U.S. Interests and Policy Choices in Afghanistan

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The United States has two compelling interests at issue in the Afghan conflict. One is the ongoing, increasingly successful but incomplete effort to reduce the threat posed by Al Qaeda and related jihadi groups, and to finally eliminate the Al Qaeda leadership that carried out the 9/11 attacks. The second is the pursuit of a South and Central Asian region that is at least stable enough to ensure that Pakistan does not fail completely as a state or fall into the hands of Islamic extremists.

More than that may well be achievable – in my view, most current American commentary underestimates the potential for transformational changes in South Asia over the next decade or two, spurred by economic progress and integration. But there is no question that the immediate policy choices facing the United States in Afghanistan are very difficult. All of the courses of action now under consideration by the Obama Administration and members of Congress carry with them risk and uncertainty.

I would like to use the opportunity of this testimony to review and offer judgments about some of the arguments over U.S. policy choices in Afghanistan that are prominent around the deliberations of the Obama Administration and Congress. I would also like to highlight some serious risks to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan that are too often neglected in that discourse.

Washington hardly needs another opinion about the troops-or-no-troops debate, but so that you can evaluate my analyses with the appropriate grains of salt, I should indicate where I stand. To protect the security of the American people and the interests of the United States and its allies, we should persist with the difficult effort to stabilize Afghanistan and reverse the Taliban's momentum. This will probably require additional troops for a period of several years, until Afghan forces can play the leading role. However, that would depend on the answer to the question General Colin Powell's reported question, "What will the troops do?" As General McChrystal wrote in his recent assessment, "Focusing on force or resource requirements misses the point entirely." Instead, after years of neglect of U.S. policy and resources in Afghanistan, and after a succession of failed strategies both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States, as McChrystal put it, has an "urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way that we think and operate." /1 While I cannot endorse or oppose McChyrstal's

specific prescriptions for the next phase of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan because I do not know what they are, I do endorse the starting point of his analysis, as well as his general emphases on partnering with Afghan forces and focusing on the needs of the Afghan population. I believe those emphases are necessary but insufficient.

Whether President Obama's policy involves no new troops, a relatively small number of additional forces focused on training, or a much larger deployment, we can be certain of one thing: American soldiers will continue to put their lives on the line in Afghanistan and the U.S. Treasury will continue to be drained in pursuit of U.S. goals there. We know this because President Obama has publicly ruled out withdrawal from Afghanistan as an option. Instead, within the Administration and prospectively in Congress, the question seems to be whether to pursue U.S. goals with the resources already invested, or to invest more in tandem with the adoption of a new strategy. It is important, then, to think through what U.S. interests in Afghanistan actually are and what means may be required to achieve them.

General McChyrstal and other senior military commanders have apparently recommended substantially increased U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan in order to stabilize what remains a weak and fractious Afghan state; to protect large sections of the Afghan population from Taliban coercion; to build up Afghan security forces; and to prevent the Taliban from forcibly seizing control of the Afghan government.

A number of credible objections have been made to this project. Some argue that the stabilization of even a weak Afghan state safe from Taliban control is beyond the capacity of the U.S. and its allies. Thus, according to Rory Stewart, in recent testimony before a Senate committee, "The fundamental problem with the [Obama Administration's] strategy is that it is trying to do the impossible. It is highly unlikely that the U.S. will be able either to build an effective, legitimate state or to defeat a Taliban insurgency…Even an aim as modest as 'stability' is highly ambitious." /2 Stewart has extensive direct experience of Afghanistan and his view is shared by some other credible regional specialists.

It is right to be skeptical of the abstract slogans of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and the enthusiasms of those in the West who define success in Afghanistan through their own political science terminology of legitimacy, rights and development. The Soviet Union defeated itself in Afghanistan by demanding, absurdly, that the country conform to its preconceived theories of revolution and state development. As the editors of a review of the Soviet war composed by the Russian General Staff put it, "Despite the Soviet Union's penetration and lengthy experience in Afghanistan, their intelligence was poor and hampered by the need to explain events within the Marxist-Leninist framework. Consequently, the Soviets never fully understood the Mujaheddin opposition nor why many of their policies failed to work in Afghanistan." /3 Similarly, the United States should be cognizant of its own potential blinders of ideology and preconceived interpretation. For example, while the development of counterinsurgency capacity and principles by the United States Army, as outlined in the recently ascendant field manual FM-34, is a generally positive development in U.S. Army doctrine, and those capacities

clearly have a role to play in U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan, it would be self-deceiving to believe that the Afghan war can now be "won" simply by "applying the manual," as the most ardent counterinsurgency advocates sometimes seem to argue.

