

AFGHANISTAN

AT THE BREAKING POINT



GILLES
DORRONSORO

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC • MOSCOW • BEIJING • BEIRUT • BRUSSELS

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SUMMARY

The current strategy of defeating the Taliban militarily is unrealistic. The coalition is on the defensive across much of Afghanistan and, with current troop levels, can at most only contain the insurgency. On present course, the coalition is swiftly heading toward an impasse.

Just to retain the areas currently controlled by the coalition would require significant additional troops next year. Many more than that would be required for the coalition, with heavy losses, to adopt an offensive stance and win back territory. Such an escalation, though, is politically untenable given the impending departure of European forces and dwindling public support for the war. A new strategy is required.

Rather than committing more troops, the United States should instead pursue a political solution to the conflict, including a cease-fire and negotiations with the insurgents. By insisting on power-sharing among the various Afghan factions and reserving the right to intervene militarily to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for extremist groups, the United States can still accomplish the more limited objective of preventing the return of al-Qaeda.

However, the United States must act quickly. Given the rapidly deteriorating security situation, every passing month strengthens the position of the Taliban. A viable exit strategy is still possible, but time is not on America's side.

President Obama and U.S. military leaders must keep five important truths in mind as they review the Afghanistan war strategy:

- **Optimistic assessments.** The U.S. command sees the situation in Afghanistan in overly positive terms and this jeopardizes its credibility with decision makers and public opinion.
- **Unrealistic objectives.** American commanders cannot defeat the Taliban militarily and can at best contain the insurgency in most provinces.
- **Irreversible advances.** As the Taliban strengthens and the Afghan government weakens, turning over security to the Afghan army is impossible in the near term.
- **Escalating troop numbers.** The current military option will only lead to an increase in U.S. troops to counter the insurgency's rise and the withdrawal of European forces.
- **Take the initiative.** The Obama administration must push for negotiations with the insurgency and a cease-fire rather than be boxed into dead-end military logic.

INTRODUCTION

This report is being written with a sense of urgency, because the coalition's current strategy is swiftly leading to an impasse. The stated objective of the U.S. command—defeating the Taliban—is unrealistic; coalition forces cannot crush the insurgency with the troops now on the ground, and the insurgency's irreversible spread throughout Afghan territory will make that task far more difficult in the coming months. The coalition is nearing its breaking point. The U.S. administration must decide on a political solution soon, before implementing an exit strategy becomes impossible. Without such a strategy, fighting in Afghanistan will escalate and coalition forces most likely will suffer a humiliating defeat. This outcome would have significant consequences for the Western security system.

In recent years the U.S. command has issued ambiguous statements that a purely military solution is impossible. Then, in the summer of 2010, the command refocused its message, stressing a single theme: Our objective is to win the war. Current operations are designed to destroy the enemy, not lay the groundwork for opening negotiations with the Taliban from a position of strength. This newly declared determination to defeat the Taliban is incompatible with a significant drawdown of coalition troops in less than one year. The beginning of the withdrawal, initially slated for summer 2011,

is being questioned openly within the U.S. military. Thus, Marine Corps Commander James T. Conway stated that the announcement of the beginning of the withdrawal was “probably giving our enemy sustenance.” The (unrealistic) objective of turning security over to the Afghans—a key element of the Kabul conference in August 2010—will have to be downgraded drastically.¹

Bets on a military victory are based on an optimistic assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. Indeed, the U.S. command says, “The momentum [of the insurgency] has been reversed.”² The insurgency’s sanctuaries and freedom of movement are being challenged, and progress is being seen in the south. Yet the vast majority of independent experts—consultants, journalists, and humanitarian workers—disagree; they maintain that the insurgency has made considerable headway in recent months and has not experienced significant reversals in the south.³ The facts have so often been at odds with the optimistic tone of NATO’s public statements⁴ that there is a risk of undermining the confidence of public opinion and political decision makers. It is therefore essential to compare independent analyses with those of the military establishment to understand how such different interpretations can exist. As publicly available data unambiguously point to a rapid deterioration in the situation, the Pentagon must explain the information on which it is basing its conclusions, particularly in that they do not appear to be shared by Western intelligence agencies, notably the CIA.

If the situation is seriously deteriorating, as most experts believe, the current strategy is leading to an escalation. Indeed, improvement in a few southern districts—where most of the efforts are being focused—cannot compensate for the nationwide deterioration in security. The argument heard most often is that the counterinsurgency operation (COIN) must be given time to bear fruit, and that its initial effects will not be significant before summer 2011. This reasoning is specious: The initial plan called for swift clearing operations in the

south to create a national dynamic and permit “Afghanization” in districts reclaimed from the insurgents. The strategy has already changed: Fighting in these districts is planned to continue for

years, leaving the rest of Afghanistan open to the insurgency’s advance. The coalition is on the defensive nearly everywhere else and can at most only contain the insurgency. In the coming months, the insurgents’ increased strength will directly threaten the coalition’s weak links, notably the European contingents that are not prepared to sustain intense combat. Reducing troop strength—or even maintaining it at the current level—seems impossible. Without a political agreement, the coalition will have to send reinforcements to contain the pressure of the insurgency. The White House plans an exit in 2011, but the current situation will require a request for additional troops. The choice is clear: Send reinforcements or accept military defeat. To avoid that choice, the United States must initiate a political process that incorporates a cease-fire and negotiations with the insurgents.

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STALEMATE IN THE SOUTH

According to the U.S. command, the southern provinces are growing more secure, and fighting in Arghandab, north of Kandahar, has transformed the local dynamic.

Petraeus contends the counterinsurgency strategy is showing momentum in Helmand province, where about 20,000 U.S. Marines and 10,000 British troops have sought to create inkblots of security in six key districts. Some areas, such as Marja, a former Taliban stronghold, have proved to be tougher to pacify—insurgents are continuing an aggressive harassment campaign—but other places, such as the districts of Nawa and Garmsir, are becoming more stable and may feature prominently in his year-end presentation to the White House....

