Testimony

Managing the Long War

U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and the Region

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U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and the Region[1]

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Over a decade and a half after the 9/11 attacks, the United States remains deeply engaged in Afghanistan. While most media coverage of U.S. counterterrorism operations overseas has focused on Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan is still an important frontline state in the struggle against terrorist groups. There are more U.S. military forces (approximately 8,400 soldiers) deployed to Afghanistan than any other active combat zone, and a range of Islamic extremist groups—from the Taliban to al-Qaeda and Islamic State—have a sanctuary in Afghanistan and the region. In April 2017, the United States dropped one of its most powerful non-nuclear bombs—a GBU-43/B massive ordnance air blast bomb—against an Islamic State network of fortified underground tunnels in the eastern province of Nangarhar, temporarily bringing U.S. operations in Afghanistan back to the public's attention. Still, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan remains controversial. Some argue that the United States has little or no strategic

[1] This testimony relies in part on such recently published work by the author as Seth G. Jones, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1912, 2017; "How Trump Should Manage Afghanistan: A Realistic Set of Goals for the New Administration," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2017; "Afghanistan," in Xenia Wickett, ed., *America's International Role Under Donald Trump*, London: Chatham House, January 2017; and *Strategic Reversal in Afghanistan*, Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 29, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, June 2016.

[2] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

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interests in Afghanistan.[4] As one *Chicago Tribune* reporter concluded, "we have no prospect for victory [in Afghanistan] and no appetite for what it would take even to gain the upper hand. In truth, we have already lost that war."[5] Others have contended that the United States wasted substantial sums of money on reconstruction and development projects.[6]

In light of these views, this testimony focuses on U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and asks the following questions. What are U.S. national security interests in Afghanistan today? What is the terrorist and insurgent landscape in Afghanistan and the region?[7] What can the United States do to mitigate the threat from Afghanistan and South Asia?

U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

The United States has a range of national security interests overseas, such as balancing against major powers like Russia and China, containing North Korea, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and targeting Islamic State and other extremist groups in countries like Iraq and Syria. But the United States also has important national security interests in Afghanistan.

First, several extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Islamic State, have a presence in Afghanistan. Additional Taliban advances on the battlefield or a U.S. withdrawal would likely allow al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other groups—such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar—to increase their presence in Afghanistan. Second, an expanding war could increase regional instability if India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia were to support a mix of Afghan central government forces, militias, and insurgent groups. Washington has a specific interest in preventing a major escalation in great power conflict in the region, particularly between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India. These states remain engaged in a proxy war in Afghanistan, with New Delhi aiding the Afghan government and Islamabad abetting some insurgent groups, like the Taliban.[8] Third, a U.S. military departure from Afghanistan could foster a perception, however misplaced, that the United States is not a reliable ally. At this point, extremist groups would likely view a withdrawal of U.S. military forces as

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[4] See Jeffrey Sachs, "U.S. Military Should Get Out of the Middle East," *Boston Globe*, April 3, 2017; A. Trevor Thrall, "Why It's So Hard to Leave Afghanistan," *National Interest*, January 28, 2016; Richard N. Haass, "The Irony of American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May–June 2013, pp. 57–67.

[5] Steve Chapman, "Trump Should End the U.S. War in Afghanistan," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 2017.

[6] See reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Available at https://www.sigar.mil/allreports/index.aspx?SSR=5.

[7] This testimony uses the terms *insurgency* and *terrorism*. *Insurgency* is a political and military campaign by a nonstate group or groups to overthrow a regime or secede from a country. Insurgent groups are nonstate organizations that use violence—and the threat of violence—to control territory. Insurgency can be understood, in part, as a process of alternative state-building. Groups often tax populations in areas they control, establish justice systems, and attempt to provide other services. *Terrorism*, on the other hand, is a tactic that involves the use of politically motivated violence against noncombatants to cause intimidation or fear among a target audience. Most insurgent groups employ terrorism, but many terrorist groups are not insurgents because they do not control—or aspire to control—territory.

