

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010



Staying Power

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Volume 89 • Number 5

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Staying Power

The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan Beyond 2011

Michael O'Hanlon

NINE YEARS ago, the United States worked with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban government in Kabul. The world was united, the cause for war was clear, and U.S. President George W. Bush enjoyed the support of roughly 90 percent of Americans. That was a long time ago.

Today, the war in Afghanistan is a controversial conflict: fewer than half of Americans support the ongoing effort, even as roughly 100,000 U.S. troops are in harm's way. Troops from more than 40 countries still make up the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but fewer than ten of those countries take substantial risks with their forces in the turbulent south and east of the country. And as the Netherlands prepares to depart Afghanistan this year and Canada remains committed to doing so in 2011, two of these coalition partners will likely soon be gone. Meanwhile, support for the coalition among Afghans has declined to less than 50 percent from highs of 80–90 percent early in the decade.

Over the years, the U.S. mission has lost much of its clarity of purpose. Although voters and policymakers in the United States

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and elsewhere remain dedicated to denying al Qaeda safe haven in Afghanistan, they have begun debating whether a Taliban takeover would necessarily mean al Qaeda's return; whether al Qaeda really still seeks an Afghan sanctuary, as it did a decade ago; and whether U.S. forces could contain any future al Qaeda presence through the kinds of drone strikes now commonly employed in Pakistan. The most pressing question is whether the current strategy can work—in particular, whether a NATO-led military presence of nearly 150,000 troops is consistent with Afghan mores and whether the government of President Hamid Karzai is up to the challenge of governing and keeping order in such a diverse, fractious land.

Such doubts would matter less if U.S. President Barack Obama did not seem to share them. Obama has more than doubled the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan since taking office, and his administration's protracted decision-making process last fall—which resulted in the president's authorizing 30,000 additional troops for the Afghan mission—was deliberate, serious, and intense. But to some in Washington, Kabul, and elsewhere, the length of that review signaled fundamental uncertainty on the part of the president himself. Contributing to this impression were leaks to the media that revealed major disagreements among top administration advisers.

Most important, in announcing his decision last December, Obama pledged to begin removing U.S. forces from Afghanistan by July 2011. By itself, the plan to make the military buildup temporary was not misguided or surprising; the Bush administration did much the same thing with the surge in Iraq. But Obama seemed to be promising a fairly rapid end to the war. Indeed, that appeared to be the message he wanted to highlight most for the U.S. Congress and the U.S. electorate. Aware of the nation's war fatigue, Obama tried to be muscular enough to create a chance to win the war while at the same time keeping the war's critics acquiescent.

Obama's attempt to have his cake and eat it, too, has had its downsides. To Afghans, Obama's words signaled that U.S. forces might depart before they had sufficiently built the Afghan security forces or achieved other key goals. Such a message may motivate some Afghans to accelerate reforms, as the Obama administration hopes, but it will also make many of them hedge their bets, unsure of what

will come next. Obama's speech has had a similar effect in Pakistan, where the country's traditional support for the Afghan Taliban has diminished more slowly than it might otherwise have. Some Pakistani military leaders still consider the Afghan Taliban to be their best defense against the potential consequences of a premature U.S. departure: either chaos or too much Indian influence in the country. That many of these fears are exaggerated or incorrect does not make them any less important.

In fact, the Obama administration's statements about July 2011 and realistic projections of how long the mission will take suggest that no sudden withdrawal will occur. Given the nature of the Afghan insurgency's dramatic recovery since 2005 and the reasons Obama agreed to a major troop increase in the first place, the drawdown will likely be gradual, with at least 50,000 U.S. troops still in Afghanistan through 2012.

TALIBAN RESURGENCE, U.S. RESPONSE

IN 2005, the Taliban and other insurgent groups began one of the most impressive comebacks against a U.S.-led military coalition in history. By the time Obama came into office, the United States had to develop a new strategy for a largely new war—and one it was losing.

Such was the context for the Obama administration's fall 2009 policy review. Those in the administration who opposed sending more troops to Afghanistan—apparently including Vice President Joe Biden, National Security Adviser James Jones, and Karl Eikenberry, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan—did so because of reasonable skepticism. After all, Washington had sent more than 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in early 2009, and just a few months later the military was asking for tens of thousands more. The skeptics also believed that Afghanistan, with its tribal society and weak traditions of loyalty to the state, was not a promising place for a classic counter-insurgency operation. They argued that the twin goals of such an operation—protecting the population and guiding the Afghan security forces toward self-sufficiency—were inconsistent with Afghanistan's history, culture, and society.