He also said he is encouraged by developments in Arghandab district on Kandahar's northern fringe, where two U.S. Army battalions have been engaged in an arduous mission to clear insurgents from pomegranate orchards and vineyards seeded with makeshift but lethal anti-personnel mines.⁵

Yet the journalists, humanitarian workers, and independent experts whom I consulted contradict this: They report that the coalition's operations have not put the insurgency on the defensive. The violent fighting in Kandahar (districts of Zhari, Panjway, Maywand, and Arghandab) and Helmand confirms the presence of a well-organized enemy that knows how to take advantage of the terrain. In the 1980s, the Soviets never controlled the area west of Kandahar, despite repeated offensives and extremely violent fighting. The Canadians' failure in Panjway (Operation Medusa) in September 2006 indicated both popular support for the Taliban west of Kandahar and their determination in combat. Furthermore, the terrain (orchards with numerous mud walls) is perfect for ambushes. The Taliban operate easily in districts that are in principle under coalition control.⁶ In Helmand province, eight months after the offensive got under way, the coalition is still conducting clearing operations to take towns that remain in Taliban hands.⁷ U.S. outposts are totally isolated, and it takes hours to leave a base, even to travel just a few hundred meters.⁸ There are no Afghan forces to provide backing for coalition forces, neither in Kandahar nor in Helmand. The state apparatus is nonexistent, and the idea of "government in a box" has proven unworkable.⁹ Afghan security forces, notably the police, are subjected to constant pressure, and very few village leaders dare to work with the coalition. Villagers rarely collaborate with Western forces, and the fact that most improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are planted during the day suggests that many villagers are complicit in the insurgency. It is naïve to think that—at least in this region—the local population wants to be protected from the Taliban; a large majority oppose the coalition presence, which they see as bringing about fighting and civilian losses.

This stalemate is confirmed by the magnitude of Western losses in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand (more than 900 fatalities since the beginning of 2001, with the pace picking up since 2008).

The ratio between coalition and insurgency losses has decreased considerably, notably due to the rules restricting the coalition's use of firepower¹⁰ and the Taliban's use of increasingly refined IEDs. Insurgency forces have a small number of men and extremely low costs; their losses are limited even in the districts where the coalition is most heavily engaged.

What developments are possible? In the best-case scenario, the coalition can hope for a tactical withdrawal of the Taliban from districts where military pressure is strongest (Arghandab, Marja, Zhari, Panjway). But harassment from neighboring districts and Pakistan will continue, because without enough troops to expand the scale of operations, it is impossible to destroy the insurgents' military apparatus. Improving security in these districts would not lead to the Taliban's collapse; rather, it would compel a redeployment of Taliban forces. The "clear" phase of the COIN was supposed to be brief to create a national momentum; prolonging it poses a new threat. Indeed, the spread of the insurgency at the national level will make operations in the south even more difficult. The insurgents have better logistics, combatants can be sent in as reinforcements in the south, and, not insignificantly, their morale is remarkably good.

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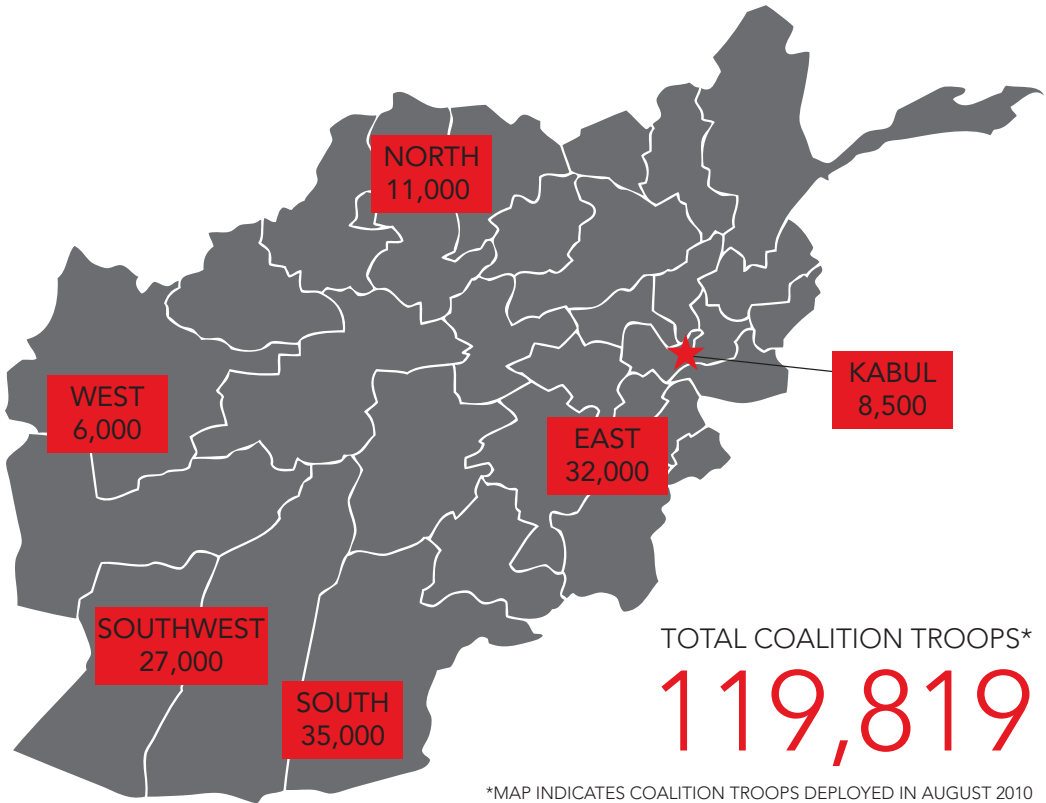
Even in the (unlikely) case that the coalition succeeds in these districts, could operations in the south influence the national dynamic? The 20,000 U.S. Marines stationed in the Southwest Command (mostly Helmand)—the best Western troops—will be forced to stay there or the Taliban will return in force, enjoying the prestige conferred by victory against U.S. forces.¹¹ Commander Conway estimates the need to maintain a presence in Helmand for five years, which is optimistic.¹² The situation around Kandahar, with around 35,000 soldiers, is fairly similar: Any security gains will have to be protected by the continuous presence of tens of thousands of troops (see Figure 1).

