Assessing U.S. Options for Afghanistan

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Public support for the war in Afghanistan has been falling for much of the last year. The manifest corruption of Afghan elections last summer aggravated this decline, but it was ongoing well beforehand and stems from deeper causes. Americans have increasingly been asking fundamental questions about the war: do we have important interests at stake? Can we secure them? Will the cost of securing them be tolerable?

The answers are less clear-cut than anyone would like – the case for war in Afghanistan is a close call on the merits. The debate often treats Afghanistan in absolutes: it is either a graveyard of empires in which no outsider can succeed and a country where we have no meaningful interests at stake; or it is a war where victory can be assured if we show sufficient resolve and where only success can avert a direct threat of attack on the American homeland. In fact it is a harder call. This war is neither the obvious necessity that its strongest supporters claim, nor the clear loser that its opponents typically see. The war engages important, but indirect, U.S. interests. It will be expensive to wage properly, could require many years to resolve, and might ultimately fail even if waged vigorously, but failure is not guaranteed and the U.S. enjoys advantages that other outsiders in Afghanistan have not. "Middle way" options designed to secure our interests but cut our costs, moreover, have important shortcomings and are unlikely to offer an escape from these dilemmas.

Most defense decisions are ultimately value judgments on how much risk we find tolerable and what price we are willing to pay to reduce a risk. The war in Afghanistan poses this problem more starkly than most given the scale of the costs and risks on both sides of the ledger here. Analysis can illuminate the costs and identify the risks, but especially in close calls it cannot predetermine value judgments on how much cost to bear and how much risk to accept. What the analysis shows here is that this ledger is close enough for reasonable people to differ. For me, the balance of cost and risk suggests a war that is worth waging, but only barely – yet one worth waging vigorously if we are to do so at all. What is clearest, however, is that neither the case for the war nor the case against it is beyond challenge or without important counterarguments.

I present this argument in five parts: the interests at stake; the cost of pursuing them via an integrated counterinsurgency strategy; the odds of success if we do so; the

prospects for a cheaper pursuit of the same ends via a "middle way" between the extremes of large-scale integrated counterinsurgency and withdrawal; and finally an assessment of the overall balance of cost and risk in light of this.

What interests do we have at stake in Afghanistan?

The United States has many aspirations for Afghanistan, as we would for any country. Americans would like Afghanistan to be ruled in accordance with the will of the governed; we would like to see minority and women's rights respected; we would like to see its youth educated and its people prosperous. But while we surely wish these things for any state, we do not ordinarily wage war to bring them about. The U.S. national security interests that might warrant war to achieve here are much narrower.

In fact, they are essentially twofold: that Afghanistan not become a base for terrorism against the United States, and that chaos in Afghanistan not destabilize its neighbors, especially Pakistan. Neither of these two primary security interests can be dismissed, but both have limits as casus belli.

The first interest is the most discussed – and the weakest argument for waging war. The United States invaded Afghanistan in the first place to destroy the al Qaeda safe haven there, and Afghanistan's role in the 9-11 attacks clearly justified this. But al Qaeda central is no longer based in Afghanistan, nor has it been since early 2002. Bin Laden and his core operation are, by all accounts, now based across the border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The Taliban movement in Afghanistan is clearly linked with al Qaeda and sympathetic to it, but there is little evidence of al Qaeda infrastructure within Afghanistan today that could threaten the U.S. homeland in any direct way. If today's Afghan government collapsed, if it were replaced with a neo-Taliban regime, or if the Taliban were able to secure real political control over some major contiguous fraction of Afghan territory then perhaps al Qaeda could re-establish a real haven there.

But this risk is shared with a wide range of other weak states in many parts of the world, from Yemen to Somalia to Djibouti to Eritrea to Sudan to the Philippines or even parts of Latin America or central, west, or North Africa, among other possibilities. And of course Iraq and Pakistan fit the description of weak states whose failure could provide havens for al Qaeda. Many of these – and especially Iraq and Pakistan – offer bin Laden prospects superior in important ways to Afghanistan's. Iraq and Pakistan, for example, are richer and far better connected to the outside world than is primitive, land-locked Afghanistan with its minimal communications and transportation systems. Iraq is an Arab state in the very heart of the Middle East. Pakistan, of course, is a nuclear power. Afghanistan does enjoy a historical connection with al Qaeda, familiarity to bin Laden, and proximity to his current base in the FATA, and it is important to deny al Qaeda sanctuary on the Afghan side of the Durand Line. But its intrinsic importance is no greater than many other potential havens – and probably smaller than many. We clearly cannot afford to wage protracted warfare with multiple brigades of American ground forces simply to deny al Qaeda potential safe havens; we would run out of brigades long before bin Laden ran out of prospective sanctuaries.

The more important U.S. interest in Afghanistan is indirect: to prevent Afghan chaos from destabilizing its Pakistani neighbor. With a population of 173 million (five times Afghanistan's), a GDP of over $160 billion (over ten times Afghanistan's) and an actual, existing, functional nuclear arsenal of perhaps 20-50 warheads, Pakistan is a much more dangerous prospective state sanctuary for al Qaeda, and one where the likelihood of government collapse enabling such a sanctuary may be in the same ballpark as Afghanistan, at least in the medium to long term. Pakistan is already at war with internal Islamist insurgents allied to al Qaeda, and by most measures that war is not going well. Should the Pakistani insurgency succeed in collapsing the state or toppling the government, the risk of nuclear weapons falling into al Qaeda's hands would be grave indeed. In fact, given the difficulties terrorists face in acquiring usable nuclear weapons, Pakistani state collapse is the likeliest scenario for a nuclear-armed al Qaeda.

