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The Next Fight *Time for a Change of Mission in Afghanistan*

POLICY BRIEF



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It is time for a change of mission in Afghanistan. U.S. and coalition forces must shift away from directly conducting counterinsurgency operations and toward a new mission of “security force assistance:” advising and enabling Afghan forces to take the lead in the counterinsurgency fight. This shift is more than rhetorical.¹ With a 2014 transition looming in Afghanistan, U.S. and allied military leaders must recognize that U.S. and coalition forces will not defeat the Taliban and its allies in the next three years. Instead, they must direct the military effort toward working by, with and through the Afghans. This effort will protect long-term U.S. security interests without a never-ending commitment of immense U.S. resources.²

The importance of strengthening Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) capabilities only increases as relations between the United States and Pakistan deteriorate. Under current conditions, the prospects of Pakistan facilitating reconciliation with the Taliban appear dim and Pakistan’s support for insurgent and terrorist groups in Afghanistan such as the Haqqani

Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba seems likely to continue.³ These conditions foreshadow a prolonged conflict in Afghanistan, one which the ANSF must have the capacity to meet.

The United States has accomplished its primary strategic goals in the war by killing Osama bin Laden, driving al Qaeda from Afghanistan, and seriously degrading al Qaeda’s capabilities across the region. Sustaining these achievements and protecting enduring U.S. regional interests in a tight budget environment require more cost-effective ways to employ U.S. military power.⁴ The United States and its coalition allies must partner with Afghan forces to sustain these successes beyond 2014.

Sustaining Progress

Since 2009, coalition forces have achieved significant operational successes in Afghanistan, reversing the Taliban’s momentum in many areas and greatly expanding the size and capability of the ANSF.⁵ Under the umbrella of NATO, increased U.S. forces have seriously degraded the capabilities of al Qaeda and Taliban leadership and their fighters, and have wrested away large swaths of southern Afghanistan once under firm Taliban control. Yet these gains, achieved at significant cost in blood and treasure, must ultimately be sustained by the ANSF.

Based on interviews with field commanders in Afghanistan conducted over the past 12 months, we

are not confident that most U.S. and NATO commanders have come to grips with the reality of the impending U.S. and allied transition. U.S. commanders are focused less on partnering with their Afghan allies and more on fighting the Taliban. Although these efforts may have been appropriate earlier in the decade-long U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, it is not the right focus as the transition draws closer.

While there is an energetic program in place to recruit, train, organize and equip Afghan forces, there is no similarly focused and adequate program to advise these same ANSF forces in combat operations and to thus maximize their effectiveness. The current International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) strategy does not sufficiently recognize a crucial dynamic: despite hard-won battlefield successes by U.S. troops, the war will ultimately be won or lost by the Afghans. The United States and its allies have yet to build the organizations or infrastructure necessary to enable their success.

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

With regard to U.S. military doctrine, the United States and its coalition partners have been working by, with and through Afghan leaders since the fall of 2001. In reality, though, Afghan military forces have not played a leading role in Afghanistan since the war began.

The vast majority of military operations in Afghanistan today are conducted by U.S. forces. U.S. conventional forces – normally, Army and Marine Corps infantry battalions – conduct classic “clear, hold and build” operations daily in southern and eastern Afghanistan. U.S. units are in the lead in the three provinces – Helmand, Kandahar and Kunar – that together account for more than half of the violence in Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.⁶ Conventional Afghan security forces tend to perform only ancillary missions such as holding areas that have been cleared and partnering with coalition units to put an “Afghan face” on counterinsurgency tasks. An exception is Afghan

special operations forces, which are closely integrated into coalition special operations and are performing well. U.S. special operations forces, together with coalition allies, carry out dozens of raids each night to disrupt the activities and degrade the leadership of Afghanistan’s insurgent groups.

U.S. forces are experienced, well trained and well equipped, and they have been highly effective in delivering results over the course of their seven-to-twelve month rotations into Afghanistan. After 10 years of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, they possess unrivaled combat skills.

