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**Leverage:**  
*Designing a Political Campaign for Afghanistan*

By Andrew Exum



Center for a  
New American  
Security

## Acknowledgments

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Joseph J. Fenty.

### Cover Image

U.S. President Barack Obama speaks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on March 28, 2010. Obama landed in Afghanistan on a surprise visit, his first since taking office, to meet Karzai and U.S. troops.

(JIM WATSON/AFP/Getty Images)

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## *About the Author*

**Andrew Exum** is a fellow at the Center for a New American Security.



LEVERAGE:  
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**Leverage:**  
*Designing a Political Campaign for Afghanistan*



## I. LEVERAGE: DESIGNING A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN FOR AFGHANISTAN

By Andrew Exum

Politics is the blind spot in America's counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. Though nearly every expert agrees with John Paul Vann's description of counterinsurgency as "political war," America's counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan has focused more on waging war at the operational and tactical levels at the expense of the strategic and political levels.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, the United States and its allies have not thought rigorously enough about how U.S. and allied interests might not align with those of the Afghan government.

Tactics and operations in counterinsurgency campaigns are important. Indeed, bad counterinsurgency tactics and operations can lose a campaign. But good counterinsurgency tactics and operations cannot, in and of themselves, win a campaign. Sir Rupert Smith is probably correct when he notes that in "wars among the people" – of which contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns are a subset – the best a military can hope for is to set the stage for political success rather than win a favorable political outcome outright on the field of battle. "We intervene in ... a conflict," Sir Rupert writes, "in order to establish a condition in which the political objective can be achieved by other means and in other ways. We seek to create a conceptual space for diplomacy, economic incentives, political pressure and other measures to create a desired political outcome of stability, and if possible democracy."<sup>2</sup>

To a large extent, U.S. and allied success in Afghanistan depends on what the Afghan government does and fails to do. A plan to affect the strategic choices of actors within the Afghan government is as necessary as military operations to defeat the Taliban and its allies. To create such a strategy, the United States and its allies must identify the key means of achieving leverage – whether political, military or financial.<sup>3</sup> They must also engage with Afghanistan's neighbors, rivals and allies to influence the political calculus of Afghanistan's leadership. Above all, the United States and its allies need a functioning relationship with the elected Afghan government.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial template for how to influence the strategic choices of actors within the Afghan government. This paper starts with an overview of sources of U.S. and allied leverage in Afghanistan and then discusses why military campaign design provides a useful template for designing a political strategy for Afghanistan. This paper concludes with six considerations for U.S. and allied policymakers and a short series of policy recommendations.

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If it is intellectually easier to think about and train units for large-scale, conventional warfare than low-intensity, population-centric counterinsurgency, it is correspondingly easier to educate military officers about counterinsurgency at the operational level than to devise strategies across the U.S. government's bureaucracy for fighting such campaigns at the political level. While the U.S. military has thought hard about creating the space Sir Rupert describes, the U.S. government has thought all too little about how to apply those other means he describes once the space is created. The U.S. military can be justifiably proud of the development of its counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24. But as Stephen Biddle noted almost immediately following the manual's publication, much about the doctrine is politically naïve.<sup>4</sup> When the

### Summary of Recommendations

- **Convene another strategic review to assess the civilian strategy, not the U.S. and allied military strategy, in Afghanistan.**
- **Build a functioning relationship with Hamid Karzai.**
- **Use U.S. and allied leverage to press the government of Afghanistan to either hold elections for district governors or appoint competent governors from Kabul.**

United States wages counterinsurgency campaigns, it almost always does so as a third party acting on behalf of a host nation. And implicit in the manual's assumptions is the idea that U.S. interests will be aligned with those of the host nation.

They almost never are, though.

In some places, such as Colombia, the interests of the United States and the host nation are broadly aligned, and important successes have been realized.<sup>5</sup> But in many other places – South Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan – the United States and its allies have been frustrated by the way in which the interests of the host nation clashed with those of the United States and its allies. Steven Metz recently lamented such “unruly clients,” and Daniel Byman correctly noted five years into the “war on terror” that unreliable allies would be a central problem of U.S. foreign interventions in the fight against transnational terror threats.<sup>6</sup>

When the U.S. military, challenged by difficult low-intensity conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, began to think about how it should develop new counterinsurgency doctrine, it had a wealth of historical experience on which to draw. U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine thus borrows heavily from the so-called “golden age” of counterinsurgency following the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> FM 3-24

cites operational lessons learned from the French experiences in Algeria and Indochina, the British experience in Malaya, and the U.S. experience in South Vietnam. Contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns differ greatly from those of the post-colonial era, but the principles of counterinsurgency remain largely the same.<sup>8</sup>

While the U.S. military busily developed tactical and operational counterinsurgency doctrine, the U.S. military, diplomatic corps and elected civilian leadership have prosecuted the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan on an ad hoc and uneven basis.<sup>9</sup> This is avoidable. At times, such as from 2003 to 2005 in Afghanistan and since 2007 in Iraq, the United States and its allies have effectively pursued political strategies. But all too often, U.S. successes have taken place by chance – having the right men and women with the right ideas in the right place at the right time. Designing a political campaign minimizes the role luck plays in whether the United States and its allies are successful. And it will make any success more sustainable.

This paper draws upon hundreds of interviews and conversations with military officers and diplomats from the United States and other NATO nations, U.S. administration officials, academic researchers and representatives of non-governmental organizations active in Afghanistan. Senior Afghan officials, military leaders and police officers have also been interviewed, as have Afghan civilians and Western journalists. All research was conducted between June 2009 and April 2010 in the United States, Europe and Afghanistan. This paper also draws on extensive primary source documentary evidence and secondary sources as well as military doctrine and social science research. The conclusions in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or analysis of the U.S. and allied diplomatic and military officials who were interviewed.