[8] See Khalid Homayun Nadiri, "Old Habits, New Consequences: Pakistan's Posture Toward Afghanistan Since 2001," *International Security*, Fall 2014, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 132–168.

their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. In addition, most European allies have indicated that they would likely withdraw their military forces in the event of an American exit, leaving behind regional powers with conflicting interests.

Given substantial Afghan government weaknesses and the country's nearly perpetual state of war since the 1970s, it is important for the United States to set realistic goals in Afghanistan. The United States should establish an enduring partnership with Afghanistan and leave a small but durable military and diplomatic presence. But it should set limited objectives: prevent the Taliban from overthrowing the Afghan government, pursue political reconciliation with those parts of the Taliban willing to negotiate, and target terrorist and insurgent groups that threaten the United States. Left to the Taliban, Afghanistan would continue to be a crossroads for various Islamic extremist groups. Combating terrorist groups in Afghanistan must therefore be part of a broader campaign to support an Afghan government willing to cooperate in the suppression of such groups.

The Terrorist and Insurgent Landscape

A range of terrorist and insurgent groups are present in Afghanistan and the region. This section examines the most important groups: the Afghan Taliban; al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent; Islamic State–Khorasan Province; and other groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar.

Afghan Taliban

The Taliban is the largest of these groups and continues to wage an insurgency against the Afghan government. Since the drawdown in the U.S. and NATO troop presence, the Taliban has slowly increased its control of rural territory in Afghanistan, particularly in such provinces as Uruzgan and Helmand.[9] It also continues to conduct complex attacks in major cities like Kabul. The Haqqani network, whose leaders sit on the Taliban's senior shura, has perpetrated some of the most spectacular terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. The Taliban and Haqqani network have benefited from a sanctuary in Pakistan, where their leadership resides and where they receive some aid from the Pakistani government, as well as limited support from neighboring states like Russia and Iran. Russia has increased its contacts with the Taliban and provided limited support out of concern that U.S. military forces may withdraw from the region; as part of a broader strategy to increase Russian influence across the globe; and to weaken Islamic State.[10] Still, the Taliban does not control any major cities and has failed to establish a strong popular support base in Afghanistan.

[9] See U.S. military data in Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*,Arlington, Va., January 30, 2017, pp. 89–91.

[10] See, for example, the comments from Secretary of Defense James Mattis in Tom Bowman, "Defense Secretary Expresses Concern Over Russian Support For Taliban," *National Public Radio*, March 31, 2017.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

Al-Qaeda has a long history of activity in the region, dating back to the group's formation by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s. Core al-Qaeda, which includes the group's global leadership, has been severely reduced in size and capability because of persistent U.S. strikes. Ayman al-Zawahiri remains al-Qaeda's leader and is flanked by such individuals as general manager Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi and senior manager Abu Muhammad al-Masri. In addition, a small number of al-Qaeda leaders are likely in nearby Iran with ties to the leadership, including Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri.[11]

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) as a regional affiliate dedicated to establishing an extreme emirate in South Asia.[12] As Zawahiri argued, "A new branch of al-Qaeda was established and is Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, seeking to raise the flag of jihad, return the Islamic rule, and empowering the shariah of Allah across the Indian subcontinent."[13] The group is led by Asim Umar, an Indian, who was a former member of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, a Pakistan-based terrorist group with branches across the Indian subcontinent.[14] Umar is flanked by Abu Zar, his first deputy. In October 2015, U.S. and Afghan forces targeted a large training camp in Kandahar Province, killing over one hundred operatives linked to AQIS.[15]

AQIS's presence in Afghanistan and the region poses a threat to the United States, though the group has struggled to conduct attacks. The group boasts several hundred members and has cells in such southern and eastern Afghanistan provinces as Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Paktika, Ghazni, and Nuristan. AQIS's current size and presence today is almost certainly larger and more expansive than what al-Qaeda had in Afghanistan five or even ten years ago.[16] This expansion may be due in part to Taliban advances in Afghanistan and AQIS's relationship with operatives from the Taliban and other groups, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e Jhangvi. AQIS's operatives in Bangladesh have been particularly active, conducting a range of attacks over the past year. In addition, AQIS conducts a steady propaganda campaign from its media arm, Al-Sahab.