In the end, however, the president decided that the skeptics did not offer a viable alternative strategy. The Bush administration had already tried a light-footprint approach in Afghanistan, and it had resulted in the Taliban's comeback—including at least a fivefold increase in violence since 2005.

Since 2005, the Taliban and other insurgent groups—such as the Haqqani network, another extremist Pashtun movement straddling central parts of the Afghanistan-Pakistani border—had substantially improved their battlefield tactics.

Several years ago, insurgents would sometimes mass a large number of fighters for battle only to lose quickly to Afghan security forces or to NATO reinforcements once they arrived. In the summer of 2006, for example, Taliban fighters sought to establish control over a large swath of southern Afghanistan but were defeated by a combination of Afghan, Canadian, and other NATO forces. By the end of 2009, however, the Taliban were typically launching large-scale coordinated operations against small, vulnerable NATO outposts, as in the city of Wanat in 2008 and in the Kamdesh District of Nuristan Province in 2009. More commonly, in smaller-scale attacks, insurgents adopted the practice of detonating roadside bombs to create initial injury and panic and then firing small arms against any incapacitated vehicles and Afghan and NATO security forces.

The Taliban had become, in many ways, a smarter insurgent force. They rarely targeted civilians with the sort of widespread and brutal

bombings that al Qaeda in Iraq once commonly perpetrated. Indeed, compared to many war-torn lands and even to high-crime countries, such as Colombia, Mexico, Nigeria, or South Africa, Afghanistan remained a safer place for normal citizens in per capita terms. But the Taliban and other insurgents made life very dangerous for NATO soldiers, Afghan security forces, and Afghan government officials. In 2009, the NATO-led coalition lost 500 soldiers, about half the total from the previous seven years combined, and the Afghan security forces lost 1,000 personnel (mostly police). Meanwhile, assassinations of political, business, civic, and tribal leaders increased, too.

The Taliban also developed a shadow government that allowed it to provide an alternative (if crude) judicial system in southern Afghanistan, especially in rural areas. And it did so in a manner often considered fairer than the government's corrupt and plodding ways. The Taliban had learned to present a kinder, gentler face, so to speak, than it had when it ruled Afghanistan from the mid-1990s until 2001. The group remained widely disliked—with 90–95 percent viewing it unfavorably in most polls—but it had softened the population's anger. At the same time, in classic Mafia style, it continued to carry out just enough violence to be feared.

By late 2009, NATO intelligence estimated that the Taliban included at least 25,000 dedicated fighters, nearly as many as they had before 9/11 and far more than they had in 2005. The Taliban also had substantial influence in most key districts of Afghanistan—keeping government officials away, requiring compliance with their edicts on property disputes and other legal matters, and sometimes taxing the population. These factors—coupled with the fact that the Taliban and the Haqqani network remained fundamentally opposed to the Afghan constitution and believed they were winning the war—led the Obama administration to conclude that the prospects were not good for high-level reconciliation with Afghan insurgents.

Against this backdrop, the administration decided it had little choice but to try a classic counterinsurgency approach. A light footprint could not arrest the Taliban's momentum, change the atmosphere of intimidation that the insurgency had created among Afghans, or protect the human intelligence networks needed to carry out even a

limited counterterrorism strategy. Nor, the administration calculated, could it give the United States the leverage necessary to reform and strengthen the Afghan government. The best approach, then, was to carry out a limited state-building mission aimed at developing Afghan security forces that could dependably control their own territory and civilian governance institutions that could provide some degree of law and order and gradual economic progress. The Obama administration rightly considered this the likeliest way to achieve its narrow goal of stopping the Taliban from retaking power and, in turn, of preventing al Qaeda and related groups from regaining substantial sanctuaries on Afghan soil.