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## **II. The Nature of U.S. and Allied Leverage in Afghanistan**

Though the United States and its allies at times appear hostage to the whims of President Hamid Karzai and the government of Afghanistan, they do in fact possess significant leverage to influence the behavior of Afghanistan's various political actors. If we think of leverage in terms of incentives, the United States and its allies have both positive and negative incentives they can bring to bear. These sticks and carrots can roughly be divided into political, security-related and financial.

**Political Incentives.** Seymour Martin Lipset defined legitimacy as “the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for society.”<sup>10</sup> Although we cannot accurately predict how much of the Karzai regime's legitimacy would dissolve were the international community to withdraw its support, much of the legitimacy the regime enjoys both domestically and internationally stems from the support of the United States and its allies.

Domestically, although some Afghans consider Hamid Karzai to be a puppet of the United States and its allies, if the United States and its allies were to withdraw support for the Karzai regime, many Afghans, sensing a shift in fortunes, might then bet on competing actors. Stathis Kalyvas, writing about political allegiance in civil wars, notes that we are better off measuring popular support

in terms of behavior and actions than in terms of attitudes, preferences and allegiances. When we do so, we find that popular support depends, in large part, on which actor manages to exert more control over the population than competing actors.<sup>11</sup> Without the support of the United States and its allies, the Karzai regime would be able to control much less of the Afghan population and would suffer a decline in popular support.

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Internationally, much of the access to international institutions that the Karzai regime enjoys – especially to the international donor community – stems from the support of the United States and its allies. Were that support withdrawn, it would then become more difficult for the Afghan political class to raise funds for Afghanistan from other countries. The Democratic Republic of the Congo offers an example of a state where the United States and its allies appear all too ready to allow conflict to continue without any significant investment from the world's most powerful states. This must be the nightmare scenario Afghan politicians worry about, even if it seems unlikely any time soon. On the other hand, the United States and its allies can do much to reassure Karzai that they stand by his side. The reforms and reconciliation process the United States and its allies would like to see do not come without a great deal of risk

for the Karzai regime. Without a strong natural constituency or powerful military to call his own, President Karzai cannot afford to alienate many of his political partners. But as the United States and its allies ask him to make tough decisions, it can also seek ways to mitigate the risks he runs through pledges of continued support in the international and domestic political spheres.

**Security Incentives.** Security incentives in Afghanistan, like political ones, can be either positive or negative. The presence of so many international forces in Afghanistan means the Karzai regime is in no danger of falling to the Quetta Shura Taliban, its allies, or other insurgent groups any time soon. Any threat to precipitously remove or withdraw those forces would affect Afghanistan's political class, and diplomats already report that President Barack Obama's 18-month timeline articulated in December 2009 is having a mostly positive effect as they address issues like corruption and reforms. But just as the threat to withdraw international troops is a negative incentive, the assurance that the United States and its allies will continue a significant troop presence dedicated to assisting Afghan security forces and fighting terrorism, provided that the Afghan government takes positive steps, should be considered a positive incentive. Likewise, the United States and its allies can pledge to sell or donate advanced weapons systems to the Afghan military – the kind of “prestige weapons” that may not be tremendously useful when fighting a low-tech insurgency but which politicians tend to desire as international status symbols.

**Financial Incentives.** Most of the Afghan state budget is externally financed.<sup>12</sup> The ability of the Karzai regime to govern Afghanistan and provide essential services to the population depends on the generosity of international donors. So the negative incentives should again be clear. But the United States and its allies can also use financial assistance as a positive incentive, pledging new

aid and development funding if and when certain requisites are met or reforms undertaken. (In some cases, though, aid and development funds can fuel the conflict in Afghanistan. This will be discussed later in the paper.) Just because such a large percentage of the Afghan budget is externally financed today does not mean it will be similarly financed years down the road. The United States and its allies, in exchange for political guarantees, can both pledge assistance and signal their continued willingness to engage the international donor community on behalf of the Karzai regime.

**Karzai's Leverage over the United States and its Allies.** No discussion of leverage in Afghanistan would be complete without at least a mention of the considerable leverage President Karzai enjoys over the United States and its allies. The Karzai regime must be aware, no matter how much the United States has expressed displeasure with its behavior, that the United States and its allies lack a viable alternative to a partnership with Hamid Karzai. By all accounts, Karzai has emerged from his early engagements with the Obama Administration insulted and suspicious of U.S. intentions. Yet Karzai must surely realize that the United States and its allies have little choice but to work with him. Alternatives to Karzai range from bad (politicians who cannot command a similar degree of respect in southern and eastern Afghanistan) to worse (a return to power of violent fundamentalists). The United States and its allies cannot hedge against Karzai by courting alternatives because no palatable alternatives exist. And with the Quetta Shura Taliban and other insurgent groups threatening from the south and east, Karzai can always claim, with some credibility, *après moi le déluge*. In the end, by having so vocally and materially committed to the Karzai regime, the United States and its allies are tied to its successes and failures. The goal, then, should be to maximize the former and minimize the latter through focused application of U.S. leverage.

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### III. Principles of Political Campaign Design

A campaign plan is defined by the U.S. Department of Defense as “a joint operation plan for series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic or operational objectives with a given time and space.”<sup>13</sup> Put another way, a campaign plan describes a way to solve a problem. Campaign design, by contrast, is defined by the U.S. Army as “a process to create a systemic and shared understanding of a complex operational problem and to design a broad approach for its resolution.”<sup>14</sup> Campaign design establishes the problem and then the general framework for solving it.