To succeed, counterinsurgency approaches require deep, supple, and adaptive understanding of local conditions. And yet, as General McChrystal pointed out in his assessment, since 2001, international forces operating in Afghanistan have "not sufficiently studied Afghanistan's peoples, whose needs, identities and grievances vary from province to province and from valley to valley." To succeed, the United States must "redouble efforts to understand the social and political dynamics of…all regions of the country and take action that meets the needs of the people, and insist that [Afghan government] officials do the same." /4

This will be difficult at best, but it is not impossible. The international effort to stabilize Afghanistan and protect it from coercive revolution by the Taliban still enjoys broad support from a pragmatic and resilient Afghan population. Nor does the project of an adequately in tact, if weak and decentralized, Afghan state, require the imposition of Western imagination. Afghanistan between the late 18th century and the First World War was a troubled but coherent and often peaceful independent state. Although very poor, after the 1920s it enjoyed a long period of continuous peace with its neighbors, secured by a multi-ethnic Afghan National Army and unified by a national culture. That state and that culture were badly damaged – almost destroyed – by the wars ignited by the Soviet invasion of 1979 – wars to which we in the United States contributed destructively. But this vision and memory of Afghan statehood and national identity has hardly disappeared. After 2001, Afghans returned to their country from refugee camps and far flung exile to reclaim their state – not to invent a brand new Western-designed one, as our overpriced consultants sometimes advised, but to reclaim their own decentralized but nonetheless unified and even modernizing country.

Despite the manifold errors of U.S. and international policy since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001, a strong plurality of Afghans still want to pursue that work – and they want the international community to stay and to correct its errors.

Then, too, the difficulties facing the United States in Afghanistan today should not be overestimated out of generalized despair or fatigue. Consider, as one benchmark, a comparison between the position of the U.S. and its allies now and that of the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

In a global and diplomatic sense, the Soviet Union failed strategically in Afghanistan from the moment it invaded the country. Nor did it enjoy much military success during its eight years of direct occupation. Neither Soviet forces nor their client Afghan communist government ever controlled the Afghan countryside. And yet, despite these failures and struggles, the Soviet Union and its successor client government, led by President Najibullah, never lost control of the Afghan capital, major cities and provincial capitals, or the formal Afghan state. Only after the Soviet Union dissolved in late 1991

and Najibullah lost his supply lines from Moscow did his Islamist guerrilla opposition finally prevail and seize Kabul.

The territorial achievements of the Najibullah government – no forcible takeover of the Afghan state by Islamist guerrillas, continuous control of all the country's cities and major towns – might look attractive today to the United States as a minimum measure of success. And there is every reason to believe that the international community can still do better than that.

By comparison to the challenges facing the Soviet Union after it began to "Afghan-ize" its strategy around 1985 and prepare for the withdrawal of its troops, the situation facing the United States and its allies today is much more favorable. Afghan public opinion remains much more favorably disposed toward international forces and cooperation with international governments than it ever was toward the Soviet Union. The presence of international forces in Afghanistan today is recognized as legitimate and even righteous, whereas the Soviets never enjoyed such support and were unable to draw funds and credibility from international institutions. China today wants a stable Afghanistan; in the Soviet era, it armed the Islamic rebels. The Pakistani Army today is divided and uncertain in its relations with the Taliban, and beginning to turn against them; during the Soviet period, the Army was united in its effort to support Islamist rebels. And even if the number of active Taliban fighters today is on the high side of published estimates, those numbers pale in comparison to the number of Islamic guerrillas fighting the Soviet forces and their Afghan clients.

In other words, the project of an adequately stable Afghan state free from coercive Taliban rule for the indefinite future *can* be achieved, although there are no guarantees. The next question, however, is whether it *should* be pursued on the basis of U.S. interests, given the considerable costs, risks and uncertainties that are involved. Here, too, a number of credible objections must be considered.

One is the argument that a heavy U.S. military presence in Afghanistan focused on population security is not the best way to defeat Al Qaeda and may even be counterproductive. Counter-terrorism is "still Washington's most pressing task," write Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson in the current issue of *Survival*, but "the question is whether counter-insurgency and state-building in Afghanistan are the best means of executing it. The mere fact that the core threat to U.S. interests now resides in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan casts considerable doubt on the proposition….The realistic American objective should not be to ensure Afghanistan's political integrity by neutralizing the Taliban and containing Pakistani radicalism, which is probably unachievable. Rather, its aim should be merely to ensure that Al Qaeda is denied both Afghanistan and Pakistan as operating bases for transnational attacks on the United States and its allies and partners." /5

Apparently like some in the Obama Administration, they recommend a policy concentrated on targeted killing of Al Qaeda leaders by aerial drones and other means.

