

War Termination in Afghanistan

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The Afghanistan debate often focuses on the short term. Is violence up or down relative to last year? Is the Taliban stronger or weaker? Are Afghan government forces ready yet to take over from international troops? This is understandable. Certainly there are many important short term challenges to overcome – from the need to negotiate a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) this fall to the need to hold an acceptable Afghan election in the spring or the need for a successful transition to Afghan security responsibility by the end of 2014.

Yet the more important issue is the long run. How do we get from transition in 2014 to an end to the war that would secure the aims for which we now fight? Short run policy is just a means to this end. Of course failure in the short run would moot the question. But success in the short run is not sufficient, and near term policies should be judged in light of their effects on the post-2014 prognosis, which is when our

real interests will either be won or lost. The President often talks about 2014 as though the war will be over then; as he said in January, “[By] the end of 2014 . . . this long war will come to a responsible end.”¹ But the war will not end in 2014. The U.S. role may end, in whole or in part, but the war will continue – and its ultimate outcome is very much in doubt.

If current trends continue, U.S. combat troops are likely to leave behind a stalemated war in 2014. The Taliban is unlikely to be able to defeat the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) or to take major urban centers such as Kabul or Kandahar. But the ANSF is also unlikely to be able to drive the Taliban from their remaining strongholds in Afghanistan’s east, south, and southwest, and the Taliban are unlikely to surrender or stop fighting simply because they cannot break rivals’ hold on major cities or because an ostensible foreign occupation is mostly gone. In fact the Taliban are likely to remain militarily viable for the foreseeable future. If so, the result will be a deadlock which the ANSF can probably sustain, but only as long as the U.S. Congress pays the multibillion-dollar annual bills needed to keep them fighting. The war is thus likely to become a contest in stamina between the Congress and the Taliban. Only if the Congress is more patient than the Taliban (or if the Taliban prove much less resilient in the next decade than they have been in the last one) can the ANSF win this contest outright.

If the ANSF is not able to defeat the Taliban on the battlefield, this leaves only two plausible long term outcomes to the war. One would be a negotiated compromise settlement with the Taliban at some point, sooner or later. The other is defeat for the Afghan government via eventual defunding of the ANSF war effort.

If defeat is to be avoided, then the purpose of the war is now to shape the terms of a future settlement to make them more favorable, and to make the settlement more sustainable once reached. And this implies that near term investments of lives and dollars make sense only if they facilitate an acceptable, sustainable, deal. There are at least three critical requirements for this which have not yet been met, and which current approaches may not meet unless we alter today’s policies.

First, we will need to get serious about governance reform in Afghanistan. Any imaginable deal will legalize the Taliban as a political party and provide them a set-aside of offices or ministries in the government. If the non-Taliban alternatives in Afghanistan continue to escalate their predation and political exclusion then a legalized Taliban will eventually expand its influence through the political process, and U.S. aims will ultimately be lost. The only way to sustain the terms of a compromise settlement is to ensure domestic political competition in Afghanistan than can contain a legalized Taliban’s influence after the deal

¹ United Press International, “Obama: Afghan war to end in 2014,” January 11, 2013, available at http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2013/01/11/Obama-Afghan-war-to-end-in-2014/UPI-33701357891200/

is signed. And this will require that we accept risk to pursue governance reform in a way that we have been unwilling to do heretofore.

Second, the U.S. Congress will have to fully fund the ANSF for many years to come. Negotiations with the Taliban will be difficult and even if they succeed the process will be long. In the meantime the ANSF will have to stave off defeat while talks grind forward. The ANSF can probably maintain a military stalemate indefinitely, but only if they receive large-scale financial support from the West – an ANSF large enough to hold its ground will be much more expensive than any Afghan government can afford. If Congressional appropriations shrink and the ANSF collapses, the Taliban will be able to seize what they want without concessions and U.S. aims will be forfeited.