Pakistani state collapse, moreover, is a danger over which the United States has limited influence. The United States is now so unpopular in Pakistan that we have no meaningful prospect of deploying major ground forces there to assist the government in counterinsurgency. U.S. air strikes can harass insurgents and terrorists within Pakistan, but the inevitable collateral damage arouses harsh public opposition that could itself threaten the weak government's stability. U.S. aid is easily – and routinely – diverted to purposes remote from countering Islamist insurgents, such as the maintenance of military counterweights to India, graft and patronage, or even support for Islamist groups seen by Pakistani authorities as potential allies against their Indian neighbor. U.S. assistance can – and should – be made conditional on progress in countering insurgents, but harsh conditionality can induce rejection of the terms, and the aid, by the Pakistanis, removing U.S. leverage in the process. The net result is a major threat over which Americans have very limited influence.

If the U.S. has few ways to make Pakistan any better, the best policy may be to invoke the Hippocratic Oath: at least do no harm. With so little actual leverage, the U.S. cannot afford to make the problem any worse than it already is. And failure in Afghanistan would make the problem in Pakistan much harder.

The Taliban are a transnational Pashtun movement that is active on either side of the Durand Line and sympathetic to other Pakistani Islamist insurgents. Their presence within Pakistan is thus already an important threat to the regime in Islamabad. But if the Taliban regained control of the Afghan state or even a major fraction of it, their ability to use even a poor state's resources as a base to destabilize secular government in Pakistan would enable a major increase in the risk of state collapse there. Much has been made of the threat Pakistani base camps pose to Afghan government stability, but this danger works both ways: instability in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to secular civilian government in Pakistan. And this is the single greatest stake the United States has in Afghanistan: to prevent it from aggravating Pakistan's internal problems and magnifying the danger of an al Qaeda nuclear sanctuary there.

These stakes are thus important. But they do not merit infinite cost to secure. Afghanistan is just one of many possible al Qaeda sanctuaries. And Afghanistan's influence over Pakistan's future is important, but incomplete and indirect. A Taliban Afghanistan is a real possibility in the long run absent U.S. action, and makes Pakistani collapse more likely, but it does not guarantee it. Nor would success in Afghanistan

guarantee success in Pakistan: there is a chance that we could struggle our way to stability in Afghanistan at great cost and sacrifice only to see Pakistan collapse anyway under the weight of its own errors and internal divisions.

What will it cost to pursue our interests?

General Stanley McChrystal has recommended an integrated counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy to secure these interests. COIN is a notoriously resource-intensive form of warfare. As current U.S. Army doctrine puts it:

> [M]aintaining security in an unstable environment requires vast resources, whether host nation, U.S., or multinational. In contrast, a small number of highly motivated insurgents with simple weapons, good operations security, and even limited mobility can undermine security over a large area. Thus, successful COIN operations often require a high ratio of security forces to the protected population. For that reason, protracted COIN operations are hard to sustain. The effort requires a firm political will and substantial patience by the government, its people, and the countries providing support.[1]
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> Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources.[2]

In the Afghan context, an integrated COIN strategy would involve a combination of population security for Afghan civilians, rapid expansion of the indigenous Afghan Army and Police, governance reforms, economic development assistance, reconciliation to wean Taliban fighters and leaders away from Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden, and carefully delimited targeting of enemy leaders who decline to be reconciled.

Such a demanding, multidimensional program requires concomitant resources. GEN McChrystal is widely reported to have concluded that current plans to support an Afghan security force of 170,000 soldiers and police with some 68,000 U.S. and about 35,000 other Western troops are insufficient, and that reinforcements will be needed; he has recommended roughly doubling Afghan forces to a total of 400,000, and is said to have proposed options ranging from 10,000 to 40,000 or more additional U.S. troops, with the lower figure representing a higher risk approach and the upper figure yielding lower risk. And the commitment could be very long: successful counterinsurgency campaigns commonly last ten to fifteen years or more.[3]

At least initially, the casualties to be expected from such an effort would also be heavy. In Iraq, a force of 130,000-160,000 U.S. troops averaged over 90 fatalities per month during the most intense period of COIN operations in January to August of 2007. Depending on the troop strength ultimately deployed and the intensity of the fighting, it is not implausible to suppose that casualty rates in Afghanistan could approach such levels. And it may well take longer for those losses to reverse and decline in Afghanistan than in

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[1] *The U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), (republication of: Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*), p. 4.

[2] Ibid., p. 43.

[3] Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: RAND, 2008), p. 10.

Iraq; it would be prudent to assume that fatality rates in excess of 50 per month could persist for many months, if not years.[4]

Can a COIN strategy succeed in Afghanistan?

The aggregate historical record of great power success in COIN is not encouraging. The political scientists Jason Lyall of Princeton and Isaiah Wilson of West Point estimate that since 1975, the success rate of all government counterinsurgents has been just 25 percent.[5] Given the costs of trying, this average offers a sobering context.

Nor are current conditions in Afghanistan encouraging. Orthodox COIN theory puts host government legitimacy at the heart of success and failure, yet the Karzai government is widely seen as corrupt, inept, inefficient, and en route to losing the support of its population. Widespread fraud in last summer's Afghan elections should not have been a surprise, but has surely reduced Karzai's perceived legitimacy, both in Afghanistan and especially abroad. Economic and political development prospects are constrained by Afghanistan's forbidding geography, tribal social structure, lack of infrastructure, and political history. The Taliban enjoy a cross-border sanctuary in the FATA that the Pakistani government seems unwilling or unable to eliminate. Violence is up, perceptions of security are down, casualties are increasing, and the Taliban is widely believed to be increasing its freedom of movement and access to the population. And only some of these challenges are things Americans can affect directly: the United States can increase security by deploying more U.S. troops, it can bolster the economy to a degree with U.S. economic aid, and it can pressure Karzai to reform, but only the Afghans can create a legitimate government, and only the Pakistanis can shut down the safe havens in the FATA. Americans can influence these choices to a much greater degree than we have so far. But the United States cannot itself guarantee Afghan reform, and to date neither ally seems ready to do what it takes.