Still, AQIS has not conducted many attacks in Afghanistan or Pakistan. It was involved in a high-profile plot in the port of Karachi in 2014, which was foiled by Pakistan security agencies. AQIS operatives have also plotted attacks against U.S. targets in Pakistan, including the U.S. embassy in Islamabad. The United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have also killed or captured

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[11] On the history of al-Qaeda in Iran, see Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran Is Accommodating the Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, January 29, 2012.

[12] Ayman al-Zawahiri, audio message, September 2014.

[13] Bill Rogio, "Al Qaeda Opens Branch in the 'Indian Subcontinent,'" *Long War Journal*, September 3, 2014.

[14] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent Claims Killing of LGBT Activist, Friend in Bangladesh," *Long War Journal*, April 26, 2016.

[15] Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the Largest' Al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan," *Washington Post,* October 30, 2015.

[16] See Richard Esposito, Matthew Cole, and Brian Ross, "President Obama's Secret: Only 100 al Qaeda Now in Afghanistan," *ABC News*, December 2, 2009.

several AQIS operatives, including Ahmed Farouq in January 2015, Qari Imran in January 2015, and Farouq al-Qatari in October 2016.

Islamic State–Khorasan Province

Since 2014, Islamic State has attempted to expand a beachhead in South Asia by leveraging existing militant networks. Islamic State leaders have called this land "Wilayat Khorasan," a reference to the historical region that encompassed parts of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.[17] Yet Islamic State–Khorasan Province, as Islamic State leaders refer to this branch, controls virtually no territory except for tiny areas in Deh Bala, Achin, and Naziyan Districts in Nangarhar Province of eastern Afghanistan. Islamic State–Khorasan Province has conducted a handful of attacks, but has failed to secure the support of most locals, struggled with poor leadership, and faced determined opposition from other local insurgent groups, most notably the Taliban.

By co-opting local networks, such as disaffected members of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, Islamic State–Khorasan Province has established an organizational structure led by an emir, a deputy emir, and a central shura with such committees as intelligence, finance, propaganda, and education. After the death of leader Hafiz Saeed Khan in 2016 from a U.S. strike, Islamic State appointed Abdul Hasib, a former Afghan Taliban member, as emir of Islamic State–Khorasan Province. Islamic State leaders reached out to other militant groups in the region. Today, Islamic State–Khorasan Province includes roughly 1,000 to 2,000 fighters, a slight decrease from 2015.[18] The group has also conducted a small number of attacks in the region, such as against a military hospital in Kabul in March 2017, a police convoy in Quetta in August 2016, Pakistani attorneys at a hospital in Quetta in August 2016, Hazara protesters in Kabul in July 2016, and the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad in January 2016.[19]

As Figure 1 shows, Islamic State territorial control in Afghanistan peaked in spring 2015, when it controlled an estimated 511,777 people (1.9 percent of Afghanistan's population) and roughly 2,919 square kilometers (less than 1 percent of Afghanistan's territory). Most of this territory was in the southwestern province of Farah and eastern province of Nangarhar, with small pockets in other provinces, such as Helmand. By winter 2016–2017, Islamic State control

