Bin Laden, visiting Afghanistan in 1996, seized upon similar ideological ideals to forge a partnership between the al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In a mutually beneficial arrangement, the Taliban would provide al-Qaeda sanctuary while al-Qaeda would help fund Taliban fighters. This symbiotic relationship would ultimately transform Afghanistan into a hub for global terrorism and spur al-Qaeda's growth into an international terrorist network.

Ineffectual Governance—the Core Problem

History, in no small part, has contributed to the current problem of constructing a viable political structure. Centuries of internal strife have led to deep fault lines with the Afghan social fabric. Afghanistan today is marked by numerous cleavages, including urban-rural, modern-traditional, theocratic-secularist, and national-tribal tensions. The rural regions are generally adverse to outside influence, including the central government; as such, Afghan government authority extends little beyond Kabul.⁶ In the absence of a strong central government, power remains dispersed among armed factions throughout the country. The resulting anarchy has perpetuated poverty, crime, drugs, and more crucially, the resurgence of the Taliban in recent years.

Adding to the problem is endemic corruption, which undermines political legitimacy. A UN report filed in January revealed that one in two Afghans were linked to acts of corruption in the last 12 months, with bribes amounting up to \$2.5 billion—almost ¼ of the GDP. Predictably, 59% of Afghans surveyed view public dishonesty as a greater threat than the lack of security and employment.⁷ Yet, corruption is intrinsically tied to the traditional Afghan “patron-client” relations, where favors and loyalty are offered in exchange for financial incentives. More disconcerting is the fact that these illicit tendencies are not confined to the lower rungs of the society. Weeding out corruption requires the broad political establishment to lead by example; this, however, seems an unlikely prospect in the near future. For instance, investigators have unearthed links between Ahmed Wali Karzai, the President’s brother and a prominent leader in the southern portion of the country, and the opium trade.⁸ More recently, in what was a thinly-veiled attempt to limit foreign interference, Karzai recently issued a decree that granted him total control over the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC)—the same body that ordered the disqualification of nearly one million votes in last year’s fraudulent elections.^{9,10}

Ironically, apart from deep fissures within the Afghan societal make-up and widespread corruption, nation-building efforts by foreign forces have contributed to the problem of establishing legitimacy. Tony Corn, in *Small Wars Journal*, points out a critical failure following the 2001 Bonn agreement: having agreed to the convocation of a *loya jirga*, the West went against the desire of two-thirds of *loya jirga* members to have King Zahir Shah as interim head of state, and bullied the assembly to accept Hamid Karzai.¹¹ Naturally, this has perpetuated the notion of the Karzai administration being a “puppet” government controlled by the West. This distrust extends to foreign assistance programs. More than half of Afghans believe that international organizations and non-government organizations are in the country for selfish financial gains.¹²

The Taliban and its Sources of Power

*“The Afghan government is the lawful government, but the Taliban’s law is the gun.” —Abdul Wahed Omarkhiel, Afghanistan district governor.*¹³

Defeating an insurgency requires an understanding of its key motivations, sources of power, and modes of operation. Far from being a monolithic organization, the Taliban today is a multi-faceted grouping loosely bonded by a common cause—overthrowing the coalition-backed government led by Hamid Karzai. At its core, the Taliban comprises a group of fervent former Taliban commanders (including Mullah Omar) who operate out of sanctuaries across the border in Pakistan. Notably, this faction includes the Haqqani network which maintains close ties with both al-Qaeda and the Pakistan's ISI intelligence agency.¹⁴ A second group operates in north-eastern Afghanistan and consists of bands whose ranks have recently swelled with Arab, Chechen and Uzbek fighters linked to al-Qaeda. The final and largest group is the product of ineffective governance. Disillusioned with corrupt provincial officials, many local tribesmen have allied themselves loosely with the Taliban.

Following the displacement of the Taliban regime in 2002, the absence of viable political entity provided a loose alliance of religious extremists, disgruntled tribal leaders and Pashtun nationalists with the opportunity to establish shadow governments across broad swaths of the country. Practicing a strict form of *Sharia* law, the extremists discharged their own brand of justice. No facet of Afghan society escaped the Taliban's influence—work practices, education, healthcare, and even marriages were controlled through the threat of violence. Effectively, the Taliban served as the *de facto* local government. The result, as described by David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency expert, is a disrupted tribal governance triad (see Figure 1).¹⁵ In an Afghan tribal organization, power is traditionally shared across tribal elders (the *jirga*), representatives from the Islamic religious establishment (the *mullah*), and the government-approved political agent. With the Taliban's resurgence, the government relinquished its role as a pole of authority.