But this does not make failure inevitable. The poor track record for COIN overall is due partly to the inherent difficulty of the undertaking, but most analysts also believe that many counterinsurgents have made poor strategic choices, and that these poor choices have been major contributors to failure. Strategies and methods can be changed – it is possible to learn from experience. And the U.S. military has learned a great deal about COIN in recent years.

The new Army/Marine counterinsurgency doctrine, for example, is the product of a nearly unprecedented degree of internal debate, external vetting, historical analysis, and

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[4] The financial costs are also likely to be large. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the war in Afghanistan cost $34 billion in FY 2008, and projects that this figure will increase in coming years: Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 15, 2008), RL33110, pp. 6, 19.

[5] Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67-106 at 69-71. For all counterinsurgencies since 1900, they find a government success rate of 40 percent; hence the odds have been getting worse over time. See also Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 93-128, and Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), which finds "strong actors" winning only 45 of 100 asymmetric conflicts between 1950 and 1998: p. 97 .

direct recent combat experience.[6] None of this makes it a magic silver bullet for COIN success, and in important ways it makes underlying assumptions about the nature of counterinsurgency that made it an awkward fit for conditions in Iraq.[7] But those same assumptions make it a much stronger fit for Afghanistan, which is precisely the kind of war the manual was built around. And there is some, albeit preliminary, empirical evidence to suggest that the new doctrine's emphasis on population security as opposed to insurgent attrition has been substantially more successful historically than more-violent, attrition-oriented strategies: Andrew Enterline and Joseph Magagnoli, for example, estimate that since World War II, COIN strategies emphasizing population security over insurgent attrition have succeeded almost 70 percent of the time.[8]

One of the doctrine's remaining shortcomings, moreover, is a problem the Obama Administration seems likely to address. The published doctrine assumes a very close alignment of interests between the United States and its host government: the manual assumes that the U.S. role is to enable the host to realize its own best interest by making itself into a legitimate defender of all its citizens' wellbeing, and that the host will see it this way, too.[9] In many ways, the Bush Administration shared this view, offering assistance with few conditions or strings on the assumption that developing its allies' capacity for good governance was all that would be needed to realize better performance. In fact, though, many allies – notably including Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf, have had much more complex interests that have led them to misdirect U.S. aid and fall far short of U.S. hopes for their popular legitimacy. Some students of counterinsurgency have thus emphasized the need for conditionality in outside assistance to reduce this problem of moral hazard: the U.S. should not assume that allies share all its interests, and Americans should impose conditions, and combine carrots with sticks in order to push reluctant hosts toward behavior that could better realize U.S. interests in their broader legitimacy and thereby damp insurgencies.[10] The Obama Administration has made it very clear that they intend to combine bigger carrots with real sticks in the form of prospective aid withdrawals should the recipients fail to adopt needed reforms. This is an important step forward in competing for hearts and minds via effective host governance.

The U.S. military forces that implement this doctrine are also much improved over their ancestors in Vietnam, or even their immediate predecessors in Iraq in 2003-4 – and

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[6] On the vetting and development process, see *U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, pp. xlvii-xlviii.

[7] In particular, the doctrine presumes an ideological struggle for the allegiance of an uncommitted public, rather than a highly mobilized ethno-sectarian war of identity, as Iraq has been: for details, see Jeffrey Isaac, editor, "The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 347-50 at 349-50.

[8] See Andrew Enterline and Joseph Magagnoli, "Is the Chance of Success in Afghanistan Better Than a Coin Toss?" *Foreignpolicy.com* [accessed on August 27, 2009 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/27/is_the_chance_of_success_in_afghanistan_better_than_a_coin_toss]

[9] See, for example, *U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, pp. 7-8, 25, 35, 37-39, 47 (e.g., paragraph 1-147: "Support the Host Nation").

[10] For a more extensive discussion, see, esp., Daniel Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 79-115.

they are vastly superior in training, equipment, and doctrine to the Soviet military that failed in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Soviet methods in the 1980s made lavish use of indiscriminate firepower that created enemies much faster than it killed insurgents. Soviet troops, moreover, were so poorly trained and motivated that their commanders were often forced to use elite commando units to carry out routine missions; regular Soviet infantry often could not be relied upon to do much more than passive garrison duty. And Soviet equipment was almost entirely designed for major warfare against NATO in central Europe – the Soviets never made a systematic decision to re-equip for counterinsurgency.[11] By contrast, the U.S. military of 2009 has adapted into an unusually proficient counterinsurgency force. It did not begin the war this way, but hard experience in Iraq, coupled with an almost preclusive training emphasis on COIN since the early years of the Iraq war, a new doctrine with a heavy focus on the population-defense methods that have proven most effective historically, and systematic re-equipment with new mine-resistant armored vehicles and other ground-force equipment designed for counterinsurgency has produced a vastly more effective military for this mission than the Soviets ever fielded.

Perhaps most important, the United States is blessed with deeply flawed enemies in Afghanistan. Afghans know the Taliban; they know what life was like under their rule. And polling has consistently suggested that few Afghans want to return to the medieval theocracy they endured before. Most Afghans want education for their daughters; they want access to media and ideas from abroad; they want freedom from thugs enforcing fundamentalism for all under the aegis of a Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Of course, these preferences are secondary to the need for security. And many are secondary to the desire for basic services such as courts free of corruption or police who enforce the laws without demanding bribes first. But because most Afghans oppose Taliban rule, the United States and its allies enjoy a strong presumption in favor of the Afghan government as long as that government can be made to provide at least basic services competently. The Taliban face an inherently uphill battle to secure compliance with their policies that even a modestly proficient government does not. And in a struggle for hearts and minds this is an important advantage.