This reality means the largest part of the coalition's offensive potential must be mobilized in Kandahar and Helmand provinces for an undetermined period.¹³ Consequently, Western forces cannot launch operations in other regions. The very structure of the coalition's offensives limits their impact on the national level. Focusing U.S. forces in just a few districts has left other regions open to the insurgency, facilitating its spread. There is no question of retaking Taliban sanctuaries, regardless of Petraeus's statement that "[y]ou not only have to reverse the momentum, you have to take away those sanctuaries and safe havens that the Taliban have been able to establish over the course of those years."¹⁴ Even if the effort were limited to Helmand, there are not enough troops to hold the northern part of the province and adjoining districts. Furthermore, retaking Taliban sanctuaries, often in sparsely populated mountainous areas, would mean giving priority to the territory rather than to the population—an error that was justly criticized in the past.

Sanctuaries in Pakistan are probably more secure today than ever before. The Pakistani army continues to indirectly (and, according to certain sources, directly) support the Afghan Taliban, despite receiving U.S. aid. The arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar was indeed—as became clear this past spring—a way for the army to

FIGURE 1

COALITION TROOP PRESENCE



Source: BBC News (2010), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8389351.stm>.

maintain control over the movement and to avoid direct negotiations between the Taliban and Kabul. Pakistani jihadists’ strength, and the growing weakness of the Pakistani state (as seen by its failures during the August 2010 floods), mean the Pakistani army could not operate against the Afghan Taliban even if it desired such action. Difficult as it might be, the army must help civilians in supplying aid to local populations, in part because Pakistani jihadist movements are using the current chaos to return in force. The Pakistani army must focus its limited resources on direct threats to the regime, such as Pakistani

jihadists, rather than the Taliban. It is therefore highly likely that the Taliban will continue to receive sanctuary in Pakistan; this makes it impossible to destroy the Afghan insurgency. The coming year is vital to the coalition's success, yet the Pakistani army has planned no large-scale operation against the Taliban. This obvious fact, which the coalition is apparently underplaying, largely dooms the current strategy.

Consequently, coalition bases will probably be subjected to strong pressure in the years to come, without hope of improvement. There is a striking parallel with the outposts in Nuristan and Kunar, which were under constant attack until they were evacuated. The enlargement of insurgent-held areas helps the Taliban concentrate greater numbers of troops against Western positions.

THE SPREAD OF THE INSURGENCY

The coalition has consistently underestimated the Taliban and, in particular, the movement's ability to adapt and expand. Despite changes on the ground, the U.S. command refuses to abandon the concept of a local insurgency that is divided and lacks a comprehensive strategy. Petraeus's most recent statements unfortunately are along the same lines: The insurgency is "not some kind of monolithic Taliban enemy,"¹⁵ and the Taliban are "a Pashtun insurgency," which would in principle limit its spread.

However, the insurgency was never Pashtun in the ethno-nationalist sense; its recruitment increasingly reaches to other ethnic groups. Indeed, the movement's spread outside of the Pashtun belt is based on two distinct mechanisms. First, Pashtun populations are alienated and are mobilizing against the government, as they did in Kunduz and in Baghlan, where there were tensions with Tajik populations over land issues. Second, creating areas of anarchy enables the Taliban to form local alliances by supporting one group over another. Indeed, the groups in conflict are forming alliances with outside players that do not necessarily take ethnic solidarity into account. As we have seen in the 1980s, competition between local leaders has allowed principally Tajik parties such as the Jamiat-e islami to take root in Pashtun regions such as Kandahar. Finally,

The coalition has consistently underestimated the Taliban and, in particular, the movement's ability to adapt and expand.

the Taliban have solid ties to many madrassas, and fundamentalism is not limited to Pashtun areas; most of the recent protests against the burning of the Koran took place in the north.

Experts close to the U.S. army neither foresaw nor understood the spread of

the insurgency; this error again calls into question the analyses that formed the army's strategic military decisions. The focus on the south, analyzed above, can be understood only if one presumes that Afghanistan's other regions are relatively stable. Thus in 2008, analyst Seth Jones asserted that the "north is fragile, but I would not classify it as an active insurgency in the north."¹⁶ This interpretation of the dynamics in the north was clearly misleading: The insurgency now partially controls the provinces of Baghlan and Kunduz, and state structures throughout the northeast have largely disappeared.

With respect to the east, Jones states, "Overall, the results have been impressive, and U.S. efforts have contributed to a decline in violence in the east."¹⁷ In the Khost region, he maintains that the United States has "turned a corner" because of its use of soft power. These quotes date to April 2008 when observers were noting the swift collapse of the security system in the east and a marginalization of tribes that benefited the Taliban and notably their regional

commander, Mawlawi Haqqani.¹⁸ David Kilcullen's writings¹⁹ evince the same optimism for Kunar (north of Jalalabad), asserting that COIN's remarkable success in this province can be applied elsewhere. In fact, the U.S. security system was swept away in Kunar and Nuristan; the insurgency now largely controls these provinces.

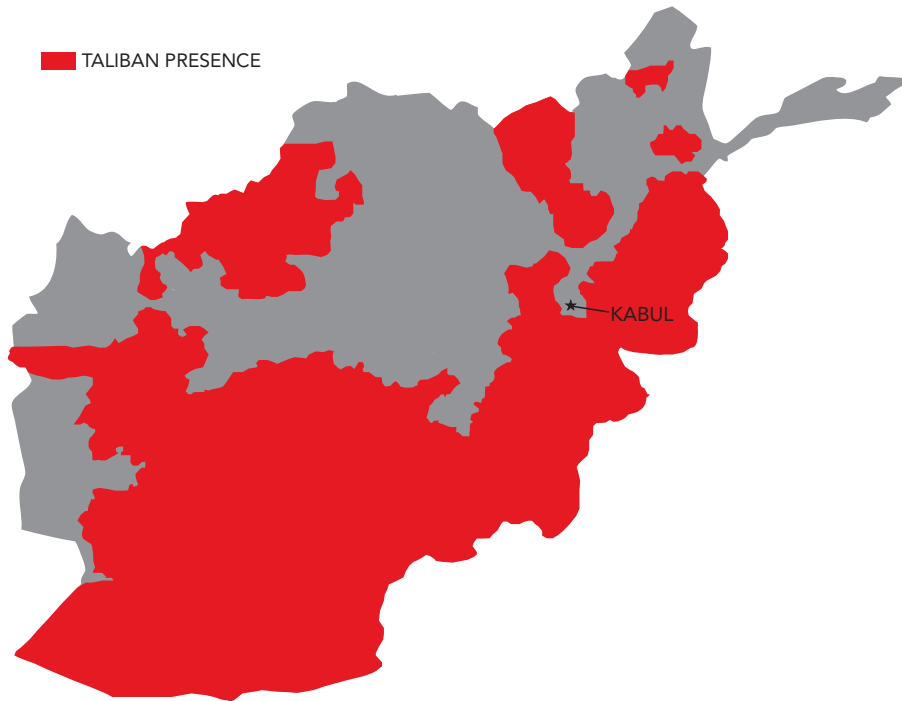
These changes were not the result of random processes. The Taliban are very mindful of the coalition's limits, including the impossibility of containing the insurgency if it spreads. They were also aware that an insurgency limited to the Afghan-Pakistani border or to the Pashtuns alone would have been fragile. The insurgents systematically sought to win over the south and the east; as early as 2002, they sent emissaries to convince the population to join the insurgency (in Logar, Wardak, and soon after in the north). All indications are that the insurgency has widened its presence and streamlined its organization. It has made considerable advances over the past two years in the east, west, and north, to the point of threatening vital roads out of Kabul. The insurgents have focused their efforts in the areas of least resistance with spectacular results.