A good campaign design, as conceived by the U.S. Army, should do three things: describe the commander's intent, describe the campaign approach, and describe any factors that would force subordinate units and commanders to think differently about the problem.<sup>15</sup> Political campaign design in a counterinsurgency should do much of the same. It should:

1. Clearly identify the “end state” of the campaign, i.e. what it is that policymakers are trying to accomplish or what “success” looks like.
2. Sketch out ways and means for objectives to be met.
3. Outline ways in which the conflict is currently being misunderstood and why a new paradigm is necessary for the U.S. military, civilian agencies and allies to be successful.

Diplomats might blanch at using a military planning process to design a political strategy in Afghanistan. Indeed, the very word “campaign” conjures up either images of Patton’s army rolling across western Europe or a U.S. politician pressing the flesh at town hall meetings in rural America – two environments from which U.S. and allied diplomats and aid workers are far removed. But one advantage the U.S. military has over its civilian counterparts is *process*. The U.S. military, specifically, has planning templates and strategic and operational planning processes that allow it to consider difficult problems in a systematic fashion and then arrive at solutions. The rest of the U.S. government does not wish to copy the often complex and bewildering military planning process in total. However, campaign design offers a relatively ecumenical template with which involved parties can consider interests, agree upon shared objectives and plan a general way to meet those objectives.

#### **IV. Designing a Political Campaign in Afghanistan**

##### **DEFINING THE ENDS**

So what would a political campaign in Afghanistan look like? First we should determine what the United States and its allies are trying to accomplish there. On that point, there has been much confusion over the past eight years. Outside observers of U.S. and allied efforts in Afghanistan can be forgiven for thinking the United States

and its allies have been conducting a counter-terror campaign, a counterinsurgency campaign, stabilization operations, humanitarian assistance, nation-building, democracy-promotion or perhaps a combination of each.

In reality, U.S. and allied goals for Afghanistan have evolved. What started out as a limited campaign to topple the Taliban regime and kill or capture the al Qaeda senior leadership in 2001 and 2002 became a broader counter-terror mission by 2002 that crept into a nation-building exercise of which the priorities and aims were never entirely clear. During this period, the U.S. focus on destroying al Qaeda clashed with the aims of other international actors that focused more on aid and development. By 2006, the Taliban had reconstituted itself across the border in Pakistan while U.S. military and diplomatic efforts focused instead on a rapidly deteriorating situation in Iraq. Over the next three years, the United States and its allies would wage a nominal counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, but one whose disjointed goals and resources would vary from region to region and from year to year. By the time GEN Stanley McChrystal took command of all NATO efforts in 2009, each of the four major regional commands in Afghanistan could accurately be described as fighting separate campaigns, often with national interests taking precedence over those of the unwieldy coalition. Units from some troop-contributing nations, for example, were so intent on avoiding casualties that aggressive combat operations against insurgents became impossible.

The Obama Administration brought some clarity to U.S. aims through the March 2009 white paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan and the president’s December 2009 televised address to the nation at the U.S. Military Academy.<sup>16</sup> In the former, the president declared that “the core goal” of the United States “must be to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in

Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.” In the latter, the president echoed the white paper, saying, “Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.”

Despite some brief speculation and confusion in the fall of 2009, as the Obama Administration launched another review of the war effort, the “commander’s intent” has been clear and consistent since President Obama took office.

#### CLARIFYING THE MEANS

Despite agreement on strategic ends, the white paper of March 2009 and the president’s speech in December 2009 differ in the supporting goals assigned by the president to the U.S. government and its allies on the ground. In March, the Obama Administration spoke of five supporting objectives:

1. Disrupting terrorist networks in Afghanistan and especially Pakistan to degrade any ability they have to plan and launch international terrorist attacks.
2. Promoting a more capable, accountable and effective government in Afghanistan that serves the Afghan people and can eventually function, especially with respect to internal security, with limited international support.
3. Developing increasingly self-reliant Afghan security forces that can lead the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism fight with reduced U.S. assistance.
4. Assisting efforts to enhance civilian control and stable constitutional government in Pakistan and a vibrant economy that provides opportunity for the people of Pakistan.
5. Involving the international community to actively assist in addressing these objectives for Afghanistan and Pakistan, with an important leadership role for the U.N.<sup>17</sup>

Much like U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, these objectives assume that the civilian governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan share the interests of the United States and its allies. The March 2009 white paper reasons that the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have not been able to effectively support U.S. and allied aims primarily because of a lack of capacity. (Nowhere, for example, does the president or his administration openly acknowledge the possibility that the government of Pakistan has been logically, if unhelpfully, supporting the Quetta Shura Taliban and other militant groups as part of a hedging strategy for when the United States and its allies eventually leave Afghanistan, though the administration is certainly aware of these activities.) These objectives, and the March 2009 white paper, also make no mention of the limited resources – to include domestic political will – that the United States and its allies have to accomplish these objectives. Moreover, the white paper does not rank one objective over any other in importance.

By September of 2009, the Obama Administration confronted reality in the form of a gloomy commander’s assessment submitted by GEN Stanley McChrystal as well as an Afghan presidential election in which allegations of ballot box stuffing and other irregularities were widely reported in the western media.<sup>18</sup> These developments led the administration to conduct another review of its policy. It soon became clear that members of the administration had initially signed on for a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan without understanding how costly such a campaign would be in time and resources. As an administration official told the *Washington Post’s* Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “It was easy to say, ‘Hey, I support COIN,’ because nobody had done the assessment of what it would really take, and nobody had thought through whether we want to do what it takes.”<sup>19</sup>

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*The president's political goals depend not so much on the actions of U.S. and allied brigades but on the actions of U.S. and allied diplomats and the responses of the Afghan and Pakistani governments.*

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The December 2009 speech featured the same political end – “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan” – but identified less ambitious means. U.S. commanders would be given only 18 months to demonstrate progress before U.S. military units would begin redeployment – too little time to wage the kind of comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign described in U.S. military doctrine.<sup>20</sup> President Obama called for “a military strategy that will break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity over the next 18 months.” In addition, he pledged to “work with our partners, the United Nations, and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security.” And finally, the president pledged to work with Pakistan to counter those militant groups – such as the Quetta Shura Taliban and the Haqqani Network – operating across the Afghan border. In total, then, President Obama called for “a military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan.”

