

Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

As U.S. military operations in Afghanistan drag on inconclusively, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Taliban insurgency is gaining ground. In the first six months of 2010, for example, there was a 31 percent rise in civilian casualties while the Shari'a was implemented in areas hitherto inaccessible to the Taliban.¹ Insurgent attacks in the first quarter of 2011 grew by 51 percent compared with the previous year² while the Afghan security forces have been increasingly penetrated by the Taliban.³

It is hardly surprising therefore that President Hamid Karzai has reportedly held several meetings with the Taliban over the past three years in an attempt to strike a deal.⁴ In the meantime, Pakistan is being destabilized still further, especially with the rise of new militant groups such as the Punjabi Taliban, despite increased attacks against militant hide-outs in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan.⁵

The emerging picture is very grim, indeed. How is it that, despite making Afghanistan the cornerstone of its struggle against militant extremism, the Obama administration's strategy is failing so miserably? Does the president's plan to withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of this year, and to remove all 33,000 troops originally added as part of the surge by the end of next summer, have a realistic chance of success?⁶ And are there any viable alternatives to this failing strategy?

THE "SURGE" AND THE AFGHAN ARMY

The clearest difference between the Bush and the Obama administrations' Afghan strategies is the more recent deployment of nearly 60,000 additional troops as part of a surge, mostly in the Pashtun areas of the south and east where the Taliban insurgency is strongest.⁷ However,

according to Matthew Hoh, former senior civilian U.S. representative in the southeastern province of Zabul, who resigned in protest over the

1 U.N. News Center (New York), Aug. 10, 2010; *The Daily Telegraph* (London), Aug. 16, 2010.

2 "ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q1 2011," The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, London, Apr. 2011.

3 *The New York Times*, May 22, 2011.

4 See, for example, *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 2, 2010.

5 Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Special Dispatch, no. 2979, May 26, 2010.

6 *The Huffington Post*, June 22, 2011.

7 *The Examiner* (Seattle), Aug. 24, 2010.

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current strategy, the “U.S. and NATO presence and operations in Pashtun valleys and villages, as well as Afghan army and police

units that are led and composed of non-Pashtun soldiers and police, provide an occupation force” against which a Pashtun insurgency “composed of multiple, seemingly infinite, local groups” is justified.⁸

Hoh’s observations should not be that surprising. As noted in an International Crisis Group report, the disorganized and weak Afghan National Army (ANA), plagued by illiteracy and innumeracy, comprises a disproportionately large percentage of ethnic Tajiks who are often deployed to the Pashtun areas.⁹ Such a policy poses a major problem for the official counterinsurgency strategy objective of winning “the hearts and minds” of the Afghan population.

The lack of Pashtun soldiers in southern and eastern Afghanistan, together with the increase in the number of U.S. and other non-Afghan troops, means that the coalition’s presence in Pashtun lands is largely viewed as a foreign force that should be resisted, provoking a localized Pashtun nationalist insurgency, which, in Hoh’s words “is fed by what is perceived ... as a continued and sustained assault, going back centuries, on Pashtun land, culture, traditions, and religion by internal and external enemies.”¹⁰ Attitudes among Afghans as a whole were less intense, yet a January 2010 poll found that 31 percent opposed U.S. military presence while 37 percent opposed the presence of NATO forces or International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF).¹¹ Given that the Pashtuns comprise roughly 30 to 40 percent of Afghanistan’s

The coalition’s presence in Pashtun lands is viewed as a foreign force that should be resisted.

population, the intensification of a Pashtun insurgency is bound to allow the Taliban to make further advances.

