



Gambling on Reconciliation to Save a Transition

December 2011

Perils and Possibilities in Afghanistan

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Summary

U.S. forces are beginning the long process of withdrawal from Afghanistan. The international community is committed to completing a security transition by 2014, at which point coalition forces will cease to have primary responsibility for assuring Afghan security. But even the best-laid transition plans are at risk of failure if shoring up the Afghan state is not made a priority. The international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn on December 5 offers the United States and its allies an opportunity to institute the changes necessary for success.

Although NATO's efforts to train Afghan national forces have made remarkable progress in recent years, it is unlikely that the indigenous military, police, and militia will be capable of independently securing the country against the wide range of terrorist and insurgent groups that will still be present in the region in 2014. Moreover, President Barack Obama's decision to withdraw the surge forces from Afghanistan by September 2012 will prevent U.S. military commanders from being able to complete what they have so effectively begun: decimating the mid-level command structure of the Taliban that serves as the vital link between the *rabbari shura* (the leadership council) based in Quetta, Pakistan, and their foot soldiers in the field.

The administration, supported by the international community, has attempted to resolve this conundrum by promoting reconciliation with the Taliban, but that effort too is faltering. The insurgent leadership simply does not believe that it has been conclusively defeated—and accepting the U.S. terms now would surely be tantamount to acknowledging defeat. These challenges are exacerbated by the most vexing issue of all—the problematic role of Pakistan, which provides the insurgents sanctuary while using them as tools in its efforts to subordinate Afghanistan. All things considered, therefore, the prospects for successful reconciliation are indeed dim.

Yet, after 2014, the international community can still leave behind an Afghanistan that is durable enough to ensure that the Taliban can never regain effective control. Such meaningful success will require not jettisoning reconciliation so much as recommitting to the “hardening” of the Afghan

state. First, the United States and its allies must invest in strengthening Afghan political institutions to deepen democracy, foster internal reconciliation, and ensure a peaceful transition of presidential power in 2014.

Second, the international community must help Afghanistan shift away from its current dependency-inducing pattern of economic growth underwritten by large quantities of foreign aid. Budgetary support for Kabul will be necessary for some time, but Washington and its allies must also assist Afghanistan in developing policy frameworks that expand private investment, effectively manage the country's mineral resources, sustain improvements in agriculture, and deepen its economic integration with Pakistan and India.

Third, the international community must commit to funding Afghanistan's national security forces through sustained contributions to a dedicated trust fund. Meanwhile, Washington should conclude the strategic partnership agreement currently being negotiated with Kabul to permit both counterterrorism operations and operational support for Afghan security forces over the long term. The United States must also delay the planned withdrawal of American surge troops and maintain the remaining U.S. forces in country until 2014.

In the absence of such commitments, the desire that Afghanistan "never again" become a haven for terrorism will remain merely a pious invocation.

The author thanks Richard Fontaine, John H. Gill, Frédéric Grare, and Sean Mirski for their thoughtful comments on this paper.

After over ten years of war, the United States and its international coalition partners are transitioning out of Afghanistan. Yet, insurgent violence continues to wrack the country and hopes for the much-hyped reconciliation process continue to fade. Above all else, the many problems created by Pakistan remain unaddressed.

Still, led by the United States, the international community committed itself a year ago at the Lisbon Summit to complete a security transition in Afghanistan by 2014. By this date, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will assume full responsibility for internal and external security, thus permitting its coalition partners to cease active combat operations and begin the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Toward this end, the Afghan government, in collaboration with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is currently in the process of identifying those areas that will be handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in three tranches.

The first tranche, announced by President Hamid Karzai in March of this year, involved the transfer of security responsibility in all districts of Bamyan, Panjshir, and Kabul Provinces (with the exception of the Surobi district in Kabul), as well as the municipalities of Mazar-i-Sharif (Balkh Province), Herat (Herat Province), Lashkar Gah (Helmand Province), and Mehtar Lam (Laghman Province). This handover, which began in July, involved areas that were "either relatively free

of insurgent activity or have a heavy presence of U.S. and NATO troops that can intervene anytime Afghan security forces become overwhelmed,” as Alex Rodriguez summarized it in the *Los Angeles Times*.¹

After extended internal discussions between Afghanistan and the ISAF leadership, Kabul has now identified the areas that would revert to Afghan responsibility in the second tranche. An official announcement on November 27, 2011, has indicated that Afghan forces will take over eighteen new areas, including central Helmand, several districts in Wardak, and the Surobi district in Kabul. All in all, Afghan forces will now oversee security in the Samangan, Balkh, Daykondi, Takhar, and Nimruz Provinces entirely, in addition to controlling large areas in the Herat, Parwan, Badakhshan, and Nangarhar Provinces.