The Taliban, moreover, are far from a unified opposition group. In fact, to refer to the opposition in Afghanistan via a singular noun is in many ways a misnomer. By contrast with the Viet Cong of 1964, for example, where a common ideology bound the leadership together and linked it to its fighters, the neo-Taliban of 2009 are a much looser, much more heterogeneous, much more divided coalition of often fractious and very independent actors. There is a hard core of committed Islamist ideologues, centered on Mullah Omar and based in Quetta. But by all accounts much of the Taliban's actual combat strength is provided by an array of warlords and other factions with often much more secular motivations, who side with the Taliban for reasons of profit, prestige, or convenience, and who may or may not follow orders from the Quetta Shura leadership. Americans often lament the challenges to unity of effort that flow from a divided NATO command structure, but the Taliban face difficulties on this score at least as severe and

[11] On Soviet methods in Afghanistan, see, e.g., Lester Grau, *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 2nd ed.; Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

potentially much worse: no NATO member is going to change sides and fight for the Taliban, but the Taliban need to be constantly alert lest one or more of their component factions leave the alliance for the government side. And this makes it difficult for the Taliban to mount large-scale, coordinated offensives of the kind that would be needed to conquer a defended city, for example – such efforts would be hard for any one faction or any one commander to accomplish without closely-coordinated assistance from others, yet such coordination can be hard to achieve in such a decentralized, factionalized leadership structure.

The Taliban also face major constraints in extending their influence beyond their ethnic base in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban is an overwhelmingly Pashtun movement. Yet Pashtuns make up less than 45 percent of Afghanistan's population overall, and constitute only a small fraction of the population outside the south and east. Afghanistan is not primarily an ethno-sectarian war of identity, as Iraq has been – most Taliban are Pashtuns, but most Pashtuns are not Taliban (in fact the government is itself headed by a Pashtun in President Hamid Karzai). Afghanistan is a war fought over the Taliban's ideology for governing, not the hope for a Pashtun government. But whereas the government has members from many ethnic groups and a presumptive claim to the loyalty of all citizens, the Taliban has a much more exclusivist identity and is especially unpopular and unwelcome outside its geographic ethnic base. This in turn will make it harder for them to conquer the north and west of the country, and acts as a limiter on their expansion in the near term. This is not to say that the north or west of Afghanistan are permanently or inherently secure; on the contrary, recent trends there are worrisome, and even these parts of the country will eventually require attention to stabilize. But the Taliban's Pashtun ethnic identity makes it harder for them to expand out of the south and east, and this in turn buys time and reduces resource requirements for effective counterinsurgency nationally. (It is worth noting that even in their first rule, the Taliban never completely secured the north – it was the unconquered "Northern Alliance's" hold over contiguous territory in that part of Afghanistan that provided allies, a base, and a jump-off point for the American Special Forces who teamed with them to topple the Taliban in 2001.)

Finally, by all accounts the enemy in Afghanistan today is much less numerous than that faced by the Soviets, for example, in the late 1980s. Intelligence estimates on insurgents' order of battle are always imprecise and uncertain. But most sources suggest that the Mujaheddin opposing the Soviets by the late 1980s numbered around 150,000 armed combatants.[12] After 1986, these guerillas were also equipped with increasingly sophisticated Western-supplied arms, and especially shoulder-fired precision guided anti-aircraft missiles. By contrast, the Taliban today are usually assessed at a strength of 20-40,000 fighters, of whom only around one-fourth are full time combatants, and who have to date deployed little or no precision weaponry.[13] The size of the insurgent force is not

[12] See, e.g., Olivier Roy, *Islam and the Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 171, 176.

[13] For estimates of Taliban combatant strength, see David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 48-49; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 33, 35, 68.

the most important variable in COIN, but against the commonplace assumption that the Soviet experience will be America's fate in Afghanistan, we must keep in mind that the situation the United States faces is less dire in important respects – including the strength of the insurgent enemy.

Is there a "Middle Way?"

COIN thus has some chance to succeed, but it will clearly be very expensive. Its costs and risks have led many to oppose General McChrystal's recommendations. Yet few of these opponents advocate leaving Afghanistan outright. Instead, most pair opposition to reinforcement and COIN with support for a middle way – a more limited presence intended to secure U.S. interests without the cost and risk of escalation. At least a half-dozen such "middle ways" have been proposed, ranging from greater reliance on drone-based counter-terrorist leadership strikes to a switch from combat to training missions for U.S. forces, early pursuit of a negotiated settlement to end the war, and others. The specifics are often fuzzy; none have been articulated with the detail of General McChrystal's proposal, and troop requirements in particular are rarely spelled out. But the idea underlying them all is to reduce the burden of McChrystal-style integrated COIN – and especially, the need for U.S. combat troops to defend Afghan civilians – without abandoning the central U.S. interests of denying Afghan soil as a base for terrorism against the West or destabilizing neighboring Pakistan.

It is easy to see why such middle ways are so popular. They could lighten the burden on the federal deficit. They would seem to offer a better fit with the U.S. interests at stake, which are real but limited and indirect. They appeal to the centrism of many American voters. The problem is that they probably won't work: their odds of success are uniformly lower than integrated COIN's.

The reasons vary from proposal to proposal. But most are tantamount to splitting off a piece of McChrystal-style integrated COIN and executing it alone, without the rest – and especially, without the large U.S. combat presence on the ground. Yet the logic of integrated COIN is that the pieces are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts; implementing one or two by themselves denies them critical enablers and undermines their effectiveness.