BATTLEFIELD UPDATE

THE U.S. APPROACH—originally crafted by General Stanley McChrystal, now being implemented by General David Petraeus, and supported by such civilians as U.S. Ambassador Eikenberry; Mark Sedwill, NATO's senior civilian representative in Afghanistan; and Staffan de Mistura, the UN special representative in Afghanistan—focuses on the south and east of the country, where insurgent activity has been greatest and where local populations have been most inclined to support or tolerate the insurgency. The approach is discriminating: of nearly 400 districts nationwide, U.S. forces are placing primary emphasis (in terms of military and civilian resources) on 81 and secondary emphasis on 41. The initial goal is to establish a contiguous zone of safety throughout the south and the east in which the population can feel relatively secure, Afghan institutions can take root, and transportation and commerce can develop.

There have already been major pockets of success, especially in southwestern Afghanistan's Helmand Province. To be sure, progress in the town of Marja, where the U.S. military launched a high-profile operation in February, remains slow. But that operation was overemphasized, both as a barometer of the war's momentum and as a model for future operations, because Marja had been a Taliban stronghold without any government presence; most major towns and cities feature a less visible insurgent presence combined with some degree of government capacity. As a whole, Helmand Province is improving, with most major population

centers now opening schools and markets, farmers moving away from poppy as their preferred crop, and overall levels of violence dropping. (NATO and the Obama administration should better measure and document this progress; as it is now, observers must rely too much on anecdotal information and conversations with military and civilian officials, such as those I had when I visited Afghanistan in May.)

Such promising trends are not present, however,

in Kandahar, the region that includes southern Afghanistan's largest city and that the Taliban consider their spiritual and historic capital. The number of assassinations of political leaders and tribal elders in Kandahar is up severalfold over the last few years, to at least one or two a week. Overall, rates of violence in the region have roughly tripled since 2006, according to ISAF figures.

Neither has the tide of battle turned against the insurgency on a national scale. From 2009 to 2010, overall levels of violence rose by 25–50 percent (depending on the metric used), and the Taliban showed increasing willingness to target civilians. ISAF currently estimates that only 35 percent of the priority districts have “good” security or better, a figure unchanged from late 2009; the number of such districts with “satisfactory” security has improved modestly, from 40 percent in late 2009 to 46 percent in the spring of 2010. Although the situation is not worsening, many priority districts still have only mediocre levels of security.

But it should not be surprising that the level of violence is still rising. The reduction of violence is a lagging, not a leading, indicator of success;

Battlefield Trends in Afghanistan

(Data are for June of each year, unless otherwise indicated)

	2005	2009	2010
U.S. troops	18,000	57,000	95,000
U.S. civilian officials	200	415	1,050
Other foreign troops	8,000	32,300	41,000
Afghan security forces	50,000*	170,000	230,000
Estimated size of insurgency	5,000	25,000	30,000
Reported weekly insurgent attacks	60	80	120
U.S. troop fatalities†	58	86	202
Other foreign troop fatalities†	5	70	121
Afghan security forces fatalities†	200*	485*	500*
Afghan civilian fatalities†	300	580	700

* Approximate † January–June of year

SOURCE: Brookings Institution, Afghanistan Index.

in Iraq, for example, troop casualty levels increased through the first six months of the surge, as additional U.S. troops entered the country. Also, as its forces have tripled in size over the last two years, ISAF has been initiating far more contact with the enemy than before. And although U.S. commanders do not emphasize this point because enemy body counts are not a highly reliable measure of success, they acknowledge that the coalition is now far more effective when it comes to arresting and killing key insurgent leaders than it was just last year. Crucially, while making these adjustments, the coalition has kept civilian casualties low. McChrystal's directives on reducing the use of force around civilians have apparently reduced the proportion of ISAF-caused civilian casualties from 40 percent in 2008 to 25 percent in 2009 and less than 20 percent in 2010.

Yet such statistics hardly capture the full state of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Two other factors get to the heart of what is involved in strengthening and legitimating the Afghan state: the development of the Afghan security forces and the fight to curb endemic corruption. The first is generally a good news story, at least with regard to the Afghan army; the second remains grim and calls for some new ideas from ISAF, the international community, and Afghans themselves.

TRAINING AND MENTORING

IN THE war's early years, the processes for recruiting, training, equipping, and fielding the Afghan security forces were quite poor. U.S. commanders told me last year, for example, that through 2008, only 25 percent of Afghan police officers received any professional training at all. Those who did receive training got too little and then almost no follow-up once deployed. Members of the security forces often reported to incompetent or corrupt leaders in the field and received pay that was too low to constitute a living wage. This dearth of resources was the result of Afghanistan's poverty and the economy-of-force philosophy that was guiding foreign actors.