They acknowledge that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan might aid Al Qaeda but argue that greater risks would flow from the failure or a U.S.-led counterinsurgency strategy.

This argument misreads the dynamics within Pakistan that will shape the course of U.S. efforts to destroy Al Qaeda's headquarters and networks there. Simon and Stevenson, for example, fear that the provocative aura of U.S. domination in Afghanistan would "intensify anti-Americanism in Pakistan" and by doing so ensure that the Pakistan Army would refuse to cooperate with American efforts to root out Islamic extremists previously cultivated by the Army and its intelligence wing, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or I.S.I. There are certainly risks along the lines they describe, but something like the opposite is more likely to be true.

The relationship between the Pakistani security services and Islamist extremist groups – Al Qaeda, the Taliban, sectarian groups, Kashmiri groups, and their many splinters – is not static or preordained. Pakistani public opinion, while it remains hostile to the United States, has of late turned sharply and intensely against violent Islamist militant groups. The Pakistan Army, itself reeling as an institution from deep public skepticism, is proving to be responsive to this change of public opinion. Moreover, the Army, civilian political leaders, landlords, business leaders and Pakistani civil society have entered into a period of competition and freewheeling discourse over how to think about the country's national interests and how to extricate their country from the Frankenstein-like problem of Islamic radicalism created by the Army's historical security policies. There is a growing recognition in this discourse among Pakistani elites that the country must find a new national security doctrine that does not fuel internal revolution and impede economic and social progress. The purpose of American policy should be to create conditions within and around Pakistan for the progressive side of this argument among Pakistani elites to prevail over time.

American policy over the next five or ten years must proceed from the understanding that the ultimate exit strategy for international forces from South Asia is Pakistan's economic success and political normalization, manifested in an Army that shares power with civilian leaders in a reasonably stable constitutional bargain, and in the increasing integration of Pakistan's economy with regional economies, including India's. Such an evolution will likely consolidate the emerging view within Pakistan's elites that the country requires a new and less self-defeating national security doctrine. As in the Philippines, Colombia, and Indonesia, the pursuit of a more balanced, less coup-ridden, more modern political-military order in Pakistan need not be complete or confused with perfection for it to gradually pinch the space in which Al Qaeda, the Taliban and related groups now operate. Moreover, in South Asia, outsiders need not construct or impose this modernizing pathway as a neo-imperial project; the hope for durable change lies first of all in the potential for normalizing relations between Pakistan and India, a negotiation between elites in those two countries that is already well under way, without Western mediation, and is much more advanced than is typically appreciated. Its success is hardly assured, but because of the transformational effect such normalization would create, the effects of American policies in the region on its prospects should be carefully assessed.

Against this backdrop, a Taliban insurgency that increasingly destabilizes both Afghanistan and the border region with Pakistan would make such regional normalization very difficult, if not impossible, in the foreseeable future. Among other things, it would reinforce the sense of siege and encirclement that has shaped the Pakistan Army's self-defeating policies of support for Islamist militias that provide, along with a nuclear deterrent, asymmetrical balance against a (perceived) hegemonic India.

Conversely, a reasonably stable Afghan state supported by the international community, increasingly defended by its own Army, and no longer under threat of coercive revolution by the Taliban could create conditions for Pakistan's government to negotiate and participate in political arrangements in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region that would address Pakistan's legitimate security needs, break the Army's dominating mindset of encirclement, and advance the country's economic interests.

American and international success in Afghanistan could also enhance the space for civilians in Pakistan who seek to persuade the Pakistan Army to accommodate their views about national security; for the United States to insist that Pakistani interests be accommodated in a pluralistic, non-revolutionary Afghanistan; and for Pakistani elites, including the Army, to have adequate confidence to take on the risks associated with a negotiated peace or normalization with India. Conversely, yielding unnecessarily to an indefinite period of violence and chaos in Afghanistan, one in which the Taliban may seek to take power in Kabul while continuing to operate across the border in Pakistan, will all but guarantee failure along all of these strategic lines.

