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After bin Laden: Do Not Retreat from Afghanistan

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The killing of Osama bin Laden should strengthen U.S. resolve to stabilize Afghanistan and ensure that it does not return to serving as a safe haven for terrorists intent on attacking the U.S. homeland. While the death of bin Laden marks a turning point in the fight against global terrorism, al-Qaeda and its affiliate organizations will not dissolve immediately.

U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan beyond that which may be justified by conditions on the ground would squander the gain of eliminating bin Laden, who appears to have played a major role in directing attacks against the U.S. up until his death two weeks ago. Instead, the U.S. should build on bin Laden's death to advance its Afghanistan strategy by seeking to convince the Taliban leadership to finally break ties to al-Qaeda and join a legitimate peace process in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda v. the Taliban. The Taliban's initial public reaction to the killing of bin Laden shows no sign of compromise. Indeed, the Taliban said bin Laden's death would provide new impetus for its "jihad against the invaders."

Only time will tell whether bin Laden's demise provokes reassessment within the Taliban on the wisdom of remaining allied with al-Qaeda, whose terrorist attacks were responsible for bringing the wrath of U.S. forces on the Taliban in the first place. Talk of troop withdrawals at this crucial juncture would likely tip the balance in the wrong direction by strengthening the hands of those Taliban who advocate continuing the fight, since they could argue that it is only a matter of time before

U.S. and coalition forces depart the region. On the other hand, continued U.S. resolve against Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and in tracking al-Qaeda operatives located in Pakistan could eventually help convince Taliban leaders that it is in their interest to shun al-Qaeda and pursue talks with the coalition forces and Afghan government.

Some Members of Congress argue that because most of al-Qaeda's core leadership is now located inside Pakistani territory, the U.S. no longer needs to pursue a counterinsurgency strategy against the Taliban in Afghanistan. But this line of thinking ignores the fact that the Taliban and al-Qaeda currently maintain a symbiotic relationship. The terrorist threat spans the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, so what happens in one country directly impacts the other. Moreover, it is believed that al-Qaeda leaders provide the Taliban with crucial resources and technical battlefield skills.

Don't Sacrifice Recent Gains. While a transition to Afghan-led security is beginning, rushing U.S. troops out of the region would risk sacrificing the gains made in the past six months. A recent report by the Defense Department noted that U.S. and coalition forces have made "tangible progress" by

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arresting the momentum of the insurgency in much of Afghanistan and disrupting insurgent leadership networks.¹ Afghan security forces are increasing in size and quality and taking a larger role in security operations. This progress will allow for the transition of security responsibilities to Afghan forces in seven areas of the country this summer.

The Administration last fall backed away from the July 2011 withdrawal date that President Obama initially announced in December 2009 and has more recently emphasized 2014 as the end date for combat operations in Afghanistan. U.S. officials apparently recognized how damaging the July 2011 withdrawal date was to the overall U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and wisely decided to change course. NATO also agreed to the 2014 timeline last year.

There is concern that those in the Administration who originally pushed for a compressed timeline for withdrawal will seek to use the bin Laden killing to rekindle their arguments for a speedy decrease in U.S. force levels in Afghanistan. U.S. military commanders on the ground are best placed to make assessments and recommendations about the pace and scope of any U.S. troop withdrawals. They have indicated that it is too early to determine the impact of bin Laden's death on the status of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

The Way Forward. Instead of using the bin Laden operation to justify large-scale troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers should seek to leverage the development to consolidate gains made on the battlefield over the past six months. This is possible only if current U.S. troop levels remain largely the same in key areas in the south that have recently come under NATO/Afghan

control. While some troop withdrawals appear inevitable this summer, they should be minimal and based solely on conditions on the ground.

The U.S. should simultaneously seek to convince the Taliban that they stand a greater chance of playing a role in Afghan politics if they break ties with al-Qaeda and seek talks with the coalition and Afghan forces. The U.S. should take advantage of the confusion that bin Laden's death has likely caused within the Taliban movement. The Taliban must be weighing the impact of bin Laden's death on the future of al-Qaeda and its ability to stay unified, project influence, and attract financing and new recruits. The U.S. should demonstrate that it is committed to taking down the rest of the al-Qaeda leadership to convince the Taliban that its continued association with the group will jeopardize its own future.

No Retreat. Bin Laden's death may signal a turning point in the fight against terrorism. But to use it as an excuse for rapidly withdrawing troops from Afghanistan is shortsighted and would likely spell disaster for the region, where a plethora of Islamist extremist groups threaten stability in both Afghanistan and nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Any arbitrary U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would open the door for the Taliban to regain influence in the region and allow al-Qaeda and its affiliate organizations to regroup and revitalize. The U.S. instead needs to press its advantage in Afghanistan and demonstrate that it is committed to helping ensure long-term stability in the region.

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1. U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces*, April 2011, at http://www.defense.gov/news/1230_1231Report.pdf (May 17, 2011).