THE KARZAI REGIME

The second major problem with the present strategy relates to the propping up of Karzai’s centralized regime in Kabul, which has cost the U.S. taxpayer almost \$300 billion in military and reconstruction (i.e., nation-building) efforts since the 2001 invasion.¹² Nonetheless, when an already corrupt regime is flooded with aid, it simply becomes more corrupt. In 2007, Afghanistan ranked 172nd of 179 countries in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI),¹³ dropping to the 179th place out of 180 countries in the 2009 CPI,¹⁴ and finally leveling off at 176th of 178 countries in the 2010 CPI (joint second last with Myanmar).¹⁵ A report of flagrant corruption appeared in the German daily *Der Spiegel*, which stated that “billions of dollars are being secreted out of Kabul to help well-connected Afghans buy luxury villas in Dubai.”¹⁶ A similar trend toward corruption attending the influx of U.S. aid can be observed in Iraq, which ranked 113th of 133 countries in the 2003 CPI but 176th of 180 countries in the 2009 CPI after having received in excess of \$50 billion in U.S. reconstruction money.¹⁷

Nor should the failure of the present nation-building project in Afghanistan be surprising given the unhappy fate of similar efforts, notably the Helmand Valley Project, lavishly funded with U.S. aid from 1946 to 1979. According to foreign policy analyst Nick Cullather, incorporating “edu-

8 Matthew Hoh to Amb. Nancy Powell, letter of resignation, Sept. 10, 2009.

9 “A Force in Fragments: Restructuring the Afghan National Army,” International Crisis Group, Washington, D.C., May 12, 2010, p. 20.

10 Hoh to Amb. Powell.

11 Afghan poll, Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research, Kabul, Dec. 11-23, 2009.

12 *Der Spiegel* (Berlin), June 5, 2010.

13 Corruption Perceptions Index 2007, Transparency International, Berlin, accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

14 Corruption Perceptions Index 2009, Transparency International, Berlin, accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

15 Corruption Perceptions Index 2010, Transparency International, Berlin, accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

16 *Der Spiegel*, June 5, 2010.

17 Corruption Perceptions Index 2009.

cation, industry, agriculture, medicine, and marketing under a single controlling authority,” this project ultimately faltered as “the engines and dreams of modernization had run their full course, spooling out across the desert until they hit limits of physics, culture, and history … [Yet] proponents of a fresh nation-building venture in Afghanistan, unaware of the results of the last one, have resurrected its imaginings.”¹⁸

The appalling lack of transparency aside, the Karzai regime’s standing as an unrepresentative and illegitimate government is illustrated by the fact that the 2009 presidential elections were marked by low voter turnout, ballot stuffing, intimidation of opponents, and widespread electoral fraud. After Karzai’s reelection, cabinet ministers were selected by the Afghan parliament largely on the basis of, in the words of one parliament member, “ethnicity or bribery or money.”¹⁹ The parliamentary elections in September 2010 were likewise marked by electoral fraud.²⁰

Other flaws of the Karzai regime include its disregard for the concepts of freedom and human rights and the presence of drug lords and war criminals in its ranks. As Freedom House’s 2010 Afghanistan assessment noted, while “blasphemy and apostasy by Muslims are considered capital crimes,” the Afghan supreme court is “composed of religious scholars who have little knowledge of civil jurisprudence.” Furthermore, prison conditions are extremely poor with many detainees held illegally and “in a prevailing climate of impunity, government ministers as well as warlords in some provinces sanction widespread abuses by the police, military, and intelligence



Current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is heavily reliant on the whims and schemes of President Hamid Karzai (left), a feckless and inconsistent U.S. ally, seen here with then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, Kabul, July 21, 2008. The 2009 Afghan presidential elections were marked by low voter turnout, ballot stuffing, intimidation of opponents, and widespread electoral fraud.

forces under their command, including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, extortion, and extrajudicial killings.”²¹

All these factors only distance the Afghan people from its government and drive them into the arms of the Taliban, in both Pashtun and non-Pashtun areas.

IGNORING STRATEGIC DEPTH

Despite the widespread publicity given to leaked documents detailing support for Taliban operations in Afghanistan by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), the problem of the Pakistani army and the ISI’s expansionist policy of “strategic depth” has yet to be ad-

18 Nick Cullather, “From New Deal to New Frontier in Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State,” *The Cold War as Global Conflict*, International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, Working Paper, no. 6, Aug. 2002.