NATO and Afghan officials have dramatically improved the situation. Since late 2009—when U.S. Lieutenant General William Caldwell, commander of the NATO training mission in Afghanistan, began working with troops from Canada and the United Kingdom to direct the initial

training, equipping, and fielding of the Afghan security forces—the number of personnel completing basic training and unit training each year has more than doubled. The quality of training is up, too, largely because teacher-to-student ratios have more than doubled (despite ongoing shortages of trainers). In the Afghan army, the better of the main security institutions, 20,000 recruits are in training at all times, and the force is on pace to reach its interim goal of 134,000 soldiers by this fall. This is partly because the army has increased soldiers' base pay, their pay for deployment to dangerous parts of the country, and other compensation. The rate at which new recruits are joining the force is now twice the rate at which soldiers are leaving.

Afghan enlistees who are illiterate—the vast majority of them—now receive mandatory literacy training. To train noncommissioned officers—those who really make good militaries work at the ground level—NATO has set up impressive new courses that focus on technical skills and on how to lead small units. And at the national military academy, which trains officers, enrollment and graduation rates have doubled in the last year. ISAF has also convinced the Afghan government to improve the procedures for selecting officers and assigning them to duty after graduation. As a result, according to NATO officers involved in the training, nepotism and favoritism have declined. In addition, almost every officer from this year's graduating class is headed out to the field, unlike in years past, when political pressures kept graduates within Kabul. These innovations have begun to yield results in combat, with increasingly positive reports of the performance of Afghan army formations against insurgents in the south and east of the country.

The approach devised by McChrystal emphasizes long-term partnering between ISAF and Afghan units, which now (for the first time) train, plan, deploy, patrol, and fight together. As of early summer 2010, about 85 percent of all Afghan army units were engaged in such partnering, which allows Afghans to be mentored and to build confidence, since they know that, if ambushed, they will have some of the world's

The rate at which recruits are joining the Afghan army is twice the rate at which soldiers are leaving.

best soldiers fighting alongside them. It also gives NATO forces a direct view of the corruption within the Afghan ranks. Thus, ISAF officials can suggest that the Afghan minister of defense take remedial or disciplinary action regarding certain commanders in the field.

The mission to train the Afghan security forces still has difficulties, especially with regard to the police. On average, the police remain less competent and more corrupt than the army. ISAF's approach to training the police remains weaker than its approach to the army: ISAF relies largely on private contractors as trainers because soldiers are considered suboptimal for the task and because there are not enough Italian carabinieri or other NATO police officers in Afghanistan to handle the job. Even counting contractors, the training mission has roughly 1,000 fewer trainers than it needs. There are also too few police personnel available to partner with those Afghan police who have completed their initial training. To address such shortfalls, the U.S. government could ask for more help from NATO allies, such as Canada, France, and Italy. Additionally, it could create a program to allow police officers from the United States to take "sabbaticals" to work for a year in Afghanistan.

Overall, the Afghan security forces are making strong progress. Indeed, their improvement is likely to be constrained less by the limited capacity of foreign trainers than by the corruption and institutional weakness throughout Afghan society. Curbing that corruption and weakness is the crux of the United States' challenge.

