

Finding the Way Out

Why it's time to end the war in Afghanistan, and how to do it.

By David Cortright

The clock is ticking toward a July decision by President Obama to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, as he has promised. The White House will face pressure from military commanders and Republicans in Congress to postpone the decision or to remove only a token force. The president should proceed with the July timetable, sooner if possible, but the U.S. also has an obligation to support the Afghan people, especially women, and to help them build a more secure and stable future without war. The challenge is to achieve a military exit in a manner that enhances security, development, and human rights. It's a tall order, but I believe it is possible.

The logic of withdrawal. The withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops is necessary because the current militarized strategy is not working. Violent incidents in Afghanistan have increased 70 percent in the last year, according to the Pentagon's November 2010 progress report, and are up more than 300 percent since 2007. The number of districts with "good" security has remained unchanged despite the deployment of 30,000 additional U.S. troops. The percentage of Afghans rating their security as "bad" is increasing.

Nearly every independent study of the war concurs that the presence of American and other foreign troops is a major cause of the insurgency. The number of Taliban fighters has increased in proportion to the expansion of foreign military forces. Insurgents are motivated by a desire to end military occupation and rid their country of foreign forces. As the scale of the military intervention has increased, the insurgency has become stronger and the influence of the Taliban has spread. Reversing this perverse dynamic will require a new strategy of demilitarization.

Security in Afghanistan requires fewer foreign troops, not more. Success depends not on additional soldiers, but on better political leaders, more aid workers, and many more educated Afghans -- women as well as men. The United States and other countries can and must assist the Afghan people, but we can be most helpful by scaling back and ending our military involvement, while ramping up our support for development and human rights.

An unwinnable war. Under just war doctrine, "probability of success" and "last resort" are essential criteria. The use of military force is not morally permissible if it is incapable of achieving justice or if viable alternatives are available. On both counts the Afghan war fails to meet ethical standards. Top commanders acknowledge that the war cannot be won militarily. Gen. Sir David Richards, chief of the British defense staff, told an interviewer for *The Sunday Telegraph* that insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be defeated. NATO commander Gen. David Petraeus says we are up against a growing "industrial-strength insurgency," now numbering more than 30,000 fighters by some estimates. It cannot be defeated through purely military means.

The former head of the U.N. mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, says that the mission in Afghanistan is doomed to failure because it lacks a political strategy. Counterinsurgency cannot succeed without a viable political alternative to which hearts and minds can be rallied. The Karzai regime is not an acceptable strategic partner for that purpose. It has alienated many Afghans and lacks political and moral legitimacy. It is a corrupt and repressive cabal based on warlords and drug traffickers and is

unworthy of the sacrifice Americans and others are making on its behalf.

The prospects for military success are also undermined by Pakistan's role as a sanctuary and support base for the Taliban. Pakistani military and intelligence agencies have long supported the Taliban and continue to provide vital political and military succor for the insurgents as they flow back and forth across the border. The United States has responded to this dilemma by pressuring a reluctant Pakistani army to wage war against its own people. The U.S. has also taken matters into its own hands by mounting frequent drone bombing strikes, commando raids, and targeted assassinations across the border. These actions have alienated and enraged many Pakistanis and are generating greater support for the very insurgency the U.S. is attempting to suppress, threatening to destabilize Pakistan itself and fueling extremism across the region.

A demilitarization strategy. The moral criterion of "last resort" requires that all nonmilitary options be exhausted before military force can be justified. In Afghanistan military means have been the first resort, not the last. More than 90 percent of all spending for Afghanistan has gone through the Pentagon. Bob Woodward's account of the president's 2009 strategic review shows that nonmilitary options were never considered. The choices before the White House were not whether to send more troops, but how many and how fast. No one asked whether better options are available for countering violent extremism and helping to stabilize Afghanistan.

The alternative to a strategy of continuous war is the pursuit of calibrated military disengagement as a means of winning political concessions and reducing support for insurgency, according to Gilles Dorransoro in his paper "Focus and Exit." This approach would reverse the logic of current policy, using the presence of foreign troops not in pursuit of illusory victory but as a bargaining chip to induce political agreement and reconciliation. Under this scenario gradual military demobilization would be linked to a broader set of security conditions that emphasize cooperation against al Qaeda and opposition to the use of Afghan territory for terrorist operations. It would be used to encourage political reconciliation and power-sharing. It also would be combined with increased support for locally based economic development and a continuing commitment to policies that enhance human rights and the well-being of Afghan women and men.