What is distinctive about the transfers in the second tranche is that Afghan forces will assume responsibility for some dangerous and contested areas, doing so while coalition forces are still present in the country in substantial strength. It is clear that large cities and the major transportation corridors have been the main focus of the transfer of responsibility this time around: when completed, Afghan security forces will protect four of the country’s five largest cities—Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad. But the absence of Kandahar City from this list, which was discussed intensely within the Karzai government during the last two months, suggests that the government is still not entirely confident about its ability to maintain control over this symbolically important center after coalition forces wrested it from Taliban domination in a difficult campaign during the summer and fall of 2010.

The details of the transfers contemplated in tranche two have been a long time coming. President Hamid Karzai was expected to announce them during the Istanbul Conference in early November. Obviously, that did not occur. The extraordinary *loya jirga* summoned by Karzai to discuss the strategic partnership declaration (SPD) with the United States also subsequently concluded a few weeks later without any declaration, although Karzai did note earlier in Istanbul that when the second tranche was completed, “nearly fifty percent of Afghanistan’s population will come under the security umbrella provided by Afghanistan’s own national security institutions.”²

The November 27 announcement confirms this promise and as such constitutes a milestone toward the Afghan government’s assumption of nationwide control in the third tranche, which based on current expectations is likely to begin in 2013 and continue well into the following year. If this timetable holds, the security transition envisaged by the international community at Lisbon will be completed on schedule by 2014, when coalition forces will cease to have primary responsibility for assuring Afghan security. The multinational conference on Afghanistan occurring in Bonn on December 5, 2011—some ten years after the first Bonn conference defined the character of the current Afghan state—will reaffirm this schedule and discuss other aspects of the transition process as well.

But Will the Transition Succeed?

Despite the international community's strong commitment to the schedule laid down in Lisbon, it is unclear whether the security transition will be substantively successful on this timeline for two reasons.

First, although the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan has made remarkable progress in building up the ANSF in recent years, it is unlikely that these indigenous forces—military, police, and militia—will be capable of independently securing the country against the wide range of terrorist and insurgent groups that will still be present in the region in 2014. The fact of the matter is that the Afghan National Army (ANA) today is still unable to prosecute high-intensity counterinsurgency operations autonomously, especially in rural areas, because only a small portion of the force can function independently. The same is even truer of the Afghan National Police, with the exception of a few elite components, such as the Afghan National Civil Order Police. In contrast, the Afghan Local Police—the rural militias set up by the coalition—have demonstrated great promise, but they are lightly armed, relatively small in number, and serve mainly as a first line of defense for village communities under attack until assistance from either the Afghan National Army or the Afghan National Police is forthcoming.

Second, President Barack Obama decided to withdraw the surge forces from Afghanistan by September 2012—meaning that lead elements of the remaining 23,000 American troops will begin rotating out of the country starting in spring next year before the second fighting season is even fully under way. That will prevent U.S. military commanders from being able to complete what they have so effectively begun: decimating the mid-level command structure of the Taliban, which serves as the vital link between the *rabbari shura* (the leadership council) based in Quetta, Pakistan, and their foot soldiers in the field. This decision thus denies ISAF the opportunity to expand to eastern Afghanistan the successful clearing operations already begun in the south. The still-maturing ANSF will thus be left with a much more difficult task than would be the case if U.S. forces were present in strength and were able to clear the east as well before the security transition was complete.

The combination of ANSF immaturity and the premature diminution of U.S. combat power in Afghanistan thus makes it very likely that, although the security transition will proceed on schedule, the Afghan state will still be incapable of independently neutralizing the threats posed by the Taliban insurgency and the terrorist groups—such as al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Haqqani network—which support its operations in different ways. If the government in Kabul fails to neutralize these threats, as is to be expected at least in the initial phase following the security transition, it could progressively weaken the Afghan state. This could lead over time either to its potential collapse or to a return to regional warlordism and civil strife, all of which produce the enabling conditions that would permit

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terrorist groups to thrive in Afghanistan and along the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. Consequently, even if the security transition is successful as a process in and of itself, it will not eliminate the threats to the American homeland and the homelands of U.S. allies if the ANSF remains incapable of autonomously subduing the myriad security threats in Afghanistan.