There are narrower objections that should be registered about the "counterterrorism-only" or "counterterrorism-mainly" argument. It is probably impractical over a long period of time to wage an intelligence-derived counterterrorism campaign along the Pakistan-Afghan border if a cooperating Afghan government does not have access to the local population; if American forces are not present; and if the Pakistani state has no incentive to cooperate. This is exactly the narrative that unfolded during the 1990s and led to failure on 9/11 for the United States. Recent improvements in targeting Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan seem to be a function, at least in part, of changing attitudes toward cooperation by the Pakistani civilian government and security services. These changes in turn are a function of the dynamic, complex internal Pakistani discourse sketched above. It is unlikely that an American willingness to allow Taliban hegemony in Afghanistan will result in greater cooperation from Pakistani intelligence; in fact, the opposite is more likely because, as in the past, some in the Pakistani security services seek such hegemony for ideological reasons, while others will likely see a need to protect their position with Islamist militias in order to defend against India in a volatile, heavily contested regional environment.

Also, if a problem in assuring Pakistan's stability lies in the country's anti-American attitudes (which may not be as important as Americans believe), then waging a prolonged war of assassination by flying robots within Pakistan's borders and without its government's participation, as some "counterterrorism only" advocates would prefer, does not seem a prescription for success. The goal of American policy in Pakistan should

be to create conditions in which this unattractive manifestation of unilateral American aerial and technological power is no longer unilateral – and control of such operations can be shifted to a responsible Pakistani government, without the fear that prevails currently in the U.S. government that Pakistani security officers will misuse targeting intelligence to protect Islamist allies.

Another objection to the U.S. investments in Afghan stability and population protection is that Al Qaeda is not in Afghanistan at all, or at least not meaningfully. A related argument is that it is pointless to take risks and make new investments to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a prospective A.Q. sanctuary because Al Qaeda can easily find other sanctuaries, such as in Somalia and Yemen, where no American counterinsurgency or stabilization project is realistic. Bin Laden's presumed current base in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, near the Afghan border, according to Stephen Biddle, has no "intrinsic importance…no greater than many other potential havens – and probably smaller than many." /6 It is also argued by some that Al Qaeda is best understood as an organization, network or movement in which physical geography such as the F.A.T.A. is not a defining feature – in this view, hotel rooms in Hamburg, Germany, or rental houses near pilot training facilities in Florida are as fundamental to Al Qaeda's operational footprint as its headquarters and training camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier.

These are credible, serious arguments that accurately describe some of Al Qaeda's character as a stateless, millenarian terrorist group. But they misunderstand the history of Al Qaeda's birth and growth alongside specific Pashtun Islamist militias on the Afghan-Pakistan border. It is simply not true that all potential Al Qaeda sanctuaries are of the same importance, now or potentially. Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri have a thirty-year unique history of trust and collaboration with the Pashtun Islamist networks located in North Waziristan, Bajaur, and the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. It is not surprising, given this distinctive history, that Al Qaeda's presumed protectors – perhaps the Haqqanni network, which provided the territory in which Al Qaeda constructed its first training camps in the summer of 1988 – have never betrayed their Arab guests. These networks have fought alongside Al Qaeda since the mid-1980s and have raised vast sums of money in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states through their A.Q. connections. These Pashtun Islamist networks possess infrastructure – religious institutions, trucking firms, criminal networks, preaching networks, housing networks – from Kandahar and Khost Province, from Quetta to Karachi's exurban Pashtun neighborhoods, that is either impervious to penetration by the Pakistani state or has coopted those in the Pakistani security services who might prove disruptive. It is mistaken to assume that Bin Laden, Zawahiri or other Arab leaders would enjoy similar sanctuary anywhere else. In Somalia they would almost certainly be betrayed for money; in Yemen, they would be much more susceptible to detection by the country's police network. The United States should welcome the migration of Al Qaeda's leadership to such countries.

Because there is no nexus on Earth more favorable to Al Qaeda's current leaders than the radicalized Pashtun militias in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, American

policy in the region must take special account of this specific, daunting political-military geography. As counterinsurgency doctrine correctly argues, the only way to penetrate such territory and disrupt or defeat insurgents, including outside terrorists like Al Qaeda's leaders, is to do so in partnership with indigenous forces that are motivated to carry out such a campaign because they see it as in their own interests. No such campaign is plausible if the Taliban rule Afghanistan. And no such campaign is plausible if Pakistan does not continue to receive the economic and political support from the international community that may lead its own elites to decide that they will be better off without the Haqqannis and other uncompromising Islamists than with them.