Depending on one's tolerance for cost and risk, it can make sense all the same to adopt a middle way and accept a greater risk of failure in exchange for reduced costs. To date, however, few middle way proponents have advocated accepting the diminished odds of success that are the corollary to their lower resource requirements. Yet we cannot get the latter without accepting the former. There is no magic middle way between the McChrystal recommendation and total withdrawal that offers comparable odds at a lower price: less is not more in counterinsurgency.

I provide a more complete analysis of such "middle way" options elsewhere.[14] For now, however, I will sketch the challenges facing four such proposals as an illustration of the difficulties involved.

[14] Stephen Biddle, "Can the Middle Hold? The Problems with Half-Measures in Afghanistan," *The New Republic*, Vol. 240, No. 4871 (November 4, 2009), forthcoming.

1. Training rather than fighting

Many, for example, would like to shift the U.S. role from combat to training and advising Afghan forces. This would put an Afghan face on the war effort, it would put the burden of the fighting on those with the most at stake, and it would ostensibly reduce U.S. exposure to casualties and reduce U.S. troop requirements. In fact indigenous military buildups are a standard element of orthodox COIN, and play a large role in General McChrystal's proposed way forward in Afghanistan; a mere call for more Afghan troops per se is perfectly consistent with the General's proposal. The real difference is the call to do it with less, and especially, with a major reduction in U.S. combat activity and the associated troop requirement.

But training and combat are not meaningful alternatives in Afghanistan. The former requires the latter, and to field a large Afghan force faster will require more, not fewer, U.S. combat troops – who will be fighting, not just teaching.

To build an indigenous security force in the middle of an ongoing war is not like teaching arithmetic to high school students – it cannot be done successfully by a handful of teachers standing in front of safe classrooms with chalk and blackboards. To field Afghan troops quickly without breaking them in the process requires close partnership, on the battlefield, with experienced Western combat units who provide a combination of on-the-job training, mentoring, role modeling, confidence building, fire support, and stiffening in actual combat. And this requires Western troops, in large numbers and in harm's way, living and fighting together with Afghan forces at all levels of command. The faster the Afghans are to be fielded, the more Western combat forces are needed to enable the partnered units to survive and improve. If a large Afghan military is to be raised – General McChrystal believes 400,000 Afghan soldiers and police will be required – then many tens of thousands of Americans will be needed to enable this, and those Americans will be exposed to combat, and to casualties.

And the process takes time even so. Proper combat advising and mentoring speeds things up, but cannot provide an effective mass military instantly. In the meantime, someone must protect not just key population centers but also the very mobilization infrastructure of recruitment centers, supply depots, bases, and transportation connections needed to create the new Afghan formations. As the Afghan military matures it will comprise an increasing proportion of the total security requirement, but in the near term there will be a large need for Western troops to fill the gap in Afghan capacity no matter how quickly the United States tries to field Afghan forces. Close partnership with expanded indigenous forces is indeed the best way to pursue counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. But this is not a plausible route to reducing U.S. combat activity or troop strength there any time soon.

2. Standoff counter-terrorism via drone strikes

Perhaps the most popular middle way is to rely on drone attacks of the kind now ongoing in northwest Pakistan to suppress al Qaeda without a major ground commitment in Afghanistan. By killing key leaders and limiting the others' freedom of action, it is argued, the drone strikes make large-scale terrorism much harder. Standoff counter-terrorism (CT) cannot destroy al Qaeda outright, but it is far cheaper than major

counterinsurgency campaigns; if it could constrain al Qaeda in Afghanistan this might secure limited aims at much lower cost.

Like training, however, CT is not strictly inconsistent with COIN, but rather a normal part of it. In a COIN context, discriminating leadership strikes are used to disrupt enemy command and control, to keep the opposition off balance, and to encourage reconcilable elements of the insurgency to realign in order to avoid being targeted. Integrated COIN involves much more than just leadership targeting, but the latter is a normal part of the former. In fact, GEN McChrystal himself led the primary organization conducting such strikes in the 2007 Iraq COIN campaign, and will surely employ them in Afghanistan as well. The drone strikes in Pakistan are outside his area of operations, but any al Qaeda re-infiltration of Afghanistan would be engaged by drones or commando strikes if detected, and the McChrystal report presupposes that the CT campaign in Pakistan would continue even as COIN in Afghanistan proceeds. CT is only a meaningful alternative to the McChrystal approach if it is conducted *without* this ongoing COIN campaign (or if the latter is substantially restricted in scale or scope) – otherwise it is simply a piece of what McChrystal himself is proposing to do.

But to pursue standoff CT without COIN is to ignore important preconditions for drone effectiveness – and especially, the need for a cooperative government underneath them. The purpose of counterinsurgency is to support the key governments; if the United States abandoned counterinsurgency in favor of counterterrorism and the governments then fell or realigned, this would undermine the counterterrorism campaign, too.

Drones are not wonder weapons. They are essentially low-performance airplanes which require targeting intelligence, benign airspace, and proximate bases to be effective. Today, a cooperative Pakistani government provides most of these requirements. Much of the intelligence to support drone targeting, for example, comes from the Pakistanis. It was their penetration of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, for example, that reportedly provided the tip that enabled a U.S. Predator drone to kill terrorist leader Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009. More generally, "HUMINT" (or HUMan INTelligence – i.e. spies or other tipsters) is a critical component of any successful counterterrorism campaign. HUMINT is not everything – there are some technical means that can be valuable in CT – but the low-tech HUMINT contribution is critical (and it is just as critical to commando raids as to drone attacks). Spies, however, require access to produce information. And access is strongly influenced by governments. The United States has historically found it very hard to penetrate hostile states to develop human sources. Penetrating wary, secretive, ruthless terrorist organizations with human informers is hard enough anywhere, but to do so on the soil of an actively hostile state means facing multiple layers of state security and counterintelligence efforts first before getting anywhere near the terrorists. Occasionally the U.S. will get lucky even in very hostile environments, but for a sustained drone campaign to keep a resilient group like al Qaeda on the ropes requires a lot more than an occasional stroke of good luck – it needs systematic intelligence of the kind that is very hard to get without the access enabled by a tolerant government. The difference between even an ambivalent ally in limited control of its territory (like Pakistan) and an actively hostile regime thus has important consequences for U.S. ability to find terrorists and prosecute effective standoff CT.