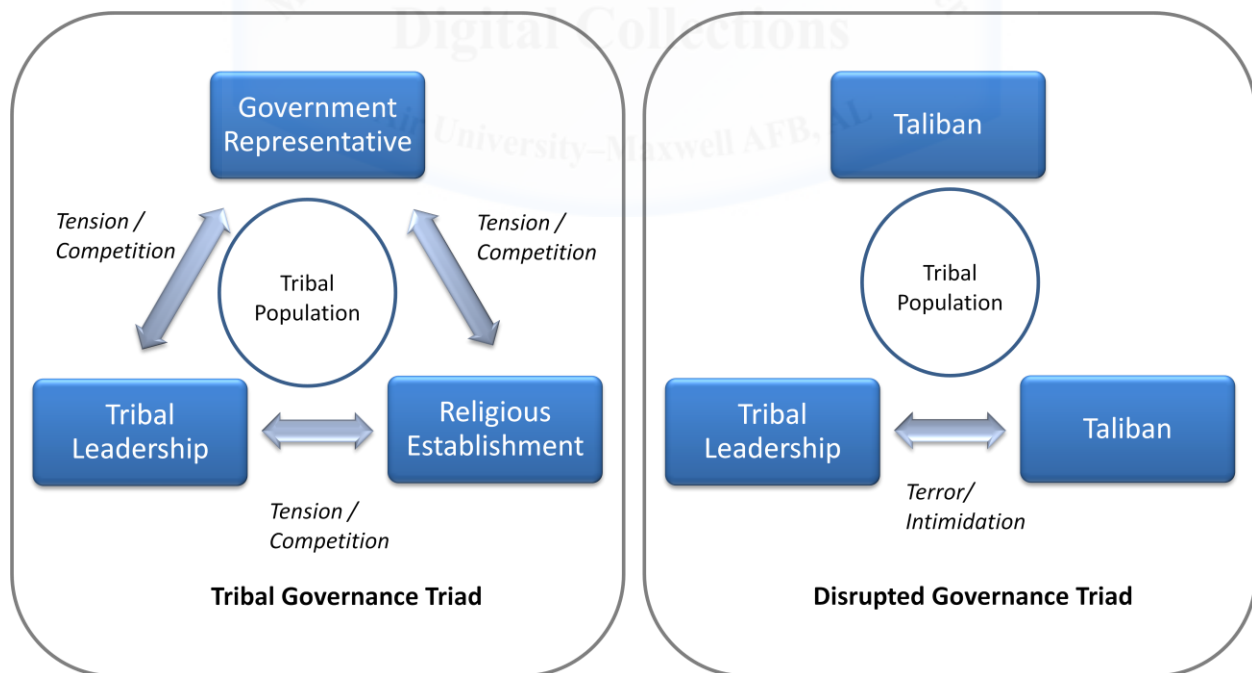


Figure 1. Influence of Taliban on Afghan Tribes (Adapted from Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla*)

As a testament to the maxim that counterinsurgency is a learning contest, the Taliban has recently has shown signs of moderating the extreme behavior it had shown during its 5 ½ year rule. In a move analogous to General McChrystal's new tactical directive issued in July last year, Mullah Omar, leader of the Afghanistan Taliban, issued a "code of conduct" that directed Taliban fighters to limit civilian casualties.^{16,17} This softer approach has become increasingly evident—through attending *shuras* (or village councils) conducted prior to the Marjah offensive, coalition officials have gathered from local residents that the Taliban has throttled back on its brutality in a bid to harness public support.¹⁸ For instance, the Taliban has stopped burning down schools and ceased opposing vaccination clinics for children.¹⁹

How about crippling the Taliban's financial lifelines? Thus far, the U.S. has enjoyed little success in this endeavor. Taliban finances are complex and fueled by multiple sources. The most widely-known is the drug trade—Afghanistan is the world's largest opium producer. Banking on this huge resource pool, the Taliban has imposed an elaborate tax system in areas under its control to derive an annual income of up to \$400 million.²⁰ A UN report filed in September 2009 estimated that opium trafficking guerillas have stockpiled more 10,000 lbs of opium—enough supplies to meet world demand for two years, and more importantly, potential profits ranging in the billions.²¹ This is supplemented by other illicit activities such as kidnappings and extortion. For instance, residents in districts under Taliban control have been forced to pay a religious "tax", usually amounting up to 10 percent of their income.²² In recent months, foreign donations, mostly from the Middle-East, have surpassed the drug trade as the primary lifeline of the Taliban.²³ General McChrystal has admitted that disrupting poppy cultivation would have minimal impact on Taliban operations, as long as foreign funding is maintained. American officials have also voiced their suspicions over foreign funding stemming from Pakistan's

intelligence operatives (though Islamabad has vehemently denied this practice). Indeed, that the enemy is elusive, shrewd and most crucially, resilient, is almost an understatement.

Hard Lessons

Between Afghanistan's tumultuous history and its current quandary, a number of common themes pertinent to the American strategy stand out. First, a large part of Afghanistan's problems stem from the lack of stable governance. With ethnic, religious and sectarian lines of identity anchored in the Afghan social fabric, Hamid Karzai's influence outside Kabul remains limited; instead, power remains diffused across religious leaders, ethnic segments, and warlords. The failure of governance contributes to an important—if not the primary—source of power for the Taliban. Between the corrupt Karzai administration and the medieval rule of the Taliban, a significant portion of Afghans have opted for the latter. Ultimately, basic security and limited governance is better than none at all.