The insurgency is still expanding, with forces in numerous areas, and the eastern provinces present a more immediate danger than the south due to their proximity to Kabul (see Figure 2). Yet the coalition did not anticipate these developments because the Taliban were viewed as a collection of disparate groups incapable of coordinating or implementing a national strategy.

Influential analyst James Dobbins maintained that "we speak of the Taliban as if it were a united enemy, but it represents only one of a number of insurgent groups headquartered in Pakistan."²⁰ That view corresponds to Seth Jones's vision of the "fractured, localized nature of the insurgency,"²¹ and that of David Kilcullen, who asserts that "although it is often described by the aggregative shorthand term 'Taliban,' the insurgent coalition in Afghanistan is actually a fragmented series of shifting tactical alliances of convenience, especially in the east."²²

FIGURE 2

TALIBAN INSURGENCY PRESENCE



Sources: *New York Times* (2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/09/12/world/asia/20100912-afghan-indicators.html?ref=asia>; Dorronsoro (2009).

The insurgency's advances are sensitive on two levels. First, when it comes to coalition operations, the Taliban are standing firm; their losses are limited, and they virtually never switch sides. Despite recent statements by Petraeus—“[there is] every possibility, I think, that there can be low- and mid-level reintegration and indeed some fracturing of the senior leadership that could be really defined as reconciliation”²³—nothing indicates that such a shift is under way. The weakening of the Kabul government and the lack of a credible structure to win over the insurgency make such developments highly unlikely.

Second, the insurgency's spread is now a reality that makes it impossible in the foreseeable future to hand the Afghans

responsibility for security. The wider insurgency also means that, without a change in the Western force, the coalition will find itself incapable of facing additional pressure. Since spring 2010, the threat on the major routes out of Kabul²⁴ has been eye-opening. The roads south (toward Ghazni and Kandahar) have long been dangerous, but now the Taliban can cut off all roads out of the capital at least for a couple of hours; they attack coalition convoys and set up roadblocks. The insurgents abduct or kill foreigners and Afghans working for NGOs and the Afghan government. The psychological and political impact of these roadblocks, which create the perception that the insurgents' success is inevitable, should not be underestimated. The threat to major arteries is an indicator of growing pressure in the Kabul/eastern region. A few dozen kilometers north of the capital, armed Taliban groups rove through villages and offer payment for attacking the coalition. The deterioration in security in districts around Jalalabad is a serious problem, because the Taliban can now regularly cut off the road between Jalalabad and Kabul. Coalition convoys are regularly attacked, the airport frequently takes rocket fire, and the insurgency has infiltrated the city.

The insurgency's advances appear irreversible because they are fueled by the swift collapse of governmental structures, leaving the Taliban free to administer a growing number of districts. The Taliban are accomplishing their policy of taking the locals in hand by authorizing Afghan employees of NGOs—as long as they are not financed by the United States—to work in the territories under their control. The insurgents are increasingly able to organize and exploit popular protests against the government and coalition forces, as seen in August 2010 in Badghis.²⁵ The lack of qualified police makes violent incidents practically inevitable, which is what the insurgents want. Reinstating the Afghan state's authority where it has disappeared, notably in the north, is no longer an option. Furthermore, regions largely opposed to the Taliban (Hazarajat and the Uzbek areas in the

west) no longer support the Karzai government *ipso facto*, but are leaning toward autonomy. The central government truly controls only the cities (with serious reservations for those of the Pashtun belt). All of these facts make strengthening the central government in the coming years appear impossible. The fight against corruption has not achieved major results and is now downplayed, but the much more pressing danger is the increasingly limited space to which the government has access.

TOWARD A NEW ESCALATION?

The southern strategy presumed swift successes, which would help establish a national dynamic, but the stalemate is radically changing the situation. The coalition's best troops will be in Helmand province and Kandahar for the next several years, which forces it to assume a defensive stance in the rest of the country. However, the opening of new fronts in the north and the Taliban's aggressiveness in the east indicate that the insurgency could break down the Western defense system in 2011 or 2012. A relatively small number of troops—only 11,000 in the north and 8,500 in Kabul—face a growing insurgency. The European contingents, who are less war-hardened, will find themselves in an unmanageable situation; increased attacks against them will force them into increasingly defensive postures. They are leaving their bases less often, giving free rein to the Taliban to organize large-scale attacks against the most isolated NATO outposts and force a retreat after years of combat, as occurred this past April in the Korengal Valley. Logistics will become increasingly complex, and more troops are dying in insurgent attacks on the main roads, including those into Pakistan.

It is therefore hard to imagine maintaining or decreasing troop strength in 2011. To the contrary, in the absence of a political process, the coalition will have to strengthen its force through one of three

options: an internal reorganization, the “Afghanization” of security, or sending in reinforcements.

Option 1: Internal reorganization

Can the coalition adapt? At this stage, it is hard to be optimistic about NATO’s ability to reform itself to counter the Taliban’s progress. The coalition consistently has failed to react swiftly to known problems. It is a bureaucratic machine oriented toward its own (admittedly highly complex) management, not toward problem solving. Those in charge still define success in terms of *inputs* (resources) and *outputs* (actions), not *outcomes* (effects).

