

U.S. POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN: CHANGING STRATEGIES, PRESERVING GAINS

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Although considerable security, political, and economic progress has been made in Afghanistan, much remains to be done to attain long-term stability and extinguish the Taliban insurgency. In this respect, while the conflict in Afghanistan is no longer consistently in the public eye, it remains of great importance to the United States. Going forward, U.S. policy should aim to protect the integrity of the Afghan state and, toward that end, attempt to end the conflict in ways that mitigate the threats of terrorism, instability, and conflict in the region.

The Current Situation

- The security environment in Afghanistan is still precarious, evidenced by the uptick in violence in 2016 and the diminishing government control in rural areas.
- Factions of the Government of National Unity remain divided, and a corrupt patronage system continues to impede reform.
- Economic growth has shrunk since the drawdown of international forces, while the government remains heavily dependent on foreign aid.
- Afghan-Pakistani relations have frayed due to widening differences on security at a time when regional competition in and over Afghanistan persists.
- The United States' willingness to indefinitely subsidize Afghanistan with some \$23 billion per year is uncertain, especially when al-Qaeda's core has been reduced to incoherence.
- However, the combination of a weakening Afghan regime and an unchecked Taliban resurgence could lead to the catastrophic collapse of the Afghan government and state, resulting in either a return to anarchy or the recrudescence of terrorist groups.

The Paths Ahead

- The United States needs to develop a strategy that protects the gains in Afghanistan while terminating the conflict.
- Regional options—resolving the India-Pakistan conflict, creating a neutral Afghanistan, or squeezing Pakistan—are too difficult to rely on alone.
- Unilateral options—either pursuing major escalation or a complete disengagement—are equally implausible because of their high costs and risks, respectively.
- Only limited approaches—moderately expanding the current commitment, seeking a political settlement, or fostering a long-term counterterrorism partnership—are left. Since a counterterrorism-only solution is unlikely to be efficacious, the United States should prioritize reaching a political settlement with the Taliban while continuing to bolster the Afghan state and its security forces.
- To be successful, Washington will need to empower the U.S. ambassador in Kabul to oversee the administration's entire strategy in Afghanistan; persuade the Afghan government to begin a serious national dialogue on political reconciliation; engage in direct talks with the Taliban; target the Taliban shura, if necessary, while inducing Rawalpindi to constrain the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan; and secure regional support for a political settlement in Afghanistan.

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