It is true, in a sense, that not all Afghan stability projects are created equal, from the perspective of an American-led campaign against Al Qaeda. Aghanistan's mountainous, Shiite-influenced central Bamiyan province, to choose an exaggerated example, may always be of marginal importance to Al Qaeda, just as it has long been less than decisive to successive Kabul governments. But to extrapolate such observations to argue that Afghanistan's national stability is only tenuously connected to Pakistan's stability defies history, demography and observable current trends. More Pashtuns live in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. Their travel and connections to international finance, proselytizing, criminal, and diaspora networks overlap. If the Taliban captured Afghanistan, this would certainly destabilize Pakistan by strengthening Islamist networks there.

It would also be mistaken to believe, as some in the Obama Administration have apparently argued, that a future revolutionary Taliban government in Kabul, having seized power by force, might decide on its own or could be persuaded to forswear connections with Al Qaeda. Although the Taliban are an amalgamation of diverse groupings, some of which have little or no connection to Al Qaeda, the historical record of collaboration between the Haqqanni network and Al Qaeda, to choose one example, is all but certain to continue and probably would deepen during any future era of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The benefits of a Taliban state to Al Qaeda are obvious: After 9/11, the United States gathered evidence that Al Qaeda used Afghan government institutions as cover for import of dual use items useful for its military projects. Reporters with the McClatchy newspaper group's Washington bureau recently quoted a senior U.S. intelligence official on this subject: "It is our belief that the primary focus of the Taliban is regional, that is Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the same time, there is no reason to believe that the Taliban are abandoning their connections to Al Qaeda…The two groups…maintain the kind of close relationship that – if the Taliban were able to take effective control over parts of Afghanistan – would probably give Al Qaeda expanded room to operate." /6 This assessment is consistent with recent history.

The United States and its allies can stabilize Afghanistan; they should try; but they may fail. To avoid failure, it will be important to account for some risks that are often underestimated in the current policy debate.

These risks arise from a tendency in Washington to under-estimate the importance of Afghan politics to the outcome of any course of action selected by the Obama

Administration. Because President Karzai has disappointed international governments; because the recent presidential election was marred by fraud allegations; because politics in Kabul appears to be difficult and fractious; and because it is not an arena in which American leverage can be easily brought to bear, there is a tendency in Washington to whistle past Afghan political issues, or to give up on the subject altogether, and to focus on other policy corridors – counterinsurgency doctrine, military deployments, civilian efforts to build schools or highways or to provide agriculture training, anti-narcotics strategy, local governance. It sometimes seems that American strategy is being designed so that it can involve itself in everything *but* the problems of Afghan politics, national integration and reconciliation. But Afghan history argues that this would be an almost certain pathway to failure.

One example of this risk is embedded in the project of building a larger and more capable Afghan National Army and police force, for which there is currently much enthusiasm in Washington. The political-military history of Afghanistan since 1970 is one in which outside powers have repeatedly sought to do with Afghan security forces what the U.S. proposes to do now. It is also a history in which those projects have repeatedly failed because the security forces have been infected with political, tribal, and other divisions emanating from unresolved factionalism and rivalry in Kabul. Armies—especially poor, multi-ethnic armies, such as the one Afghanistan has—can only hold together if they are serving a relatively stable and unified national government. This has generally not been available to the Afghan Army since 1970.

Arguably, there are at least three cases during the last four decades in which programs to strengthen Afghan security forces to either serve the interests of an outside power or suppress an insurgency or both failed because of factionalism and disunity in Kabul.

During the nineteen-seventies, the Soviet Union tried to build communist cells within the Army in order to gradually gain influence. The cells, unfortunately, split into two irreconcilable groups, and their squabbling became so disabling that the Soviets ultimately decided they had no choice but to invade, in 1979, to put things in order.

Then, during the late nineteen-eighties, faced with a dilemma similar to that facing the United States, the Soviets tried to "Afghan-ize" their occupation, much as the U.S. proposes to do now. The built up Afghan forces, put them in the lead in combat, supplied them with sophisticated weapons, and, ultimately, decided to withdraw. This strategy actually worked reasonably well for a while, although the government only controlled the major cities, never the countryside. But the factional and tribal splits within the Army persisted, defections were chronic, and a civil war among the insurgents also played out within the Army, ensuring that when the Soviet Union fell apart, and supplies halted, the Army too would crack up and dissolve en masse. (I happened to be in Kabul when this happened, in 1992. On a single day, thousands and thousands of soldiers and policemen took off their uniforms, put on civilian clothes, and went home.)

