

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2640
October 5, 2009

Shortsighted U.S. Policies on Afghanistan to Bring Long-Term Problems

Lisa Curtis and James Phillips

I absolutely believe that al-Qaeda and the threat of al-Qaeda and Taliban senior leadership are critical to stability in the region... But I also believe that a strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a shortsighted strategy.

—U.S. and NATO Forces Commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal, speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 1, 2009

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the outcome of the current White House debate on Afghanistan to the future of vital U.S. national security interests. Early discussions have been characterized by wishful thinking about the U.S.'s ability to negotiate a political solution in the near term and confusion about the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. A shortsighted view of the long-entrenched problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan risks plunging the region into deeper instability, thus reversing recent gains against al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban.

The success of increased drone strikes against al-Qaeda and senior Taliban leaders in Pakistan's tribal border areas over the last year has apparently led some U.S. officials to mistakenly conclude that these types of operations alone can end the threat from al-Qaeda and its extremist allies. Analysis of the Taliban and its evolution over the last 15 years reveals, however, that its ideology, operational capabilities, and close ties with al-Qaeda and other Pakistan-based extremist organizations allows the movement to wield tremendous influence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus the U.S. cannot

hope to uproot extremism from the region without denying the Taliban the ability to again consolidate power in Afghanistan.¹

Voices in Pakistan. There have been several positive developments in Pakistan over the last six months, such as the Pakistan military's thrust into the Swat Valley to evict pro-Taliban elements and significant improvement in U.S.–Pakistani joint operations along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border that led to the elimination of Baitullah Mehsud in August. Moreover, the Pakistani military is reportedly preparing for an offensive in South Waziristan, where al-Qaeda and other extremists have been deeply entrenched for the last few years.

But this recent success in Pakistan should not mislead U.S. policymakers into thinking that the U.S. can turn its attention away from Afghanistan. In fact, now is the time to demonstrate military

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2640.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

resolve in Afghanistan so that al-Qaeda and its affiliates will be squeezed on both sides of the border.

If the U.S. scales back the mission in Afghanistan at a time when the Taliban views itself as winning the war there, it is possible that the recent gains in Pakistan will be squandered. Anti-extremist constituencies in Pakistan that are fighting for their lives and the future of Pakistan are begging the U.S. to “stay the course” in Afghanistan, with full knowledge that a U.S. retreat would embolden extremists region-wide. Washington should listen to these voices.

Negotiation from Position of Weakness Equals Surrender. There appears to be some wishful thinking within the Obama Administration regarding the U.S.’s ability to negotiate a political solution with the Taliban in the near term. A survey of the failed attempts by U.S. diplomats in the late 1990s to convince the Taliban to improve their record on human rights and to turn over Osama bin Laden should inform current U.S. deliberations about the efficacy of such attempts at engagement.

After eight years of battling coalition forces, the Taliban ideology is even more anti-West and visceral now than it was in the 1990s, and the bonds between al-Qaeda and the senior Taliban leadership are stronger. In addition to close ties forged on the battlefield and congruent ideological goals, the symbiotic relationship between the two Islamist organizations has been reinforced by intermarriage. For example, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the top leader of the Taliban, is reportedly married to one of bin Laden’s daughters.

Despite these strong ties, there is a perpetual desire in Washington to try to distinguish the Taliban leadership from al-Qaeda and its global agenda—a desire that has little basis in reality. The goals espoused by the senior Taliban leadership and al-Qaeda do not differ enough to justify separating the two organizations with regard to the threat they pose to U.S. national security interests. If the Taliban increases its influence in Afghanistan, so does al-Qaeda.

Some in the Obama Administration appear to advocate allowing the Taliban to control certain parts of Afghanistan or including their leaders in governing structures. The risk of pursuing these “top-down” negotiations right now is that the Taliban is in a relatively strong position in Afghanistan and would be able to cow moderate Afghans who support a democratic process.

A top-down negotiation with hard-line elements of the Taliban at this time would also constitute an abandonment of America’s Afghan partners who are fighting for a better future for their country. These Afghans are fighting to avoid a return to Taliban rule, which included complete disregard for citizens’ rights—particularly of women (including outlawing education for girls)—and the systematic destruction of the rich historical and cultural traditions of the country in order to force a barbaric interpretation of Islam on the Afghan people. If the U.S. caves in to the Taliban, America would be seen the world over as a weak and unreliable partner, unwilling to defend the very ideals upon which the U.S. itself is founded.

Although there are no signs that the senior Taliban leadership is ready to compromise on a political solution or break its ties with al-Qaeda’s destructive global agenda, there is advantage in pursuing local reconciliation efforts that bring the non-ideological “foot soldiers” of the Taliban into the political process. The goal of such a strategy is to put military pressure on the top Taliban leaders and to protect the population from intimidation by the Taliban while simultaneously convincing local insurgents that they are on the losing side and would benefit by laying down their arms and joining the mainstream political process.

Do Not Undermine Friends and Embolden Enemies. President Obama must give his military commanders the best chance for success by meeting their requests for the troops and resources necessary to fully implement the counterinsurgency strategy adopted by his Administration in March.² As Gen-

1. See Lisa Curtis, “Scaling Back in Afghanistan Would Jeopardize Security of U.S. Homeland,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2625, September 23, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2625.cfm>.

2. James Phillips, “Success in Afghanistan Requires Firm Presidential Leadership, Not Half-Measures,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2607, September 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm2607.cfm>.

eral McChrystal warned in his October 1 speech: “We must show resolve. Uncertainty disheartens our allies, emboldens our foe.”

If the Obama Administration chooses to deny its field commander’s request for more troops and instead seeks to engage Taliban leaders in negotiations with the vain hope that these militants will break from their al-Qaeda allies, the results would likely be disastrous. Many Afghans that currently support the Kabul government would be tempted to hedge their bets and establish ties with the Taliban, while Afghans sitting on the fence would be

much more likely to come down on the Taliban’s side. President Obama must take the long view and avoid shortsighted policies that undermine U.S. friends in Afghanistan and Pakistan while encouraging America’s enemies.

—Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center and James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.