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U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: Costs of Accelerating Troop Withdrawal Too High

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The situation in Afghanistan has spiraled downward over the past 10 days, but before making hasty decisions on next steps in Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers need to consider what has contributed to this ominous turn of events and what options there are for adjusting the U.S. strategy to avoid further such incidents. U.S. policymakers should also be aware that leaving Afghanistan prematurely would likely lead to the revival of al-Qaeda and increase the threat of further attacks on the U.S. homeland.

Clarify Strategy. President Barack Obama's laser-like focus on timelines for troop withdrawals over the past two years has signaled that the U.S. is more interested in getting its troops out of the country than in achieving its goals. This has led Afghan President Hamid Karzai to become a less reliable partner for the

U.S. as he seeks to hedge against an early U.S. drawdown. As events over the past 10 days demonstrate, the U.S. cannot carry out the mission in Afghanistan without reliable Afghan partners.

The manner in which the Administration has sought to engage the Taliban has raised further questions about U.S. strategy. The U.S. needs to take into account the views of Afghan civil society and coordinate its peace moves more closely with the Karzai administration. The public disagreement between U.S. and Afghan officials over the opening of a Taliban office in Doha, Qatar, revealed weakness in the strategy and gave the impression that talking with the Taliban was leading to splits between Washington and Kabul. Moving forward, the U.S. should be more transparent about the negotiations with the Taliban and reassure Afghans that it will not sacrifice the progress on human rights, including for women, made over the past decade.

U.S. over-anxiousness to negotiate with the Taliban could jeopardize U.S. counterterrorism objectives and lead to greater instability throughout the region. Premature concessions to the insurgents would provide the movement with legitimacy and

discredit peaceful political players. The U.S. misread the intentions of Taliban leaders and underestimated the strength of their bonds with al-Qaeda when it sought to engage them before 9/11. U.S. officials should not make the same mistake again.

The military gains made against the Taliban over the past 18 months are still fragile. While it may be appropriate for the Administration to keep doors open for negotiations with the Taliban, it would be unwise to agree to major concessions—such as releasing Taliban leaders from prison—before the group has renounced international terrorism or shown willingness to participate in a peaceful political process.

Reduce Reliance on Pakistan. The Obama Administration has sought to include Pakistan in its efforts to reconcile with the Taliban, even though Pakistan continues to serve as a sanctuary for Taliban and Haqqani network militants fighting coalition forces in Afghanistan. Islamabad views the sanctuaries as a bargaining chip to force its way into the negotiations process. Washington needs to make clear that Islamabad's role in the talks depends on its willingness to use its leverage with Taliban insurgents to bring them to compromise.

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The U.S. should also communicate that while it is open to engaging the Taliban, it is not desperate to do so and has other options it can pursue. Political reconciliation is desirable but only if it contributes to the goal of ensuring that Afghanistan never again serves as a safe haven for global terrorists.

Pakistani intelligence officials understand better than anyone how to break apart the Taliban–Haqqani–al-Qaeda nexus. Pakistani security officials have had close relationships with members of these groups for three decades and likely have a well-developed understanding of the dynamics among the organizations and the strengths and weaknesses of each of the groups’ leaders. But if Pakistan is unwilling to use its leverage to help bring genuine peace to Afghanistan, there are other policies—aside from pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban—that the U.S. can pursue. Even as the U.S. is drawing down combat forces, it can continue to provide diplomatic, financial, and military support to allies in the region that oppose the Taliban.

Policy Recommendations.

Moving forward, the U.S. should:

- **Firm up the alliance with the Afghan government.** The U.S. and Karzai administrations need each other to counter the Taliban and stabilize the country. Both countries need to prioritize completing the Strategic Partnership Agreement talks, which will help demonstrate that the U.S. will remain engaged financially, diplomatically, and even militarily to some degree in the country long after 2014.
- **Stop focusing on time-lines for withdrawal.** The Administration’s continued focus on withdrawing troops gives the impression that the U.S. is rushing for the exits, which has led to uncertainty and fear among Afghans. The scope and pace of withdrawals over the next two years need to be driven by U.S. military commanders on the ground, not by U.S. domestic electoral politics.
- **Exercise caution in approaching negotiations with the Taliban.** The U.S. should establish a process of negotiations that is jointly led with the current Afghan government and puts in place measures that guarantee that the Taliban will participate in a normal political process. The U.S. should verify that the Taliban has broken ranks with al-Qaeda and its allies and that negotiations with the Taliban do not interfere with the U.S. ability to reach a Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Karzai government that allows the U.S. to keep troops stationed in Afghanistan for training and counterterrorism purposes after 2014.
- **Reduce dependence on Pakistan.** Washington and Islamabad have opposing goals for Afghanistan that can no longer be swept under the rug. Pakistani officials often claim to their U.S. counterparts that they lack capacity to take on terrorist sanctuaries within their borders, but these claims are questionable and need to be tested. At the least,

the U.S. should expect Pakistani authorities to punish individuals involved in supporting terrorism or harboring Osama bin Laden. Unless Pakistan demonstrates a willingness to actively squeeze Taliban insurgents on its soil and use its leverage to bring them to compromise with the U.S. and Afghan authorities, the U.S. should consider alternative policy options to stem terrorism in the region. The U.S. and NATO partners can look beyond Pakistan and toward other like-minded partners in the region to help stabilize Afghanistan. While it is in America’s interest to encourage stability in Pakistan, it is also vital to U.S. national security that international terrorists are rooted out of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Change in Strategy. Bin Laden’s death last May was a victory for the U.S. in its fight against terrorism. But if the Taliban is able to regain influence in Afghanistan without breaking its ties to international terrorism, it would provide an opportunity for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups to revive and regroup in the region. While events have taken a negative turn in Afghanistan over the past week, a change in U.S. strategy in Afghanistan that demonstrates more resolve and patience would help calm nerves in the region and restore U.S. credibility with the Afghan people.

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