Finally, the U.S. Congress will have to accept compromise with the Taliban. This will not be pleasant. The Taliban are brutal, loathsome actors with much innocent blood on their hands, and they represent an ideology contrary to deeply held American values. It would be easy to oppose concessions to such a group. But if we oppose concessions then we have to face the alternatives realistically. Unless we are willing to fund a much larger, longer, U.S. war effort than anything currently proposed, then we have no means to end the war militarily. A no-concessions policy thus means either funding the ANSF at multi-billion dollar annual expenditures indefinitely or accepting defeat. Unless the Congress is willing to accept the former or tolerate the latter, the only alternative is compromise.

If we are unwilling to do these things, a continuation of current policies will eventually yield outright defeat on the battlefield. This would not be a “responsible end” to the war – it would be closer to what the Nixon Administration was willing to accept in the final stages of the Vietnam conflict, a “decent interval” between the United States’ withdrawal and the eventual defeat of its local ally. And this decent interval would be purchased at the cost of more American lives and possibly another \$100 billion or more of the taxpayers’ money, depending on the time it takes for the end to arrive. A strong case can be made for taking the steps needed to make settlement possible. But if we are not willing to do this, a better choice than slower, costlier defeat would be to get all the way out now and avoid wasting more lives and resources in the meantime. For the United States, losing per se is not the worst-case scenario; losing expensively is. Yet that is exactly what a myopic focus on short-term transition without the political work needed to settle the war will probably produce.

To make this case, I first review American interests in the war to establish the minimum conditions that would constitute an acceptable outcome. I then consider the military prognosis on the battlefield and argue that the war is likely to remain stalemated as long as the ANSF is funded. Next I assess the prospects for a negotiated settlement that could secure our interests, and I conclude by evaluating the steps we would need to take to make such a settlement viable.

U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

The United States has many aspirations for Afghanistan. We would like its economy to be prosperous, its children to be educated, its government to be democratic, the rights of its women and minorities to be respected, and its people to enjoy a decent chance for a better life. We seek these things for any country in the international system, so surely we would want them for Afghanistan, too. Normally, however, we would pursue this broader agenda via peaceful economic, diplomatic, and political means. When it comes to killing in the name of the state via warfare, by contrast, there is a much narrower range of potentially vital national interests that might justify such extreme measures.

In fact, they are essentially twofold: that Afghanistan not become a base for terrorism against the West, and that chaos in Afghanistan not destabilize its neighbors, especially Pakistan.

The first interest is the most discussed – and the weaker argument for waging war. The United States invaded Afghanistan in the first place to destroy the al Qaeda safe haven there, and Afghanistan's role in the 9-11 attacks clearly justified this. But al Qaeda central is no longer based in Afghanistan, nor has it been since early 2002; it is now headquartered across the border in Pakistan. The Taliban movement in Afghanistan is clearly linked with al Qaeda and sympathetic to it, but there is little evidence of significant al Qaeda infrastructure within Afghanistan today that could threaten the U.S. homeland in any direct way. If today's Afghan government collapsed, if it were replaced with a neo-Taliban regime, or if the Taliban were able to secure real political control over some major contiguous fraction of Afghan territory then perhaps al Qaeda could re-establish a real haven there.

But this risk is shared with a wide range of other weak states in many parts of the world, from Yemen to Somalia to Syria to Djibouti to Eritrea to Sudan to the Philippines or even parts of Latin America or central, west, or North Africa, among other possibilities – including Pakistan. Many of these offer al Qaeda prospects superior in important ways to Afghanistan's. Syria, for example, is richer and far better connected to the outside world than is primitive, land-locked Afghanistan with its minimal communications and transportation systems. Pakistan, of course, is a nuclear power. Afghanistan does enjoy a historical connection with al Qaeda, and it is important to deny them sanctuary on the Afghan side of the Durand Line. But its intrinsic importance is no greater than many other potential havens – and probably smaller than many. We clearly cannot afford to wage protracted warfare on an Afghan scale simply to deny al Qaeda potential safe havens anywhere terrorists might go sometime in the future; we would run out of money and troops long before al Qaeda ran out of prospective sanctuaries.