19 *BBC News*, Jan. 2, 2010.

20 “Freedom in the World 2011, Afghanistan,” Freedom House, Washington, D.C., accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

21 “Freedom in the World 2010, Afghanistan,” Freedom House, Washington, D.C., accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

Pakistan has signed a number of large arms deals with China.

dressed in a meaningful way. This policy, rooted primarily in Pakistanis' perception of their country's identity as an

Islamic state and pursued in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and parts of India, has been manifested in support for various Islamist militant groups for at least four decades as a means of projecting Pakistani influence abroad.

Pakistan itself is an artificial state composed of diverse ethnic groups that are united solely by religious affiliation. Hence, fear of Pashtun and Baloch (Pakistan's largest provinces geographically) desires for autonomy or independence, together with concern about India's influence, also provides a basis for pursuing Pakistani strategic depth. For example, to suppress Baloch nationalism, the Pakistani military and intelligence have engaged in human rights abuses including the arrest and disappearance of some 8,000 Baloch activists in secret prisons.²² They have also safeguarded the Taliban Shura, the council responsible for directing operations in Afghanistan under the leadership of Mullah Omar, which for its part has formed a close working relationship with the Haqqani terrorist network and other Islamist militants in Afghanistan.²³ At the same time, the Pakistani army and ISI are dependent on Western financial aid and, consequently, engage in limited cooperation with Washington and NATO by playing a double game with militants based in the Afghan-Pakistani border regions. This involves attacking them on occasion but often providing early warnings and escape routes during security operations against them.²⁴ That said, the military and intelligence do allow for U.S. drone attacks and are directly engaged in clashes with groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban in Waziristan, which are committed to overthrowing the Pakistani government.²⁵

The result has been the increasing destabilization of Pakistan itself. A clear example is the rise of the Punjabi Taliban, the most likely culprit for the

bombing of a Sufi shrine in Lahore in July 2010, which killed at least forty people: Pakistani army and ISI coddling of Punjab-based Islamist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba has allowed for these organizations to provide safe havens in southwest Punjab for Taliban militants who have then set up Islamic seminaries to promote their ideology.²⁶

In addition, there is increasing cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing in opposition to what is viewed as a U.S.-Russian alliance in Afghanistan.²⁷ Most notably, some 11,000 Chinese troops have been stationed in the northernmost province of Gilgit-Baltistan, ostensibly to provide aid for flood-relief efforts,²⁸ where they have been reportedly "building infrastructure by investing billions of dollars."²⁹ The aim is to ensure control over a route leading to the port of Gwadar in Balochistan with relatively near access to the Persian Gulf and proximity to substantial copper reserves. This is another reason behind the Pakistani military and intelligence's safeguarding of the Taliban Shura and other Islamist militants in Balochistan; exploitation of the province's mineral wealth and Chinese investment have generally not benefitted the indigenous population, sparking discontent and adding fuel to the Baloch nationalist insurgency.³⁰

Pakistan has also signed a number of large arms deals with China. During Pakistani prime minister Yousuf Gilani's visit to Beijing on May 17-20, 2011, the Chinese agreed to provide Islamabad "immediately" with fifty new JF-17 Thunder multipurpose fighter jets,³¹ driving the Indian defense

22 *The Nation* (Islamabad), Oct. 24, 2009.

23 Tufail Ahmad and Y. Carmon, "The New U.S. Policy in Afghanistan: Evading the Root of the Problem," Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 568, MEMRI, Dec. 2, 2009.

24 Ibid.

25 *The Long War Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 14, 2011.

26 Amjad Ayub Mirza, "The Warrior Seminaries of Punjab," *Daily Times* (Lahore), July 17, 2010.

27 Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 691, MEMRI, May 26, 2011.

