

## Afghanistan Strategy on Stage: Five Key Questions for the Administration

By Richard Fontaine and John A. Nagl

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The upcoming congressional testimony of the administration’s national security team on Afghanistan may be the most pivotal since September 2007, when General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified about the “surge” in Iraq. At that time, Crocker and Petraeus appeared before skeptical congressional committee members, many of whom were unconvinced by reported progress in Iraq and unsure about the way forward. The testimony galvanized media attention and helped turn the political debate in Washington away from considerations of troop withdrawals.

Similarly, the testimony of Obama administration officials about the way ahead in Afghanistan will garner enormous attention from Congress, the American people, and others around the world. Whether their words will alter the political dynamic on this critical issue remains to be seen; what is certain is that the world will listen closely for indications of U.S. intentions and resolve. As this testimony takes shape, Congress and the administration should consider five key sets of questions.

### Corruption

Afghanistan’s fraudulent presidential election raised serious questions about the perceived legitimacy of the government in Kabul. In its wake, numerous observers argued that the election, combined with entrenched problems of corruption and government inefficiency, rendered impossible the kind of counter-insurgency strategy that Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal has advocated.

**QUESTION:** How can the United States most effectively partner with a host government plagued by corruption and inefficiency? In the face of such problems, what steps must the United States take to help bolster the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan government? Are there alternative or complementary strategies to partnering with the government of Afghanistan?

### Al Qaeda

Top administration officials have suggested that a Taliban return would lead to a renewed al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Must the Taliban be defeated to ensure that Afghanistan does not return to its pre-Sept. 11 status as a sanctuary for al Qaeda? Does the administration’s new strategy aim to defeat the Taliban or merely to weaken it—or simply to prevent it from regaining control of the central government in Afghanistan?

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### Afghan Forces

The ability of American troops to withdraw successfully from Afghanistan will hinge in large part on the ability of Afghan forces to ensure security on their own. Today, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is too small, and it is authorized to grow only to 134,000 troops by October 2010. Gen. McChrystal desires an Afghan National Army of 240,000 troops; even this would be relatively small given Afghanistan’s large and dispersed population, varied terrain, and manifold security challenges.

**QUESTION:** What are the central barriers to accelerating the growth of the Afghan National Army, and how can these be overcome? What is the maximum number of troops by which the ANA can realistically grow each year? At what point might the United States realistically expect ANA brigades to take on major security missions without external support?

### Civil-Military Campaign

A key feature that enabled the success of the “surge” in Iraq was near-seamless civil-military cooperation under Crocker and Petraeus. Their unusually close personal collaboration was backed by a joint civil-military campaign plan that enumerated the roles and responsibilities of the military and civilian efforts there. In Afghanistan, eight years into the war effort, civilian efforts to improve governance and stimulate the Afghan economy are not fully coordinated or resourced.

**QUESTION:** Will the United States work to accelerate civilian development efforts and more closely integrate them with the military? What will be the roles of coalition partners and the Afghan government in this endeavor?

### Pakistan

The history of American involvement in South Asia, and particularly U.S. disengagement following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, has produced fears in Pakistan of renewed abandonment. Such fears have prompted Pakistan to hedge by developing strategies to mitigate the fallout from any U.S. departure, and these strategies have involved ties to insurgent groups in Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** What are the words and actions by which the United States can convince Pakistan—and those on the fence in Afghanistan—to abandon such mitigation strategies? How can America best demonstrate the determination to prevail that will encourage actors in the region to move away from the insurgents?

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