

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 23

Date: June 25, 2012
From: Max Boot
Re: What It Will Take to Secure Afghanistan

Afghanistan is approaching a major inflection point in its long and turbulent history. In 2014 most of the foreign military forces are due to pull out. With them will go the bulk of foreign financing that has accounted for almost all of the state's budget. Twenty fourteen is also the year that Afghanistan is due to hold presidential elections. Hamid Karzai, the only president the country has known since the fall of the Taliban, has said he will not seek another term in office. Thus Afghanistan is likely to have a new president to lead it into a new era. This era will be shaped by many factors, principally decisions made by Afghans themselves, but the United States has the ability to affect the outcome if it makes a sustained commitment to maintain security, improve the political process, and reduce Pakistani interference so as to build on the tenuous gains achieved by the U.S. troop surge since 2010.

THE PROBLEM

The signing of a U.S.-Afghan Security Partnership Accord in April 2012 and the Chicago Summit Declaration in May alleviated some of the uncertainty about the post-2014 period—but only some. President Barack Obama and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) heads of state agreed to remain committed in Afghanistan after 2014. However, the nature and extent of that commitment remain opaque.

At times Obama has depicted the U.S. mission in Afghanistan in fairly narrow terms—designed, as he said in announcing the troop surge on December 1, 2009, to “deny al-Qaeda a safe haven,” deny the Taliban “the ability to overthrow the government,” and “strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government.” The Chicago Declaration commits the United States to the more ambitious goals of helping craft “a democratic society, based on rule of law and good governance.” However attractive the maximalist position, it would require an increased deployment of foreign troops and political advisers, and changes in Afghanistan’s political culture, that are unlikely to occur. Yet even the minimalist objective, designed to prevent a return to power by the Taliban (which has consistently refused to renounce its long-standing ties with al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups based in Pakistan and

would be likely to provide them a safe haven in Afghanistan), will be impossible to achieve absent a substantial commitment.

Attempts to safeguard U.S. interests “on the cheap” are likely to fail. If the security situation deteriorates, a small number of Special Operations Forces (SOF) would have difficulty operating—as they do today in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. The Kabul government is only likely to extend cooperation to SOF if, in return, it receives substantial support to maintain its fragile authority. This memo recommends seven specific steps the United States can take to buttress the fragile forces of authority in Afghanistan, grouped into three categories: security, politics, and Pakistan’s role.

THE WAY AHEAD

Security

The United States and its allies should commit to provide \$6 billion a year for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) indefinitely to support a force of 350,000 soldiers and police. The administration’s plan calls for a cut in funding to \$4.1 billion after 2014, from \$6 billion this year. This would necessitate laying off 120,000 soldiers and police from the current force of 350,000 soldiers and police, which the Afghans are able to manage with U.S. help. Many would no doubt find work with insurgents or narco-traffickers, further exacerbating the security situation. The administration defends its plan in the interests of fiscal prudence. But while \$2 billion in savings will not make much difference in the context of a \$3.8 trillion U.S. budget, that sum could make a huge difference on the ground in Afghanistan.

Hold off making any further cuts to the force of sixty-eight thousand U.S. troops between September 2012 and December 2014 unless conditions on the ground improve dramatically. There will be pressure in Washington to announce another troop drawdown in late 2012 or early 2013. The next U.S. president—either Obama or Mitt Romney—would be wise to resist that pressure. Only the presence of large numbers of American troops can ensure that security continues to improve. For all the dissatisfaction with the war effort revealed in polls, there is little intensity to the opposition—there are no antiwar demonstrations and the war has not become a major political issue. Thus the next president will have a relatively free hand to maintain current troop levels until 2015 even though the move will not be popular.

Pledge to maintain a substantial advisory and counterterrorism presence after 2014 of twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand troops. Washington will be tempted to leave the smallest possible presence after 2014 and to confine troops to safe bases. This would be a mistake unless peace breaks out between now and then. A force of, say, five thousand troops would have a hard time defending itself, much less carrying out its mission. And advisers who are confined to base would not be able to effectively mentor the ANSF or gain “situational awareness.” It would be safer and more effective to have a more robust presence so that U.S. troops could protect themselves while also helping the ANSF with logistics, planning, air support, medevac, route clearance, and other important functions. The estimated force size of 23,500 to 35,000, which would cost \$25 billion to \$35 billion annually, is based on work by David Barno and Andrew Exum of the Center for a New American Security. Such a commitment should be sustainable for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, even with reduced end-strength, because they have left Iraq and do not have a major role in most Pacific Command contingencies. It would also be sustainable fiscally since it represents just 0.2 percent of U.S. GDP (\$14.6 trillion) and 0.8 percent of the federal budget (\$3.7 trillion).