Enter Political Reconciliation as Deus Ex Machina

The administration, supported by various members of the international community, has attempted to resolve the dangers threatening the security transition by promoting reconciliation with the Taliban. This effort is premised on the calculation that a political solution to the conflict would, by definition, minimize the burdens facing the ANSF in regards to security en route to and after the transition; it would also enable the United States and its coalition partners to proceed with progressively larger troop withdrawals from Afghanistan sooner rather than later.

Consistent with this logic, the Obama administration has initiated a series of overtures toward both the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network in the hope of exploring the prospects for reconciliation. The United States has laid out its terms: the insurgents must renounce violence; irrevocably cut their ties with al-Qaeda; and abide by the Afghan constitution, including its protections for women and minorities. The Karzai government, using its own intermediaries and the High Peace Council headed by the late Burhanuddin Rabbani, has also embarked on parallel outreach efforts toward the Quetta *shura*, the Haqqani network, and the Hizb-i-Islami (Gulbuddin) headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

While reaching out to these adversaries is sensible in principle, this effort has not yet yielded much fruit in practice—and it is unlikely to do so in any meaningful way at least in time to assure a peaceful security transition in 2014. The reasons for this failure are many and intractable.

To begin, it is still not clear whether the Quetta *shura* as a whole has any genuine interest in reconciliation with the Afghan government on Washington's terms. The *shura's* acceptance of these terms today would be tantamount to acknowledging defeat after a decade of war. Yet currently there is not a shred of evidence either that the *shura* believes that it has been defeated or that it has in fact given up on its objective of making a comeback in Afghanistan.

To the contrary, the Taliban continue to emphasize creating shadow governments in the Afghan districts they control or contest, which suggests that they still seek to regain control in the south and the east en route to restoring the rule they enjoyed almost throughout Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. This relentless process hardly indicates they are prepared to forego their quest for power, or, in effect, surrender

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by accepting the three onerous conditions laid down by the Afghan state and its foreign protectors.

The recent assassination of Afghanistan's principal envoy, Burhanuddin Rabbani, by the Taliban also signals that the *shura* may not perceive an urgency for peace that matches the administration's need for a successful reconciliation as part of the security transition. Rabbani's killing has now dulled even Karzai's enthusiasm for negotiations with the Taliban, and it has deepened skepticism throughout Afghanistan about the prospects for a peaceful termination of the conflict.

To be sure, there was a miniscule faction within the *shura* that was interested in the possibilities of reconciliation with Kabul during the middle of the last decade, a group most conspicuously associated with Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar Akhund, who was apprehended by Pakistan in February 2010. This clique, nevertheless, always represented a distinct minority and never included the two currently critical deputies, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir.

Most important of all, however, the *Emir Al-Momineen* (Leader of the Faithful), Mullah Muhammad Omar, has signaled little interest in reconciliation on the terms enunciated by the Afghan government and the United States. He is the one individual who commands the absolute loyalty of the entire *rabbari shura*, the three regional *shuras* in Quetta, Peshawar, and Miramshah, and the Taliban insurgency as a whole, and who serves as the unifying link between all the factions populating the diverse Taliban movement. All Omar's public pronouncements and his covert directives to the shadow governors to date suggest that he still views the *shura* as a government-in-waiting and the Taliban insurgency as inexorably proceeding toward inevitable victory—convictions that do not bode well for the hope of a negotiated settlement.

It is possible that the Afghan Taliban *might* be willing to cut ties with al-Qaeda—the single most important consideration for the United States—as part of a larger settlement with Kabul. This might occur if the al-Qaeda connection was all that stood in the way of securing some share of power in Afghanistan. But the evidence today at the operational level only corroborates how deeply intertwined these two groups and many other terrorist outfits have become. Furthermore, it is patently unclear why the insurgent leadership would want to accept the coalition's peace terms right now, no matter how uncomfortable they may be with their Pakistani protectors and how desirous they are of returning to their own country (see table 1).

This is especially the case because they believe that so far they have only been hurt, but not decisively defeated, by ISAF's military operations. And, more to the point, they are convinced that NATO forces are irrevocably headed out the door by 2014 and will leave behind a fragile Afghan state that constitutes easy pickings. For an insurgency, whose members have survived over thirty years of bitter and unrelenting war, to surrender on the eve of the departure of its most capable

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.

Source: Ashley J. Tellis, *Creating New Facts on the Ground: Why the Diplomatic Surge Cannot Yet Produce a Regional Solution in Afghanistan*, Policy Brief 91, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2011.

opponents defies reason—and the evidence thus far suggests that the Taliban have been nothing but cunning and rational.