CORRUPTION, CONTRACTING, AND KANDAHAR

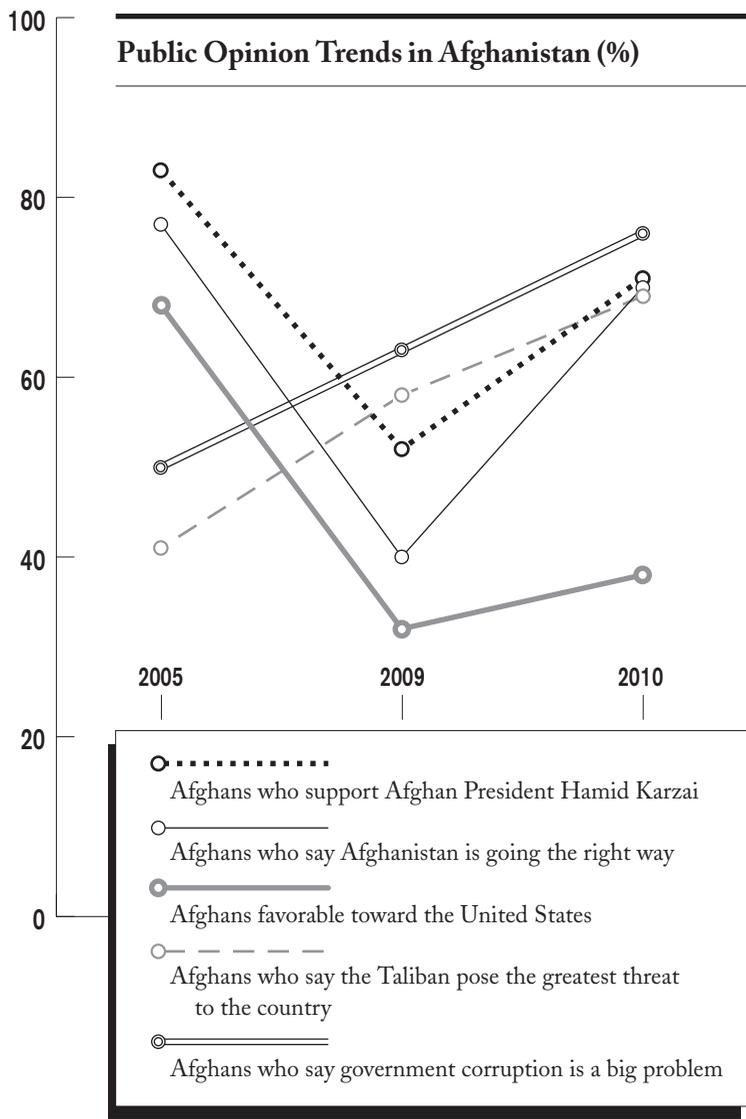
THE AFGHAN government has limited reach across its territory because it is hampered by a lack of human capital and an excess of corruption. Of the 122 Afghan districts receiving special emphasis from ISAF, only about ten will have representatives from the Afghan government by the end of 2010, and only ten more are expected to receive representatives in 2011. To mitigate the problem, international personnel and Afghan leaders are trying to use the traditional *shura* (council) consultation process to give all tribes and communities a voice in setting development priorities. The National Solidarity Program, an initiative of the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation

and Development, can then provide cash grants to the communities represented by *shuras* (or by the related bodies known as community development councils). NATO military commanders and civilian personnel can often disperse funds in a similar fashion. Thus, there are a number of bodies promoting local order and development that are imperfect but much better than nothing.

The Afghan government is one of the most corrupt in the world. Piles of cash from Afghanistan make their way to Dubai every day, often taken from foreign aid budgets intended for development projects. Positions in government are routinely sold to the highest bidder, who then sells subordinate positions—and the process ends with Afghan citizens having to pay bribes for virtually all government services.

The Afghan government's Major Crimes Task Force has undertaken at least one prominent prosecution, of a former minister of mines, Muhammad Ibrahim Adel, but the case is proceeding very slowly. More than a dozen other officials are under indictment or investigation for wrongdoing. These proceedings constitute a promising but still modest trend.

The corruption problem is particularly acute in Kandahar, where a mix of Afghan politics and NATO logistical needs is actually reinforcing the very corruption that fuels the insurgency. As a U.S. congressional report highlighted in June, ISAF relies on a system of private companies and security firms—militias—to transport supplies, construct roads and buildings, and protect vital supply lines and military bases. In so doing, the coalition not only tolerates but also strengthens a corrupt local order led by the syndicates of Gul Agha Sherzai (a former governor of Kandahar who is now governor of Nangarhar, in eastern Afghanistan, but whose family remains powerful in Kandahar) and Ahmed Wali Karzai (the head of Kandahar's provincial council and a half brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai). These syndicates are far more powerful than the offices of the provincial governor or the mayor of Kandahar, both of whom are appointed by the president. Like the Mafia, the Sherzai and Karzai families control economic and political favors throughout the province. They continue to earn money from ISAF—and especially from the United States—because U.S. procurement and contracting laws require any company winning U.S. contracts to fill out onerous paperwork and comply with other



SOURCE: Brookings Institution, Afghanistan Index.

red tape. The Sherzai and Wali Karzai families are often corrupt, but only they have the personnel to fill out such forms, maintain contracting requirements, and produce rapid results on the ground. (Sometimes they pay off insurgents not to attack convoys; this achieves the immediate goal of getting supplies through, of course, but strengthens the insurgency in the process.)