The ways and means to accomplish the first of the president’s goals regarding military operations

are more or less clear. Although the conflict in Afghanistan is hardly a binary insurgency pitting the government of Afghanistan against one unified network of insurgents, U.S. and allied militaries understand how to wage a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign that denies militant groups support from the population, addresses drivers of conflict at the local level, and creates time and space to build key institutions such as those in the security sector. The U.S. military and its allies have also learned much over the past eight years with respect to the most efficient ways to train and equip the security forces of a host nation. Reversing the Taliban’s momentum and building Afghan capacity, then, are missions the U.S. military and its allied partners have the means to achieve, even when addressed within the president’s time constraints.<sup>21</sup>

The president’s second and third goals depend not so much on the actions of U.S. and allied brigades but on the actions of U.S. and allied diplomats and the responses of the Afghan and Pakistani governments. The military will most certainly help in trying to achieve all these goals but might not be the principal actor in some efforts.<sup>22</sup>

With respect to the second of the president’s goals, a “civilian strategy” in Afghanistan has for too long been shorthand for aid and development programs only occasionally connected to, and often at odds with, desired political outcomes. But paradoxically, despite its poverty, the last thing Afghanistan needs at the moment is more aid and development funding. Andrew Wilder, for example, has demonstrated that aid and development funding has been a *destabilizing* influence on Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> “Spending too much too quickly with too little oversight in insecure environments is a recipe for fueling corruption, delegitimizing the Afghan government, and undermining the credibility of international actors.”<sup>24</sup>

Afghanistan is already the world's most extreme example of a *rentier* state, as demonstrated by Astri Suhrke.<sup>25</sup> An incredible 69 percent of President Karzai's budget in 2004 and 2005 was financed externally. By way of comparison, even at the height of the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan in 1982, only 29 percent of Afghanistan's budget was financed by aid. Very little of this aid – of which the United States donated roughly half, or 37.7 billion dollars, between 2001 and 2009 – can be considered to be neutral or even effective.<sup>26</sup> In the case of aid and development, the means have gotten ahead of the ends. Although the subject of aid and development is one that deserves its own careful treatment, the primary intent of all aid and development, at this late stage in the conflict, should be to address *immediate drivers of conflict*.

What is needed with respect to a civilian strategy in Afghanistan, then, is less aid and more a coherent political strategy for the United States and its allies to assist the government of Afghanistan to govern in a way that both promotes its legitimacy and allows the United States and its allies to militarily leave Afghanistan within the next five years. This is the political outcome explicitly desired by the peoples of the United States and other troop-contributing nations. The perpetuation of a *rentier* state in Afghanistan, and aid that fuels rather than alleviates the conflict, are at odds with that political outcome.

The United States and its allies need a strategy to influence the behavior of Afghanistan's political class. This strategy can be coercive, consensual or, most likely, both. That means delivering a unified message, prioritizing efforts and using leverage provided by civilian and military aid and assistance to encourage positive behavior. (The third of the president's goals, building an effective partnership with Pakistan, is not covered by the scope of this paper but would involve a similar effort.)

Policymakers should follow several guidelines when they are ready to commit as heavily to an

essential political counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan as they have to a military campaign. At a minimum, they should examine sources of U.S. and allied leverage, thinking of their order in importance and in what order they should be applied. They should also think about how fast they should escalate the application of leverage and when it makes sense to shift from positive incentives to negative ones. And they should think about the ways in which the Karzai regime will resist pressure or apply pressure of its own.<sup>27</sup>

Key assumptions necessary for this exercise include recognition that the political will necessary to continue support for the NATO-led conflict in Afghanistan is waning within the troop-contributing nations but will remain strong enough to support operations at current or roughly similar levels of troops and aid over the next 12 months and at slightly lower levels for the 12 months following. In order to make the most of those next 24 months, though, the United States and its allies should consider six issues: U.S. and allied relations with the Afghan president, U.S. organization, regional concerns, intelligence, priorities and risk.

## **V. Political Campaign Design in Afghanistan: Six Considerations**

### **THE KARZAI OPPORTUNITY**

In large part, to design a political strategy for Afghanistan is to determine the most appropriate way to manage U.S. and allied relations with Hamid Karzai and his regime. In part due to the way in which the United States and its allies remained studiously neutral in the Afghan presidential elections of 2009, President Karzai has become ever more convinced the United States and its allies are out to get him.<sup>28</sup> It is quite logical that he would have reached this conclusion. What is he to make, for example, of a new U.S. administration that shows far less interest in him than its predecessor and indeed sends its new ambassador in Kabul to the rallies of his political rivals? The problem is, when the United States and its allies back Karzai into a corner, he falls

back on the worst tendencies of Afghan politics and becomes more recalcitrant in the face of stated U.S. and allied interests.

The Obama Administration is correct to use both carrots and sticks with President Karzai, but it must use them more effectively. President Karzai should be taken, first and foremost, on his own terms. While he is, by all accounts, not very good at governing, he is a gifted politician. His politics are tribal, meaning he is looking for consensus, balance and compromise on a daily basis. He cannot be expected to rapidly address the existential problems of the Afghan state. The United States and its allies, then, should paradoxically be thankful for having a partner in Afghanistan like Hamid Karzai (the United States has had much worse partners elsewhere) and support him. Karzai's relative power, at the moment, is quite weak. He has very little money, very little by the way of a military and governs a country riven with internal divisions and rivalries that predate Afghanistan's descent into chaos in 1978.