NATO logistics are a disaster, because the Taliban extort logistics companies; the coalition is thus financing its enemy. In addition, private security firms in charge of convoy security are corrupt and often create tensions with the local population. Yet it took a U.S. Senate report (*Warlords, Inc.*), commissioned following a series of press articles, to officially raise the issue. Nothing indicates that things are changing on the ground. Western armies’ effectiveness is hampered by three types of obstacles: intellectual, human, and tactical.

The war is being conceived on the basis of false theories that are not being called into question as a result of failures. The coalition continues to base its actions on a false vision of the adversary and on hypotheses that long have been debunked. The relationship between development aid and security, for example, has long been challenged.²⁶ Increasing aid to areas rife with violence only fuels the war economy; it does not translate into political support. The tribal policy is another example of intellectual constructions without a serious empirical basis that are reiterated nonetheless.²⁷ The idea of dividing the Taliban in order to co-opt smaller groups has been put forward for

years, although it has never yielded results. Pakistan obviously has no desire to break off its relations with the Taliban, although U.S. policy remains based on the idea of a bargain in which it provides aid to Pakistan in exchange for action against the Taliban.

Why have U.S. forces not learned from past mistakes? Part of the explanation is the use of security specialists (in terrorism and counterinsurgency) who lack knowledge of Afghan society. It is revealing, in this regard, that the civilian commission that established COIN's principles in the summer of 2009 did not include a single Afghanistan specialist. It seems that the dominant analysis—the one heeded by the U.S. command—is essentially internal, produced as a result of stays on coalition bases. Leaders must consider the analyses of other experts, if only to avoid fiascos as predictable as Marja.

The coalition does not have the necessary human resources to implement the COIN. Coalition forces' programs lack continuity, and personnel turn over so quickly that they have few relationships with Afghan society—or time to build them. The personnel change on average every six months, although some individuals carry out several tours of duty (not necessarily in the same place). The lack of institutional memory is a key problem in Afghanistan. There is a shortage of translators, who are often insufficiently trained²⁸ and, for security reasons, often work outside of their native region, giving rise to linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. The coalition has a limited awareness of its own history, which is why proposals that have failed many times are regularly re-presented. This lack of continuity in programs enables a proliferation of initiatives that undergo regular name changes (such as the militia programs), and whose results are never really evaluated.

The coalition's tactical repertoire is limited and predictable.

Compared with similar wars, Western troops move very slowly, which

The lack of institutional memory is a key problem in Afghanistan.

rules out the element of surprise. On average, coalition soldiers carry several dozen kilos on operations. Coalition forces have never attempted helicopter operations in

which troops are dropped off on ridges in order to clear the area. Troop movements take an extremely long time to prepare because of the threat of IEDs; advancing a few kilometers can often take several hours. Outside of Special Forces operations, there is no element of surprise, because the Taliban are highly skilled at reading the coalition's movements. Patrols are largely ineffective, with coalition soldiers remaining in villages for at most a few hours. European troops have instructions to limit losses, which constrains their tactical options. Their practices are essentially defensive; for example, they cannot pursue the adversary if ambushed. European troops are focused on troop protection, not on seeking or destroying the enemy.

Option 2: Afghanization

Could Afghan forces significantly contribute to operations? Continuing training and developing the Afghan forces remain a priority, *even in the event of a political solution*. However, all indications are that they will not be able to take over from Western forces, even on a local level, for a number of years, and even then solely for defensive actions. A less-than-selective recruitment process has permitted the Taliban to infiltrate the troops²⁹ and reflects the

regime's lack of legitimacy. Thus far, particularly in Marja, Afghan forces have played a purely symbolic role³⁰; their independent operation in Laghman province in August 2010 was a fiasco.³¹ Afghan forces will not be able to withstand a Taliban advance; at best they can defend their own bases or guarantee urban centers (up to a certain point).

Some commentators hope that partitioning the country could lead coalition forces to leave. The fight would then pit a Taliban-dominated south against a pro-Western north. For example, a proposal by Robert Blackwill, former U.S. ambassador to India, to divide Afghanistan is based on the idea that the Afghan state is an artificial construct, and Afghan territory could be divided along ethnic lines. In practice, this would suppose large-scale ethnic cleansing; hundreds of thousands of Pashtuns would probably be forced to leave the north. The Afghan army would become what it is already tending toward: a force dominated by Tajiks (notably Panjshiris) and Uzbeks.

We would offer the Afghan Taliban an agreement in which neither side seeks to enlarge its territory—if the Taliban stopped supporting terrorism, a proposal that they would almost certainly reject. We would then make it clear that we would rely heavily on U.S. air power and Special Forces to target any Al Qaeda base in Afghanistan, as well as Afghan Taliban leaders who aided them. We would also target Afghan Taliban encroachments across the de facto partition lines and terrorist sanctuaries along the Pakistan border. Though careful analysis is needed, this might mean a longtime residual U.S. military force in Afghanistan of about 40,000 to 50,000 troops. We would enlist Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and supportive Pashtuns in this endeavor, as well as our NATO allies, Russia, India, Iran, perhaps China, Central Asian nations and, one hopes, the U.N. Security Council.³²

Blackwill does not explain why the Taliban should accept such a proposal when their bases in the north are rapidly growing.

Such a policy would be disastrous. Paradoxically, the insurgency would find itself in the position of acting as the representative of the Afghan nation in the face of an alliance of regional and international forces that are weakening central institutions. The destabilization of Pakistan is a grave danger, because the Afghan-Pakistani border (which is not recognized by Afghanistan) would disappear, with consequences for Balochistan. Even from a Western or Indian standpoint, that situation is unfavorable: Losing control over the border areas would allow all jihadist groups to find sanctuary there.