28 Ibid.

29 Special Dispatch, no. 3772, MEMRI, Apr. 19, 2011.

30 *The Guardian* (London), July 18, 2010.

31 Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 691, MEMRI, May 26, 2011.

minister to attack the deal as a “matter of serious concern” that would force New Delhi to upgrade its military “capability.”³²

In failing to address the problem of strategic depth in any meaningful way, U.S. strategy has also inadvertently swung the Indian government away from its formerly pro-Western orientation because New Delhi, like Tehran, has a vested interest in an independent Afghanistan, free of Taliban rule, so as to reduce Pakistan’s influence in that country. Thus, for example, in April 2010, Foreign Minister S. M. Krishna reiterated New Delhi’s official disagreement with Washington’s opposition to the Iranian nuclear program and welcomed Tehran’s plan to send low-enriched uranium to Turkey.³³ This policy shift was effectively a reversal of the Indian government’s November 2009 vote alongside Washington at the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer the Iranian nuclear program to the U.N. Security Council.³⁴

WHAT'S NEXT?

If the present flawed strategy is sustained, it is likely that the Obama administration, having eventually realized Afghanistan’s increasing destabilization, will not uphold the withdrawal timetable that began in July and will instead commit troops for many years to come. Indeed, senior military figures such as Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, already have in mind a much greater, long-term commitment to a large U.S. military presence.³⁵ Though a



A Chinese special forces commander gestures to a Pakistani soldier during a joint military drill near Karachi, Pakistan, March 8, 2009. The growing alliance between the People's Republic of China and Pakistan further complicates U.S. policy options and exacerbates tensions in the area. Some 11,000 Chinese troops have been stationed in Pakistan's northernmost province, and Beijing has promised Islamabad advanced fighter jets.

Taliban takeover of the country is highly unlikely, the ongoing war will prove at best a massive drain on U.S. resources and lives, possibly reaching a cost of up to \$100 billion a year, all for killing a few dozen al-Qaeda militants in a country whose annual gross domestic product is a mere \$13 billion.³⁶

Contrary to the official line of Western governments, the fear of Afghanistan becoming once again an al-Qaeda base for overseas terror attacks is not that well-grounded. Although al-Qaeda and allied groups are well established in Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan, they have largely evolved beyond conventional bases with their primary recruiting tool being the Internet. Consequently, they are capable of devising and preparing terror attacks on Western soil such as the Madrid train

32 Ibid.

33 Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 568, MEMRI, Dec. 2, 2009.

34 *Deccan Herald* (Bangalore), Nov. 27, 2009.

35 Agence France-Press, June 15, 2011.

36 “The Cost of the Afghanistan War,” Afghanistan Study Group, Washington, D.C., Aug. 16, 2010.

Many Afghans view the Taliban as a force intending to serve Pakistani interests.

bombing in March 2004 and the July 2005 London bombing. Do proponents of the present strategy to prevent al-Qaeda's resurgence in Afghanistan also recommend sending large forces to Somalia and Yemen? Indeed, in Somalia there is an African Union peacekeeping force, deeply resented by the local population, which is actually losing ground to Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen, an al-Qaeda-allied group.

It is also likely that the Pakistani military and intelligence, after securing their interests in Afghanistan, will focus their policy of strategic depth on India, Kashmir, and Bangladesh, destabilizing the whole of South Asia. Given aggravating factors such as growing tension between Pakistan and India, owing to the former's water crisis, an Indo-Pakistani regional war might well ensue. When Pakistan was able to focus its policy of "strategic depth" elsewhere, a military conflict with India occurred in 1999 following Pakistani incursions into Kashmir. This did not involve the use of nuclear weapons, but then-President Musharraf moved nuclear warheads toward the joint border.³⁷ One may also note the Indo-Pakistani military-standoff in 2001-02 over Kashmir that was only prevented from turning into an all-out war by intense international mediation.³⁸