Finally, during the mid-nineteen-nineties, a fragmented and internally feuding

Kabul government, in which Karzai was a participant for a time, tried to build up national forces to hold off the Taliban, but splits within the Kabul coalitions caused important militias and sections of the security forces to defect to the Taliban. The Taliban took Kabul in 1996 as much by exploiting Kabul's political disarray as by military conquest. The history of the Afghan Army since 1970 is one in which the Army has never actually been defeated in the field, but has literally dissolved for lack of political glue on several occasions.

None of these examples offers a perfect analogy for the present, but the current situation in Kabul does contain echoes of this inglorious history. Karzai's opportunistic and unscrupulous campaign for reëlection contains two overlapping patterns of political disunity that could undermine the effort to rapidly build up and deploy the Afghan Army during the next few years. The president assembled a coalition of warlords and war criminals in his campaign coalition. Some of these warlords, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, are the very same characters whose vicious infighting caused the Afghan Army to dissolve in the face of Taliban pressure during the nineties.

Also, the currently unresolved split between Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, the opposition leader, could become a proxy for the national division between southern Pashtuns, from whom the Taliban draw their strength, and northern Panjshiri Tajiks, with whom Abdullah has long been affiliated (although one of Abdullah's parents is a Pashtun). If Karzai and Abdullah become virulently or violently at odds, it is easy to imagine a Kabul government divided from within by its warlords and undermined from without by the Taliban on one side and disaffected northern groups on the other. This is poor ground on which to build an army of illiterate volunteers while in a hurry.

To improve its chances for success, the United States and the international community must bring all of their leverage to bear to ensure the formation of a coalition government in Kabul that incorporates all of the meaningful sources of non-Taliban opposition and sets Afghan political and tribal leaders on a sustained, Afghan-led program of political, constitutional and electoral reform.

Some analysts have suggested invoking the Afghan institution of a *loya jirga* to host some or all of this continuous reform process. Whether that specific institution is selected or not, the spirit of this suggestion is critical – Afghans have many difficult but important political and constitutional issues to negotiate, and political business-as-usual will not carry these negotiations forward adequately at a time when the United States is risking blood and treasure in support of Afghan stability. Issues that require discussion and negotiation among Afghan leaders, both formal and informal, include the future of the electoral system, to ensure fraud on the scale alleged in the most recent election cannot recur; political party formation and activity; constitutional issues such as the election of governors and the role of parliament; and issues of national integrity such as the access of different ethnic, tribal and identity groups to government employment and opportunity in the expanding security services.

Political reform and Afghan-led negotiations of this type must be seen as fundamental to American policy in Afghanistan no matter what choices are made about troop levels and deployments. Such a process would be part and parcel, too, of national program of reconciliation and reintegration designed to provide ways for Taliban foot soldiers to find jobs and for their leaders to forswear violence and enter politics.

This emphasis on political stability through continuous Afghan-led negotiation and national reintegration, as opposed to grandiose state-building or policies premised on the pursuit of military victory by external forces, should not be seen as an adjunct wing of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, but as fundamental. It is clear that no realistic level of American and Afghan forces deployable in the foreseeable future can provide security to the population in every village of Afghanistan. Accepting this reality and developing a political-military strategy that best accounts for it will lead, inevitably, to support for Afghan-led political approaches at the national, provincial, district and sub-district level. This is how the late Gorbachev-backed government in Kabul achieved a modicum of stability in far less favorable circumstances.

America's record of policy failure in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the last thirty years should humble all of us. It should bring humility to the way we define our goals and realism about the means required to achieve them. It should lead us to choose political approaches over kinetic military ones, urban population security over provocative rural patrolling, and Afghan and Pakistani solutions over American blueprints. But it should not lead us to defeatism or to acquiescence in a violent or forcible Taliban takeover of either country. We have the means to prevent that, and it is in our interest to do so.

Notes:

1/ McChrystal, “Commander’s Initial Assessment,” August 30, 2009, Unclassified Version, p. 1-1.

2/ “Testimony of Rory Stewart,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee, September 16, 2009

3/ Grau and Gress (eds.), *The Soviet-Afghan War*, p. xix.

4/ McChrystal, op. cit., p. 2-4.

5/ Simon and Stevenson, “Afghanistan: How Much is Enough?” *Survival,* October-November 2009.

6/ “Assessing the Case for War in Afghanistan,” Statement by Dr. Stephen Biddle, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, September 16, 2009

7/ “Are Obama advisers downplaying Afghan dangers?” McClatchy Newspapers, October 11, 2009.