Most NATO officials are aware of this paradoxical problem but have not produced a cogent strategy for addressing it. And although NATO forces in the area have good plans for how to strengthen the ability of

the governor and the mayor to serve their constituents, that process will take time that the coalition may not have. Thus, U.S. forces risk destroying Kandahar as they try to save it. After all, corruption contributes to the insurgency as much as the Taliban's fanatical ideology does; the insurgency's strength in and around Kandahar is largely the result of certain tribes' becoming angry because they do not share in the region's wealth and choosing therefore to provide recruits to insurgent forces.

The U.S. military's recently formed Task Force 2010 has begun to provide oversight aimed at reducing abuses among Afghan contractors and subcontractors. In addition, the U.S. Congress could allow more

flexibility in the application of U.S. contracting procedures in war zones, so that the military could reduce its complete dependence on groups such as the Sherzai and Karzai syndicates. Existing Afghan power brokers may object to ISAF efforts to work with a wider array of local actors, but ISAF need not cut off the former to improve the situation. The imperative is to spread the wealth more effectively—to ensure that more tribes and powerful leaders have a stake in the current strategy and are therefore less likely to support the insurgency as a form of protest. This approach would require explaining to the existing power brokers that any violence they perpetrate against local competitors will jeopardize their ability to win business in the future. And now is the time to act, since local resistance to such changes will be easier to control while U.S. forces are still increasing their spending; it is easier to implement a new approach when the contracting pie is growing rather than shrinking.

WHAT IT TAKES

NATO'S TWO-PART mission in Afghanistan—to protect the population while gradually training Afghan forces to assume that responsibility on their own—can be set to an approximate schedule.

Counterinsurgency doctrine suggests that a security force of 600,000 is needed to ensure robust security throughout a country of 30 million people, such as Afghanistan. But any doctrine is only approximate. In the case of Afghanistan, the ratio of 20 security personnel for every 1,000 civilians probably needs to be applied only in those parts of the country where Pashtuns predominate, since only there is the insurgency intense. Among the rest of the population—approximately 55 percent—a ratio of fewer than 10 security personnel for every 1,000 citizens would likely suffice. This implies that security in Afghanistan could be maintained by a competent force of roughly 400,000 troops.

By the end of 2010, ISAF will have nearly 150,000 troops in Afghanistan. The Afghan security forces will number about 250,000, with perhaps 150,000 of those in decent shape or in strong partnership arrangements with NATO troops. That means that there will be roughly 300,000 competent security personnel in place, half foreign and half indigenous—about 100,000 forces shy of the overall requirement

of 400,000. Given that shortfall, some parts of the country will have to be left relatively unguarded into 2011. According to current ISAF projections, it will take until late 2011 for Afghan security personnel to number 300,000. Making the force 350,000 strong would take most of 2012, and reaching 400,000 would take until 2013.

As the Afghan security forces build toward 400,000 competent personnel, ISAF forces will be needed for two main reasons: to make up the difference between the available Afghan forces and the goal of 400,000 troops and to train and mentor those Afghan forces. How many forces are needed for the second mission? Afghan-ISAF partnering needs to be intense for roughly one full year after a unit is formed, and the current partnering approach requires ISAF units to team up with Afghan units of similar size or perhaps larger ones that are better trained. Thus, for example, a NATO battalion of 1,000 soldiers might pair with a relatively weak Afghan battalion of 1,000 or a relatively strong Afghan brigade of 3,000. Recognizing that such details will be worked out on a case-by-case basis and that all projections are therefore approximate, one can estimate that to add 75,000 Afghan personnel to the security forces, NATO would need to provide roughly 35,000 trainers, mentors, and partners for them. (Even if it required 50,000 trainers or only 25,000, the U.S. mission would be lengthened or shortened by only a few months.) In addition to the trainers, NATO would also need to deploy additional forces to boost the aggregate (Afghan and foreign) security personnel to reach the 400,000 goal.

Consider where the U.S. mission will be in mid-2012, when Obama will likely be running for reelection. According to ISAF projections, by then the Afghan security forces will have about 300,000 troops formed into units (plus some tens of thousands more in training but not yet deployable). If ISAF deploys 35,000 troops to train, mentor, and partner with Afghan units, that would make for a total security force of 335,000 in the country. For the total to reach 400,000, another 65,000 ISAF troops would be needed. There would then be 100,000 ISAF soldiers in total, and given likely allied contributions by that point, roughly 65,000 of those would be American. The bottom line, then, is that Obama would be asking voters to reelect him when there were still well over 50,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan.