Though there is no sign of militants seizing nuclear weapon stockpiles, a Pakistani refocus on strategic depth vis-à-vis the Indian subcontinent could well increase the chance of Pakistani or Indian nuclear weapons falling into the hands of Islamist militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban; this group is committed to attacking the United States and other Western countries unless they "accept Islam or pay *jizya* [a tax imposed on non-Muslims]."³⁹ Such a scenario should not be dismissed out of hand. After all, militants were able to launch a hard-hitting assault on a major naval base in Karachi on May 22, 2011, following

the failure of talks with al-Qaeda over the release of naval officers arrested on suspicion of links to the terror group. At least ten people were killed and two U.S.-made P3-C Orion surveillance and anti-submarine aircraft worth \$36 million each were destroyed.⁴⁰ How, then, can it be taken for granted that Pakistan's nuclear stockpiles are so much more secure?

POSSIBLE STRATEGY CHANGES

In light of the failure of the current strategy, it is worthwhile to examine a number of proposed alternative approaches to the war in Afghanistan and weigh their pros and cons.

Pakistan Garrison. In his book *Operation Dark Heart* and elsewhere,⁴¹ Col. Anthony Shaffer suggests that Washington withdraw conventional forces as quickly as possible, leaving 20,000 special forces troops in Afghanistan and garrisoning forces in Pakistan for operations against al-Qaeda militants and their allies. Yet, as Matthew Hoh pointed out, while garrisoning troops in Pakistan may be conducive to fighting al-Qaeda, this scenario is unlikely to materialize as the Islamabad government would not risk the public and military outrage attending the permanent deployment of these troops.⁴²

Promote economic development in Afghanistan. This suggestion, put forward by the authors of the Afghanistan Study Group report, includes "giving Afghanistan preferential trading status with the U.S., Europe, Japan, and other leading global economies," together with "promoting 'special reconstruction zones' for foreign and domestic companies to produce export goods."⁴³

37 *The Nation* (Islamabad), July 6, 2006.

38 "2002-Kashmir Crisis," GlobalSecurity.org, accessed Aug. 8, 2011.

39 *BBC News*, Jan. 29, 2007.

40 *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), May 27, 2011.

41 Anthony Shaffer, *Operation Dark Heart* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company Ltd., 2011), pp. 278-81.

42 Hoh to Amb. Powell.

43 "The Way Forward: A Five Point-Approach," Afghanistan Study Group, Washington, D.C., Aug. 16, 2010.

A U.S. strategy of containment coupled with broader regional engagement is needed.

This proposed policy is based on the belief that “endemic poverty has made some elements of the population susceptible to Taliban overtures. Moreover, failed and destitute states frequently become incubators for terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and other illicit activities.”⁴⁴ It represents a common belief among counterinsurgency theorists: namely, that creating employment opportunities drives people away from militant groups. However, a 2010 study based on research in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the southern Philippines, showed that far from reducing violence, providing jobs actually led to increased violence.⁴⁵ A plausible explanation for this is that while government counterinsurgency programs may promote employment at the local level, fighting continues to disrupt the overall economy so that there is no substantial change in the military situation.⁴⁶ People may get jobs “cleaning streets, picking up trash, or manning a checkpoint,” but their pay is “probably still low,” and the business environment remains poor owing to instability.⁴⁷

Several further points come to mind. For one thing, given the U.S. domestic economic difficulties, one can readily doubt Washington’s ability to resolve Afghanistan’s economic woes. For another, the study group missed the fact that the biggest sources of support for Islamist terrorism are not failed states but donors from the wealthiest Arab Persian Gulf states such as Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as recently leaked diplomatic cables reveal.⁴⁸ Indeed, the fact that militants tend to come from the more comfortable walks of society has also been documented by such scholars as Daniel Pipes.⁴⁹