Pakistani cooperation is also needed for airspace access. The Pakistani Air Force is no juggernaut, but little is needed to shoot down a small fleet of slow-moving, unmaneuverable, remotely-piloted airplanes loitering for hours over the same locations. Even a minimal air defense effort could clear the skies of CT drones. And piloted or not, airplanes need bases. Even high-endurance drones have finite range and dwell time over target. Today, Pakistan quietly provides base access; without this, the problem of simply reaching remote target areas becomes much harder.

And this means that preserving friendly governments – the central purpose of COIN – is crucial to standoff CT. If the Taliban were restored to power in Kabul because the U.S. counterinsurgency failed, we would obviously lose that sort of access in Afghanistan, significantly hampering our ability to pursue al Qaeda there. Perhaps even worse, they could threaten the stability of the government in Islamabad. In 2000, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan and Pakistan was its ally, but in 2001 the Bush administration coerced Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf into turning on his erstwhile ally and aligning with the United States. That realignment was never as complete as Washington wanted, but it was enough to persuade the Taliban and a variety of other Islamist terror groups within Pakistan that the secular government in Islamabad had become a tool of the hated Americans. The result has been a growing insurgency within Pakistan fueled by groups once aligned with (and indeed created by) the government they now attack. These groups are diverse, and the connections between them are complex – they are not a monolithic unified front. But they are interconnected, and they share great distrust of both the United States and a secular Pakistani government. Collectively, they have mounted an insurgency that is dangerous enough as it is; with the advantage of a state-scale haven across the Durand Line its virulence could increase dramatically. If COIN failure in Afghanistan enabled insurgent success in Pakistan, this would undermine the effectiveness of U.S. CT there even as the need for it skyrocketed: state collapse in Pakistan would threaten control of its nuclear arsenal and create an urgent need to prevent its nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of al Qaeda or other radicals, yet the loss of Pakistani state intelligence cooperation would hamstring U.S. CT effectiveness at just the moment when we needed it most.

To be sure, the connection between Afghan and Pakistani stability is incomplete. Karzai could fall, but if Pakistanis put their house in order and defeat their own insurgency, then the net consequences would be moderate; conversely, Pakistan could fail even if Afghanistan stabilizes. COIN in Afghanistan affects Pakistan, but only indirectly. The problem is that the odds of success in Afghan COIN and Pakistani CT move in the same direction. COIN failure makes CT failure more likely, and vice versa. And this makes CT a poor substitute for COIN: the weaker our effort in the latter, the lower our odds in the former; failure in the latter undermines the former.

3. Negotiation and reconciliation

Another common proposal is to negotiate a power-sharing deal with some or all of the Taliban as a means of ending the war without the escalation embodied in the McChrystal recommendations. America's real interests are limited, so why not pursue a settlement to bring the Taliban into a coalition government on the proviso that they keep al Qaeda out and deny the use of Afghan territory for destabilizing Pakistan? Others

recommend lower-level reconciliation with individual Taliban foot soldiers. Many of these fight more for the financial incentive of pay to feed their families than for any ideological commitment to Mullah Omar; if so, then why not outbid the Taliban for their services and win them over to the government's side without killing or capturing them all?

Here too, the only real difference with McChrystal is the assumption that this is an alternative to reinforcement and escalation. The McChrystal report itself explicitly calls for low-level reconciliation with Taliban fighters, after all, and many successful counterinsurgencies end by negotiation rather than outright annihilation to the last insurgent – nothing in orthodox COIN precludes a negotiated settlement as the mechanism by which insurgents cease fighting. The problem is the idea that this can be done on the cheap and still produce terms the West can accept. It cannot.

The issue here is the terms. Today the Taliban have little incentive to accept any deal the West could live with. The Taliban leadership appear to believe that they have the upper hand and are in the process of winning the war outright by driving the foreigners out and toppling the Karzai government. And this is hardly a crazy position for them to take: the McChrystal report itself suggests that the security trends are now dangerously negative for the government. Why should Taliban leaders compromise for half a loaf when the whole bakery is apparently available? Karzai has reportedly been reaching out to the Quetta Shura and Hekmatyar factions of the Taliban via Saudi intermediaries for some time now; the talks have never made real progress because the Taliban insist on a total withdrawal of foreign forces as a precondition for negotiation. This is an obvious nonstarter and the Taliban surely understand this – the indications are that the other side is unwilling to accept any meaningful compromise when they think total victory is in prospect.

A similar problem confronts related proposals for lower-level reconciliation with individual Taliban foot soldiers. In principle the government could try to outbid the Taliban for their foot soldiers' services. The Taliban, however, are not an easy employer to leave. Foot soldiers who turn on them are subject to brutal retaliation against themselves and their families. If the government cannot offer security against the inevitable retribution, it would be suicidal for individuals or small groups of fighters to change sides. Nor is mere acceptance of government subsidies real evidence of realignment: the worst outcome is actually penetration of government militias with fighters who take the government's pay but answer to Taliban commanders whose ability to threaten families in an insecure environment makes real alignment with the government too dangerous.