Even if it is assumed that the Taliban can stomach an Afghan constitution that respects gender rights and the rights of minorities, it would be much harder for the insurgents to accept what President Karzai and the United States are now mutually negotiating even as they encourage the Taliban to reconcile: a strategic partnership declaration (SPD) that promises a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Though his enthusiasm for the agreement has waxed and waned, Karzai's recent speech to the extraordinary *loya jirga*, and the gathering's response to his proposals, confirms that the die is now cast. The U.S. military will be on Afghan soil for years to come.

Almost every analysis of the motivations underlying the Taliban insurgency concludes that whatever the myriad grievances of the rebels may be in regard to government corruption, tribal rivalries, and liberal social mores, they are united in their opposition to the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. This issue creates a chicken-and-egg conundrum. An SPD that did not provide for an American presence in Afghanistan would make reconciliation with the Afghan government a tad more attractive for the Taliban. However, given the likelihood of future power struggles within the country, there are fewer incentives for Karzai to pursue reconciliation if he cannot assure himself of an enduring American capability that protects him and his regime's interests. In accepting the long-term foreign presence, Karzai's consequential transformation only accentuates the fundamental fact that the U.S. protection which makes reconciliation viable for Afghanistan makes it even more anathema for the Taliban.

Given these realities, it is not surprising that the administration's initiatives regarding reconciliation have not borne much fruit thus far. The Haqqani network has declared that it will not be party to separate peace talks with the administration, deferring instead to the Quetta *shura* as the lead interlocutor for any negotiations. The *shura*, or at least a part thereof, gives the impression of some sort of interest in discussions—but not with Kabul, only with Washington. This insistence, of course, undermines the administration's position that reconciliation ultimately must be an Afghan-led process, but even this problem is manageable in comparison to some of the others discussed above.

In any event, despite several administration conversations thus far with the *shura*'s representative—identified in press reports as Tayeb Agha, a secretary to Mullah Muhammad Omar—the insurgent leadership as a whole does not appear to be committed to a negotiated end to the war and could be simply playing the United States as it bides its time waiting for the transition and its chance to truly take control. All the same, there is no alternative to testing the Taliban's intentions. A continued conversation with the insurgent leadership is, therefore, necessary—if nothing else, it could help divide the opposition and assist reintegration—but the

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administration and the international community ought not to overinvest in this negotiation or pursue it at the cost of bolstering the Afghan state.

The Problem Is Pakistan

Although the prospects for successful political reconciliation are undermined by many challenges, at the end of the day, there is none more vexing than the problematic role of Pakistan. The most obvious reason the Quetta *shura* has reduced incentives to reconcile with the Afghan government is that it and its fighters currently embedded in communities along the frontier enjoy substantial immunity to coalition military action because of the sanctuary provided by Pakistan. As long as ISAF either cannot or will not breach this safe haven out of respect for Pakistan's sovereignty, the *shura* will not feel compelled to reconcile with Afghanistan because its security, its warfighting capabilities, and its regeneration capacity are not threatened by military action. More pertinently, Pakistan becomes the kingmaker, shaping the success or failure of Afghan reconciliation because of the pressure it can apply on the *shura* and its affiliates with regard to decisions relating to war and peace.

Recognizing this fact, the Obama administration has sought to persuade Pakistan—through a combination of public and private entreaties as well as pressure—to encourage the Quetta *shura* and its constituents to enter into a dialogue with the United States and with Afghanistan. Despite repeated efforts, however, the administration's initiatives have not been successful thus far for the simple reason that American and Pakistani objectives on this issue are fundamentally at odds.

Although the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are superficially bound together by the desire for a negotiated end to the conflict in Afghanistan, they agree on very little else. The United States seeks to leave behind after 2014 an Afghanistan that is united, capable, and independent—attributes it deems to be not only the just desserts of peace but also essential for regional stability in the long run. Pakistan, in contrast, seeks an Afghanistan that, although nominally unified, is anything but capable and independent. Specifically, it desires an Afghanistan that would be at least deferential to, if not dependent on, Islamabad as far as Kabul's critical strategic and foreign policy choices are concerned.

Stated precisely, Pakistan wants Afghanistan to be strong enough to prevent its internal problems from spilling over into Pakistan, but not so strong as to be able to pursue independent policies that might compete with Pakistan's own interests. Key military leaders who drive Pakistan's national policies on this matter seem to hold the belief that a return to the pre-2001 past is still possible—a situation where Afghanistan remains somewhat chaotic but “manageable,” nonthreatening, and decidedly subordinate to Pakistan in the international arena. Such subservience would permit Islamabad to gain an advantage in regard to managing both its

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independent rivalry with Afghanistan and the challenges posed by the evolving Afghan-Indian geopolitical partnership.