A second basis of power for the Taliban, and the key to weakening the Taliban-al-Qaeda alliance lies in Pakistan. Any attempt to resolve the Afghanistan predicament must involve regional actors, especially Pakistan. Beyond the porous borders of Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have long sought sanctuary in the remote tribal areas of North-West Pakistan. Recent events have further pointed to signs of solidarity between Afghanistan and Pakistan Taliban. For example, the bombing in Khost that resulted in the death of seven CIA agents was found to involve leadership from both militant camps.²⁴ Indeed, the “two countries but one challenge” paradigm proposed by President Obama in March 2009 underscores the need to engage Pakistan as a key partner.²⁵ In addition, expanding engagement beyond Pakistan to include nations such as Russia, India, Iran and China will aid the U.S. cause, since these leading powers have vested interests in preventing the collapse of Afghanistan.

Third, contrary to the popular conception that the al-Qaeda and the Taliban are inseparable, there are important differences between the two organizations which can be exploited to advance U.S. interests. Al-Qaeda comprises mainly Arab militants united by the common ideology of a global jihad; in contrast, the Taliban is an indigenous political movement with deeply entrenched roots in Afghanistan's social fabric. Analysts, for example, have drawn parallels between Taliban and Lebanon's Hezbollah, a social and political movement that uses intimidation in combination with social programs and propaganda as a source of power.^{26, 27} Even if the threat *appears* to stem from a common source, the Taliban and al-Qaeda are fundamentally different entities. Defeating the Taliban may dislodge al-Qaeda from the region, but the counterterrorism agenda extends much farther beyond Afghan borders. Conversely, a severely weakened al-Qaeda may have little impact on the effectiveness of the Taliban. Understanding the relationship between the two fights is essential—only then can we assess the true worth of Afghanistan in relation to America's strategic goals.

The last, and perhaps most important, lesson, drawn from Afghanistan's past is the need for sustained commitment towards developing legitimate political institutions. In the absence of a long-term strategic vision, Afghanistan's addiction to foreign patronage has repeatedly resulted in disastrous outcomes. Just as the withdrawal of the Soviet Union resulted in a power vacuum that prompted the rise of Islamic extremism, neglect by the U.S. in the embryonic years of the Karzai administration has led to the resurgence of the Taliban. Moving forward, America must ensure enduring political stability to prevent a scenario all too familiar to Afghans. Foreign intervention cannot be an end in itself. A long-term strategic vision for Afghanistan, coupled with a sustained commitment to remove the chronic sources of instability, is necessary to achieve a viable peace.

III. Evaluating “Means” —Taking on the Taliban

Military Capacity

*“ISAF is a conventional force that is poorly configured for COIN, inexperienced in local languages and culture, and struggling with challenges inherent to coalition warfare. These intrinsic disadvantages are exacerbated by our current operational culture and how we operate.”*²⁸ — General McChrystal, Commander ISAF, 2009.

The recent media furor over General McChrystal’s leaked assessment and his recommendations for additional troops underscores the dilemma facing the Obama administration. Is military escalation the best solution? How extensive, and how long, a military commitment can the U.S. afford?

From the military’s perspective, the counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan is severely under-resourced. Counterinsurgency operations, by nature, are manpower intensive. To cite a commonly-used rule of thumb published in the Army’s counterinsurgency manual, a minimum of twenty friendly troops is required for every thousand residents.²⁹ With a population numbering close to 29 million, Afghanistan will require 580,000 counterinsurgents—far more than current or projected levels. General McChrystal highlights that even with reinforcements, victory over the Taliban cannot be guaranteed. Numbers aside, success will require an overhaul of the counterinsurgency strategy and a fundamental change in operational culture.

Having been engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq for the last eight years, the American military hails as one of the more experienced forces in counterinsurgency operations. Yet, the demands of fighting two concurrent irregular campaigns have taken its toll. A 2009 study undertaken by the Government Accountability Office provides useful insights into the readiness of the military. Not surprisingly, the high operational tempo has severely impacted the Department of Defense’s (DoD) ability to provide sufficient forces in specialized capabilities,

including engineering, civil affairs, transportation and military police. To compensate for these shortfalls, the DoD has adjusted mobilization cycles, resulting in deployment rates in excess of stated goals.³⁰ Multiple combat tours have become increasingly common. Further compounding the DoD challenge is the operational environment. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is a mountainous, land-locked country with poorly developed infrastructure and transportation networks. Thus, the emerging requirements for Afghanistan will likely place higher demands on specialized skills such as engineering, civil affairs—forces already stretched and undermanned.

Beyond manning, training capacity and equipment availability are also issues of concern. The majority of investments in training (at least up to 2009) have been devoted to Iraq. For example, the DoD has dedicated extensive training areas to mimic Iraq's urban settings, incorporated Arabic speakers in exercises and focused on tactics for densely populated areas. The emphasis on Iraq has led to limited training capacity for Afghanistan, which calls for different operational skill sets and cultural competencies. Adjustments would need to be made to reconfigure training capabilities. Similar requirements will be exacted on equipment. For example, the MRAP vehicle currently employed in Iraq is not well-suited to Afghanistan terrain; the Army is thus developing a lighter version to meet mission requirements. Collectively, the problems with training and equipment overturn the assumption that military forces can simply be rerouted from Iraq to Afghanistan.