Strike a deal with the Islamist militants. There is frequent talk of the need to negotiate a deal with the ideologically-driven insurgents. To this end, certain U.S. officials—such as special envoy Marc Grossman—seem eager to establish contact with Mullah Omar and have him “bless a political settlement on behalf of most Afghan insurgents.”⁵⁰

This approach, however, creates numerous problems. First, there is no indication that if a certain group agreed to a deal with the Western powers, it would be followed by other, let alone all, militant groups. Were a treaty of sorts to be struck with Mullah Omar, it does not follow that the Haqqani network, for example, would adhere to it. Concerning the Taliban itself, the events that unfolded after the “Shari‘a for peace” deals in 2009 between the Pakistani security forces and the Taliban in the Swat Valley⁵¹ demonstrate the ways in which the Islamist militants could exploit an agreement as a prelude to expanding control into adjoining areas. The “Shari‘a for peace” deals were initially struck in February 2009, but the spread of violence perpetrated by Taliban militants in Swat eventually led to an offensive in the area by the Pakistani security forces in May 2009. Further, it is unlikely that members of the various Islamist groups accept the basic ideals of pluralism, respect for the rule of law, and human rights. In addition, the 2010 debacle over Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour illustrates the fog surrounding any potential reconciliation process with the militants. Depicted as one of the most senior Taliban leaders in direct negotiations with the Karzai government, Mullah Mansour was actually a shopkeeper, based in Quetta, who concocted a web of lies about his Taliban credentials in order to receive hefty payments.⁵²

Indeed, the notion that the “ideological in-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Constructive COIN,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 2010.

⁴⁶ Ibid, cited in Joel Wing, “Fighting Insurgents Isn’t the Same as Countering Terrorists,” *Musings on Iraq*, July 25, 2010.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *The Guardian*, Dec. 5, 2010.

⁴⁹ Daniel Pipes, “The Causes of Terrorism: It’s Not about Money,” *DanielPipes.org*, June 24, 2002.

⁵⁰ Michael Hughes, “Desperately Seeking out Mullah Omar,” *The Huffington Post*, May 31, 2011.

⁵¹ MEMRI, Dec. 15, 2010.

⁵² *The New York Times*, Nov. 22, 2010.

The Afghan president should be pressured to devolve power from Kabul.

surgents” enjoy a considerable degree of popular legitimacy among Afghans is totally misconceived, despite the Karzai regime’s lack of popularity. As foreign policy strategist Michael Hughes notes, a focus on negotiating an agreement for power sharing and peace between the central government and the Islamist insurgents amounts to little more than a “deal that enables” an “elite to monopolize power.”⁵³ For if polling data provide any indication, it would appear that many Afghans view the Taliban as a force intending to serve Pakistani interests and have unfavorable views about Pakistan’s role in the country.⁵⁴ Therefore, as Hughes points out, “many Afghans believe awarding the Taliban with any power would be tantamount to gifting Islamabad undue sway in Kabul.”⁵⁵ Any approach toward political reconciliation would surely require a broader representation of civil society in Afghanistan.⁵⁶

Nor does Osama bin Laden’s May 2011 killing by U.S. forces herald a dramatic change in the strategic situation, despite Obama’s buoyant assertion that in “Afghanistan, we have broken the Taliban’s momentum … and after years of war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates, we have dealt al-Qaeda a huge blow by killing its leader—Osama bin Laden.”⁵⁷ In fact, al-Qaeda has been moving for quite some time away from conventional military bases and a centralized leadership primarily under the direction of one man to a decentralized mode of operations. The Middle East Media Research Institute, for example, has provided an in-depth report on how al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaki made YouTube into a primary recruiting tool for aspiring jihadists: The radical cleric, recently killed by a U.S air strike,⁵⁸ has more than 2,500 clips on YouTube—including

lectures, sermons, and compilation videos supporting his jihadist philosophy—and has attracted well over three million views.⁵⁹

All this casts serious doubt on both Obama’s assessment of the implications of bin Laden’s death for the war on terror and his assertion that the present strategy has “broken the Taliban’s momentum” in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The only way to salvage the decade-long U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and to prevent the country’s transformation into a regional and global hotbed is to adopt a new strategy of containment coupled with broader regional engagement.