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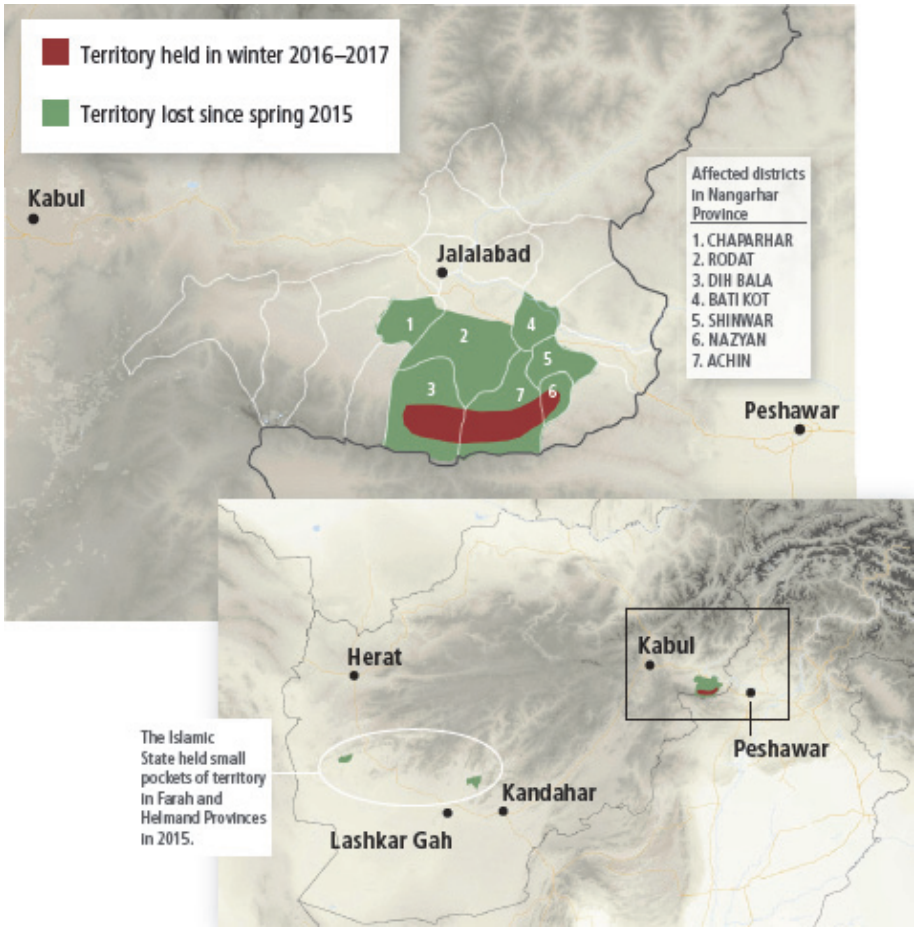
[17] *Khorasan* comes from the Persian language and means "where the sun arrives from."

[18] Author interviews with U.S., Pakistani, and Afghan officials in 2016 and 2017. Several reports have almost certainly vastly overstated the size of Islamic State—Khorasan Province, putting it between 9,000 and 11,000. See, for example, Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': A Nuanced View," London: Royal United Services Institute, February 5, 2016.

[19] Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abedmarch, "After Deadly Attack on Kabul Hospital, 'Everywhere Was Full of Blood,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 2017; Shafqat Ali, "70 Dead as Taliban Bomb Protest over Lawyer's Killing in Quetta," *Nation* (Pakistan), August 8, 2016; Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "What Quetta Bombing Reveals About Islamic State and Pakistani Taliban," *Diplomat*, August 9, 2016; Syed Ali Shah, "14 Injured as Roadside Bomb Targets Judge's Police Escort in Quetta," *Dawn* (Pakistan), August 11, 2016; "Afghanistan Mourns Protest Blast Victims," *Al Jazeera*, July 23, 2016; Khalid Alokozay and Mujib Mashal, "ISIS Claims Assault that Killed 7 Near Pakistani Consulate in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 13, 2016.

had decreased to only 64,406 people (an 87-percent drop) and 372 square kilometers (also an 87-percent drop) from 2015 levels.[20]

Figure 1: Islamic State Control of Territory in Afghanistan[21]



Other Groups

In addition, fighters from other militant groups, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, are also involved in the insurgency in Afghanistan. The Obama administration focused on counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda rather than counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban, yet counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are deeply interlinked in Afghanistan. Territory controlled by the Taliban has been used—and will likely continue to be used—by terrorist groups to plan for and conduct attacks in Afghanistan, the region, and perhaps globally.