The difficulties associated with force readiness and training are symptomatic of a larger problem: operational culture. The U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated beyond doubt that traditional kinetic effects have limited utility in counterinsurgency campaigns. Conventional military prowess, misapplied, can be a handicap. General McChrystal has pointed out that a fundamental, but not necessarily intuitive, change in military mindset to focus on the population is critical for success. Since taking over the reins of ISAF, he has repeatedly stressed

the calibrated use of force, enhanced cultural awareness, deeds-based information operations, and engaging the population. However, altering operational culture will take time. In the era of the “strategic corporal”, transformation must be all-inclusive to reach down to all strata of the military establishment. More often than not, actions at the lowest levels can have strategic consequences. General McChrystal’s recent decision to put Special Forces under his direct control out of concern of continued civilian casualties underscores this point.³¹

Another benchmark of military capacity lies in its capability to train host-nation security forces. Major stumbling blocks, however, stand in the way of plans to expand the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). The challenges are not insignificant: drugs, illiteracy, corruption, ethnic tensions, outdated equipment, meager salaries, and even Taliban infiltration.³² Adding to the difficulty is the lack of trainers—a recent Reuters report revealed a shortfall of up to 2400 personnel for the training mission.³³ Further compounding the problem is the manpower requirements of the on-going war. With the ANSF under tremendous pressure to raise forces and feed new units into the fight, the long term strategic goal of creating a legitimate, effective security force is compromised. Even if the projected targets of 134,000 and 96,800 personnel in the ANA and ANP respectively are realized in October 2010, the quality of training is likely to suspect in the near term.³⁴

In sum, while public debate was centered on troop levels, the problems plaguing the military cannot be understood by calculating the number of boots on Afghan soil. The challenges associated with force availability, training, equipment, and operational culture, while not insurmountable, must be included in the calculus for determining America’s military influence in Afghanistan. With President Obama’s announcement to deploy additional troops, the American commitment in Afghanistan will total more than 100,000 troops. Even if U.S. forces in Iraq drawdown as planned, diverting capabilities to Afghanistan will not be a straightforward affair.

In the short term, the sheer size of the deployment will most definitely stretch a military institution straddled between two unconventional campaigns. More crucially, success will require a significant change in operational culture within ISAF and fundamental revamp of the Afghan security forces.

Civilian Capacity

“Counterinsurgency is only as good as the government it supports. NATO could do everything right - it isn’t - but will still fail unless Afghans trust their government.”—David Kilcullen³⁵

While military action will be predominant until a suitable level of security is attained, success in counterinsurgency will ultimately require a cadre of civilian experts to support governance and development functions, shepherd the political reform process, and implement anti-corruption initiatives. General McChrystal has lined up a scheme that calls for 80 pre-packed governments to take root across Taliban areas in the span of two years.³⁶ While ambitious, the plan can succeed—provided sufficient civilian capacity is mustered to train and recruit effective administrators.

The State Department’s response has been to stand up the interagency Civilian Response Corp (CRC). However, this initiative has been stifled by a lack of funding, focus and leadership, as well as fundamental problems that are organizational in nature. To start, the State Department and U.S. development agencies are short of personnel conversant in Dari, Pashto and other native languages spoken in Afghanistan.³⁷ As of March 2010, there are no more than 1,000 American civilians in Afghanistan representing U.S. agencies, including the Departments of State, Defense, Agriculture, Justice, Treasury, Homeland Security, as well as the CIA, FBI, and the Drug Enforcement Administration.³⁸ Compared to the DoD, civilian agencies also have less flexibility to mobilize staff for duty in war zones. Further compounding the problem is security. More often than not, the military does not have the resources to provide security for civilian

personnel outside of forward operating bases. The prospect of operating in a dangerous environment has in turn contributed to difficulties in recruitment.³⁹

The shortfall in civilian expertise has inevitably led to the DoD stepping in fill the overall gap with military resources and private contractors. As an indication, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) predominantly consists of military forces, rather than civilian counterparts.⁴⁰ With insufficient civilian capacity, the military has taken on a more active role in areas previously spearheaded by Civil Affairs units. For instance, strategic communication, and in particular public affairs, is now increasingly managed by military units.⁴¹ The drawback is limited reach back—with greater specialization and training, civilian officials can more effectively draw on the resources and expertise of civilian agencies based in the U.S.. In the medium term, these problems will undermine the administration's efforts to increase the civilian component of PRTs, and potentially allow PRTs to be lead by non-military personnel. Clearly, building Afghan self-sufficiency will require a more significant civilian contribution.

The Monetary Dimension

*“Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy.”*⁴²—President Obama, address to West Point Cadets, 2009.