The primary weakness of the current model is its unsustainability: Tens of thousands of U.S. and coalition infantrymen are required to take the war to the Taliban and its allies, while the Afghan units that are scheduled to take over the war by 2014 remain largely untested – and are perhaps far from ready. Given the priority accorded U.S.-led combat operations, commanders have devoted few intellectual or material resources to advising Afghan combat units in the field. The coalition effort devoted to providing embedded advisors with Afghan combat units is fragmented and ad hoc, a practice dating to a 2009 policy change.⁷ Large numbers of Afghan army units have no embedded U.S. or coalition advisors; instead they either work in loose partnership with U.S. combat units or are wholly unsupported.

U.S. Options

NATO’s November 2010 Lisbon conference established a clear timetable whereby Afghans will assume lead responsibility for the country’s security by December 2014.⁸ As the United States and its allies prepare to transition in Afghanistan, U.S. and allied operations in Afghanistan could proceed along one of the following four paths:

OPTION 1: STATUS QUO

The United States could continue to lead direct counterinsurgency operations through 2013 and beyond.

This plan would involve keeping substantial combat resources in Afghanistan, and would exact the greatest level of punishment on the Taliban before the December 2014 transition to Afghan security control. Support for the ANSF would remain a secondary task. The benefit of this approach is its ability to continue to conduct the counterinsurgency fight and degrade the Taliban as long as possible with the most capable forces – U.S. and coalition combat troops. It would delay shifting the composition and focus of U.S. troops to advising and supporting Afghans until 2013 or beyond. During this sustained period of U.S. leadership, the size of the ANSF could continue to expand to its target of 352,000 by November 2012, with U.S. combat operations effectively buying the ANSF the time and the space to do so.⁹

OPTION 2: DELAYED AFGHAN TRANSITION

The United States and its allies could revise the NATO framework agreed upon in Lisbon in 2010 and delay the transfer of lead security responsibility in Afghanistan to a date beyond December 2014. This approach would dramatically increase the long-term commitment of sizable coalition combat forces to Afghanistan while further delaying the ANSF's assumption of a lead role in the counterinsurgency fight. U.S. and coalition combat forces could, in theory, continue to fight the Taliban until conditions are fully met for a handoff to the ANSF, delaying both the western drawdown and Afghan leadership of the war for potentially several years beyond 2014. Such a delay would allow more time to build and train Afghan forces and might allow U.S. and allied forces to break the back of the insurgency before handing over security to the host nation, the way the United States did in Iraq between 2007 and 2009.

OPTION 3: CONTINUED TRANSITION WITH MISSION CHANGE

The United States and its allies could maintain the Lisbon roadmap while accelerating the ISAF change of mission in 2012 from counterinsurgency to

“security force assistance” – advising and supporting Afghan forces conducting counterinsurgency. This option would shift the U.S. and coalition main effort to a primary focus on enabling the Afghan forces in combat. Changing the U.S. and allied mission sooner rather than later would mean U.S. and allied forces would still have sizable numbers of combat forces and enablers in Afghanistan during the transition to putting Afghan forces in the lead. The U.S. and allied coalition could essentially “test drive” Afghan capabilities while retaining enough coalition forces to provide both direct and indirect assistance to Afghan units and their coalition advisors.

OPTION 4: ACCELERATED TRANSITION AND WITHDRAWAL

The United States and its allies could adopt a more rapid withdrawal schedule with an aim of removing all or nearly all combat and advisory forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. This would constitute a major departure from the Lisbon roadmap and would posit that the United States and its allies would have either significantly fewer or no combat units or enablers in Afghanistan beyond 2014. This approach would require the rapid transfer of lead security responsibility to the ANSF and an across-the-board down-sizing of U.S. force structure, enablers and infrastructure throughout Afghanistan in the next three years. Several conditions might drive the adoption of this approach, including domestic politics in the United States and western Europe (where the war is increasingly unpopular), Afghan domestic politics, growing budgetary pressures on U.S. defense spending or the conclusion by U.S. policymakers that U.S. forces have already achieved their core U.S. counterterrorism objectives.