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*The military has, at last, a  
clear chain of command.  
Civilians in Kabul do not.*

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Instead of seeking to influence every decision Karzai makes, the United States and its allies should make very clear their shared "red lines" – especially with respect to negotiations with the Quetta Shura Taliban and other insurgent groups but also with respect to the 2010 parliamentary elections. Then the United States and its allies should seek to build a relationship between President Karzai and its designated envoy in order to move on, discreetly, to issues of importance to the United States and its allies going forward.

#### ORGANIZING FOR A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

A political campaign designed to influence the behavior of the government of Afghanistan, would be organized much differently from the way the United States and its allies are currently organized. In the summer of 2009, an external team gathered by GEN Stanley McChrystal to review strategy and operations in Afghanistan quickly determined that what the government of Afghanistan does and fails to do matters much in terms of mission success. But the way in which the United States and its allies are organized continues to facilitate operations designed to defeat the Taliban and protect the people of Afghanistan from the influence of insurgent groups far better than it does a campaign to influence the behavior of the government. The military has, at last, a clear chain of command. Civilians in Kabul, senior representatives, ambassadors and envoys all compete for time in which to lobby Karzai.

Engaging foreign leaders effectively means choosing effective U.S. counterparts. In Iraq, between 2007 and 2009, GEN David Petraeus and Amb. Ryan Crocker effectively represented U.S. interests before the government of Iraq. Iraqi politicians were able to exploit little daylight between the positions of the Multinational Force – Iraq and the U.S. embassy.<sup>29</sup> In Afghanistan, between 2003 and 2005, one could argue a similar dynamic existed between LTG David Barno and Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad.<sup>30</sup> No such dynamic exists today. The NATO commander, the U.S. ambassador, the NATO senior civilian representative, the U.N. senior civilian representative and President Obama's Senior Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan all command the attention of Afghan decision-makers. And while relations between the men are reportedly professional, tensions between their organizations have at times proven poisonous.<sup>31</sup> This is not a recipe for success. In his survey of nine counterinsurgency campaigns, researcher Mark Moyar notes that "superior

counterinsurgency leaders performed best when given dominion over all civil and military organizations in their jurisdictions because they could integrate and drive all activities in unison and fix leadership problems in all of the organizations.”<sup>32</sup>

Even if unity of command is impossible due to the number of national and international organizations represented in Kabul, unity of effort is required. For as Michael Semple has argued, the one relationship that matters the most in Afghanistan over the next year is the relationship between the U.S. and Afghan governments.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, President Obama must decide on the one person, or pair of people, who represent his interests in Afghanistan. One option is to direct the U.S. ambassador in Kabul to subordinate his efforts to those of the new NATO civilian representative, former British ambassador to Afghanistan Mark Sedwill. Another option is to drop the pretense of a coalition and direct GEN McChrystal to represent U.S. interests to President Karzai alongside the U.S. ambassador. Yet another option is to designate one civilian or military official in charge of the political, military and economic efforts. A high-ranking retired officer like GEN Anthony Zinni might be ideal in such a role. Whoever is in charge, though, must be based in Afghanistan. Trying to forge a working relationship with President Karzai from Washington, as Amb. Richard Holbrooke has attempted to do, is difficult if not impossible.

GEN McChrystal and Amb. Sedwill are currently trying to quietly coordinate the efforts of national ambassadors in Kabul. More important, though, is for one of them – or another senior diplomat or military officer – to form the kind of close working relationship with President Karzai necessary to advance U.S. and allied interests.

### REGIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The conflict in Afghanistan, of course, is not taking place in a vacuum. Shifts in U.S. policy in neighboring states affect the leverage the United

States and its allies have in Afghanistan. As an example, security and political guarantees offered to the government of Pakistan might further convince the Karzai regime, which views Pakistani ambition in Afghanistan with great wariness, that the United States and its allies are preparing to betray their Afghan allies. Similarly, any stance the United States or its allies take on Indian diplomatic and development initiatives in Afghanistan is likely to affect Pakistani concerns about the alliance between Delhi and Kabul and cause Pakistan’s security services to either continue or increase their support to Afghan insurgent groups based in Pakistan. In the end, it is unlikely that U.S. or allied diplomats will be able to anticipate all of the second- and third-order effects their decisions in Afghanistan will have on the region and vice versa. At the least any decisions made with respect to Afghanistan and its neighboring states should be accompanied by good-faith efforts to mitigate risk elsewhere. And in the same way the United States and its allies seek to anticipate the effects of decisions made by their own policymakers, they should also build scenarios to predict how policy shifts from regional states might similarly affect U.S. and allied leverage in Afghanistan. In the same way, the United States and its allies should engage friendly neighboring states to play a positive role in affecting the behavior of the Afghan government.

### INTELLIGENCE

To be successful in a consensual or coercive campaign in Afghanistan or elsewhere, the United States and its allies must understand, to paraphrase Thomas Schelling, what individuals in the government fear and what they treasure.<sup>34</sup> This author discovered, while traveling through Afghanistan in 2009, that while U.S. and allied intelligence officers could often hold forth in great detail concerning the organization and motives of Afghanistan’s various insurgent groups, they were often stumped when asked to describe the activities of local power

brokers or government officials. “Who controls the water here?” is an example of a question that would often baffle local commanders and their intelligence officers. It shouldn’t.

In a counterinsurgency campaign where commanders must determine and target the drivers of conflict in a community, these kinds of questions are as important as those related to the enemy’s order of battle. GEN McChrystal’s intelligence chief, MG Michael Flynn, understands this and directed intelligence officers in Afghanistan, in both an internal memorandum as well as a paper published by CNAS, to reorient their efforts to reflect the kinds of questions commanders should be asking.<sup>35</sup>

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*In the same way that wars  
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Understanding the familial and business interests and connections of Afghanistan’s elected and appointed leaders and power brokers allows the United States and its allies to use leverage at both the strategic and operational levels. Gathering intelligence should not merely allow the United States to target insurgent leaders. It should also allow the United States and its allies to better understand the motivations of those in the Afghan government and other power brokers.