In terms of containment, the first change that can be implemented on short notice is the substantial reduction of U.S. and NATO troop numbers in the Pashtun areas and their redeployment to anti-Taliban strongholds further north in Afghanistan or to bases far from populated areas. The next step would be to aim to either stick to the withdrawal timetable with 10,000 troops out by the end of the year and another 23,000 withdrawn by summer 2012 or follow Shaffer’s plan of commencing an immediate withdrawal of conventional forces, with a view to having them all out as soon as possible.

This should entail working to remove the “surge” troops by the end of this summer, leaving no more than 30,000 troops—including a residual force of special forces—by the end of 2012, combined with air support to contain the ideologically-driven Taliban militants bent on taking over Afghanistan. Meanwhile, and despite Karzai’s fraudulent electoral victory, it will be too

53 Hughes, “Desperately Seeking out Mullah Omar.”

54 BBC News, Feb. 5, 2009.

55 Hughes, “Desperately Seeking out Mullah Omar.”

56 Thomas Ruttig, Afghanistan Analysts Network, cited in *ibid.*

57 Text of President Obama’s speech, TMP LiveWire, May 19, 2011; *The Guardian*, May 19, 2011.

58 National Public Radio, Sept. 30, 2011.

59 Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 632, MEMRI, Aug. 28, 2010. Awlaki’s infamous “44 Ways to Jihad” (published on Jan. 5, 2009) has been posted on dozens of YouTube pages and was cited in at least two major terrorism cases in the United States in the summer of last year.

difficult to end financial aid to his regime. Instead, the Afghan president should be pressured to devolve power from Kabul to facilitate efforts at political reconciliation, aimed at resolving the massive problem of resentment, particularly among rural Pashtuns, over what is viewed as the imposition of unrepresentative government. Here, the practical steps put forward by the Afghanistan Study Group make sense. For example, as an important start toward reconciliation, “the Afghan parliament should be given confirmation authority for major appointments, district councils should be elected, budgeting authority decentralized, and elected provincial representatives should be included in the national level council that determines the portion of funds distributed.”⁶⁰

What should decentralization entail at the local level? Pointing to Zahir Shah’s 40-year reign (1933-73), which was largely peaceful because of the king’s approach of “co-optation of and cooperation with village society,” David Katz has aptly proposed a decentralized system based on a string of local leaders endowed with certain federal assets, powers, and obligations, who would link Pashtun village society with the central government through a “densely layered” web of “constantly renegotiated, local and social solidarity networks.”⁶¹ Katz’s suggestion to fight the Taliban in their Pakistan sanctuaries through the use of semi-autonomous warlords is less plausible, both because the warlords might not be talked into such operations and because the only forces capable of acting decisively against these Taliban sanctuaries are the Pakistani military and intelligence, which have given the militants these sanctuaries in the first place.

“Shari‘a for peace” deals suggested by some have proven disastrous for all involved with the exception of the Islamist terrorist groups that exploit them. Attacks continued unabated as in this bombing by the Taliban of a school van in northwestern Pakistan, September 13, 2011. Pakistani troops were forced to go on the offensive against the Taliban in May 2009 having just signed a deal with them in February.

Coupled with a reduction in foreign troop presence in Pashtun areas, such measures can be highly instrumental in ending the Pashtun nationalist insurgency, which is often conflated with the ideologically driven Taliban. At the same time, the Afghan National Army needs to become more inclusive of Pashtuns. Encouraging the ANA to broaden its ethnic base is much more sound than supporting localized Pashtun militias and warlords opposed to the Taliban, as they themselves, in the words of Hoh, make a mockery of “our own rule of law and counter-narcotics efforts,”⁶² thus increasing the risk of driving Taliban recruitment. The latter policy would also be incredibly impractical to implement as it would require working with tribes on an individual level.