By any measure, Afghanistan will be an expensive war. Estimates of the costs incurred thus far vary. As of October 2009, Congressional Research Service estimates \$227 billion spent on Afghanistan since 2002. On the other hand, John Kerry, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, places the price tag of the war at \$243 billion.⁴³ With the addition of troops to bolster the faltering campaign, the cost of the war can only escalate. A metric widely used in cost projections is the cost per soldier. Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution, calculates that each soldier will cost an additional \$1 million, on top of salaries and equipment already stocked in the inventory. Using this rule of thumb, Obama's decision to send

30,000 troops will cost an additional \$30 billion every year, on top of what the U.S. is already spending.⁴⁴

To understand the wider implications of the Afghanistan commitment, these numbers must be placed in the context of overall defense spending and the fiscal situation. A congressional report published in September 2009 states that a total of \$944 billion has been appropriate for Iraq, Afghanistan and other operations related to the Global War on Terror.⁴⁵ When considered in tandem with America's budget deficit, defense spending becomes a disconcerting issue. For fiscal year 2010 alone, the American deficit amounts to \$1.6 trillion, \$150 billion more than 2009 and the highest since World War II.⁴⁶ Starting at the turn of the century, U.S. debt has increased almost exponentially from \$3.4 trillion to a projected \$14.3 in February 2010.⁴⁷ Closely mirroring this trend is defense spending. A congressional study highlights that defense expenditure has increased an average of 9 percent per annum for the last decade.⁴⁸ Including the funds projected for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the military budget for 2010 will amount to just over \$700 billion.⁴⁹

To be sure, defense spending is not the sole cause for America's fiscal woes. The global financial crisis, health care programs, taxation policies are all culpable culprits. The bottom line, however, remains unchanged: America is spending a lot of money it does not have. Viewed in broader terms, the escalating defense expenditure is indicative of America's increased reliance on the military as the principal element in fighting the Global War on Terror. No price should be too high to guarantee national security; yet, as the statistics suggest, the fiscal situation has reached a point where further increases in military spending will eventually undermine long term national security.⁵⁰

Support for the War

The cost of the war, in both blood and treasure, impinges on another key resource for the Afghanistan campaign—support of the American public and international partners. Should support on the domestic front evaporate, increasing or extending U.S. commitment in Afghanistan will undoubtedly prove more difficult. Here, Iraq plays into the calculus, as the public's appetite for two long-drawn conflicts cannot be taken for granted. Support for Afghanistan has traditionally outweighed Iraq, but recent trends are showing signs of a reversal. As illustrated in Figure 2, polls conducted by CNN reveal a growing proportion of the public disenchanted with American involvement in Afghanistan.⁵¹

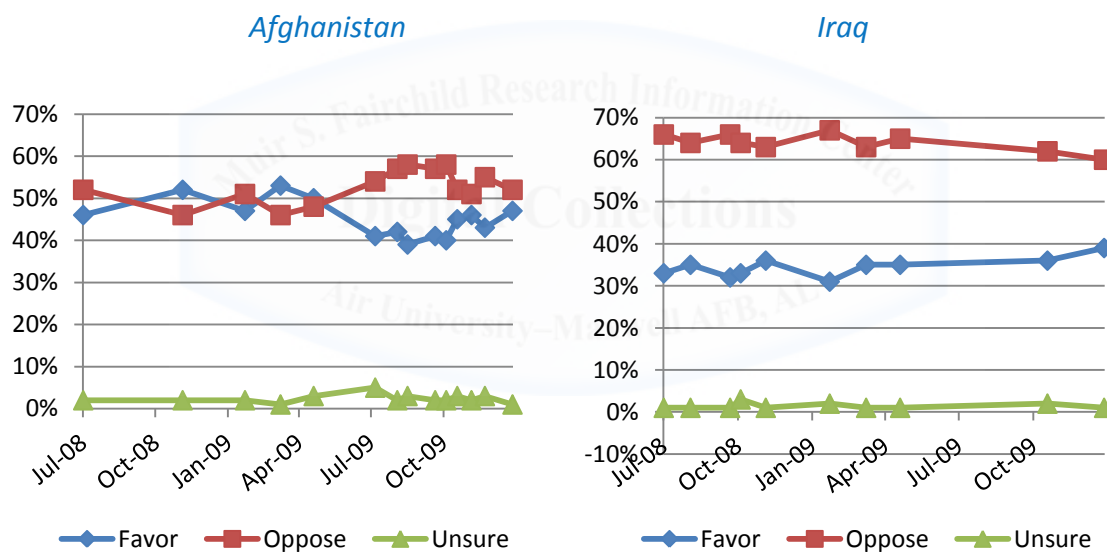


Figure 2. Approval Ratings of Afghan and Iraq War (CNN Poll)

Beyond American shores, the decline in support for military intervention in Afghanistan is markedly more obvious. The United Kingdom, for instance, has been under increasing public pressure to withdraw its military contingent due to mounting casualties.⁵² While approval ratings for joint British-US military action surged as high as 74% in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, a recent poll conducted by BBC reveals support is waning rapidly.⁵³ 63% of respondents indicated a preference for the government to pull out of Afghanistan by the end of 2010.⁵⁴ Canada,

another key partner, announced its intentions to withdraw its contingent of 2800 troops from southern Afghanistan in 2011. The latest sign of weakening support came from the Netherlands. In a development that could potentially open the floodgates for remaining NATO nations to pull out of Afghanistan, the Dutch cabinet collapsed following the refusal of the Labor Party to extend the Afghan mission for an additional year.⁵⁵ As the Afghanistan campaign enters a pivotal phase where more—not less—forces are needed, this trend is especially disconcerting.