Time for a Change of Mission: Security Force Assistance

Given that the United States has met most of its goals in Afghanistan, we believe that the most prudent option for U.S. policymakers is to adhere to

the Lisbon framework for transition in Afghanistan and accelerate the change in mission. By doing so, the United States and its allies will have more time and resources to support the ANSF ahead of the coming transition in 2014, increasing their capabilities and providing vital support as they take ownership of the fight.

The first option, which we believe reflects the U.S. military's inclination to remain at the forefront of the counterinsurgency fight, assumes too much risk in trying to transfer lead security responsibility over to the Afghans late in the transition when U.S. and coalition enablers will be fewer and when too few U.S. combat forces will be available to serve in support of Afghan-led combat operations. Untested Afghan forces may not be ready to sustain the successes earned by U.S. and coalition forces and could jeopardize the long-term interests of the United States in the region, as well as the successes that the coalition achieved in 2009 and 2010.

Meanwhile, the second option – a transition delayed beyond 2014 – would effectively break the coalition consensus cemented in Lisbon, and would likely be politically unsupportable in the United States, among its coalition partners, and very likely in Afghanistan as well. Furthermore, it is manifestly unclear that one, two or even a dozen more years beyond the 10 already spent fighting in Afghanistan would markedly improve the necessary Afghan readiness to assume the lead security role, or better set the conditions for the protection of U.S. interests beyond 2014. Further delaying Afghan leadership of the security effort simply puts off an important decision with little assurance of higher probabilities of success, while incurring substantial additional cost in blood and treasure to coalition nations.

The fourth option – an accelerated transition leading to the withdrawal of nearly all coalition forces in 2014 – would jeopardize the political, economic and security gains achieved to date. This result would

“We’ll get one shot at transition, and we need to get it right.”¹⁰

– GEN DAVID PETRAEUS,
MARCH 15, 2011

dramatically diminish U.S. influence in the region and increase instability. It would likely encourage parties in Afghanistan and regionally to accelerate their planning for civil war. In failing to sustain the ANSF over the long haul, this option would likely contribute to its failure. Should the ANSF prove unable to sustain or improve upon the current security gains, civil war would become more likely, and transnational terrorist groups could reestablish safe havens in Afghanistan.¹¹ A long-term substantial U.S. presence, by contrast, would permit the United States to continue shaping the security situation in Afghanistan and the region in light of U.S. interests.¹²

Toward a Sustainable Fight against the Insurgents

A change in mission would require U.S. and allied commanders to assume near-term operational risk for long-term gain. U.S. combat units are more proficient than their Afghan counterparts in combined arms warfare. But the number of U.S. combat units in Afghanistan will decrease over the next several years, and 2014 is not the time to discover the kind of weaknesses in the ANSF that sustained combat often reveals.

Many U.S. commanders observe that the successes achieved since 2009 are both fragile and reversible. In truth, the massive U.S. intervention in 2009 created an “American ecosystem” in parts of southern and southwestern Afghanistan, artificially supported by billions of U.S. dollars and tens of thousands of U.S. troops. U.S. military operations demonstrably changed the face of the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand – and, as far as security is concerned, for the better. The crucial test of the gains experienced in these areas, however, will be whether the Afghan

government and security forces can maintain this elaborate system with far fewer dollars and far fewer U.S. and coalition troops.

In our judgment, U.S. forces should enable the Afghans to take the lead well before the 2014 transition. Organizing major parts of the remaining U.S. force more clearly toward the “advise and assist” mission is also needed sooner rather than later. If U.S. units were handing off their areas of operation at the end of their current tours to their Afghan counterparts as opposed to other U.S. units, the coalition approach to developing those very same ANSF units would be radically different.¹³ Put another way, if a U.S. unit’s rotation back to the United States depended on the readiness of local ANSF units to take over and sustain stability, the focus of current U.S. units towards their Afghan counterparts would change rapidly from fighting the Taliban themselves to better preparing the Afghans to assume that mission. The United States and coalition nations need to catalyze and accelerate these efforts.