The more important U.S. interest in Afghanistan is indirect: to prevent Afghan chaos from destabilizing its Pakistani neighbor. With a population of 193 million (six times Afghanistan's), a GDP of over \$230 billion (over ten times Afghanistan's) and an actual, existing, functional nuclear arsenal, a failed Pakistan would be a much more dangerous sanctuary for al Qaeda. And the risk of government collapse there may be in the same ballpark as Afghanistan, at least in the medium to long term. Pakistan is already at war with internal Islamist insurgents allied to al Qaeda, and by most measures that war is not going well. Should the Pakistani insurgency succeed in collapsing the state or toppling the government, the risk of nuclear weapons falling into al Qaeda's hands would be grave indeed. In fact, given the difficulties terrorists face in acquiring usable nuclear weapons, Pakistani state collapse is the likeliest scenario for a nuclear-armed al Qaeda.

Pakistani state collapse, moreover, is a danger over which the United States has limited influence. The United States is now so unpopular in Pakistan that we have very limited options there. Certainly we have no meaningful prospect of deploying major ground forces to assist the Pakistani government in counterinsurgency. U.S. air strikes can harass insurgents and terrorists within Pakistan, but the inevitable collateral damage arouses harsh public opposition that could itself threaten the weak government's stability. U.S. aid is easily – and routinely – diverted to purposes remote from countering Islamist insurgents, such as the maintenance of military counterweights to India, graft and patronage, or even support for Islamist groups seen by Pakistani authorities as potential allies against their Indian neighbor.

The net result is a major threat over which Americans have very limited influence. With such a limited ability to make a bad situation much better, it is especially important to avoid making it any worse than it needs to be.

And failure in Afghanistan could make the prognosis in Pakistan much worse. All states worry about instability on their borders. For a state as internally threatened as Pakistan, this danger is greater than most. The Taliban are a transnational Pashtun movement that is active on either side of the Durand Line and sympathetic to other Pakistani Islamist insurgents. By many accounts, their links to anti-Pakistani militants are growing as these groups expand and seek allies to extend their reach and power. If Afghanistan descended into chaos, a combination of refugee flows, safe haven in an anarchic Afghanistan beyond Pakistani state control, and the calling in of IOUs by anti-Pakistani militants who had assisted the Afghan Taliban in part to secure the latter's support against Islamabad could eventually be enough to tip an already-unstable Pakistan into collapse. Much has been made of the threat Pakistani base camps pose to Afghan government stability, but this danger works both ways: instability in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to the civil government in Pakistan, and the latter is a greater threat to U.S. interests than the former.

These security interests are real but they are not unlimited. Afghanistan's potential effect on its neighbor is genuine, but indirect. Nor does failure in Afghanistan predetermine failure in Pakistan: if Pakistan puts its own house in order and marshals the full resources of the state behind its own counterinsurgency effort then it could survive in spite of chaos on its border. A series of uncertain events would have to break in unfavorable ways for an Afghan failure to yield a nuclear-armed terror threat from south Asian militants. The consequences for our own security if this chain of events did unfold would be radically grave, but the likelihood of this should not be overestimated. Americans have invested major resources to combat unlikely but grave threats in the past (the Cold War nuclear arms race had much the same quality), but that does not mean we should always do so, or that it necessarily makes sense to do so here. Reasonable people can thus differ on whether our interests in Afghanistan warrant American warmaking to secure, or whether they merit the scale of effort we are now expending.

But to the extent that our interests in Afghanistan are worth waging war to secure, these interests turn centrally on denying the use of Afghan territory by Pakistani militants, and secondarily on denying the use of that territory to al Qaeda or other terrorists who might use it to strike the West. Success or failure in the war is properly judged against these criteria.

The Military Prognosis in Afghanistan

The war we are waging to secure these interests has made important but incomplete progress since 2009. Prior to that time, the Taliban had been expanding their influence in much of the country's east and south, they were solidifying de facto control of much of the central Helmand River Valley, and they were posing a growing threat to Kandahar and even Kabul. The troop surge announced by the President in fall 2009, however, coupled with other Western reinforcements and a major expansion of the ANSF, reversed this momentum and re-established government control in much of Afghanistan's south and southwest.