IV. Defining “Ends”—Rethinking Strategic Goals in Afghanistan

Re-appraising Afghanistan as a National Security Interest

How vital is Afghanistan to the U.S.? The answer to this question, together with the “means” at hand, should influence the end states and corresponding strategies the U.S. must adopt. According to Donald Neuchterlein, who advocated the idea of categorizing interests based on their degree of importance, the litmus test for vitality lies in how intolerable a situation would turn out if not resolved effectively.⁵⁶ In other words, when inaction causes serious harm, the issue should be classified as “vital”. On the other hand, where circumstances are painful but tolerable, national interests are deemed “major” and do not require the use of military force. For example, nuclear deterrence during the height of the Cold War was clearly a “vital” strategic imperative; on the other hand, intervention to prevent human rights abuse, while congruent with American ideals, does not warrant the same level of importance.⁵⁷ With an increasingly strained resource pool, the need to evaluate and prioritize national interests naturally takes on more importance.

Thus far, the debate on the importance of Afghanistan to national security has not generated any outright winners. At one end of the spectrum, Afghanistan is no longer deemed to be worth the fight. The original objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom, as articulated by

President George Bush in an address to the country in October 2001, were the destruction of terrorist infrastructure, capture of al-Qaeda leaders, and the cessation of terrorist activities in Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Based on these benchmarks, the American campaign has been largely successful; although terrorist acts continue to plague Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda's key leadership escaped across the border into Pakistan, the destruction of the bulk of terrorist training camps removed a central source of al-Qaeda's power. Peter Beinart, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, asserts that al-Qaeda is no longer capable of staging a terrorist act near the scale of 9-11.⁵⁹ Complex, mass-casualty attacks typically require extensive training—a resource increasingly scarce to al-Qaeda. This observation is further backed by studies, such as those conducted by Simon Fraser university, which indicates that fatalities from terrorism have declined as much as 40 percent since 2001.⁶⁰ Viewed from this perspective, the larger goal of reducing the terrorist threat on American interests has largely been successful.

The case for diminishing emphasis on Afghanistan is bolstered by a second line of reasoning—the fallacy behind the al-Qaeda-Taliban alliance. While the revival of the Taliban poses a great risk to the Afghanistan's embryonic government, such a scenario does not necessarily equate to a return of the al-Qaeda and an increased terrorist threat to America. To revisit an earlier point, al-Qaeda and the Taliban are disparate organizations with differing aspirations and motivations. Further, if the political imperative is to assist weak and failing states in order to deny safe havens to terrorist networks, Afghanistan constitutes only one of many countries that pose the same risk to America. The attempted bombing of Flight 253 by a Nigerian indoctrinated in Yemen provides a grim reminder that the war on terror will be fought on multiple fronts. Notably, this argument has resonated with key political leaders, including Vice-president Biden who has opposed further escalation of the military build-up. The counter-

terrorism strategy he proposes focuses instead on Pakistan, leveraging on Special Forces and drones to target the al-Qaeda.⁶¹

These arguments have found an equally vehement opposing voice, who insists that Afghanistan is a fight that must be won at all costs. The alternative—a Taliban victory—is simply too costly. Afghanistan will revert to become a sanctuary for terrorist networks. More than that, Al-Qaeda associates around the world will be emboldened by the collapse of the United States at the hands of a vastly inferior insurgency force. Indeed, such an outcome will not be unlike the “divine victory” scored by Hezbollah over Israel in 2006—one of the more poignant scenes from the conflict was the waves of celebration that ripped through the Arab world after Hezbollah survived the massive Israeli onslaught.⁶²

A broader implication of defeat is the credibility of the U.S. and the downstream impact on foreign policy interests. To draw a parallel from the Soviet experience two decades ago, pulling out of Afghanistan without achieving a measurable form of success would invariably tarnish American credibility. America’s leading role in international affairs and the global war on terror will be undermined. More crucially, coalition-based operations, involving NATO for example, will be put at risk. Effort to harness greater commitment from partner nations will prove more difficult, since the Afghanistan episode will cast grave doubts on the feasibility of U.S.-led enterprises. More likely, America will find itself more alone in the long war.

The optimal solution probably lies in between the two extreme positions put forth. The original impetus for military intervention was to eradicate terrorist capabilities located in Afghanistan that posed a direct threat to national security. In contrast, the current campaign against the Taliban is a preventive effort to ensure Afghanistan does not evolve in a terrorist breeding ground. In other words, while the Afghanistan was undoubtedly a threat to national security back in 2002, the case for classifying the state as a “vital” interest is less clear cut today.

Nevertheless, achieving an enduring peace remains a centerpiece of American foreign policy. Apart from denying sanctuary to terrorist networks, Afghanistan holds the potential to anchor the stability of the region, which includes nuclear-armed Pakistan. The challenge thus lies in achieving this end state with a strategy that commensurates with what the U.S. can afford, and bounding commitment to ensure that long term security and interests are not unduly compromised.