The persistence of this conviction enables Rawalpindi—the headquarters of the Pakistani military where all these decisions are made—to avoid unpleasant choices about cutting ties with the Afghan insurgency and other terrorist groups. It grants the military establishment the latitude to attempt to push the United States without forcing a complete break in bilateral relations. Unfortunately for Pakistan, if the international community succeeds in its current endeavors in Afghanistan, it would end up leaving behind a state that would be anything but deferential to Pakistan. This, then, justifies in Rawalpindi the strategy to prevent exactly this outcome.

Pakistan's continuing support for the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network remains the key instrument by which it seeks to secure its strategic aims vis-à-vis Afghanistan. By aiding these groups, protecting them, and supporting their operations, Pakistan seeks to use them as bargaining chips in its negotiations with Kabul. These negotiations are aimed ultimately at securing Afghanistan's acceptance of Pakistan's western boundaries, Islamabad's authority over the Pakistani Pashtuns, and constraints on Afghan-Indian ties (and Afghanistan's strategic policies more generally) as determined by Pakistan.

The Pakistani military believes that the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network would be relatively sympathetic to its interests on these issues. Consequently, given the choices available to Pakistan, they are judged to be better investments for advancing Pakistan's aims in Afghanistan than those currently dominating politics in Kabul. The military has thus continued, and will continue, to protect these assets despite the larger efforts of the United States to defeat them.

In this game of chicken between Rawalpindi and Washington that has played out since the killing of Osama bin Laden, the United States has already blinked. After initially insisting both publicly and privately that Pakistan target the insurgents through military action (including in North Waziristan, an insurgent hotbed that shares a border with Afghanistan), the administration has now settled on simply urging Pakistan to bring the insurgent groups to the negotiating table.

Having for years denied any relationship with the insurgents, Pakistan presently appears willing to consider the U.S. request to facilitate reconciliation—but on its own terms. For example, senior Pakistani military leaders have repeatedly urged U.S. officials to cease combat operations against the insurgents on the grounds that fighting while talking is incompatible. Similarly, they have resisted American pleas for expanded Pakistani military action against the insurgents because, they say, it would undermine their ability to intercede with the militants in future negotiations, while simultaneously claiming limitations in combat capacity.

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The Pakistani military has also demanded from its American interlocutors greater “clarity” about the desired end state in Afghanistan. This is a bit of a ruse because American officials have on numerous occasions described the kind of Afghanistan they would like to see solidify after 2014. The emphasis on clarity, however, pertains to the nature of the regime that Pakistan would like to see in place after the security transition. It is meant to convey indirectly the Pakistani willingness to bring the insurgents to the table provided there is some assurance that they will become part of a future governing dispensation in Afghanistan that protects Rawalpindi’s geopolitical interests.

Such assurances cannot be offered by the United States a priori—and will not be offered presently by President Karzai even if he wanted to—without undermining the current constitutional order in Afghanistan and riling the country’s already restive minorities. Consequently, Pakistan has declined so far to issue any public appeals to the insurgents urging them to participate in the peace process. According to senior Afghan officials, Pakistan has also demurred on offering safe passage to any *shura* leaders resident in its territories who may be inclined to discuss reconciliation directly with Kabul. Not surprisingly then, it has been ambivalent about supporting an office for Taliban representation abroad, which could serve as an independent contact point for peace discussions outside of Pakistani control. More tellingly, it has gone out of its way to target Afghan Taliban leaders who have displayed any inclination to explore independent negotiations with the government. And, finally, Pakistan has betrayed no interest in providing Afghan officials with access to those Taliban leaders detained by Islamabad in spite of repeated Afghan requests on this score.

The current strategy of the Pakistani military leadership thus suggests that they are prepared to assist with Afghan reconciliation only if it advances their conception of what constitutes a desirable outcome—a malleable regime in Kabul post-2014—and only if they are permitted to play the paramount role in midwifing this result.

The reasons for this behavior are not hard to understand. Despite appearances to the contrary, the Quetta *shura* has not been as supportive of Islamabad’s priorities as the Pakistani military establishment often believes. Unlike the Haqqani network, which—in Admiral Michael Mullen’s now celebrated characterization—“acts as a veritable arm”³ of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, the Quetta *shura* has never been a wholly owned subsidiary of Pakistan. Despite the mutual benefits of the relationship, the *shura* has invariably pursued its own interests, which, representing the preoccupations of the Pashtuns, often run counter to Pakistan’s own objectives. (The Haqqanis, in contrast, are more pliable on this count, but they are also less influential in Afghan society and hence matter less in comparison.)