Yet the results fell short of stabilizing the country as a whole. Important areas in Afghanistan's east and some parts of the south remain under Taliban control. And while the surge weakened the Taliban it did not destroy them or their ability to inflict casualties. When the original 2009 campaign plan was written it was hoped that the surge would clear the Taliban from Afghanistan's critical terrain and so weaken the insurgency that the war would be close to a finish by the time Afghans took over. This has not happened. Tight deadlines for U.S. withdrawal combined with Taliban resilience have left insurgents in control of enough critical terrain to remain a threat well after 2014.

To date there are few signs of any looming collapse in the Taliban's will to defend these strongholds or expand their influence beyond them. Their funding base and sanctuaries in Pakistan will remain viable for the foreseeable future. And they have shown themselves still capable of inflicting serious casualties through

the 2013 fighting season. Some now hope that when U.S. combat forces withdraw in 2014 this will undermine the Taliban's status as opponents of foreign occupation, and that this will weaken their ability to recruit and motivate fighters. Yet the withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces in 1989 had no such effect on the Mujaheddin, who continued to fight through more than a decade of subsequent bitter warfare over the spoils; there is ample historical precedent for Afghan militants to fight on long after foreign forces' withdrawal. Nor will the 2014 transition actually remove all foreign "occupiers" – if a follow-on force of Western advisors or counterterrorist special forces remains, this will offer all the justification the Taliban needs to continue a war they claim is motivated by resistance to foreign occupation. After all, the Western footprint in the country when the insurgency began was hardly omnipresent; if 25,000 Western troops in 2004 were sufficient to motivate the Taliban to mount an insurgency then would a residual of perhaps as much as half that many in 2015 really do otherwise? Overall, the Taliban have shown remarkable patience and resilience from 2002-2014, and there is little reason to suppose that they will cease fighting or lose effectiveness any time in the foreseeable future. The ANSF will thus inherit a more demanding job than originally planned in 2009.

The Afghan government forces that will take over this job are a mixed lot. Their best units will probably be capable of modest offensive action to clear Taliban strongholds; others' corruption and ineptitude will leave them part of the problem rather than the solution for the foreseeable future. Opinions on the net potential of this amalgam vary; on balance, a reasonable optimist would assess the ANSF as likely to hold most or all of the terrain the surge cleared but unlikely to expand the government's control much beyond that. ANSF casualties were heavy this fighting season, but there is little evidence that this broke any units' will to fight or undermined their ability to hold ground over any large area of the country. Depending on the size of the post-2014 ANSF structure, they may have to contract their zone of control somewhat to ensure adequate security in the areas they hold. They will continue to need assistance from Western enablers for many years (especially in the form of medical evacuation, air support, logistical support, military intelligence, and planning). And they will probably not be able to wrest control of established Taliban strongholds any time soon, if ever. But their performance this year gives little reason to assume that they will collapse – it is reasonable to expect them to hold their ground as long as they are supported by the necessary enablers, and especially, as long as someone pays the bills to keep the ANSF operating.

Those bills will be substantial, and it is the U.S. Congress who will have to pay most of them. The Coalition has always understood that an ANSF big enough to hold what the surge gained would be vastly more expensive than the Afghan government could afford. Last year's ANSF operating budget of \$6.5 billion was more than twice the Afghan government's entire federal revenue. Most of the money to keep the ANSF fighting will thus have to come from abroad, and the lion's share from the U.S.

In principle this funding should look like a bargain. Current estimates for the annual cost of a post-transition ANSF often fall in the \$4-6 billion range; even \$10 billion a year would be tiny relative to the nearly \$120 billion the U.S. spent to wage war with mostly American troops in 2011. The further one gets from 2011, however, the less salient that contrast becomes. And other natural comparisons are much less congenial. Annual U.S. military aid to Israel, for example, was \$3.1 billion in FY 2013; U.S. requirements for the ANSF will surely exceed this for a long time, and will probably exceed combined U.S. military aid to both Israel and Egypt together for the foreseeable future.