This is not to say that negotiation is unwise, or that low-level reconciliation is impossible. But a precondition for success is a change in the Taliban's expectations for the war, and an ability to provide real security at the grassroots level. If an improved Western military effort persuades key factions that the payoff to fighting is lower and the cost higher than they think now, then negotiating space opens up that might make acceptable deals possible. And a credible promise of real security under government pay could wean away an important fraction of today's Taliban foot soldiers. Such deals could substantially shorten the war and reduce its cost to all sides. But without a major change in the tide of battle and the associated expectations, it is hard to see where the mutually-

agreeable common ground lies that could enable such deals. And the heart of the McChrystal approach – and its price tag – is the intent to produce exactly that change in the tide of battle. It will be hard to get the result without the price.

4. A light footprint

Some argue that the chief obstacle in Afghanistan is nationalist resistance to foreign occupation. In a proud, xenophobic society, it is argued, foreign forces stimulate an "antibody reaction" in which, regardless of the foreigners' mission or intentions, Afghans will fight to expel any alien presence. The larger and more visible the foreign presence, the harsher the resistance. If so, then reinforcement will only make things worse, and a better strategy is to reduce outside forces to a minimal strength adequate only to advise Afghan leaders on defending themselves, perhaps in combination with an increase in development aid.

Afghans surely resent foreign occupation, as would anyone. But it is far from clear that this is the primary problem, or that a drawdown to a "light footprint" posture could defeat the Taliban. In fact we have considerable experience with light footprint approaches in Afghanistan: this is exactly what the United States actually did there after 2001. In 2004 there were only 15,200 foreign troops in the country; as recently as 2006 there were only 20,400 in a country of about 30 million people. The thinness of these deployments was defended by then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld precisely in terms of a perceived need to avoid nationalist resistance to a large presence that he thought would be seen as a foreign occupation. If a light footprint could avert insurgency then there should be no war in Afghanistan today. To put it mildly, it has not worked out that way: the Rumsfeld light footprint policy gave us the mess we have now. It yielded too little security to protect the population from the Taliban, too few trainers and advisors to create an indigenous military, but enough foreign presence to alienate the public all the same.

By contrast, there is evidence to suggest that civilians will accept foreign forces when these are strong enough to bring security in exchange. Americans, for example, were hated and resisted in Iraq's Anbar Province in 2004-6, when they were present in numbers large enough to be irritating but too small to provide real security. By late 2007, when reinforcements (together with the Anbar Awakening) enabled the troops to offer security in exchange for their presence, that presence was tolerated to the point where this author was able to walk the central marketplace in Falluja in November 2007 handing out candy to schoolchildren. Americans were not loved in Anbar even then. But because the U.S. presence brought security it was tolerated. Afghanistan, by contrast, is now the worst of both worlds: there are enough foreign forces to be annoying, but not enough to accomplish much. Reducing those numbers would cede the country to the insurgents; increasing them to enable real security might make the price worth paying for Afghans.

Nor would an increase in development aid compensate for a dramatically reduced security footprint. Aid is in fact a major component of orthodox counterinsurgency strategy. But to rely on it as an *alternative* to the security provided by military forces is impractical in an active war zone. Aid is inherently political and is clearly understood to be so by the Taliban, who systematically target Western aid projects for attack. Without large security forces to defend them, aid projects cannot survive. In fact, development projects in Afghanistan are often destroyed even when they *are* defended, if those

defenses are inadequate. No sensible Taliban will allow aid projects to undermine their control over the population when insurgents have the means at their disposal to destroy them or to intimidate their staff; aid without security in Afghanistan is fruitless.

Assessment

Opponents of COIN for Afghanistan certainly have a case. The stakes are not unlimited. The costs of pursuing them are high. And there is no guarantee that even a high-cost pursuit of Afghan COIN will succeed given the inherent difficulties of the undertaking and the particular challenges of this theater in 2009.

But while success is not guaranteed, neither is failure. Some governments succeed in COIN, and the familiar comparisons of today with the Soviets in Afghanistan or the United States in Vietnam pit apples against oranges: in 2009, the U.S. military is much more proficient, and the Taliban insurgency much less so, than their forebears. Great powers do not always fail in COIN; the U.S. is an unusually experienced counterinsurgent force today; the Taliban have serious problems of their own; and astute strategic choices can make an important difference. This combination gives the United States an important *possibility* for successful counterinsurgency.

Moreover, U.S. withdrawal poses important risks, too – and especially, it could easily cause an Afghan government collapse with potentially serious consequences for U.S. security. The Taliban's weaknesses make it hard for them to overthrow a U.S. supported government while large Western military forces defend it. But without those Western troops, the Afghan state would offer a much easier target. Even with over 50,000 Western troops in its defense, the Karzai government has proven unable to contain Taliban influence and prevent insurgents from expanding their presence; if abandoned to its fate the government would surely fare much worse. Nor would an orphaned Karzai regime be in any position to negotiate a compromise settlement that could deny the Taliban full control: with outright victory within their grasp, it is hard to see why the Taliban would settle for anything less than a complete restoration.

A Taliban restoration would put the resources of a state at their disposal. Even the resources of a weak state would enable a major increase in funding, freedom of operation, training opportunities, planning capacity, recruitment potential, and military staging, refitting, reconstitution and resupply for cross-border operations. The result could afford al Qaeda with an improved sanctuary for attacking the United States. But even if it did not, it would almost certainly afford Pashtun militants and their allies in Pakistan with a massive sanctuary for destabilizing the regime in Islamabad, and thereby create a major increase in the threat to the Pakistani government and the security of its nuclear arsenal. Even without a state haven in Afghanistan, Pakistani insurgents might ultimately topple the government in Islamabad, but with the additional resources of an openly sympathetic state across the Durand Line this threat is even more dangerous. And this threat constitutes one of the few really plausible pathways by which al Qaeda could obtain a useable nuclear weapon.