Given this delicate relationship between the Pakistani deep state and the Quetta *shura*, Rawalpindi simply cannot be sure that it can compel the insurgent leadership to accept a deal that might be otherwise in Pakistan's best interests. Moreover, fearful that the Taliban might—however improbably—reach an independent agreement with the United States that leaves them out in the cold or accept terms that are more favorable to the insurgency in comparison to themselves, Pakistan's generals seem determined to superintend the reconciliation process as closely as possible. Unfortunately, this approach—though it may be understandable from a Pakistani perspective—only ends up further alienating Kabul and the Afghans more broadly. It makes them even more determined to resist Pakistani domination and further deepens their reliance on India. These actions, in turn, only reinforce the destructive Pakistani behaviors that generated the cycle of distrust in the first place.

Unhappily for the United States, there is no easy way out of this predicament. If the administration surrenders to the Pakistani demand for a controlling interest in the reconciliation process and its outcome, it will lose the government in Kabul as a partner in Afghanistan and alienate key Afghan constituencies including the Pashtuns. It will also stoke an ethnic backlash within the country and pave the way for deepened regional competition involving India, Iran, and the Central Asian republics, which are certain to coalesce to prevent any Pakistani domination of Afghanistan.

If the administration stands behind Kabul—as it should—it runs the risk that Pakistan will continue to play its subversive games, supporting the Afghan Taliban insurgency while offering only as much counterinsurgency and counterterrorism cooperation as is necessary to keep American assistance flowing. Pakistan will maintain the appearance of assisting reconciliation while withholding true collaboration until such time as it is assured that its proxies will enjoy the guaranteed access to power that provides Pakistan with dominant influence in Afghanistan.

The administration's recent decision to give Pakistan a central part in the reconciliation negotiations, therefore, represents a dangerous gamble. Although born out of frustration rather than predilection, it could end up not in a breakthrough but in a frustrating stalemate. Though clearly Pakistan cannot be excluded from the reconciliation process, nor should it be, it is hard to imagine how Rawalpindi can proffer a solution here that advances its own interests while being simultaneously acceptable to Kabul. If either Pakistan gave up its goal of dominating Afghanistan or Kabul gave up its objective of avoiding subordination to Islamabad, political reconciliation with the Taliban could be feasible, but neither seems in sight. As a result, the administration's new reliance on Pakistan to catalyze the reconciliation process, far from providing a fillip to "fight, talk, and build,"²⁴ could actually provoke endless prevarication that is intended mainly to wait out the American drawdown in Afghanistan.

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The only two solutions that the United States had in principle to defeat this Pakistani strategy now lie beyond reach. Neither the Bush nor the Obama administration allocated the resources necessary to procure a comprehensive military success against the Taliban when circumstances were favorable. Neither administration was successful in confronting Pakistan over the sanctuaries either, thus leaving the U.S. military with the horrendous task of attempting to defeat a well-protected insurgency without sufficient manpower or the ability to target its foreign sources of support.

An ironclad American commitment to invest and endure in Afghanistan would have enabled the coalition to defeat the Pakistani strategy as well because, whatever Islamabad's local advantages may be, Pakistan cannot end up victorious in any sustained strategic competition with the United States. American misgivings about the costs of the Afghan war, the merit of the stakes involved, and the integrity of its Afghan partners, all combined, however, to provoke a strategic mistake. The Obama administration announced a public deadline for withdrawal from Afghanistan, a debacle only partially mitigated by the more extended timeline established at Lisbon.

The net effect of this unfortunate announcement, therefore, has not been increased pressure for arriving at a political solution. Rather, it has only motivated the insurgents to run down the clock while also inducing Pakistan to protect its proxies all the more zealously because of the expectation that they will become indispensable for advancing Rawalpindi's interests in the aftermath of the coming security transition. The administration's new reliance on Pakistan to shepherd reconciliation will only provide Rawalpindi with more opportunities to achieve these aims—and, in the process, animate greater Afghan and regional opposition to Pakistan. These dynamics cumulatively will also contribute to further undermining American and coalition aims in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Obama administration's strategy of "fight, talk, and build" is, therefore, subverted not by any intrinsic illogic but by the welter of contradictions embedded in the corrosive external environment within which it must be implemented. Even the administration's otherwise sensible emphasis on strengthening the Afghan and Pakistani states and integrating them into a larger regional trading order is still subject to the risks of being undermined by the persistent Pakistani military discomfort with economic integration within the greater South Asian region. To its credit, however, President Asif Ali Zardari's civilian government in Pakistan has persisted in pushing the boundaries of the possible in this regard.