If the ANSF's appropriations are cut back, their military viability would erode quickly. The Administration appears likely to seek the smallest ANSF appropriation they can, cutting expenditures back as far as possible to make the bill easier to pay. This means, however, that even modest reductions below the requested levels would force the ANSF to shrink below the troop strength needed to hold the line – and a shrinking pool of patronage money could quickly split the institution along factional lines. Either result risks a return to the atomized civil warfare of the 1990s, yet this chaos would provide exactly the kind of terrorist havens that the Coalition has fought since 2001 to prevent. A stalemated war is strategically tolerable for Americans (if tragic for Afghans), but chaos represents defeat, and stalemate can only be maintained as long as the U.S. Congress funds it.

The Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement

If Congressional funding is sustained forever, then the Afghan stalemate can probably be maintained forever. But if not, then the only way to end the war will be through a negotiated settlement in which both sides must compromise.

Yet there is widespread skepticism on the prognosis for such talks. Many doubt the Taliban are serious. After all, they assassinated Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of Karzai's High Peace Council and the Kabul official charged with moving talks forward. If they can simply wait the U.S. out and win outright, why should they make concessions in a serious negotiation? Others see the Taliban seeking only legitimation and a soapbox for political grandstanding. Many worry that the sheer complexity of talks involving multiple Taliban factions, their Pakistani patrons, the government of Afghanistan, the government of the U.S., other allies, and intermediaries such as Qatar, few of whom trust the others, will prove too difficult. Many U.S. conservatives doubt the Administration's motives in the talks, fearing giveaways to cover an Administration rush to the exits and worrying that negotiation signals weakness. American progressives fear the loss of hard-won gains for Afghan women and minorities in concessions to the Taliban. Many Afghans, especially women's groups and non-Pashtun northerners, share such concerns; some have even threatened civil war to prevent this.

Is there any real prospect, then, for a deal offering anything more than a fig leaf to conceal policy failure? Perhaps. The Taliban have, after all, publicly expressed willingness to negotiate, and this posture incurs cost to them. The Taliban is not a monolithic actor, but a potentially fractious alliance of factions. When Mullah Omar's representatives accept talks, other factions worry about deals being made behind their backs. Taliban field commanders wonder whether the battlefield prognosis is as favorable as their leadership claims (if outright victory is near, why negotiate?), and face the challenge of motivating fighters to risk their lives when shadowy negotiations might render such sacrifice unnecessary. All of this reduces Taliban effectiveness, and none is necessary: all they needed to avoid such complications is to have declared their refusal to parley. In the meantime the Coalition would incur all the costs and potential divisions of proposing talks. The Taliban could simply have pocketed these gifts and carried on, yet they have instead declared their willingness to negotiate, accepting costs they could have averted. This implies some actual interest in a settlement of some kind.

In fact there may be good reasons for the Taliban to explore a possible deal. Omar and his allies have been living in exile for over a decade, their children are growing up as Pakistanis, and their movements are surely watched and constrained by their Pakistani patrons. Afghans are famously nationalist, and Afghan-Pakistani rivalry is old and deep; exile in Pakistan surely grates on the Afghan Taliban. Perhaps more important, they live under the constant threat of assassination by U.S. drones or commando raids – just ask Osama bin Laden or six of the last seven al Qaeda operations directors, all killed or captured in such attacks. And the war imposes costs on the Taliban, too. Stalemated warfare is an equal opportunity waste of lives and resources. They are probably able to continue indefinitely, and they will certainly not surrender simply to stanch the bleeding, but this does not mean they enjoy it or would prefer it to any possible settlement terms. Stalemate is costly enough that the Taliban might consider an offer if the process is not tantamount to capitulation.

What would such a deal comprise? In principle a bargaining space exists wherein all parties' vital interests could be preserved even if no one's ideal aims are achieved. The Taliban would have to renounce violence, break with al Qaeda, disarm, and accept something like today's Afghan constitution. In exchange they would be legalized as a political party, they would receive some set-aside of offices or parliamentary seats, and any remaining foreign forces in Afghanistan would withdraw – negotiations would turn on the scale and nature of the set-aside, and the nature of any modest changes to Afghan government policies. The Afghan government would have to accept a Taliban role in a coalition government, and the springboard for Taliban political activism this would provide. In exchange, the government would preserve the basic blueprint of today's state, and would surely command the votes needed to lead a governing coalition, at least in the near term. Pakistan would have to give up its blue sky ambitions for an Afghan puppet state under Taliban domination, but would gain a stable border and enough influence via its Taliban proxies to veto any Afghan-Indian axis that could threaten Pakistan.