Politics

Go slow on peace talks. U.S. officials want a peace deal with the Taliban that would enable a faster U.S. drawdown. But a grand bargain on acceptable terms—with the Taliban giving up their arms and becoming a normal political party—is

unlikely. Taliban foot soldiers in Afghanistan may feel coalition pressure, but their leaders remain safe in Pakistan, and Pakistan's generals are loathe to permit the Taliban to sign a peace treaty that could allow them to slip out of Islamabad's grip. Under those conditions, putting too much pressure on Kabul to reach a deal with the Taliban could backfire by causing the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks to recreate the Northern Alliance and renew the devastating civil war of the 1990s. A better course of action would be to pursue deals with individual Taliban commanders—offering them incentives to stop fighting—and thus try to split the insurgency.

Identify and groom a successor to Karzai. Afghanistan would benefit from a leader more committed to fighting corruption and establishing the rule of law. But the political process is unlikely to produce such a leader on its own. Iran, Pakistan, and various Afghan warlords will back their favored candidates. The United States should do the same. It is doubtful that an ideal candidate can be found, but, at a minimum, it should be possible to identify the “least bad” one. Admittedly American policymakers erred in picking Karzai in late 2001 and they may err again—but they at least know much more about Afghanistan than they did then. And to avoid making any choice is to cede the decisive vote to malign actors.

Pakistan's Role

End American subsidies for the Pakistani military. The Obama administration cut \$800 million in U.S. military aid to Pakistan in the summer of 2011 after the two countries clashed over the Osama bin Laden raid and other issues. But the administration has held out the prospect of restoring that funding, and it wants to budget roughly \$2 billion for aid to Pakistan in fiscal year 2013. Some payments for the use of Pakistani territory to move supplies to Afghanistan make sense even at the expense of continuing a small degree of reliance on Islamabad, but all other military aid should be terminated because Pakistan has consistently shown that it is a foe of U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Further subsidizing the Pakistani military sends an indirect subsidy to the Taliban and Haqqani Network. Contrary to Washington's worst fears, even after an aid cutoff, Pakistan's army would remain strong enough to keep jihadists from seizing power in Islamabad—an outcome that is opposed by most Pakistanis and, more to the point, most Pakistani generals.

Launch drone and/or SOF strikes on Haqqani and Taliban leaders in Pakistan. Though the CIA and SOF have long targeted terrorist leaders in Pakistan, primarily using drones, their targets have been mostly confined to al-Qaeda. A few Pakistani Taliban and Haqqani leaders have also been eliminated, but senior Taliban figures have not been targeted, because Washington wants to avoid antagonizing Islamabad. But U.S. forces, even at the current force level of eighty-seven thousand, have shown they can survive without the Pakistani logistics line; they have done so since November 2011. Pakistan may also withdraw cooperation in drone strikes on al-Qaeda, but that organization has been so weakened that the strikes are less important now than a few years ago. Regardless of Islamabad's reaction, it is necessary to undertake an aggressive campaign of drone strikes to increase the pressure on the Taliban and the Haqqani Network to prevent them from taking advantage of the NATO drawdown.

CONCLUSION

Most or all of these steps will be necessary to secure Afghanistan's future, not as an ideal state—a Switzerland of Central Asia—but as a minimally functioning state with security forces that can prevent the reemergence of Taliban rule and the likely reestablishment of al-Qaeda sanctuaries given the close ties between the two organizations. U.S. policymakers may decide that they would rather commit scarce resources elsewhere. But, if so, they should be under no illusions about the ability of the United States to prevent the reemergence of the conditions that led to 9/11. It is difficult enough to shape events in Afghanistan with a substantial U.S. commitment; it will become nearly impossible without it. The good news is that the vast majority of Afghans do not want a return to Taliban rule, and with continuing American support, their post-2001 state should be able to survive the challenges ahead.

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