Evidence suggests that some ANSF units are failing today because they commonly operate in the field without embedded, continuous coalition support.¹⁴ Despite the importance of the security force assistance mission, no senior U.S. headquarters, organization or senior commander is currently dedicated to advising Afghan forces. (One can only observe the way in which the initial training of Afghan forces improved after the appointment of a U.S. three-star general officer in 2009 to appreciate the effect organizational changes can have on priorities – and results.)

Neither the U.S. Army nor Marine Corps has the institutional roots to support specialized combat advisor capabilities.¹⁵ Likewise, neither service has devoted a portion of its U.S.-based force structure to training, organizing, equipping or championing the delivery of dedicated advise and assist capabilities to Afghanistan. Regardless of the institutional support, the U.S. military in Afghanistan must

reorganize its force structure to best support the ANSF. The structure and function of specialized advise and assist units – specifically, combat advisors – are vastly different than those of large-scale conventional units designed to wage either maneuver warfare or direct counterinsurgency.

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps should demonstrate enough agility to develop and train competent and cohesive advisory units to meet this pressing need.

As the ANSF increasingly assumes direct combat roles, it must prepare to sustain whatever security gains the coalition makes in the next three years. To protect long-term U.S. security interests, a moderately stable Afghanistan is essential – and may ultimately be won or lost by the ability of the ANSF to assume leadership in this counterinsurgency fight. The ANSF must prepare for combat, enabled with embedded U.S. and coalition advisors who can leverage coalition fire support, intelligence, logistics and medical evacuation. The U.S. and allied command must recognize this inevitability and act now to best prepare ANSF to take the lead.

Policy Recommendations

To the Obama administration: Direct the U.S. commander in Afghanistan to change his mission no later than October 2012 from conducting a counterinsurgency campaign on behalf of the Afghan government to a security force assistance mission that enables Afghan forces to fight a counterinsurgency campaign extending beyond 2014.¹⁶

To the ISAF/U.S. Forces commander: Design and request a post-October 2012 force structure primarily focused on advising and enabling the ANSF to replace U.S. combat units in counterinsurgency operations. Organize a subordinate advisory command led by a general or flag officer to lend focus and unity of effort to the combat advisory mission. Direct the ISAF Joint Command in Afghanistan to reduce its direct counterinsurgency operations to

maximize Afghan counterinsurgency operations supported by U.S. troops and enablers.

To the U.S. Army and Marine Corps: Immediately identify a cadre of officers and noncommissioned officers to serve as embedded combat advisors in Afghanistan through 2014 and beyond. Create long-term promotion and assignment incentives to encourage high-quality officers and noncommissioned officers to volunteer for advisory billets.

To U.S. Special Operations Command: Establish a provisional advisory command in the United States to oversee the selection, training, deployment and redeployment of combat advisors.¹⁷ Be prepared to institutionalize this command as a long-term component of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) led by a general or flag officer. Prepare to assume responsibility for providing a Special Operations Forces (SOF) -led Advisory Command in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

By continuing to place its forces in the lead in counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, the United States is ultimately working against its long-term security interests. Because U.S. units can execute counterinsurgency operations better and faster than their Afghan counterparts, they are continuing to do so despite the looming transition. Afghan forces must move more rapidly to take the lead in Afghanistan while the United States and its coalition allies still have significant numbers of troops and enablers in the country. U.S. commanders need to assume greater risk in the near-term if the Afghan forces are to succeed in this task.

The United States and its coalition partners must change their mind-set toward this war. U.S. and allied troops will not defeat the Taliban before 2014. That job must fall to the Afghans. U.S. commanders will prevent that from happening if they continue to lead the war themselves.

ENDNOTES

1. "Security force assistance" is a term of art within military strategy and doctrine. It is defined as "the unified action to generate, employ and sustain local, host-nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority." (U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07 Stability Operations, October 2008).

2. The war in Afghanistan has cost more than 1,700 American lives, \$557 billion and immense political and diplomatic capital. According to the Congressional Research Service, cumulative spending on the war in Afghanistan would total \$557 billion since FY2002. See Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service (March 29, 2011): 10.