#### **TRIAGE**

Wars are fought with limited resources. An earlier published CNAS paper argued that due to limited counterinsurgency forces in Afghanistan, the

command in Kabul should use forces available to protect those population centers most targeted by Taliban campaigns of fear and intimidation, leaving other areas either under-protected or unprotected.<sup>36</sup>

Leverage works the same way. In the same way that wars are fought by nations and groups with limited resources, political campaigns are fought with limited leverage. The counterinsurgent force, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, must decide what really matters. In Afghanistan, what really matters is by no means completely clear – which speaks to the importance of better intelligence. But it is possible to determine some obvious political priorities.

A common theme to emerge from conversations and formal interviews with commanders of provincial reconstruction teams and brigade combat teams is the importance of dependable district and provincial governors. Some military and civilian officials interviewed for this paper have questioned whether or not district and provincial governors should be directly elected rather than appointed by officials in Kabul. Though this is ultimately a question for Afghans, the United States does have interests at stake. Direct election may or may not lead to the election of honest leaders who can govern effectively. Afghanistan, we should bear in mind, is not a mature democracy with the freedom of press and campaign finance laws enjoyed by the United States and other countries. Direct democracy at the district and provincial levels could merely serve to empower the local warlords with the money and muscle to gain office. In addition, direct democracy at the district and provincial level would remove a key mechanism through which effective leverage over the government in Kabul can generate positive effects at the local level. On the other hand, direct democracy might increase the local legitimacy of district governors. Regardless, good district or provincial governors can address drivers of conflict more effectively than U.S. and allied military commanders and diplomats and

can greatly amplify what provincial reconstruction teams and infantry battalions are trying to do. “If there is a good district chief in an area, there won’t be any bomb blasts or suicide bombings,” an Afghan student told a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal*. “If you get the right people in place, there won’t be any need for military operations.”<sup>37</sup>

### **ASSUME RISK**

One area in which the United States has always used leverage over host nation governments is in the development, training and equipment of security forces. In some nations, such as Egypt, where the regime is relatively secure, attaching conditions to the kind of equipment and training provided to security forces has not been particularly effective at changing regime behavior. In other nations where the regime is less secure, attaching conditions to the training and equipment provided to security forces has more of an effect. Counterinsurgency scholar Mark Moyar warns, however, that “in countries where the United States had a large presence and a vocal public commitment,” such as Afghanistan, “threats carried a good deal less weight.”<sup>38</sup> In El Salvador, the United States was able to effectively use leverage; in South Vietnam, it was not.

Also in Afghanistan, the U.S. and allied desire to gain leverage over the government clashes with the operational requirements of U.S. and allied efforts in southern and eastern Afghanistan. On the one hand, the United States and its allies would love to link support for the Afghan army and police forces to the behavior of the Afghan government, with levels of U.S. and allied security force assistance entirely dependent on what the Afghan government does or fails to do politically. On the other hand, U.S. and allied commanders in southern Afghanistan especially face an immediate need of Afghan soldiers and policemen to conduct aggressive operations in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces in 2010. The NATO commander in

Kabul, together with his NATO civilian representative, the U.S. ambassador and decision-makers in Washington, must determine the degree to which the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) can slow down its training of Afghan soldiers and policemen to gain leverage over the government of Afghanistan without significantly endangering the success of operations in the South. This requires the United States to juggle risks.

Happily, in the case of the Afghan army, the United States and its allies may be able to produce enough positive incentives – in the form of advanced “prestige” weapons systems, cherished by governments but of little use in counterinsurgency – to affect the behavior of the government without resorting to negative incentives that could endanger ongoing operations. The tradeoff between strategic effects and operational requirements illustrated by the Afghanistan Army example, though, highlights the kind of risks the United States and its allies must run if they are to be successful in affecting the behavior of the Afghan government. Short-term stability operations might have to be endangered to facilitate that which is required for the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

### **VI. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The war in Afghanistan has frustrated U.S. and allied political leaders as much as it has challenged the fighting organizations of the NATO alliance. The militaries of NATO have in general done a much better job of learning from the experience than have politicians and civilian agencies. To be successful in Afghanistan, the men and women of the U.S. and allied militaries need their leaders to organize and prosecute a campaign to affect the behavior of the government of Afghanistan. This effort must begin with rigorous planning and aggressive reorganization of efforts on par with what took place within NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command in 2009.<sup>39</sup> Whether the political will exists in

Washington to tackle such an effort remains to be seen, but should policymakers decide to attempt to design an effective political strategy for Afghanistan, they should do the following:

**1. Convene another strategic review to assess the civilian strategy, not the U.S. and allied military strategy, in Afghanistan.**

In fall 2009, President Obama correctly forced his commander in Kabul, GEN Stanley McChrystal, to answer some tough questions about U.S. and allied military operations in Afghanistan. Almost one year later, though, it is the U.S. political strategy that is adrift. The president should now ask some tough questions of his secretaries and envoys: What are the political ends the United States and its allies are fighting to realize? What are key points of U.S. and allied leverage? Is the United States effectively organized to carry out the president's strategic initiatives in Afghanistan? Is either the ambassador in Kabul or the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan an effective interlocutor with Afghan policymakers? Is the U.S. embassy in Kabul fully supporting the counter-insurgency campaign being waged by NATO and its Afghan allies? In assessing aid and development funds spent in Afghanistan, what percentage is reducing levels of violence, and what percentage is fueling the conflict?