The larger problem remains the dangerous game of "managed jihadism" still played by Pakistan. Rawalpindi continues to solicit and accept American assistance in fighting some terrorist groups, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the

Tehrik-e-Taliban Mohmand, the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, and the Lashkar-e-Islam, which directly target Pakistan, even as it supports other militant groups, such as the Quetta *shura*, the Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which attack the interests of its coalition partners.

To date, the United States and the international community have failed to change this troublesome Pakistani behavior. Persuasion has had little impact because the Pakistani military, which dominates national security policymaking within the country, has a deeply entrenched and pernicious worldview that is not susceptible to change without a dramatic transformation of the Pakistani state itself—something that is nowhere in sight right now. Even bribery by the United States in the form of generous military and civilian assistance has made no difference. The Pakistani military has calculated that it can pursue its current subversive policies without fear of retaliation on the assumption that Pakistan is too important to be punished or to be allowed to fail. And meaningful coercion by Washington has never been tried. The United States depends on Rawalpindi for continued prosecution of the counterterrorism campaign inside Pakistan, and for the ground and air lines of communication supporting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. All of this has reinforced Rawalpindi's belief that it is immune to the most consequential American threats.

So Where Do We Go From Here?

When all is said and done, there is no denying that the situation in the region is unfavorable for the success of the administration's current policy and the coalition's present objectives—at least insofar as these are centered on the hope of reconciliation as a means of bridging the limitations in indigenous Afghan capabilities amidst the coming security transition. When the international community meets in Bonn on December 5, hoping that Afghanistan will be “able to look back on 2011 as a year of politics,”²⁵ this cruel fact should not be forgotten if the gains realized thus far are to be preserved.

If the United States and its partners are to snatch success in these circumstances, it will require not jettisoning reconciliation so much as recommitting to the “hardening” of the Afghan state. This is undoubtedly a difficult and complex enterprise. Stated telegraphically, it requires diverse initiatives in three different baskets: political, economic, and strategic.

In the political realm, the United States and the international community ought to concentrate on aiding Afghanistan to devolve power through constitutional evolution, strengthening the administrative capacity of the state through a substantial mentoring program at the national and the provincial levels, and supporting the reform of various political institutions, especially the party system, the judiciary, and the electoral process.

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The coalition should also, as a matter of urgency, focus on assuring a peaceful transition of presidential power in Afghanistan in 2014, in accordance with the current constraints enshrined in its constitution. The objective of all these efforts must be to deepen democracy and foster internal reconciliation in Afghanistan—outcomes that will help, more than any other, to denude many of the resentments fueling the insurgency—but these initiatives, in any case, should be undertaken in partnership with President Karzai, not in opposition to him.

Parenthetically, confronting the problems of Afghan governmental corruption will also be important in the political realm, but they cannot constitute the central part of the undertaking. The international community has made its own modest contributions to the prevalence of corruption in Afghanistan and this cancer will not be eradicated anytime soon, even if President Karzai were to act with as much rectitude as the United States demands. But it is not obvious that governmental and societal dishonesty is the single most important underlying cause driving the Taliban insurgency. Consequently, any structural solutions that help to defeat corruption in Afghanistan should be pursued, but the United States and the international coalition should above all else avoid locking themselves into a situation where they end up battling the Afghan government and the Taliban at the same time. On this score, as on many others, allies and enemies should not be confused.

In the economic realm, the principal objective of international engagement must be to help Afghanistan shift away from the current corrupting and dependency-inducing pattern of economic growth underwritten by large quantities of foreign aid. Not only is this growth model unsustainable over the long term, it will also be severely stressed during the next two years as the United States and the international community draw down their military forces in Afghanistan. These withdrawals will dramatically constrain the multiplier effects arising from large coalition expenditures within the country, which—together with diminishing foreign assistance—promise to undermine the recent record economic expansion.

Supporting the Afghan government during the security transition will, therefore, require continued budgetary support by the international community for at least some time to come. Equally important, Kabul will need substantial assistance to develop policy and regulatory frameworks that support national economic regeneration through expanded private investment, the effective management of its vast mineral resources, sustained improvements in agriculture, and deepened regional integration to include access through Pakistan to India's capital and markets.

In the strategic realm, the first and most important order of business must be concluding—and hopefully announcing in Bonn—the partnership declaration currently being negotiated between the United States and Afghanistan. Now that the extraordinary *loya jirga* has endorsed a long-term American (and coalition) military presence in Afghanistan, the Obama administration should ensure that the

resulting agreement provides the United States with sufficient basing rights to deploy the appropriate mix of air and ground forces necessary to conduct counterterrorism operations *and* support the ANSF as appropriate well into the future.