[20] Jones et al., 2017.

[21] Jones et al., 2017.

Policy Considerations

U.S. objectives in Afghanistan should be realistic and limited. Accomplishing U.S. objectives will require a steadfast commitment from the United States and its partners to strengthen national and local governance; establish a more enduring security commitment; revise U.S. policy toward the region, including changing Pakistan's strategic calculus; and continuing to provide economic and humanitarian support.

Strengthen National and Local Governance

Improving governance is important for the ultimate success of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and the region. Militant groups can take advantage of weak governance. Afghanistan ranks among the worst countries in the world in every category of governance—accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption—according to World Bank estimates.[22] Pakistan is not far behind, ranking among the bottom 30 percent of countries worldwide in each of these categories.[23]

Better national and local governance is particularly important in Afghanistan, where the country faces a burgeoning insurgency that has allowed militant groups to gain a foothold.[24] Significant problems continue to plague Afghanistan's National Unity Government, such as widespread corruption, deteriorating economic conditions, disagreements over reconciliation with the Taliban, and competition for power among political elites. President Ashraf Ghani has clashed with the Afghan Parliament, and several major political issues remain unresolved. The political agreement that created the National Unity Government, which the United States helped broker, required the Afghan government to hold parliamentary and district council elections. Yet the elections are long overdue. The agreement also stipulated that Afghanistan convene a grand assembly of elders, a *loya jirga*, from across the country to amend the Afghan Constitution and formally establish the position of prime minister. But Afghan political elites disagree about the timing of the elections and electoral reform. Some elites argue that the current election commission lacks legitimacy because of its flawed handling of the 2014 elections. They contend that elections cannot be held until the election process and the Independent Election Commission are reformed.[25]

Washington's most important political priority in Afghanistan should be to focus U.S. efforts on working with the Afghan government and political elites to improve governance and reach a

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[22] The Worldwide Governance Indicators database, World Bank, 2017. The data are available at www.govindicators.org and were accessed on April 18, 2017.

[23] The Worldwide Governance Indicators data for Pakistan are from 2015. Pakistan is ranked in the bottom 27 percent for voice and accountability, the bottom 1 percent for political stability, the bottom 27 percent for government effectiveness, the bottom 29 percent for regulatory quality, the bottom 24 percent for rule of law, and the bottom 24 percent for control of corruption.

[24] Scott Smith and Colin Cookman, eds., *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001–2014,* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2016.

[25] See Ali Yawar Adili and Martine van Bijlert, "Pushing the Parliament to Accept a Decree: Another Election Without Reform," Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 10, 2016.

consensus on contentious issues, such as electoral reform. U.S. diplomats and White House officials were instrumental in negotiating the agreement that led to the National Unity Government and should make a similar effort to overcome the differences on electoral reform to permit legislative elections to go forward. Afghanistan should not hold a *loya jirga* until there is a broader consensus on its ultimate purpose. Poorly organized elections marred by corruption and a contentious *loya jirga* would be more destabilizing than helpful. The United States should also continue to support governance from the bottom up, since tribes, subtribes, clans, and local communities play an influential role in a country with a weak and sometimes unpopular central government.

Without expecting early results, Washington should also continue to encourage and promote regional support for an Afghan-led process of reconciliation with the Taliban. The Obama administration's exit deadlines to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan likely undermined the prospects for peace. While Taliban officials were intermittently willing to engage in peace talks, they were faced with a classic question of "time horizons": Why reach a peace settlement today if their battlefield prospects and bargaining position were likely to improve once U.S. forces and other NATO forces withdrew? Today, the possibility of a small but durable U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may increase the possibility of a settlement, however difficult talks will be.

