

RECONCILING WITH THE TALIBAN?

TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE
GRAND STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

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SYNOPSIS

The stalemate in coalition military operations in Afghanistan has provoked a concerted search for new solutions to this conflict. Among the more provocative ideas that have gained currency is the notion of promoting reconciliation with the Taliban. Such a proposition would have been considered simply ridiculous a few years ago: After all, the United States defeated the Taliban and drove them out of Afghanistan in a fit of righteous anger because of the Taliban's refusal to surrender the al-Qaeda masterminds who directed the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington. After several years of wearying combat, however, many in Europe and the United States now appear to believe that resolving Afghanistan's problems of stability may necessitate negotiating a peace with the Taliban insurgents and ending the conflict so that Western troops now operating in the country may finally come home.

A worse solution could not be imagined right now. Reconciling with the Taliban is a deceptively beguiling strategy for pacifying Afghanistan—and one that is doomed to fail presently. Not only is the Taliban leadership uninterested in such conciliation, President Hamid Karzai's interest in rapprochement too is colored largely by his bid for reelection and his fears of abandonment by the United States. Consequently, any attempt at reconciliation that involves a negotiated bargain centered on the formal exchange of obligations between the government and the insurgents will not materialize. This is not necessarily bad news because reconciling with the Taliban is both premature and unnecessary for the success of Western aims in Afghanistan. In sum, the situation in Afghanistan is serious but it is by no means hopeless—and can be retrieved through a concerted modification of current NATO strategy, including a return to proper counterinsurgency operations.

The vehement opposition to reconciliation by the Taliban's *rahbari shura* (leadership council) does not imply that the idea is ipso facto absurd. It does mean, however, that

reconciliation cannot be produced as a result of a political compromise so long as key Taliban constituents are convinced that military victory in Afghanistan is inevitable and, hence, precludes the necessity for any accommodation with Kabul. A successful reconciliation can be fructified in such circumstances only through a coalition political-military victory that diminishes the incentives for some key elements of the insurgency to continue resisting. If such a victory can be achieved, reconciliation between the rent-a-Taliban *lumpenproletariat* and tribal and village elders on one hand and the Afghan state on the other hand would become possible, but paradoxically at a time when it is also least necessary. The central question, then, remains one of how to produce the political-military victory in Afghanistan that makes reconciliation possible.

If victory in Afghanistan—understood as the marginalization of the Taliban as an armed opposition—is to be achieved, the goal of coalition operations will have to be erecting an effective state that can control its national territory and deliver the personal security, responsive governance, and economic development necessary to ensure internal stability. Nothing less will suffice for attaining even the most minimal strategic objective, namely, ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a haven that extremist groups of different stripes can use to mount catastrophic attacks on other members of the international community. Because the effective control of national territory is essentially what is at issue, a democratic regime in Afghanistan turns out to be superior to all the alternatives, such as an exclusive focus on counterterrorism, or a return to acephalous tribalism, or accommodating fundamentalists within the government, or accepting an authoritarian system.

Consequently, the strategic choices between counterterrorism and state building in Afghanistan—choices that are often posed as alternatives in the political debate in Europe and the United States—represent a false and misleading dichotomy that should be decisively rejected. Further, the claims that Washington can live with radical Islamists like the Taliban while continuing the war against al-Qaeda or that it can exit Afghanistan and yet prosecute al-Qaeda successfully in Pakistan are entirely fallacious. The United States, accordingly, should reaffirm its original goal of building an effective Afghan state and, in order to achieve this objective, should act to reverse the strategic neglect that has characterized this “good war.” President Obama’s recent unveiling of his own policy for Afghanistan (and Pakistan) promises to do that.

Three important reasons justify such a renewed effort. To begin with, the Taliban simply do not control Afghanistan, and, although they have mounted a hazardous challenge to Kabul through widespread hit-and-run attacks, they have organic roots in fewer than 15 percent of the districts in Afghanistan. Further, in NATO’s struggle against the Taliban, the coalition and the United States in particular are neither occupiers of Afghanistan nor viewed as such, except by a small portion of the population that traditionally has been suspicious of the presence of all foreigners within the country. Finally, the Afghan public, by an overwhelming margin of 82 percent to 4 percent, is

still very much opposed to the Taliban, not only viewing them as the country's biggest threat but also, and more important, desperately seeking the success that ought to accrue from the presence of Western military forces in their country.