There are many in the administration who are content to prosecute counterterrorism goals to the neglect of supporting the Afghan military in combat. Such a policy would be dreadfully shortsighted as well as counterproductive. Not only would the ANSF fail in its counterinsurgency efforts without American “enablers” and “embeds,” but such a failure would also ultimately imperil the American counterterrorism operation, which cannot survive in some secure *laager* in Afghanistan while the country around it falls victim to Taliban resurgence. Acquiring the right to maintain military forces in Afghanistan through a strategic partnership accord with Kabul will, therefore, be insufficient if it is not complemented by the right policy choices in Washington and elsewhere about the missions to which the U.S. and allied forces remaining in Afghanistan will be committed.

In this context, it will be equally important for Washington to fund, in cooperation with the international community, the full panoply of ANSF capabilities identified as necessary in current NATO-ISAF-Afghan plans for the foreseeable future. Presently, Afghanistan does not have the national resources to finance the security forces it needs for successful counterinsurgency in the face of the prospective withdrawal of coalition forces. Comprehensively strengthening the protective organs of the Afghan state, to include the ANSF in its entirety, through international underwriting of the ANA Trust Fund, among other things, will therefore be essential. Although the costs of this endeavor are likely to run into a few billion dollars annually—the best estimates suggest somewhere between \$4 and \$8 billion—they represent a bargain compared to the burdens of current coalition combat operations and, more importantly, are indispensable for preventing the regeneration of a terrorist sanctuary in Afghanistan.

What will make the most difference toward achieving this goal immediately, however, has nothing to do with the ANSF. Delaying the withdrawal of the U.S. surge troops now in Afghanistan beyond 2012 and retaining the full remaining complement of some 68,000 U.S. troops until 2014 will enable U.S. commanders to consolidate coalition control in the south and in the east before the security transition is complete, thereby bequeathing a safer region to their Afghan replacements and more hopeful portents of success in the time to come.

While these endeavors are under way, the international community must resign itself to the prospect that Pakistan’s currently obstructionist policies are unlikely to change. That Pakistan will continue to play an unhelpful role in the Afghan campaign must, therefore, simply be accepted as a fact of life. What is most important where Pakistan is concerned is that the United States and the coalition shed their illusions about what can be expected from either Islamabad or Rawalpindi.

The history of the last decade proves abundantly that a genuinely strategic partnership between the United States, its allies, and Pakistan will remain beyond reach for a long time. The U.S.-Pakistani relationship in particular—unfortunately—will remain “transactional” in the near term, irrespective of whether either side chooses to acknowledge it—and this condition will persist so long as the Pakistani military continues to dominate the commanding heights of national decisionmaking within the country. The current crisis precipitated by the tragic killing of Pakistani soldiers in a NATO air strike illustrates this reality clearly.

Yet, meaningful success can nonetheless be achieved despite Rawalpindi’s interference—if success in this context is defined as leaving behind after 2014 an Afghan state that is durable enough to ensure that the Taliban can never regain meaningful control of the kind that would permit al-Qaeda and other global terrorist groups to return and operate with impunity. Unfortunately for the administration and the coalition, political reconciliation with the *shura* currently offers the least plausible avenue for realizing this end. If, in the face of this reality, the international community still shies away from making the appropriate investments in hardening the Afghan state, the desire that Afghanistan “never again” become a haven for terrorism will remain merely a pious invocation.

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Notes

- 1 Alex Rodriguez, “Karzai lists areas due for security transfer,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2011.
- 2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Statement By His Excellency Hamid Karzai President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan: Security & Cooperation at the Heart of Asia,” November 2, 2011, <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/4585>.
- 3 Admiral Michael Mullen, Testimony Before the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 22, 2011, transcript available at http://armed-services.senate.gov/e_witnesslist.cfm?id=5252.
- 4 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Testimony on Afghanistan and Pakistan Before the United States House Foreign Affairs Committee, October 27, 2011, transcript available at www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/10/176281.htm.
- 5 German Federal Foreign Office, “The International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn to set the course for Afghanistan’s future,” May 5, 2011, www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_16B34F7F3A272107895C7259D0F4250C/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/AfghanistanZentralasien/Bonn_Konferenz_2011/Bonn-Konferenz-Einstieg-node.html.

This Policy Outlook is based on [testimony](#) offered before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, *2014 and Beyond: U.S. Policy Towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, Part I*, November 3, 2011.

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