

# Fixing Afghanistan

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## Given the growing disconnect between U.S. politics and strategy in Afghanistan, a military analyst offers ten steps toward a lighter, better endgame.

**A**fter 11 years of war, the U.S. military is applying a strategy in Afghanistan that works, based on gradually empowering the Afghanistan government to take charge of its affairs. The problem is that it isn't appropriately resourced and is attempting to achieve results along a political timeline determined in Washington, D.C.

In brief, the strategy runs this way: A fiscally supportable force of Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police forces, in partnership with Afghan Local Police trained by U.S. special operations forces, will fight the Taliban insurgency, holistically confronting its military arm as much as its political arm. It will be extremely difficult for the Taliban insurgency to defeat a security strategy that adopts a decentralized, village-based approach that seamlessly blends civil and military approaches and enlists the population in its own defense. With greater security provided to Afghanistan's cities through conventional forces and the countryside protected through a mix of ANA, ANP and ALP forces, the Taliban will find it increasingly difficult to operate throughout Afghanistan.

Yet current plans to withdraw most forces by 2014 make this unsustainable. As the Obama administration decides the size and scope of future U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, it is useful to consider a number of alternative approaches nested within current strategy. The following recommendations are made in the spirit of creating a lighter, leaner and hence more sustainable (fiscally, politically, militarily and politically) U.S. presence in Afghanistan that can prevent the country from either falling to the Taliban movement in the long-term or becoming a satellite state of another regional power.

**1. Reset the war narrative.** The Obama administration must reset the narrative, which is at present focused on withdrawal and transition, not victory and stability. Even though the administration recently signed a 10-year

agreement with the government of Afghanistan to provide sustained financial and other support after U.S. troops withdraw, Afghan security forces will still require direct U.S. military assistance such as combat support, logistics, medical care and intelligence. Additionally, a robust training and mentoring presence will also be required with our troops co-located with Afghan security forces in Afghanistan's countryside where combat is likely. Current plans call for all of these assets to be gone by 2014, which will consign Afghan security forces to a less-than-optimal level of proficiency to combat the Taliban effectively.

A narrative that emphasizes the abandonment of Afghanistan in 1992 and how it led to the Taliban and al-Qaida is an argument that still resonates with many Americans. An effort should be made to reject a non-conditions-based withdrawal and to make the case for an enduring U.S. presence in Afghanistan that is fiscally sustainable and focused on victory. We should lead from the front and provide a path to victory Americans can fiscally and wholeheartedly support.

**2. Shift to a lighter, leaner, longer-term military presence.** Large Afghan army and police forces will play a crucial role in any long-term strategy to provide stability to Afghanistan. However, conventional Afghan forces are expensive and, while they are capable, cannot provide sustained rural security to Afghanistan's countryside without an adequate local partner force. The creation of the ALP program, a brainchild of Gen. David Petraeus, in the last few years provides a way forward for an Afghan war strategy that defeats the Taliban and is financially sustainable.

It aims to provide a persistent presence of defensively oriented security forces recruited locally, trained by U.S. special operation forces and vetted by their communities and the Ministry of Interior. The ALP report to the Afghan National Police in the district and are provided basic weapons and other support in addition to receiving a regular salary. Where these forces have been deployed, they have proved to be extremely effective and cheaper than conventional Afghan forces. Efforts should be made to drastically expand the Afghan Local Police program, which is key to a village-based, decentralized, long-term strategy that blends civil-military strategies seamlessly and enlists the Afghans in their own defense.

**3. Pressure Pakistan.** We cannot prevail in Afghanistan without solving the Pakistani security problem. That requires, for starters, being as frank with ourselves as we are with the Pakistanis. The only reason Islamabad went after the Taliban and its associates when they overran the Swat River Valley in 2009 is because the attacks directly threatened Pakistan's interests. The fact that the Pakistani government hasn't repelled the Taliban in the rest of their country reveals their true strategy with respect to the stability of Afghanistan.

We need a campaign to stabilize Waziristan and Baluchistan in order to eliminate the Taliban's nascent state government and its military bases of support. Targeted airstrikes that secure tactical victories are insufficient. We should pursue this with the Pakistanis if we can, but be prepared to initiate it alone if we must. We should prepare for this by reducing our dependency on supplies from Pakistani ports as well as reviewing our security assistance to the country.

**4. Reduce U.S. fiscal responsibility for Afghanistan.** The administration has agreed to a 10-year financial commitment to Afghanistan to help maintain security forces. This reduces or eliminates any incentives the Afghan government may have to assume more of the financial responsibility for its own military and police forces. An effort should be made to renegotiate this agreement, reduce this fiscal burden and free the Afghans to make their own decisions about how to fund their government.

**5. Target Taliban senior leaders.** A central pillar of the administration's strategy for Afghanistan has been a negotiated settlement with the Taliban's senior leaders. To this end, the U.S. has not actively targeted its leaders within Pakistan, though it has increased UAV attacks against al-Qaida within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Additionally, there have been no attacks within the area of Quetta in Pakistan, where senior Taliban leaders

are known to congregate. Furthermore, independent operations have not been attempted in Karachi and other cities where some senior Taliban leaders reside.

A strategy that targets senior Taliban leaders will provide needed military and moral support to an Afghan government increasingly on its own, and provide needed security space as Kabul assumes more responsibility for its security affairs.

**6. Reduce development spending.** The cash tsunami that was unleashed in Afghanistan when development spending increased in 2009 fed corruption. Additionally, the chronic inability of the U.S. government to account for the money it has spent raises serious questions about its ability to manage the conflict responsibly. Furthermore, few, if any, corrupt Afghan officials have been convicted. Cutting development spending will force the Afghan government to assume more responsibility for its financial future and prompt it to develop its own revenue sources. It will also reduce the U.S. costs of the war, making it easier to fund a long-term military presence.

**7. Reduce the role of NATO.** The arrival of NATO in Afghanistan and its assumption of control of the campaign in 2005-6 greatly inhibited the ability of coalition forces to fight the Taliban insurgency. Weighed down by bureaucracy, a lack of experience with counterinsurgency, insufficient political support at home and risk-averse behavior, NATO's approach to fighting the insurgency did little to quell the conflict. Many alliance countries have already left Afghanistan or are intending to do so; continued reductions in NATO's Afghan footprint will allow better-coordinated U.S. forces to wage a better counterinsurgency campaign.

**8. Have talks with the Taliban leaders, but no negotiations.** A determined campaign to defeat the Taliban will inevitably lead some members of the Islamist movement to seek either re-integration or reconciliation with the Afghan government. Largely for this reason, it is useful to maintain talks with the Taliban if only to allow some of its members to change sides and join the Afghan government. There will not be a negotiated end to the war with the Taliban; our present strategy has squandered any leverage we may have had.

**9. Develop Afghanistan's natural resources.** Throughout its history, Afghanistan has relied on an outside power for its financial stability. The rediscovery of about \$4 trillion worth of minerals in 2010 suggests a way to change that.

**10. Conduct an internationally legitimate 2014 election for Afghan president.** The U.S. government's poor handling of the 2009 and 2010 elections in Afghanistan cannot be repeated. Charges of corruption called into question the legitimacy of the Karzai administration and the country's entire government system. The U.S. must step up its efforts to ensure that an honest, fair and legitimate Afghan presidential election is held 2014.

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*Armed Forces Journal*

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