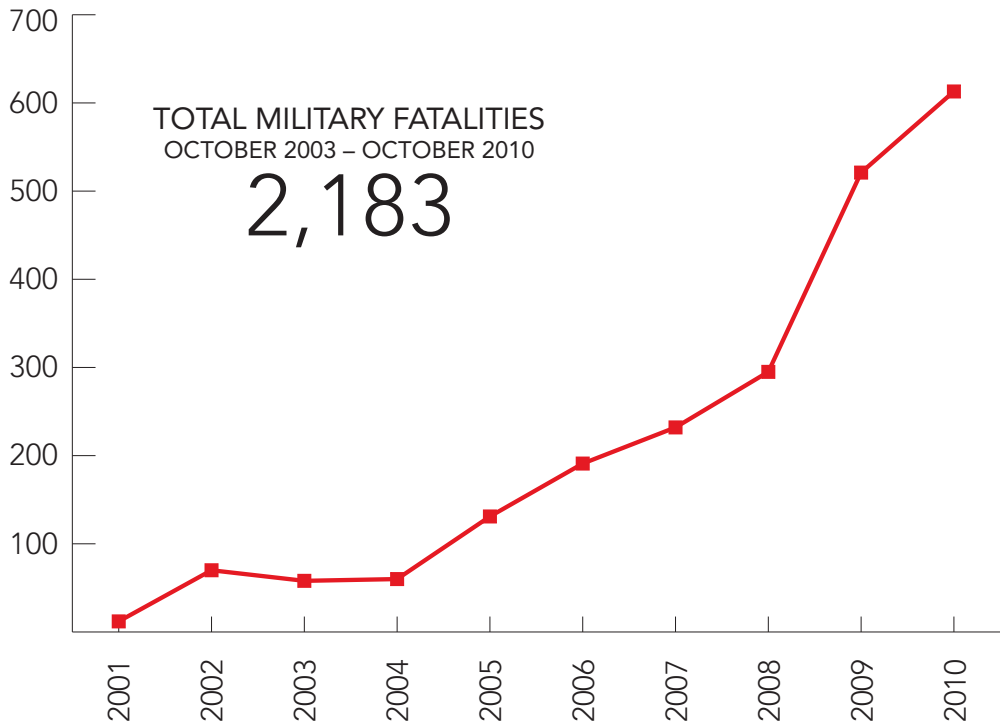
Proposing Afghanistan's partition destabilizes the country by reviving Afghan fears of manipulation by imperial powers; it strengthens mistrust of the international community. Even in a more nuanced form, proposals of "decentralization" and other forms of devolution barely conceal the desire to bypass and weaken Kabul. Such talk would have the same destabilizing effects on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Option 3: Sending in Reinforcements

If the Taliban cannot be contained through improvements in coalition forces' performance or by Afghanizing the war, then more troops must be sent to Afghanistan. Since strengthening the Afghan security system would take a decade in the best-case scenario, the implicit length of time for the coalition would be ten to fifteen years. Precise calculations are difficult, but tens of thousands of men would be required to merely contain the Taliban; many more would be required for the coalition, with heavy losses, to adopt an offensive stance and win back territory (see Figure 3).

In addition, the United States would probably have to replace the European forces, which most likely will be gone before 2015.

FIGURE 3 COALITION MILITARY FATALITIES



Source: <http://icasualties.org>.

Decisions made in Washington are placing other NATO members in increasingly difficult positions. The conduct of strategy has become purely American, and the risk of unilateral withdrawal by the allies is growing. European populations are increasingly opposed to the war in Afghanistan; following the Iraqi experience, it is hard for a European government to defy popular opinion for too long. Dutch troops left Afghanistan in August 2010, and Canada plans to withdraw its troops in 2011. Great Britain publicly reiterated its decision to withdraw its combat troops before 2015, Poland is envisioning 2013, and Spain is also leaning toward an early withdrawal. Opposition

parties, notably in France, are challenging the consensus on the presence of their troops in Afghanistan. European governments especially—now including Great Britain—are placing implicit political conditions on loss levels. In the current circumstances—with a strategy seen as hardly credible and the political cost of leaving quickly decreasing—the only rational decision for European countries is to *unilaterally* set a withdrawal deadline. The departure of European troops will have to be compensated by the addition of tens of thousands of American troops. With a plurality of Americans now opposed to the war, political support for a military escalation is probably insufficient.³³

The argument that we cannot judge the strategy until next year is weak because, as we have seen, the strategy has changed and the operations under way in the south cannot change the national dynamic.³⁴ But many pundits are hoping for a reversal of the situation along the lines of what happened in post-surge Iraq. The comparison with Iraq is intellectually inconsistent, and it stands in the way of a rational policy in Afghanistan.³⁵ In fact, that comparison has an essentially moral and political dimension, with no analytical value as far as the effective conduct of the war is concerned. The narrative of the surge is based on the idea that at a time when most analysts believed the situation in Iraq to be desperate, the U.S. army took risks and found the solution. The surge in Afghanistan would therefore be a test of military, rather than civilian, leadership. But for the coalition, the immediate and deferred costs of waiting are so large that the political leadership must put the war in Afghanistan back into perspective compared with other national priorities. Indeed, the importance of this theater to American interests doesn't justify the financial and human burden induced by the presence of more than 100,000 U.S. troops.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

- 1 The U.S. command's optimistic assessments of the situation in Afghanistan are out of step with the vast majority of independent experts' reports and witness accounts collected in Afghanistan. This difference in interpretation jeopardizes the command's credibility with political decision makers and public opinion. The gravity of the situation demands an open debate about the current strategy's likelihood of success.
- 2 The objective established by the U.S. command—defeating the Taliban militarily—is unrealistic, given the number of available troops and the lack of cooperation from Pakistan. Indeed, the successes that U.S. strategists are hoping for in the south are local; even in the unlikely event that such successes are realized, they cannot lead to a Taliban defeat. In the vast majority of provinces, the coalition is in a defensive position and can at best contain the insurgency.

- 3 The insurgency's advances are now irreversible. The Taliban are increasingly taking over the administration of the population; there are more and more areas of anarchy, and the government controls only the urban centers. Considering the rapidly weakening Afghan government, turning security over to the Afghan army is impossible in the near term.
- 4 The current military option is leading ineluctably to escalation with no prospect of ultimate success. There is not enough innovation in conceiving and waging the war to make up for the insurgency's progress. The tactics that have been proposed—notably the training of militias and the co-opting of insurgent groups—have already been tried and will produce only marginal results. Not only will it be impossible to withdraw in the summer of 2011, it will be necessary to send in reinforcements to counter the rise of the insurgency and the progressive withdrawal of European contingents. Indeed, the coalition's military force will soon be incapable of confronting the insurgency's spread.
- 5 The U.S. administration must take the initiative rather than allowing itself to be boxed into dead-end military logic. Time is working against the coalition, and the U.S. administration must push for negotiations with the insurgency and a cease-fire.