The president could improve security immediately by ending offensive combat operations, especially commando attacks and night raids on Afghan homes. The number of U.S. military raids has increased sharply with the administration's military surge, and this has created deepening resentment and anger among many Afghans, including President Hamid Karzai. In an interview with *The Washington Post* in November 2010, Karzai said he wanted American troops off the roads and out of Afghan homes. "The time has come to reduce military operations," Karzai said. U.S. troops must cease these raids, he insisted, because they "violate the sanctity of Afghan homes and incite more people to join the insurgency." A combat ceasefire could be combined with a drone bombing halt, as part of a diplomatic initiative to facilitate power-sharing negotiations within Afghanistan and to encourage Pakistan and neighboring states to cooperate for regional stabilization.

The pace of military withdrawals can be used as a form of bargaining leverage. The reductions should proceed according to a flexible timeline that is linked to related political, security, economic, and social conditions. The commitment to leave completely and the timetable for doing so would be used to gain Taliban compliance with security cooperation agreements and the continuation of democratic political procedures. The pace of withdrawal could be slowed or accelerated depending on whether the parties defy or cooperate with political, security, and social commitments. If the Taliban continue their attacks and renege on security and political cooperation, the pace of withdrawal could be slowed. Political and financial support for the Kabul government could be ramped up or down in response to its readiness to share power and preserve the precarious progress that has been achieved in human rights and social development.

Real help. While military measures in Afghanistan have mostly failed, international development and human rights programs have attained a modest degree of success. Consider the gains that have

been achieved since 2002:

- Many clinics and hospitals have been constructed or rebuilt, and access to health care has increased from very little coverage in 2001 to more than 80 percent by 2007. Immunization rates have risen, and infant and child mortality rates are declining. The number of trained midwives is now 2,400, five times greater than during the Taliban years.
- Access to education has improved dramatically. Nearly 7 million children are now enrolled in primary school, 37 percent of them girls -- compared to less than 1 million boys 10 years ago.
- The Afghan constitution reserves 25 percent of seats in parliament for women. Since 2004, women have been free to vote and participate in elections, with women comprising approximately 44 percent of voters in the 2005 parliamentary election, although participation rates have declined since then.

Women's political rights have come under increasing pressure in recent years as Taliban influence has spread and reactionary tendencies have strengthened within the Kabul government -- this despite the presence of nearly 100,000 U.S. troops. Nonetheless, the social and human rights gains are real and should be protected. They have been funded by civilian aid agencies and are not connected to combat missions. They can and should continue as troop levels decline.

Demilitarization is important but insufficient by itself and will not bring peace unless it is tied to sustained support for development and human rights. Health, education, and women's rights programs are rare bright spots in Afghanistan and need to be preserved.

An interim security force. To provide security assurances as foreign forces leave, an interim security force should be deployed under U.N. auspices. Taliban representatives have suggested the creation of an international Muslim-led protection force and have pledged not to attack it. The deployment of such a force would facilitate the withdrawal of foreign troops and bolster Afghan security. It might increase the willingness of the Taliban to accept security and political cooperation agreements. Its mission would be population protection, not combat. It could help provide security for women and others who might be threatened by insurgents and warlords as foreign forces leave.

The required interim security force would not need to be large, once U.S. military operations cease and insurgent attacks diminish. A force of perhaps 30,000 troops might be sufficient, drawn from moderate Muslim states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey. It would need to be paid, trained, and equipped by the United States and its NATO allies. As U.S.-led forces cease operations and pull back to their bases in advance of withdrawal, the interim security force could be introduced. The security force would operate for a limited period, with the consent of the Afghan government under the authority of the U.N. Security Council.

The United States cannot simply abandon the people of Afghanistan. This is not an excuse for maintaining an unwinnable war, but for ensuring that we withdraw in a responsible manner, with an enduring commitment to development and human rights. The uncertainties are many, but the proposed strategy of gradual demilitarization offers the best option among limited and unattractive choices. The current strategy of large-scale counterinsurgency and targeted bombing is questionable morally, unwinnable militarily, and unsustainable politically. The alternative may be risky, but it is preferable to the known dangers of war.

David Cortright, a Sojourners contributing writer, is director of policy studies at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. This article is drawn from his forthcoming book *Ending Obama's War: Responsible Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Paradigm Publishers, 2011).

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