

# WebMemo



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## Maintain Momentum in Afghanistan

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President Barack Obama's State of the Union address Tuesday night included brief words on the war in Afghanistan, where nearly 100,000 U.S. troops are deployed. While he was clear on U.S. objectives in the war when he stated, "By preventing the Taliban from establishing a stranglehold over the Afghan people, we will deny al-Qaeda the safe haven that served as a launching pad for 9/11," he also undermined overall U.S. strategy by saying that he would begin withdrawing U.S. troops this July. The U.S. should maintain a robust U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan until it is clear that the recent progress is sustainable.

In addition to scrapping arbitrary timelines for withdrawal, the Administration should take a stronger leadership role in driving political reconciliation inside Afghanistan, intensify efforts to work with Pakistan in denying the Taliban sanctuary on its side of the border, and bolster diplomatic efforts that encourage regional support for a stable, peaceful, and unified Afghanistan that is inhospitable to international terrorists.

**Don't Quit When You're Ahead.** General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, recently wrote a letter to the troops under his command commending them for recent progress in the war, according to media reports. He credited gains to the American troop surge, the growth and improving quality of the Afghan security forces, and the work of the international community in providing crucial development aid, education, and health care to the Afghan people. General Petraeus said the 30,000 additional U.S. troops sent to the Afghan theater in 2010 "halted a downward security spiral in much of the country."

Instead of reiterating the unhelpful July 2011 withdrawal date, Obama should have spent more time in his address telling the American people about these recent gains in Afghanistan and thus lifting public confidence in the ability of the United States to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. Republican leaders support the President on the war in Afghanistan, but they reject arbitrary timelines for withdrawal. As Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, stated:

Tonight, the President's speech reflected a strong commitment, which I support, to defeating insurgents in Afghanistan and rooting out al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, I am concerned that the President has placed a timeline beginning in July for the withdrawal of our troops. This sends a mixed message to our troops and to the enemies they face. I steadfastly believe that, going forward, leaders in Washington must look to our commanders on the ground when determining our troop levels.

At last November's NATO summit in Lisbon, the Administration had appeared to back away from the July 2011 withdrawal date and highlight instead 2014 as a target date for transferring security

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responsibilities to the Afghan government. It seemed the Administration had finally accepted that repeatedly talking about a July 2011 date for withdrawal was unhelpful to the overall strategy and thus had decided to alter its narrative accordingly. Obama's statement in the State of the Union, however, raises doubts about his genuine commitment to success in Afghanistan that will create confusion among America's allies and encourage its enemies to simply wait it out.

Another problem with repeating the July 2011 drawdown mantra is that it weakens Pakistan's resolve in its fight against extremists on its territory. The announcement of a withdrawal date discourages Pakistan from breaking ties with its former Taliban proxies, on whom it believes it would need to rely in the event that coalition forces depart the region prematurely. The best way to solidify Pakistan's cooperation and shift its calculations on support for the Taliban is for the U.S. to reassure the Pakistanis that it is committed to the region over the long term.

**Lead Political Reconciliation.** Succeeding in Afghanistan requires a sustained and multi-pronged commitment. Now that the tide is beginning to shift against the Taliban on the battlefield in Afghanistan, the U.S. should keep up the military pressure while also pursuing avenues for political reconciliation.

Afghan and Pakistani officials are stepping up their engagement and enhancing efforts to negotiate a peace settlement in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan High Peace Council, led by former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, visited Pakistan earlier this month. The U.S. should take a proactive role in these talks in order to protect U.S. equities and ensure that U.S. military and financial investment in the region over the past decade will not be squandered.

The Administration should counter the perception that the U.S. is war-weary and ready to strike a grand bargain, which could allow Taliban leaders friendly to al-Qaeda to return to power. Instead, the U.S. should support political reconciliation that involves all ethnic groups in Afghanistan and upholds a vision for the region that strengthens those who support democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism and weakens those who adhere to destructive, extremist ideologies.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's efforts to promote reconciliation have been inconsistent and threaten to inflame ethnic tensions among groups who fear that he will not protect their interests. The Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara ethnic minorities fear a return to the atrocities carried out against their communities during Taliban rule of the country in the late 1990s. If they conclude that the Taliban are in a position to regain influence, they are likely to re-arm and prepare for a return to civil war. The debacle last November in which Karzai was duped into negotiating with a Taliban imposter demonstrates that the U.S. and coalition strategy for political reconciliation is still at the early stages and requires more serious attention.

The Obama Administration will have an opportunity to assert a leadership role in the reconciliation process when the Afghan and Pakistani leaders come to Washington for trilateral talks some time in late February. In these talks, the goal should be to convince the Pakistan military to shift its strategy in Afghanistan so that it does not invest in the Taliban and instead develops political alternatives. While Washington should acknowledge Pakistani regional security concerns, it should also make clear to Islamabad that it is prepared to devote substantial military, economic, and diplomatic resources to the goal of preventing a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

**A Genuine Reconciliation Effort.** A hasty retreat from the fight in 2011 because of a U.S. political timetable would squander hard-fought military gains made last year and jeopardize U.S. national security by returning the battlefield advantage to the Taliban, whose leadership remains allied with al-Qaeda. Instead of talking about withdrawal timelines to score domestic political points, the Obama Administration should lead a genuine reconciliation effort between Afghanistan and Pakistan that will strengthen those who support democracy and pluralism and weaken those who support extremist ideologies that breed terrorism in the region.

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