3. In the aftermath of a NATO airstrike killing 24 Pakistani soldiers in November 2011, Pakistan announced it was boycotting the second Bonn conference on Afghanistan, decreasing the conference's prospects for success and dealing a significant blow to a near-term political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan. See Alissa Rubin and Salman Masood, "After Strike in Pakistan, Rage and Damage Control," *The New York Times* (November 27, 2011). Also see, Joshua Foust, "Boycotting Bonn: Why Afghan War Conference is Likely to Fail," *The Atlantic* (November 30, 2011).

4. For discussion of U.S. strategic interests in Afghanistan and Central and South Asia, see LTG David W. Barno and Dr. Andrew Exum, *Responsible Transition: Securing U.S. Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2011*, Center for a New American Security (December 2011); and LTG David W. Barno, Dr. Andrew Exum and Matthew Irvine, *Beyond Afghanistan: A Regional Security Strategy for South and Central Asia*, CNAS (June 2011). For discussion of the implications of defense budget reductions, see LTG David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), Nora Bensahel and Travis Sharp, *Hard Choices: Responsible Defense in an Age of Austerity*, CNAS (October 2011).

5. For an assessment of the effectiveness of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, see GEN Jack Keane, USA (Ret.), testimony before the House Armed Services Committee (July 27, 2011).

6. For a map and discussion of current transition to Afghan lead plans within ISAF, see "Transition to Afghan Lead: Inteqal," NATO Media Backgrounder (October 5, 2011).

7. In 2009, the mission of training the ANSF was given to the newly created NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A), a stand-alone organization focused exclusively on garrison-based training. Prior to the creation of NTM-A, the training and advisory mission was run by Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A). CSTC-A provided both garrison-based training and embedded trainer/advisors within Afghan units to enable their combat operations. For a discussion of accomplishments of NTM-A since its founding in 2009, see LTG William Caldwell IV, "Denying Safe Haven in Afghanistan," *Journal of International Security Affairs* 21 (Fall/Winter 2011). The ISAF commander at the time, GEN Stanley McChrystal, directed U.S. and allied conventional units to "partner" with Afghan forces in all operations. This had the perhaps unintended consequence of dismantling the nascent advisory efforts in many parts of the country.

8. NATO, "Declaration by NATO and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on an Enduring Partnership Signed at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal" (November 20, 2010). This 2014 deadline for transition had been articulated by both President Barack Obama and President Hamid Karzai in separate speeches in 2009.

9. Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service (October 21, 2011): 34.

10. GEN David Petraeus, testimony before Senate Armed Services Committee (March 15, 2011): 9.

11. For discussion of Afghan civil conflict and requirements to support the ANSF following the transition to lead security responsibility, see Ashley Tellis, "2014 and Beyond: U.S. Policy Towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, Part I," testimony before House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia (November 3, 2011): 2.

12. For discussion of force requirements (25-35,000) for long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan see LTG David W. Barno and Dr. Andrew Exum, *Responsible Transition: Securing U.S. Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2011*, Center for a New American Security (December 2011).

13. Author discussion with a senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, October 2011.

14. Currently, some military forces within ISAF do embed advisors and combat forces within ANSF units. The U.S. Marine Corps and Army Special Forces have some embedded ANSF advisor teams, along with British and French forces. The

majority of ISAF forces, however, notably conventional U.S. Army units, instead "partner" with ANSF counterparts.

15. The exception is U.S. Army Special Forces that have a specific assigned mission of advising foreign militaries. These missions and capabilities, however, are not found among the inherent missions or skill sets of conventional units.

16. U.S. units scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan in the next 12 months must be given time to adjust their predeployment training.

17. This was the recommendation of then-U.S. Army LTC John Nagl in the first policy paper published by the Center for a New American Security: "Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for a Permanent Army Advisor Corps," Center for a New American Security (June 2007).

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U.S. Army Sgt. Kyle Layton, 59th Mobility Augmentation Company, 8th Engineer Battalion, Fort Hood, Texas, instructs a soldier from Route Clearance Company, 2nd Kandak of the Afghan National Army, how to load rounds into the chamber of an M-2 .50-caliber machine gun during weapons training at Forward Operating Base Lagman, Afghanistan, March 24, 2010.

STAFF SGT. STEPHEN SCHESTER/U.S. Army