**2. Build a functioning relationship with Hamid Karzai.** Hamid Karzai is, for better or for worse, the United States' man in Kabul. He can be forgiven, though, for not knowing who *his* man is in the United States. The United States should settle upon one point person for dealing with the Afghan president, because a healthy relationship with Karzai is the "defeat mechanism" the United States and its allies are looking for in the fight against Afghanistan's enemies. A political strategy aimed at Afghanistan's leadership can just as easily rely upon a consensual approach as a coercive

approach. But in order for the United States and its allies to not resort to coercive measures, they must first build a relationship with the Afghan president. Amb. Richard Holbrooke, living in and operating from Washington, has unsurprisingly failed to do this. So too, though, has the U.S. ambassador in Kabul. A new U.S. "tsar" for Afghanistan might succeed if he is actually based in Afghanistan, and so too might the NATO senior civilian representative if he is given the full support of the troop-contributing nations. Whoever takes the lead in building this relationship, though, must first convince the Afghan president he has an enduring partner in the United States and its allies and then move on to addressing difficult conflicts of interests.

**3. Use U.S. and allied leverage to press the government of Afghanistan to either hold elections for district governors or appoint competent governors from Kabul.**

In the kind of "counter-war" operations currently employed by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, in which military units and civilian officials seek to address the factors driving the conflict at the local level, effective aid and development projects aimed at stabilization can reduce levels of violence.<sup>40</sup> In order for those activities to succeed, though, effective local governance is a prerequisite.

**And if all that fails?** What if the United States and its allies fail to develop a working relationship with the government of Afghanistan and U.S. and allied forces succeed only in extending the writ of a corrupt and predatory government over the next year? What if key actors within Afghanistan's political class continue to behave in a way that maximizes their own short-term gains at the expense of Afghanistan's long-term stability?

In that case, the United States and its allies should focus on mitigating risk in Afghanistan and hastening the withdrawal of U.S. and allied

military forces after June 2011.<sup>41</sup> The efforts of the next 12 months in Afghanistan are intended to build up Afghan institutions sufficiently to resist a persistent insurgency that will likely endure past the departure of the United States and its allies. After June 2011, the United States and its allies already expect to transition to a mission more closely resembling foreign internal defense (FID) or security force assistance (SFA), focusing their efforts almost entirely on training and equipment for Afghanistan's security forces.<sup>42</sup>

Should the U.S. and allied strategy in Afghanistan fail between now and June 2011, the United States and its allies should hasten the transition to FID or SFA, recognizing that Afghanistan's institutions will be strong enough to defend areas of the country already under Afghan government control but not yet strong enough to exert authority over all parts of the country. Afghanistan's civil war would likely continue, with those forces supported by the United States and its allies fighting for power in southern and eastern Afghanistan against insurgent groups supported by the government of Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

This scenario is the ugliest reality for the people of Afghanistan and fails to achieve Obama's policy aims in the near term. Disrupting terror networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan would grow more difficult, and dismantling them completely would be out of the question.

All the more reasons, then, to ensure that the United States and its allies have a coherent political strategy for 2010.

## ENDNOTES

1. When I refer to the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, my definitions of those terms roughly conform to those found in *JP 1-02, The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, U.S. Department of Defense, 13 June 2007. Additional discussion of these terms can be found in the first chapter of Millett and Murray's *Military Effectiveness, Vol. 1: The First World War* (Routledge: 1988). John Paul Vann famously said of the war in Vietnam that it was "a political war and . . . calls for discrimination in killing. The best weapon for killing would be a knife, but I'm afraid we can't do it that way. The worst is an airplane. The next worst is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle – you know who you're killing." See Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).
2. Smith, Rupert, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 2007): 272.
3. When this paper discusses "leverage," it means to discuss the strategic-level leverage as applied to the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and not the tactical-level leverage employed by U.S. battalion and company commanders to friendly and neutral actors on a daily basis on the ground in Afghanistan.
4. See 'Counterinsurgency Manual Review Symposium.' *Perspectives on Politics*. Vol. 6, No. 2, June 2008.
5. See, in particular, the section on the administration of Álvaro Uribe in DeShazo, Mendelson and McLean's "Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State: Lessons from Colombia", Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 2009.
6. Metz, Steven. "On Unruly Clients," *World Affairs*, March/April 2010; Byman, Daniel L. "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006): 79-115.
7. The French and British experiences – and the writings of David Galula, Roger Trinquier and Sir Robert G.K. Thompson – are particularly relevant and cited.
8. Two useful primers on the principles of counterinsurgency remain Kalev Sepp's "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, May – June 2005 and David Kilcullen's "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency," [http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/COIN/repository/28\\_Articles\\_of\\_COIN-Kilcullen%28Mar06%29.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/COIN/repository/28_Articles_of_COIN-Kilcullen%28Mar06%29.pdf).
9. "War," H.R. McMaster has written, "is the final auditor of military institutions" ("Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War," *Orbis*, Fall 2008). Military organizations and the men and women who serve in them are the first to suffer from poorly constructed military campaigns, which explains why they are logically among the first to adjust their culture and behavior. Social scientists describe the effect "external shock" has in prompting innovation in military organizations and is explored in greater depth by Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff in their edited volume *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics and Technology* (2002).
10. Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (March 1959).
11. Kalyvas, Stathis. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
12. Figures for 2004 and 2005, discussed later in the paper, suggest 69 percent of Afghanistan's budget derives from external aid. Although I was not able to access current figures, it is worth noting that annual U.S. aid to the government of Afghanistan more than doubled between 2005 and 2009. Source: Tarnoff, Curt, "Afghanistan: U.S. Foreign Assistance," Congressional Research Service (14 July 2009).
13. Joint Publication 1-02, U.S. Department of Defense (13 June 2007).
14. TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, U.S. Department of the Army (28 January 2008).
15. Ibid.
16. Both the white paper and the speech can be accessed via the White House at, respectively, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf) and <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>. In the end, and much to the chagrin of some of the president's supporters, the stated aims of the Obama Administration do not differ very much from U.S. policy toward Afghanistan in the final year of the Bush Administration.
17. These objectives are taken from the March 2009 white paper verbatim.
18. The author of this text also served as a member of the team which drafted GEN McChrystal's assessment, which was leaked to *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward and published on September 20, 2009. The redacted report can be accessed at [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140).
19. "Civilian, Military Officials at Odds Over Resources Needed for Afghan Counterinsurgency," *The Washington Post* (8 October 2009).
20. Soon after the president's speech, both the Secretaries of Defense and State "walked back" the president's comments on the 18-month timetable, saying the United States would only begin a withdrawal in 18 months, and a gradual one at that.
21. The biggest obstacle remains training effective commissioned and noncommissioned officers for the Afghan army and police. While the United States and its allies can carry out effective counterinsurgency operations in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces and ramp up the amount of training and equipment provided to Afghanistan's nascent security forces, low rates of literacy hinder efforts to build an officer corps. Just 43 percent of Afghan men can read – compared with 84 percent of Iraqi men and 99 percent of U.S. men. (Source: CIA World Factbook).
22. The efforts being made by the U.S. and allied militaries to train and equip the Afghan police and army are certainly examples of the military assisting in efforts related to the president's second goal.
23. The preliminary results of Wilder's research can be found via the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University at <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=19270958>.