CONCLUSION

The current debate on the success of operations in the south fails to address the crux of the problem in Afghanistan. Even in the event of success, the insurgency has made such advances that a coalition victory is unthinkable. Waiting several months to learn the outcome of operations in the various districts before deciding on the conduct of the war is a mistake. The successes will probably be debatable, and those who are the most optimistic will always believe some limited and local progress offers promise for the future. However, the evolution of the conflict depends only marginally on these operations. For this reason, the current military option can lead only to military escalation. If the U.S. command maintains its objective of military victory, it must plan immediately to bolster the force in 2011 in order to face the insurgency's push forward.

The U.S. political leadership must decide without delay to open negotiations with the insurgency. Every passing month strengthens the position of the Taliban and weakens the Afghan government, which now controls only a few cities. With Karzai in decline and the Taliban gaining strength, there is no good reason for Washington to further delay negotiations. In doing so, the Obama administration risks encouraging the insurgents to hold out for a unilateral coalition withdrawal, resulting in major humiliation for Washington, and

The objective— preventing the return of al-Qaeda—can be met without defeating the insurgency.

possibly even another civil war with unpredictable results.

A new narrative must be focused on U.S. security, which must be carefully distinguished from a victory against the Taliban. First, if al-Qaeda is the reason that the United States is in Afghanistan, a real success must be

acknowledged. Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan is now minimal (a few dozen individuals and no organization). Second, the current war is placing the United States in a position of weakness, notably vis-à-vis Iran: Far from being a sign of strength, it is highlighting an inability to face reality and a lack of political imagination. The objective—preventing the return of al-Qaeda—can be met without defeating the insurgency. The entire purpose of negotiations is to end the civil war and guarantee that radical groups do not return. Power-sharing among Afghan factions is the only solid guarantee that Afghanistan will not serve as a sanctuary for these groups. International (and predominantly U.S.) forces should be able to intervene directly from bases in Afghanistan or in the region should these groups return, particularly if they set up training camps. The coalition's goal in these negotiations should be to strike a political deal robust enough to withstand a slow withdrawal of international forces. Such a deal would necessarily entail the creation of a coalition government,

and the creation of a small number of international military bases in Afghanistan for fighting al-Qaeda and other extremist groups.

The U.S. administration has repeatedly distanced itself from the negotiations, described as an Afghan process, but Karzai is simply not a reliable partner to lead negotiations. He gains little by encouraging negotiations, because any successful process will mean the end of his power. His only hope of remaining relevant would be to drag out negotiations for years without results.

The Pakistani military establishment remains the Taliban's most critical patron. It literally holds the keys to negotiations with top Taliban mullahs, leaving the coalition no choice but to go through Islamabad—at least at the outset. If the United States wishes to negotiate an orderly withdrawal of coalition troops and a guarantee that al-Qaeda will not return to Afghanistan, it must make a deal with the only parties who can deliver on it: Pakistan and the Taliban.

The international coalition will need to initiate the negotiations by offering a cease-fire and an amnesty for the Taliban leadership to entice them back to Afghanistan. This will remove, at least partially, the Taliban leadership from Pakistan's sphere of influence. In addition, it would be a good test of the homogeneity of the Taliban leadership; in case of a split, the coalition could use the internal conflict in the insurgency. More likely, a cease-fire would both diminish the level of casualties on the coalition's side and open the way for talks at a local and national level, breaking the cycle of violence and polarization that is so damaging for the coalition.

NOTES

- 1 He notably says, "It doesn't mean, in small isolated pockets that they can't have the lead with coalition enablers supporting them, but to say that they'll be able to do much more before October of next year would be stretching it, only because we haven't finished the development of their force." See Ben Farmer, "U.S. General Knocks Afghanistan Withdrawal Hopes," *Telegraph*, August 24, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/7962374/US-general-knocks-Afghanistan-withdrawal-hopes.htm>.
- 2 John Simpson, "Petraeus 'Would Speak Out' If Afghan Pullout Too Risky," BBC News, August 23, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11054539>.
- 3 This was the consensus I observed during my most recent visit to Kabul in June 2010. Nearly all of the Afghanistan experts attending the conference "The Art of the Possible in Afghanistan and Pakistan," hosted by the Afghanistan–Pakistan Center of Excellence, June 6–8, 2010, publicly expressed their skepticism about the current strategy, including Thomas Johnson, Alex Strick von Linschoten, Michael Semple, Mariam Abou Zahab, Joanna Nathan, and others. I cannot think of an Afghanistan expert (as opposed to a counterinsurgency or terrorism expert) who has publicly or privately stated his/her confidence in the current strategy. NGOs with a long-term presence, such as CARE and Oxfam, or that specialize in security, such as ANSO (Afghan NGO Safety Office), not to mention the UN political officers, all support the view that the situation is deteriorating. See Rod Nordland, "Security in Afghanistan Is Deteriorating, Aid Groups

Say," *New York Times*, September 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/12/world/asia/12afghan.html?ref=world>. The views of the NGOs are especially significant because NGOs have no interest in overstating the risks, which could end their programs. See also Doyle McManus, "High-Level Doubts on Afghanistan: Former Officials Who Once Supported the War Are Now Questioning It's Worth the Cost," *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 2010, available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-mcmanus-afghanistan-20100912,0,6278870.column>.

- 4 The documents recently posted online by WikiLeaks gave an image of the war that is significantly different from the image presented in official NATO communications, notably with regard to the number of incidents (often unreported in the press) and the visible deterioration in security since at least 2004, and not 2006 as often stated by commentators.
- 5 "Petraeus Holds Out Prospect of Reconciliation With Taliban," Agence France-Presse, August 15, 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20100815/pl_afp/afghanistanunrestuspetraeustaliban_20100815192221, and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In Kandahar, U.S. Tries the Lessons of Baghdad," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/02/AR2010080205235.html?waporef=obinsite>.
- 6 There have been direct attacks against the U.S. base in Kandahar (July 2010) and against mercenaries protecting the road between Lashkargah and Sangin (August 2010).
- 7 Kim Sengupta, "Ambushes, Firefights and IEDs Hamper Latest British Offensive," *Independent*, August 2, 2010.
- 8 On the omnipresence of IEDs and the difficulties of getting around, see Stuart Webb, "Afghanistan: 'Don't Get Too Close—If He Goes Up You'll Go With Him,'" *Guardian*, August 7, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/07/bomb-disposal-experts-afghanistan>.