This danger is real, but it is not unlimited and should not be exaggerated. For a U.S. withdrawal to result in a nuclear al Qaeda would require a chain of multiple intervening events: a Taliban restoration in Kabul, collapse of secular government in Islamabad, and

loss of control over the Pakistani nuclear arsenal (or deliberate transfer of weapons by sympathetic Pakistanis). None of these events are certainties, and the compound probability is inherently lower than the odds of any one step taken alone. Though these odds are hard to estimate, analysts such as John Mueller make a persuasive case that terrorists are more likely to fail in their efforts to obtain nuclear weapons than they are to succeed, and the series of setbacks needed for a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan to yield a useable al Qaeda nuclear capability probably implies a compound likelihood that is low in absolute terms.[15]

But U.S. withdrawal increases all the probabilities at each stage. And the consequences for U.S. security if the chain does play itself out are very severe. Unlike the Soviet Union in the Cold War (or even contemporary states such as Iran), al Qaeda may be much less susceptible to deterrence, and considerably more likely to use a nuclear weapon if they acquire it. One need not accept "one percent doctrines" or other extremist versions of nuclear threat-mongering to be concerned with the consequences of a potential al Qaeda nuclear capability.[16] Nor does it resolve the issue simply to find that al Qaeda is "unlikely" to acquire nuclear weapons even if the Karzai government falls. When the stakes are high, even low probabilities of true disasters can be too high to accept: most Americans buy life insurance in a society in which the risk of death in a given year is less than one half of one percent for 45-54 year olds; it is clearly not unreasonable to consider accepting costs to address low-probability events.[17] If a nuclear al Qaeda were impossible or virtually so, then the prospect could simply be ignored. But otherwise the issue inevitably comes back to a difficult value judgment on risk tolerance. This is not a new problem. After all, a central feature of U.S. security policy throughout the Cold War was America's willingness to expend large resources to reduce the odds of unlikely events: a Soviet bolt-from-the-blue nuclear strike was surely never very likely, but the consequences if it ever did happen would have been so severe that the nation accepted huge costs to reduce the odds of such a disaster from low to very low. Americans have long debated whether this judgment was wise. But there is considerable precedent for American governments, of both parties, displaying enough concern with unlikely but dangerous scenarios to expend great effort to reduce the odds.

Nor do the available "middle way" options offer a way out of the dilemmas here. Many are potentially important *components* of an integrated, properly resourced COIN

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[15] John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006); idem, "How Dangerous are the Taliban? Why Afghanistan is the Wrong War, *ForeignAffairs.com*, April 15, 2009; for a debate on this issue, see Paul Pillar, Fawaz Gerges, Jessica Stern, James Fallows, and John Mueller, "Are We Safe Yet?" *ForeignAffairs.com*, September 7, 2006.

[16] See Ron Susskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). Susskind argues that Vice President Cheney held that any risk of a nuclear attack greater than one percent should be treated as a certainty for purposes of U.S. policy.

[17] On the death rate for 45-54 year olds, see M.P. Heron, D.L. Hoyert, J.Q. Xu, C. Scott, and B. Tejada-Vera, "Deaths: Preliminary Data for 2006," *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 56, No. 16 (2008), Table 1; on the rate of life insurance ownership among Americans, see Anna Sachko Gandolfi and Laurence Miners, "Gender-Based Differences in Life Insurance Ownership," *The Journal of Risk and Insurance*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (1996), pp. 683-693 at 691.

strategy. But to pull individual pieces out of this integrated context and undertake them alone as substitutes for major troop deployments is to deny them essential preconditions they need to function. The pieces of orthodox COIN strategy interact: security enables development and governance, development and governance enhance security, governance facilitates CT, CT improves security, security enables negotiation and reconciliation. Each is a valuable complement to the others; none is a viable substitute. In a world of probabilities rather than guarantees, no strategy – whether COIN or a middle way – can ensure success. But different strategies offer different odds. Integrated COIN is expensive, but in exchange it offers a higher probability of success than any of the proposed middle ways. Middle ways are cheaper, but also likelier to fail: they represent disembodied pieces of an integrated COIN campaign attempted in isolation and are therefore less likely to succeed than an integrated campaign that provides key enablers and offers synergies among the parts.

The net result is thus a difficult value judgment between unattractive alternatives, rather than a clear cut, open-and-shut case on analytical grounds. In this context, analysis can exclude certain popular but overstated positions: in fact, COIN in Afghanistan is not hopeless; the United States is not without important interests in the conflict; to secure these interests does not require a modern, centralized, Westernized Switzerland of the Hindu Kush; conversely, success is not guaranteed if only we are resolute; U.S. interests in Afghanistan are not unlimited; and the most important U.S. interests in the conflict are indirect and concern Pakistan more than Afghanistan per se. Analysis can also establish that the likely costs of pursuing COIN success will be high, and that the available "middle way" alternatives have important shortcomings and do not represent reliable, high-likelihood but low-cost means of securing American interests without the sacrifices demanded by integrated COIN. Analysis can illuminate the causal pathways by which different outcomes can affect U.S. interests in general, or the danger of a nuclear al Qaeda in particular. But with important costs and risks on both sides of the ledger, the answer for how much cost is worth bearing for what reduction in risk is ultimately a value judgment rather than an analytical finding. This is *not* a judgment on the value of American lives or the moral worthiness of sacrifice or resolve. All options here involve risks to American lives – a choice to withdraw, for example, is neither more nor less humanitarian, neither more nor less respectful of sacrifice or service or others' suffering, than the opposite. Rather, the judgment here is between accepting greater casualties and sacrifices in the nearer term to reduce some probability of higher casualties and sacrifices in the longer term. For me, this balance is a close call but ultimately favors the conduct of integrated COIN in Afghanistan. But reasonable people can differ on such judgments. Perhaps the most important conclusion is instead that the choice is unavoidably hard: what analysis can show is that there is no course open to us that is without important downsides – there is no easy way out of Afghanistan for the United States in 2009.