Political Legitimacy—the Key Goal

“We will not win based on the number of Taliban we kill, but instead on our ability to separate insurgents from the center of gravity—the people.”—General Stanley McChrystal, Tactical Directive dated 2 July 2009.⁶³

The central contention of this paper is that political legitimacy should be the focal point of all efforts in Afghanistan. Removing the Taliban threat, while crucial, does not constitute an end by itself. The absence of political settlement has been—and remains—the key driver of instability and conflict in Afghanistan. A legitimate government capable of winning the trust of the Afghan populace will naturally weaken the Taliban’s hold over the population. To this end, the incentive program coined by General McChrystal and Afghan leaders aimed at luring insurgents to switch allegiances is noteworthy. While only a modest number of Taliban’s followers have defected, the results underline the appeal of jobs and security in a country torn by centuries of war.⁶⁴ Such initiatives could conceivably target the bulk of Taliban members, whose motivations stems from disillusionment with corrupt governance.

Apart from sidelining the Taliban, political legitimacy serves as the bedrock for building a stable Afghan state. In “Guiding Principles for Stability and Reconstruction”, a recently published capstone document from the United States Institute of Peace, legitimacy is defined as a cross-cutting principle for achieving the key end states in state-building (see Figure 2).⁶⁵ Clearly,

if a sustainable trajectory of development and stable governance is to be achieved, legitimacy is a vital precondition.

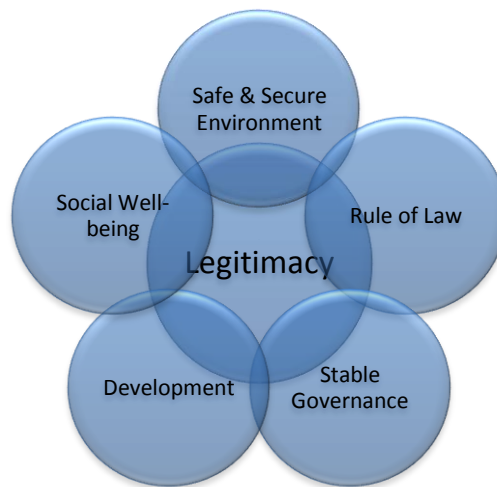


Figure 3: Legitimacy as a core principal in Stability and Reconstruction

A third reason for pursuing political legitimacy as the primary goal lies in its impact on the support of the American public and international partners. Illustrative here is the Afghan election last year. Having uncovered blatant signs of fraud, the decision to cancel the second round of voting not only undermined Afghanistan's nascent democracy, but also severely undercut both domestic and international support for the continuing intervention. The debacle raised somber questions on the wisdom of putting American and coalition troops in harm's way to support a government elected through illegitimate means. Ultimately, the U.S. needs a credible partner to sustain its efforts to rebuild Afghanistan.

V. Shaping "Ways" to Achieve a Viable Peace

With political legitimacy as the central goal, the following key tenets are recommended in shaping the strategy to develop a legitimate Afghan government.

Marginalize, not destroy, the Taliban

President Obama's aims of "disrupting, dismantling and destroying" the insurgency may prove a step too far for a military already strained from fighting two concurrent wars.⁶⁶ Annihilating the Taliban would likely require a protracted campaign; however, from both operational and fiscal standpoints, open-ended military escalation is not sustainable. Moving away from an enemy-centric approach, emphasis should instead be placed on marginalizing the Taliban by protecting the population, weeding out corruption, and establishing effective governance. The measure of success here lies in threat posed to the political legitimacy—as long as the insurgency is weakened to the extent that the government retains its credibility and remains capable of performing key functions, this objective should be considered accomplished. In addition, to further curtail Taliban's influence on the populace, the military may not be the sole instrument. Negotiations with the Taliban (an option currently ruled out by the U.S., but favored by Karzai) should be considered a plausible alternative to achieve a political endgame acceptable to Afghans.⁶⁷

Protect the Population

Rather than hunting down an elusive enemy, focus should instead be channeled into providing security to the populace. Maintaining a continuous presence to protect population centers wrestled from the Taliban's control should be a key element in McChrystal's "Clear-Hold-Build" strategy. In the short term, this task can be performed by coalition forces or as a collaborative effort between ISAF and the ANSF, as witnessed in the recent Marjah offensive. In time, however, Afghans will need to do the heavy lifting. A competent Afghan security force credible among local communities is an essential precondition for enduring stability and preventing the resurrection of the Taliban. To this end, a concerted effort to shore up the pool of trainers in Afghanistan is paramount. Equally important is the need to strike a careful balance

between efforts to reconstruct the ANSF and the on-going campaign to weed out the Taliban. The skill sets relating to the provision of local security and that associated with counterinsurgency operations are different. While the current focus is on the latter, emphasis must shift towards developing self-sufficient security institutions capable of supporting governance and rule of law.

Strengthen Civilian Capacity

Troops alone will not win the war. Without a matching civilian capacity, gains in security are meaningless in the longer term. In the absence of a cadre of civilian experts groomed to undertake stability and reconstruction operations, McChrystal's strategy of rolling in functional governments after weeding out the Taliban in provinces across the country will invariably fail. To this end, beefing up civilian capacity to address the current civilian-military mismatch is crucial. Expanding the pool of civilian experts will allow the military to focus on its core responsibilities, and facilitate the drawdown of troops. Moreover, unlike the military "surge", the U.S. will likely need to maintain civilian expertise in Afghanistan long after the withdrawal of military forces. Beyond the short term prerogatives of establishing core governance functions, consultants will undoubtedly play a crucial role in shepherding and fine-tuning the political setup, so that it becomes acceptable to Afghans. A significant increase in resources and attention to address the current shortfall in civilian expertise is therefore a key ingredient for success.