24. Andrew Wilder and Stuart Gordon, "Money Can't Buy America Love," *Foreign Policy* (1 December 2009).

25. Astri Suhrke is a political scientist at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. The figures which follow are taken from a presentation delivered at a Wilton Park Conference in March 2010 and are cited with her permission.

26. In some cases, aid *has* had a positive effect on how the Afghan government is perceived at the district and provincial levels. But this effect, research has shown, has tended to be both short-term and non-cumulative. See Jan Böhnke, Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher, "Assessing the Impact of Development Cooperation in North East Afghanistan, 2005-2009," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Germany), <http://www.bmz.de/en/service/infotehke/evaluation/BMZEvaluationberichte/index.html>.

27. I am particularly indebted to Steve Biddle for conversations and correspondence that contributed to this section.

28. This conclusion is based on interviews and conversations with several retired and active U.S. and allied diplomats who have worked with President Karzai over the past five years. See also Elizabeth Rubin, "Karzai in His Labyrinth," *The New York Times Magazine* (4 August 2009).

29. The effective and close working relationship developed between GEN Petraeus and Amb. Crocker has been the subject of many volumes, including Linda Robinson's *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (Public Affairs, 2008) and Tom Ricks's *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (The Penguin Press, 2009).

30. That is certainly the opinion of RAND researcher Seth Jones, whose book *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's war in Afghanistan* is the most exhaustive single-volume record of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan since 2001. (See, especially, 139-150.)

31. GEN McChrystal and Amb. Eikenberry went out of their way to stress their respect for one another in December 2009. See "What rift? Eikenberry, McChrystal take vows of unity," Reuters blog, 8 December 2009, accessed at <http://blogs.reuters.com/frontrow/2009/12/08/what-rift-eikenberry-mcchrystal-take-vows-of-unity/> and "McChrystal, Eikenberry Defend Afghan Plan on the Hill," National Public Radio, 8 December 2009, accessed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121198728&ft=1&f=1004>. But interviews conducted by this researcher with staff members in both the U.S. embassy in Kabul and the ISAF command between June 2009 and March 2010 reveal tensions and frustrations between the two staffs.

32. Moyar, Mark. *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009: 279).

33. See remarks made at the Center for American Progress on November 5, 2009. "Reconciliation and Insurgency: Political Strategies in the Afghan War." Video available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/events/2009/11/AfghanInsurgency.html>.

34. Schelling, Thomas C., *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT and London, 1966).

35. See "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan" (with Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor), Center for a New American Security (4 January 2010), <http://www.cnas.org/node/3924>.

36. See Exum, Fick, Humayun and Kilcullen, "Triage: The Next 12 Months in Afghanistan and Pakistan," The Center for a New American Security (10 June 2009), <http://www.cnas.org/node/976>.

37. "Kandahar Offensive to Focus on Good Governance," *Wall Street Journal* (29 March 2010).

38. Moyar, 276.

39. Starting in June of 2009, GEN McChrystal both initiated a strategic review of all ISAF operations in Afghanistan and placed all regional commands under a separate three-star command in order to avoid the previous dynamic whereby individual regional commands fought more or less separate campaigns.

40. As evidence, see the effect of CERP funds on levels of violence as demonstrated by Eli Berman, Jacob Shapiro and Joseph Felter: "Can Heart and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq," NBER WP #14606, accessed at <http://econ.ucsd.edu/~elib/ham.pdf>; "Counter-war" is introduced in Loup Francart's *Maîtriser la violence: Une option stratégique* (Paris: Economica, 2002).

41. Senior military officials have supported this, arguing that if progress is not realized by June 2011, the strategy is not working. See, for example, the testimony of ADM Mike Mullen to the U.S. Senate on 2 December 2009. His prepared remarks can be accessed here: <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2009/December/Mullen%2012-02-09.pdf>.

42. For a discussion on the distinctions between these two missions, see Derek C. Jenkins, "Distinguishing Between Security Force Assistance & Foreign Internal Defense: Determining a Doctrine Road-Ahead," accessed at *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/146-jenkins.pdf>, on 15 April 2010.

43. This is the scenario I described in a 2009 policy paper, "Afghanistan 2011: Three Scenarios," The Center for a New American Security (20 October 2009), <http://www.cnas.org/node/3578>.







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