The United States would have to accept the Taliban as a legal political actor with an extra-democratic guarantee of positions and influence, and the U.S. would probably forfeit any significant base structure for counterterrorism from Afghan soil. Of course this would sacrifice aims the U.S. has sought since 2001. It would put at risk the hard-won rights of Afghan women and minorities by granting the Taliban a voice in Afghan politics. And it would mean legalizing and offering a share of power to an organization with the blood of thousands of Americans on its hands. This would be far from an ideal outcome.

Yet if properly negotiated, it could at least preserve the two vital U.S. national interests at stake in Afghanistan: that Afghan soil not become a base for militants to attack the West, and that it not become a base for destabilizing Afghanistan's neighbors. The non-Taliban majority in a coalition government would preclude 2001-style base camps in a post-settlement Afghanistan as long as the Taliban are denied control of internal security ministries or district or provincial governments in critical border areas. By contrast, an ANSF collapse and subsequent chaos would preclude nothing. And whatever fate Afghan women and minorities suffered under a stable coalition would be far less bad than what they would face under anarchy. A compromise deal with the Taliban would be a bitter pill to swallow, but it would sacrifice far less than would defeat in a defunded war.

What is to be Done?

Absent military re-escalation to compel Taliban capitulation, we face two intellectually defensible ways forward.

One is to get serious about negotiations that aren't just Taliban surrender talks. Meeting with the Taliban is only part of this, and may be the easiest part. Seriousness on this score also demands painful political work now on at least two other fronts.

The first such front is in Afghanistan. There will be challenges getting anti-Taliban northerners to accept concessions, but the biggest problem is predatory, exclusionary misgovernance in Kabul. Any settlement will legalize the Taliban and grant them a political foothold. An acceptable deal will provide only a minority foothold initially, but the Taliban would then be free to expand it electorally if they can. Over the longer term, the containment of the Taliban's influence will thus depend on internal political competition from a viable non-Taliban alternative. Karzai's government, however, is deeply corrupt, exclusionary, and getting worse. If his successor continues this trend it will hand the Taliban their best opportunity for real power. The Taliban are not popular in Afghanistan; the reason any deal will require extra-democratic set-asides for them is because they know how unpopular they are and will surely reject a mere invitation to compete in elections without guarantees. The one political ace-in-the-hole they enjoy is a reputation for

honesty: they are seen as brutal but incorruptible. This advantage is not yet enough for them to command popular support over any meaningful part of the country, but if today's misgovernance continues to worsen, eventually even a brutal but honest movement will make headway. If a legalized Taliban eventually controls critical border districts, and its Pakistani militant allies then call in wartime IOUs to establish base camps under Taliban protection, the result could be nearly as dangerous as government military defeat. The only real insurance against this is governance reform.

To date, however, the West has been unwilling to compel reform, preferring benign "capacity building" to coercive diplomacy with Kabul. Benign assistance might be enough if the problem was just a lack of capacity, but it isn't: Afghanistan is misgoverned because its power brokers prefer this; benign capacity building via Western aid just creates better trained kleptocrats given this. Real improvement thus requires, *inter alia*, real conditionality wherein Western assistance is provided only if reforms are implemented and withheld otherwise. Without this, self-interested officials have no incentive to reform. Yet heretofore the West has been systematically unwilling to threaten to withhold assistance – the Coalition campaign plan turns on transition, and any withholding of assistance is seen chiefly as a threat to rapid creation of an Afghan civil and military administration that could take over and let Coalition troops go home. If we cannot credibly threaten to withhold something Kabul values, however, then governance will never improve. Of course, the West's potential leverage was greater when aid budgets were bigger and military resources more plentiful; the less the West can promise, the less leverage a threat to withhold it conveys. But without conditionality even vast assistance does little for governance reform, and liberal unconditional aid often makes matters worse by fueling corruption; serious conditionality could make even a smaller budget into a stronger tool for reform. To use it properly, however, means accepting the risk that we may have to reduce deliberately Afghan institutions' capacity if they continue to refuse reform. This is neither easy nor pleasant, but it is necessary if we are going to be realistic about settlement.²

The other front on which serious political work is needed is Capitol Hill. Any deal will require real concessions from the West, and will take years to negotiate. This means the Congress must sustain two potentially unpopular policies if Afghan talks are to succeed.