Leverage on Pakistan

As history has demonstrated, Afghanistan's fate is intrinsically tied to its neighbors. In particular, Pakistan, with its long-standing ties with insurgent networks in the region, could play a decisive role. If the current campaign against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) proves successful, the insurgency in Afghanistan would be denied an important sanctuary and a key

source of power. Indicative here is the arrest of the Afghan Taliban military chief, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, on the eve of the Marjah offensive—the result of collaborative operations between the CIA and Pakistan’s ISI.⁶⁸ In addition, recent overtures by Pakistan to play a central role in U.S.-Afghan talks should be viewed as a positive development. While the motive (of molding a political setup favorable to Pakistani interests) may be selfish, Pakistan’s influence over the Haqqani network could potentially drive a wedge between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Ultimately, the counterinsurgency thrust alone will not suffice; success will also depend on diplomatic efforts to align Pakistan interests with American strategic prerogatives.

Sustained Commitment

Last, setting a realistic timeframe for achieving a viable peace is necessary for all parties involved. By all accounts, building an effective state for the first time in Afghanistan’s modern history will be a task of monumental proportions. The process will be slow and painstaking. To reiterate a theme raised repeatedly in this paper, combating the Taliban, developing the ANSF, strengthening local governance, establishing a political setup acceptable to Afghans, will likely take time. Even if America can reduce its military footprint in the next few years, a sustained commitment to the region—in terms of governance, training, development—will remain necessary in the longer term. Barnett Rubin, a leading expert in Afghanistan, has projected that Afghanistan will not become a self-sustaining member of the international community in the next ten years.⁶⁹ Patience is not the best of American virtues, but clearly, no quick fixes are available in Afghanistan.

VI. Conclusion

Eight years into Afghanistan, a viable state of peace remains a distant prospect. The combination of limited resources, a resilient and crafty adversary, and a demanding operational

environment calls for a re-evaluation of the American strategy. Approaching the problem from a “means”—“ends” — “ways” methodology yields useful insights. To begin, U.S. ambitions must be adjusted without compromising the vision of enduring peace in Afghanistan and the larger goal of combating terrorism. Annihilating the Taliban may no longer be a tenable option—in all likelihood, the resilience of the opponent suggests that a low-level insurgency will persist for the foreseeable future. Instead, the U.S. should seek to contain their influence while concurrently bolstering civilian capacity to develop core governance functions. In addition, engagement with regional partners is key. Pakistan, in particular, should be leveraged upon to weaken the Taliban, and possibly to drive a wedge between local insurgents and al-Qaeda.

These efforts should set the stage for the most crucial mission—pursing an enduring political system acceptable to Afghans. Establishing a legitimate government in a fractured state with geographic, linguistic, sectarian and cultural fault lines will be a tall order by any measure; yet it is a vital task. The centre of gravity of this war lies with the Afghan people. Only with functional governance can the U.S. set the trajectory for enduring peace and sustained development in Afghanistan. In essence, political legitimacy—not destruction of the Taliban—should be the principal measure of success.

Acronyms

ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Force
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRC	Civilian Response Corp
DoD	Department of Defense
ECC	Electoral Complaints Commission
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
MRAP	Mine Resistant Ambush Protected
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

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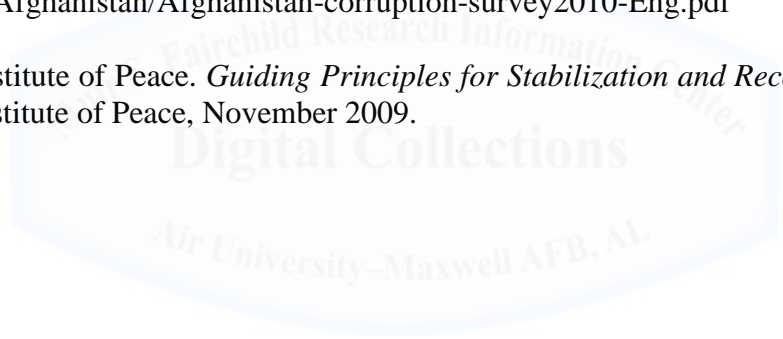
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End Notes

¹ While outlining the key thrusts of the Afghanistan strategy, President Obama did not clearly articulate an end state or exit strategy. President Barack Obama, “The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (speech, United States Military Academy at West Point, 1 December 2009).

² Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 8.

³ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 5.

⁴ The Soviet invasion resulted in devastating consequences for Afghanistan. As of mid 1989, 1.24 million Afghans were reported to be killed, with another 5 million (1/2 of the population) displaced from their homes. Soviet casualties numbered 13,833. See Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 198.

⁵ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 210.

⁶ Thier, “The Politics of Peace Building”, 42.

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²⁴ “Two Heads, Same Body”, *Economist*, 14 Jan 2010.

²⁵ President Barack Obama, “What’s New in the Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” ,

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²⁸ McChrystal, *Commander’s Initial Assessment*.

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