Establish a More Enduring Security Commitment

The U.S.'s immediate security focus should be building the capacity of Afghan forces to protect populated areas and target terrorist leaders and their support networks. The United States needs to continue partnering with Afghan special operations units (the Ktah Khas, commandos, and Afghan national army special forces), as well as the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and local forces. Over the past several decades, no Afghan government has been able to sustain itself without support from outside powers. This has been particularly true when the country faced a serious security threat, as it does now. It is much cheaper for the United States and its allies to support Afghan security forces than it is to deploy large numbers of U.S. and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) soldiers. The United States should carry through on its commitment to providing roughly $4 billion per year through at least 2020 to help sustain the costs of the Ministries of Defense and Interior and improve the retention of quality police and soldiers. The United States should also continue to build up the Afghan Air Force, which is plagued by low operational readiness, maintenance problems, and a lack of trained aircrew.

An aggressive campaign should involve continuing to designate Afghanistan as an area of active hostility for the use of lethal force, giving the U.S. military flexibility to target terrorists.[26] In addition to targeted strikes, U.S. and Afghan government forces need to work closely with tribes, subtribes, clans, and other local actors. In southern parts of Nangarhar, for example, the

[26] White House, "Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities," May 22, 2013. The redacted and declassified document is available at https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/ppd/ppg-procedures.pdf.

population is mostly Ghilzai Pashtun from such tribes as the Shinwaris.[27] Support from these communities, along with such forces as the Afghan Local Police and programs like Village Stability Operations, is important to hold any areas that are cleared.[28]

The new U.S. administration should retain and perhaps modestly increase the current American force of 8,400 soldiers. Afghanistan could be regarded as an important regional base in a global campaign against Islamic extremists and other threats to U.S. interests. Unlike many other Islamic countries, Afghan leaders and most of the population want U.S. forces to stay. The United States should also work closely with countries participating in the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission to sustain their current numbers and roles. As part of a total non-U.S. NATO commitment of around 5,000, these countries include Italy in the west; Germany in the north; and Turkey in the capital region. A sustained U.S.- and NATO-led security role is important, since a larger military role for Afghanistan's neighbors would be either infeasible (Afghans, for instance, continue to harbor animosity toward the Russians for their invasion in the 1980s and are even more hostile to Pakistan), increase regional security competition (a larger Indian security role would likely increase friction with Pakistan), or undermine American interests (an Iranian security role would be unwelcome in Washington).

Revise U.S. Policy toward Pakistan and the Region

There are substantial challenges to regional cooperation. First, there is security competition among major powers, most notably between Pakistan and India. Afghanistan has long been entangled in a "great game" among neighboring states and global powers.[29] Most of Afghanistan's neighbors prefer a stable central government in Kabul but want one that protects their own interests. New Delhi, for example, has enjoyed close relations with the Afghan government and sought to minimize Islamabad's influence and weaken anti-Indian terrorist groups. Pakistan, on the other hand, has attempted to minimize New Delhi's influence in Afghanistan and has supported proxy groups. An enduring U.S. commitment to Afghanistan may help alleviate some, although not all, of this security competition. The rise of Islamic State–Khorasan Province has raised concerns that some countries—such as Iran and Russia—might increase their cooperation with the Taliban to hedge against Islamic State. The Taliban has been effective against Islamic State in such Afghan provinces as Helmand and Farah. But Russian or Iranian cooperation with the Taliban would undermine long-term stability and ensure that the region continues to attract and give rise to violent extremist groups. The United States should

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[27] See Robert Kemp, "Counterinsurgency in Nangarhar Province, Eastern Afghanistan, 2004–2008," *Military Review*, November–December 2010.

[28] See Ty Connett and Bob Cassidy, "Village Stability Operations: More than Village Defense," *Special Warfare*, Vol. 24, No. 3, July–September 2011.

[29] William Dalrymple, *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839–42*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013; Diana Preston, *The Dark Defile: Britain's Catastrophic Invasion of Afghanistan 1838–1842*, New York: Walker & Company, 2012; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004; Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995.

communicate publicly and privately to these countries—particularly Moscow—that the United States will not tolerate support to the Taliban.

Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other groups have used Pakistan territory to recruit fighters, secure funding, and conduct operations. The biggest challenge may be curbing Pakistan's support to militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban, which Islamabad uses as a foreign policy tool. While Pakistan security agencies have targeted Islamic State and al-Qaeda operatives, Islamabad's support to other militant groups undermines regional stability. The Afghan Taliban has safe havens within parts of Pakistan and access to funds and equipment. Washington's goal should be to change Pakistan's calculus over time, while recognizing that, whatever policies Washington adopts, Islamabad will likely not alter its Afghanistan policy quickly—even if civilian leaders in Pakistan favor such an outcome.

The United States should review its options for dealing with Pakistan. For example, the United States could take further steps to pressure Taliban sanctuaries within Pakistan, with or without the support of Islamabad. The May 2016 U.S. killing of Mullah Mansour, the head of the Afghan Taliban, while he was traveling in Pakistan indicates the kind of direct action against the Taliban and the Haqqani network that could make an important difference. Congress has reduced military assistance to Pakistan in recent years and curtailed Pakistan's access to foreign military financing. But even today's reduced amounts of U.S. assistance could be cut further. Targeted economic sanctions could be selectively applied against specific organizations and individuals; Washington could encourage other countries to consider similar steps. On the more positive side, Washington might also sketch out a vision of an improved relationship with Pakistan if Islamabad were to cut its ties with militant groups attacking both Afghanistan and India. This outcome would be highly desirable for broader American interests, given Pakistan's central role in the stability of the entire region—and its ability to upend that stability.

In addition, an enduring U.S. commitment to Afghanistan would send a strong signal to Islamabad that the country does not need to prepare for a post-American region, a rationale that Pakistan policymakers repeatedly used to justify their support to the Taliban and other militant groups. With a long-term U.S. commitment to the region, Washington and Islamabad can focus on building a more constructive and enduring political, economic, and security relationship. A U.S. commitment should help allay Pakistan's fears that the country will face an Afghanistan again in chaos or an Afghanistan dominated by India. U.S. goals should be to change Pakistan's calculus over time, while recognizing that whatever policies Washington adopts, Islamabad is not likely to change its Afghanistan policy quickly.

Provide Economic and Humanitarian Support

Economic and humanitarian challenges are acute in Afghanistan because of the government's fragility and the Taliban-led insurgency that has engulfed much of the country. The United States should continue working closely with the United Nations, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and major financial contributors to better address serious economic and governance challenges. Rather than focusing on a broad array of economic issues, U.S. diplomats might concentrate on working with organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to prevent developments that could increase large-scale opposition

to the government, such as a poor agricultural harvest, rising unemployment, and a prolonged energy shortage. An electricity blackout, such as the one that occurred in Kabul in January 2016 following the Taliban sabotage of Kabul's main power supply, could decrease morale and increase antigovernment sentiment, particularly if prolonged. Next to Syria, Afghanistan has produced the second-largest number of refugees in the world, at 2.7 million.[30] This number could further increase if American and international support are not sustained.

America Is Still Welcome

Of all the countries in which the United States is engaged against Islamic extremists, Afghanistan is one of the few places where the local government—led by President Ashraf Ghani and chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah—and the bulk of the local population have welcomed U.S. military forces. Despite this support, there are some powerful figures that object to the U.S. military presence. Among the most vocal is former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, who remarked in April 2017 that he was committed to "ousting the U.S." from Afghanistan.[31] But Karzai does not speak for most Afghans.

U.S. interests in Afghanistan do not diminish the importance of Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other frontline states battling terrorist groups. But the United States should make Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan an important and enduring part of the struggle against al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other extremists. Since terrorist groups continue to operate in Afghanistan and the region, the United States must aim the Taliban from overthrowing the Afghan government, pursue political reconciliation where feasible, and target terrorist and insurgent groups that threaten the United States. This approach may not quickly end the war, but it would be an important contribution to U.S., regional, and international security.

[30] Data are from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Facts and Figures about Refugees," Geneva, 2016.

[31] Mujib Mashal, "Calling Successor a 'Traitor,' Afghan Ex-Leader Denounces U.S. Bombing," *New York Times*, April 15, 2017.