First, the Congress must continue funding multi-billion-dollar annual appropriations for the ANSF until the negotiations reach fruition, which is likely to be years. And these appropriations will need to continue in the face of the inevitable crises in U.S.-Afghan relations that we have seen with such frequency over the last decade. There will surely be another Afghan corruption scandal that will hit the newspapers, or another wave of Afghan protests over an accidental Koran burning, or another American advisor killed by an Afghan recipient of U.S. aid, or another occasion when an Afghan president plays to local politics by

² For a more detailed discussion of strategies for governance reform in Afghanistan under current conditions, see Stephen Biddle, "Salvaging Governance Reform in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 16, April 2012, available at: <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/salvaging-governance-reform-afghanistan/p27778>

insulting American sensibilities. If the Congressional response to such crises is to reduce the ANSF's appropriations, the result could soon be an inability to stave off defeat long enough to settle the war on acceptable terms.

Second, the Congress must accept compromise with the Taliban. This will not be easy. There are few other negotiating partners as abhorrent as these. The difficulties here can be seen in microcosm in the Administration's recent experience of trying to negotiate a mutual prisoner release with the Taliban as an early confidence building measure. Last year the Administration offered to release five Taliban detainees from Guantanamo in exchange for the Taliban releasing Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, their only American prisoner. This offer to release Guantanamo detainees produced sharp criticism from U.S. lawmakers; stung, the Administration then withdrew the offer, the Taliban charged bad faith (both on the detainee issue and on the addition of new conditions from Karzai), and the negotiations collapsed. Serious talks will provide serial opportunities for such controversies extending for years; success will require a Congressional willingness to keep the temperature of such disagreements low enough to allow the Administration to negotiate.

If the U.S. is unwilling to accept the costs a serious settlement effort requires, then the other defensible policy at this point is to cut American losses and get out now. A stay-the-course policy that cannot end the war and eventually results in its defunding is a recipe for a more expensive version of failure. Losing per se is not the worst case – losing expensively is. And continued myopic focus on short term transition without the decisions needed to settle the war is likely to produce exactly this.

Some might see the Obama administration's current policy as a hedged version of such disengagement already. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan will soon shrink to perhaps fewer than 12,000 advisers and trainers, and U.S. aid might decline to around \$4 billion a year for the ANSF and \$2–\$3 billion in economic assistance, with the advisory presence costing perhaps another \$12 billion a year. This commitment is far smaller than the 100,000 U.S. troops and over \$100 billion of 2011, and it offers some chance of muddling through to an acceptable outcome while discreetly concealing the United States' probable eventual failure behind a veil of continuing modest effort. Only in Washington, however, could up to \$20 billion a year be considered cheap. If this yielded a stable Afghanistan, it would indeed be a bargain, but if, as is likely without a settlement, it produces only a defeat drawn out over several years, it will mean needlessly wasting tens of billions of dollars. In a fiscal environment in which \$8 billion a year for the Head Start preschool program or \$36 billion a year for Pell Grant scholarships is controversial, it is hard to justify spending perhaps another \$100 billion in Afghanistan over, say, another half decade of stalemated warfare merely to disguise failure or defer its political consequences. It is harder still to ask Americans to die for such a cause. Even an advisory mission involves risk, and right now, thousands of U.S. soldiers are continuing to

patrol the country. If failure is coming, many Afghans will inevitably die, but a faster withdrawal could at least save some American lives that would be sacrificed along the slower route.

I prefer the first way: a real effort to lay the political groundwork to end the war via a compromise settlement. But without the groundwork, success is unlikely. And if Americans persist in unexamined and unrealistically rosy assumptions about the post-transition prognosis while stalling on reform in Kabul and failing to build a consensus for sustained funding at home, then the likeliest result will be a more expensive version of failure. Getting out now would be a better policy than that.