According to current projections, the Afghan security forces could reach 400,000 by mid-2013. But even then, 75,000 Afghan soldiers would still require the help of an ISAF mentoring force of approximately 35,000 troops—two-thirds, or more than 20,000, of whom would likely be U.S. troops.

To be sure, these are optimistic estimates. Troop requirements would increase if parts of Afghanistan besides the south and the east proved more dangerous than expected or if the planned ISAF approach proved deficient. And there is also the matter of how U.S. policy may evolve, especially regarding the vague July 2011 deadline that Obama has set.

DECIPHERING A DEADLINE

THANKFULLY, it appears unlikely that the United States will rapidly depart from Afghanistan starting in July 2011. For one, the campaign plan drafted by McChrystal and Eikenberry last summer envisioned having at least three years to fight the Taliban and train the Afghan security forces. By the summer of 2011, the Afghan security forces will still be well short of their necessary size and competence.

In light of such practical considerations, there are major strategic and political reasons why Obama is unlikely to reduce the U.S. commitment dramatically. Since his presidential campaign began, he has declared the Afghan-Pakistani theater his top national security priority. Because he has gained full ownership of this war by now, to accelerate the U.S. departure prematurely—before the insurgency was weakened and Afghan forces adequately improved—would risk being seen as conceding defeat in a war that he chose and led. And although an anxious Congress may push him to withdraw, the fear of seeming weak on national security will probably pull at least as firmly in the other direction.

To discern the likely significance of July 2011, it is perhaps most instructive to look at the words of key administration officials and military leaders. In announcing the so-called Afghan surge last December, Obama said, “These additional American and international troops will allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces, and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan

in July of 2011. Just as we have done in Iraq, we will execute this transition responsibly, taking into account conditions on the ground.” He added, “It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security. . . . That is why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended—because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own.”

Several high-ranking officials spoke about the July 2011 date in the days after Obama’s announcement. “While there are no guarantees in war, I expect that we will make significant headway in the next 18–24 months. I also believe that we could begin to thin our combat forces in about the same time frame,” said Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, meanwhile, testified to Congress that “beginning to transfer security responsibility to the Afghans in summer 2011 is critical—and, in my view, achievable. This transfer will occur district by district, province by province, depending on conditions on the ground. . . . The United States will continue to support [Afghans’] development as an important partner for the long haul. We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we abandoned the country only to see it descend into chaos and into Taliban hands.”

Months later, in May, at a press conference with Karzai, Obama elaborated on the deadline: “Beginning in 2011, July we will start bringing those troops down and turning over more and more responsibility to Afghan security forces that we are building up. But we are not suddenly, as of July 2011, finished with Afghanistan.” The next month, in June, General Petraeus quoted Obama in emphasizing to Congress that the United States would not be “switching off the lights” in Afghanistan in July 2011.

These comments suggest a plan to withdraw U.S. troops gradually over several years, not precipitously in July 2011. To be sure, some officials have characterized that month as a major turning point. In perhaps the administration’s most emphatic utterance, Biden reportedly told the journalist Jonathan Alter, “In July of 2011 you’re going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it.” And indeed, Obama is preserving some wiggle room so that if he judges next year that the war is clearly being lost, the United States could accelerate its draw-down and cut its losses, effectively acknowledging the failure of the

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current strategy. But that is not the existing plan, and nearly all public statements have emphasized that the troop reductions will be responsible, based on conditions on the ground, and gradual over a period of years.

The notion that the ISAF mission will be completed by July 2011 is not consistent with the conditions in Afghanistan, the U.S. campaign plan, or public utterances on the subject by administration officials. Indeed, it is likely that Obama will run for reelection with more than 50,000 U.S. troops still in Afghanistan, and with no realistic prospect of bringing them all home early in what would be his second term. He will have doubled U.S. expenditures on the war during his first term, and he may well also have presided over a doubling of U.S. casualties. The price for success will be high. But the United States and its partners can likely achieve a significant level of success—represented by an Afghan state that is able to control most of its territory and gradually improve the lives of its citizens—if ISAF and other key actors contain Afghan corruption and demonstrate several more years of resolve in what is already the United States' longest war. 🌐