



Executive Summary

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U.S. POLICY AND STRATEGY TOWARD AFGHANISTAN AFTER 2014

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As the United States continues to withdraw troops from and prepares to leave Afghanistan, the country faces multifaceted and significant challenges of governance, economy, security, and regional dynamics. These are all occurring within the context of the potential for an expanded civil war when international forces leave the country. It is time to refocus from the conflict itself and ask hard, but realistic, strategic and policy questions as to the future of Afghanistan, and what role, if any, the United States should play in shaping that future.

On October 7, 2001, the United States began its air campaign against Afghanistan's Taliban. The initial target list was exhausted after a few days, and, of course, the Taliban regime completely collapsed by mid-November. These were heady times for the United States, who seemingly had the international public's *carte blanche* as to its policies and strategies toward Afghanistan. Once it was clear that the Taliban regime was over, the United States, in conjunction with the United Nations (UN), held the Bonn meetings in December 2001 ostensibly to map the political future for Afghanistan.

After nearly 13 years, over 2,200 lives and over U.S. \$650 billion later, the United States appears to be on the verge of concluding its long military campaign in Afghanistan. Despite the cost and challenges, the reality that Afghanistan still ranks consistently in the bottom 10 countries for human development and corruption, and the uneven but clear progress that the country has made in many areas, the United States will soon scale down its involvement in Afghanistan, and quite possibly pull all uniformed military forces out of Afghanistan quite rapidly. Additionally, the widely reported corruption that exists throughout the Afghan

government; the resilient Taliban-led insurgency; and a litany of Western blunders, mishaps, and tragedies have all helped to undermine Western interest in the Afghan War. Recent surveys suggest that public support for the war is dwindling in Western and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries, with 75 percent of European respondents and 68 percent of U.S. respondents supporting either withdrawal or immediate troop reductions, according to the German Marshall Fund Annual Transatlantic Trends Survey. Alternatively, perhaps the declining interest in Afghanistan is connected to a widespread popular and policymaker belief, especially since the 2011 Abbottabad Raid that killed Osama bin Laden, that U.S. and NATO war aims in Afghanistan have been achieved, or at least achieved to a sufficient degree given the current fiscal and political climate.

This monograph answers six key questions about U.S. policy and strategy for Afghanistan. First, did the United States have or develop critical national interests in Afghanistan and its immediate neighborhood on or because of the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11)? The history of Afghan-American relations shows that the United States never had vital interests in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, when two vital national interests immediately came into being:

1. Destroy al-Qaeda and degrade its network of support, both to exact retribution and to prevent its ability to do further harm to the United States; and,
2. Make it impossible for anti-American terrorists to again operate from Afghanistan or its immediate neighborhood.

Second, was overall U.S. strategy to pursue those new vital interests successful and appropriate? We

identify at least four major strategic approaches: counterterrorism, nation-building, conventional military operations, and counterinsurgency. These strategic approaches were not nested together well; indeed, efforts were often overlapping and even duplicative. Different entities within the national security architecture had responsibility for different parts of the strategy. Thus, although the strategy was perhaps clumsy and overly expensive, most Americans have come to believe that our Afghanistan strategies have achieved our post-9/11 national interests, or at least as much as they are likely to.

Third, what outside conditions shaping U.S. involvement in Afghanistan exist now? We examine four major factors: the modern-day multipolarity of the region (the “new Great Game”); the war-weariness among Western publics; the technological and military advances that have made counterterrorism less labor-intensive, reducing the required footprint; and the fragile economic conditions across the globe. Each of these factors influence and possibly constrain current and future U.S. strategy toward Afghanistan and its surrounding region.

Fourth, do new vital and/or important national interests not met by our earlier strategies exist in this region? We identify no vital interests and four important interests that now exist in and around Afghanistan, which are:

1. Contain or prevent the threat of terrorist attacks on the homeland or American interests abroad;
2. Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from the region;
3. Ensure regional stability; and,
4. Forestall rising peer competitors in the region.

Fifth, what strategy(s) should the United States adopt or emphasize to achieve any vital and/or important national interests in/around Afghanistan? To pursue the current interests at a reasonable cost, given Afghanistan’s relative distance from the United States but closeness to the Asian powers, we recommend a three-part strategy for post-2014 Afghanistan, as follows:

1. Finish destroying al-Qaeda;
2. Continue rebuilding Afghanistan; and,
3. Regionalize strategy.

Finally, what risks and challenges are associated with new policies and/or strategies? In the short term, Afghanistan is set to undergo a major political

transition, as post-Taliban President Hamid Karzai finishes his second term in office in 2014 and will have to give way to a new President. Also, the regional multipolar power struggle means that all actors will continue to pursue their interests inside and around Afghanistan. Exacerbating this problem are the growing global Great Power rivalries between the United States and both a rising China and a resurgent Russia, which are playing out in multiple arenas by way of many actors and various strategies, which may cause the United States to shift its focus to some other area(s). Another complication is that long-term and large-scale Western military presence in Afghanistan cannot be contemplated, given the difficulty in securing an adequate Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Afghanistan and the United States. Finally, all of the foregoing suggests that any substantial American withdrawal or disengagement from Afghanistan will lead to a deepening of the civil war already underway there.

This monograph was completed in April 2014, and therefore does not include mention of more recent developments such as the U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement. However, the problems and themes it describes are permanent ones, and continue to present important considerations for protecting the interests of the United States and its allies in the region in the longer term.

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