- 9 The police force in Marja has tense relations with the local population, which limits the possibilities of dismantling active Taliban networks. See for example C. J. Chivers, "Afghan Police Earn Poor Grade for Marja Mission," *New York Times*, June 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/world/asia/02marja.html?ref=afghanistan>.
- 10 C. J. Chivers, "General Faces Unease Among His Own Troops, Too," *New York Times*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/23/world/asia/23troops.html?ref=afghanistan>.
- 11 Anne Flaherty, "Marines Likely to Stay in Afghanistan for Years," Associated Press, August 24, 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100824/ap_on_go_ot/us_us_afghanistan. The 10,000 British troops have been redeployed in Kandahar.
- 12 Farmer, *op. cit.*
- 13 A significant part of the coalition's troops have logistical or administrative duties or are not trained for intense fighting. In addition, NATO bases are spread all over the country, often with forces just large enough to contain the insurgency. The ability to engage in offensives is therefore limited.
- 14 General David H. Petraeus, BBC interview, August 23, 2010, "Petraeus: Progress Made, But Challenges Continue," available at <http://www.centcom.mil/news/petraeus-progress-made-but-challenges-continue>.
- 15 Dexter Filkins, "Petraeus Builds a Case for Success in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/world/asia/16petraeus.html>.
- 16 "Strategic Chaos and Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan," Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 111th Congress, 2nd Session, April 2, 2008, Serial No. 110-171, 43, www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/41674.pdf.
- 17 Seth G. Jones, "America Is Making a Difference in Eastern Afghanistan," *Globe and Mail*, April 1, 2008, available at <http://www.rand.org/commentary/2008/04/01/GM.html>.

- 18 Similarly, analyses by UN and NGO experts were unambiguous: All noted an accelerated deterioration in the situation and a breakthrough by Haqqani.
- 19 David Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar," in Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) 243.
- 20 James Dobbins, "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," CT-318, Testimony presented before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 26, 2009.
- 21 Seth G. Jones, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," CT-324, Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia, on April 2, 2009.
- 22 David Kilcullen, *op. cit.*, page 231 and following.
- 23 General David H. Petraeus on *Meet the Press*, August 15, 2010, transcript available at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38686033/ns/meet_the_press-transcripts.
- 24 Security in the capital itself (for which Afghan forces are largely responsible) is good, apart from suicide operations, which are virtually unavoidable.
- 25 After an incident in which two Spanish soldiers were killed, the Taliban organized a protest against foreign forces, see Robert H. Reid, "Fears Taliban Expanding in Afghan North, West," Associated Press, August 26, 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100826/ap_on_re_as/as_afghanistan.
- 26 Report on Wilton Park Conference 1022, "Winning 'Hearts and Minds' in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations," March 11–14, 2010.
- 27 Equally inexplicable is the idea of returning to the rural power structure of the 1970s; see Mitchell LaFortune, "Learning From WikiLeaks," *New York Times*, July 31, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/opinion/01lafortune.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

- 28 Matthew Mosk, Brian Ross, and Joseph Rhee, "Whistleblower Claims Many U.S. Interpreters Can't Speak Afghan Languages," ABC News, September 8, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/afghanistan-whistleblower-claims-us-interpreters-speak-afghan-languages/story?id=11578169>.
- 29 Three British soldiers killed by an Afghan soldier; the Spanish also lost two men in Badghis in August 2010. See Kim Sengupta, "Bloodbath at Patrol Base 3 Leaves Afghan Strategy in Doubt," *Independent*, July 14, 2010.
- 30 C. J. Chivers, "Marines Do Heavy Lifting as Afghan Army Lags in Battle," *New York Times*, February 20, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/world/asia/21afghan.html?ref=afghanistan>.
- 31 See "Afghan Army Offensive Goes Disastrously Wrong," BBC News, August 13, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10963556>.
- 32 Robert D. Blackwill, "A De Facto Partition for Afghanistan," *Politico*, July 7, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0710/39432.html>.
- 33 Aliyah Shahid, "6 in 10 Americans Are Against the War in Afghanistan, as President Obama Sends More Troops: Poll," *New York Daily News*, August 20, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2010/08/20/2010-08-20_6_in_10_americans_are_against_the_war_in_afghanistan_as_president_obama_sends_mo.html.
- 34 For a more detailed analysis, see Gilles Dorransoro, *Fixing a Failed Strategy in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/dorransoro_fixing_failed_strategy2.pdf.
- 35 Although fundamental differences between the two contexts make it impossible to transpose solutions, and despite frequent denials on the part of U.S. strategists, the Iraqi surge is the implicit and explicit reference of those who conceived the Afghan COIN. Five major differences between the two contexts should be underscored: 1) The Iraqi insurgency is highly fragmented and comprises a significant number of foreign militants with very violent internal conflicts; the Taliban are a coherent, relatively well-organized movement

(fighting with Hezb-i islami is marginal). Radical elements in the Iraqi insurgency were attacking the cornerstones of the Iraqi social order, provoking a reaction in kind from the Sunni sheikhs. The situation is more complex in Afghanistan, where the Taliban are cautious in their relations with prominent village leaders. 2) Unlike in Iraq, Afghan tribes are not military units capable of standing up to the Taliban. 3) The Iraqi insurgency is essentially urban, unlike the Afghan insurgency; this introduces major differences at the tactical level. 4) The Iraqi insurgency has no sanctuary in a neighboring country, unlike the Taliban, who are supported by Pakistan. 5) The Iraqi state, even after the dissolution of the army, is incomparably more solid than the Afghan state. In addition, the uncertain success of the U.S. command's approach in Iraq is probably due more to the alliance with Sunni sheikhs than to a change in U.S. practices in Baghdad. And this alliance had already been proposed in 2004 by Sunni leaders threatened by ultra-violent jihadist groups; the only thing preventing an agreement was hesitation on the part of the U.S. government.

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