There may, however, be some merit in the recent policy of the Afghan Local Police Program, implemented in a few areas wrested from Taliban control after the departure of NATO

60 “The Way Forward: A Five Point-Approach.”

61 David Katz, “Reforming the Village War: The Afghanistan Conflict,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2011, pp. 21-2.

62 Hoh to Amb. Powell.

Encouraging the Afghan army to broaden its ethnic base is preferable to supporting Pashtun militias and warlords.

forces.⁶³ This entails arming local tribesmen rather than warlords and is reminiscent of what the Afghan government once denoted the Afghan Militia Forces (AMF). The AMF had been largely disarmed and demobilized by 2005 in favor of a national army, yet there is no reason why a police program cannot coexist with and supplement a more ethnically representative army. Finally, it should be made clear to the Taliban that any future hosting of al-Qaeda militants or anti-Western aggression emanating from areas under their control would be met with severe counterterrorism retaliatory strikes.

On the other hand, a broader approach to regional negotiations is required, which can address the problem of the strategic depth policy of the Pakistani military and intelligence forces. Abandoning this policy will not only translate into ending support for Islamist militant groups but also into cracking down on them, particularly on the Taliban Shura in Quetta.

Above all, Washington should recognize that Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Iran, Russia, and China—though having a vested interest in preventing the Taliban from returning to power—are reluctant to legitimate a large, foreign military presence in Afghanistan. The Uzbeks, in particular, fear that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan will offer support to their own Islamist movement. New Delhi is concerned with a more aggressive Pakistani pursuit of the strategic depth policy while the Iranian and Chinese governments are worried about potential Taliban support for Baloch and Uighur Islamist militants. However, Tehran, presently confident that the Taliban will not retake Kabul, is reportedly extending them support.⁶⁴ This is not so much a means of expanding Iranian influence in Afghanistan as it is a ploy to keep U.S. forces bogged down in an unwinnable counterinsurgency campaign, diverting attention from Tehran's nuclear program and preventing the possibility of a preemptive U.S. strike on

these facilities.

A multilateral agreement involving these countries, the United States, and other NATO members,

aimed at militarily neutralizing Afghanistan and incorporating Pakistan into this framework, should, therefore, be devised. The signatories should agree to respect Afghan independence and military neutrality.⁶⁵ This would mean, for example, that the Indian military could not operate out of Afghanistan, which could assuage Islamabad's fears of New Delhi's regional expansion that has partly fed the belief in the necessity of strategic depth. Likewise, Islamabad's chief ally Beijing, not having to fear the possibility of permanent U.S. bases in Afghanistan, could help pressure the Pakistanis to abandon strategic depth in return for economic cooperation on projects in Afghanistan like the Aynak copper mine, in which Beijing has invested \$3 billion.⁶⁶ Such an incentive could entice the Islamabad government to join the accord if one adds negotiated compromises over issues such as the British-imposed Durand border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which the former does not accept.⁶⁷ It is paramount that the consequences of strategic depth in terms of Pakistani stability be discussed openly in these regional negotiations. If the ISI and the Pakistani army were convinced of the security threat emanating from support for various militant groups, they would be much more likely to abandon their expansionist policy. To this end, Washington should also offer to end drone strikes in Pakistani territory, placing responsibility for tackling the militants in Pakistan in the hands of the country's own security forces.

Only by adopting this new approach can stability be achieved for U.S. security interests at both the Afghan and regional levels. Persisting in the present strategy, by contrast, is an assured recipe for disaster.



65 Selig Harrison, "How to Leave Afghanistan without Losing," *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 24, 2010.

66 Anatol Lieven, "China Is Key to America's Afghan Endgame," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2010.

67 Harrison, "How to Leave Afghanistan without Losing."

63 Fox News, Mar. 8, 2011.

64 See, for example, *The Long War Journal*, Aug. 6, 2010.