Accomplishing coalition aims in the current circumstances will require many alterations in policy—all detailed in the accompanying report—at the strategic, operational, domestic (in Afghanistan), and external levels of action. Yet the emphatic conclusion is that a political-military success is eminently possible in Afghanistan even now, but it would require a combination of constancy of long-term commitment on the part of Washington, a return to proper counterinsurgency operations of the kind that were pursued most systematically between 2003 and 2005 in Afghanistan, and a significant transformation of the Afghan government's performance in regard to governance.

Taken together, these three components will be necessary to rebuild Afghan state capacity and increase its legitimacy. If these tasks can be completed successfully, the transfer of popular allegiance from the insurgency to the government will then become possible and with it the eventual defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Moreover, if these three components can be sustained, the coalition's problems in regard to Taliban sanctuaries and the *shura* presence in Pakistan can be substantially offset, thus benefiting U.S. relations with Kabul and Islamabad simultaneously. In this context, the United States ought to focus on implementing a strategy for defeating the Taliban by hardening Afghanistan from the inside out because relying on Islamabad's cooperation to achieve this end will be a long and arduous enterprise at a time when neither Washington nor Kabul has any magic solutions to transform Pakistan's long-standing diffidence.

President Obama has boldly declared “that Pakistan needs to root out the terrorists. And after years of mixed results, we will not, and cannot, provide a blank check. Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders. And we will insist that action be taken—one way or another—when we have intelligence about high-level terrorist targets.” But even these words cannot obscure the painful reality that Washington and the West have few real levers with which to coerce Islamabad at a time when the United States itself depends heavily on Pakistani cooperation for success in both its counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and its counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. Consequently, progress on this central issue—namely Islamabad's willingness to target the Taliban—will be slow in coming because, even if all the other entanglements involving India are resolved, there is simply no *deus ex machina* that resolves the twin challenges of state incapacity and conflicted motivations in Pakistan. As a result, the United States has no choice but to try and engage Pakistan through a long-term commitment without in any way expecting that such dedication will yield quick results in Islamabad.

What will make the greatest difference on this issue, and to the eventual outcome in Afghanistan more generally, however, is the durability of the U.S. commitment to that

war-torn country. Simply put, an ironclad determination to stay involved in assuring Afghanistan's security over the long term is required. Entertaining the notion of an exit strategy, as President Obama did previously, is in fact particularly dangerous because, by signaling American impatience in regard to the mission in Afghanistan, it will have exactly the effect of spurring the insurgents to outlast the international coalition; encouraging important Afghan bystanders, whose cooperation is necessary to defeat the Taliban, to persist in their prevailing ambivalence because the current dispensation in Kabul will be quickly assessed as perishable and hence unworthy of their enduring support; and inducing Islamabad to eschew relinquishing its support for the Taliban because of its expectation that the insurgents may once again be required to protect Pakistan's interests in the regional security competition that will ensue after the United States departs Afghanistan.

Attempting to mitigate these problems by transiently accelerating American support to Afghanistan merely in order to ensure an early exit from the theater will not work either. Such an approach would betray all the indicators that motivate the insurgents, the bystanders, and the regional states to simply wait Washington out while they protect their own interests in the interim through means that would ultimately defeat President Obama's professed intention "to defeat al-Qaeda and combat extremism." Success in Afghanistan, therefore, cannot be achieved through any cheap solutions focused on delivering temporary amelioration—an improve-and-exit strategy—but only by a serious commitment to building an effective Afghan state that, in turn, requires an invest-and-endure strategy for the long term. While this latter approach undoubtedly adds to America's current economic and political burdens, the importance of the national security objectives implicated in Afghanistan demands no less of the Obama administration—as it has already recognized—if it is to faithfully discharge its obligation to protect the American people. ■