



FOCUSED ENGAGEMENT

A New Way Forward in Afghanistan

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About the Author



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Cover Photo

Cpl. Reece Lodder/U.S. Marine Corps

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Executive Summary

The war in Afghanistan was a topic largely absent from the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In 2012 and 2013 Donald J. Trump referred to Afghanistan as a “complete and total disaster.” He decried the loss of life and waste of taxpayer dollars, and called for withdrawing U.S. troops.¹ During the campaign he said he would keep American troops in Afghanistan but would “hate doing it.”² He has a point. The status quo is unsustainable.

Afghanistan is beset by a resilient but brutal Taliban insurgency that uses shadow governance, military operations, terrorist tactics, and propaganda to advance their cause. They have sanctuary in Pakistan to plan, coordinate operations, train, and gather logistics. The Taliban receive funding and support from covert and private foreign donors, as well as illicit economic activity. Predatory neighbors foment instability in Afghanistan.

The United States has spent more in assistance to Afghanistan (in real terms) than it did for the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after the Second World War. Progress has been impressive. This includes tens of thousands of kilometers of roads built, a reported fifteen-year increase in life expectancy, thousands of officials trained, major advances in health care, education, human rights, and telecommunications, and the construction of a 352,000 strong Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF).

That support, however, has made many Afghan elites fabulously rich. Despite 15 years of capacity-building, too much of the Afghan government remains predatory and kleptocratic. Abuses by Afghan officials and warlords have inspired some Afghans to support insurgent groups that kill American soldiers.

A recent survey shows only 29 percent of Afghans believe the country is headed in the right direction; nearly 90 percent decry government corruption as a problem in everyday life; over 40 percent fear bumping into their Army and Police.³ Given the understandable selection bias favoring nonviolent areas, these numbers are astonishing.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah want reform but have differing visions and their administration is too divided to act decisively. The Afghan government remains unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and Taliban controlled areas. A successful end to the war is nowhere in sight.

The United States bears its share of the blame. Micromanagement from Washington has led to damaging bureaucratic silos, sluggish decision-making,

and a host of implementation problems that have amplified the problems above and fed local perceptions that the United States does not want peace in Afghanistan.

The cost of current U.S. engagement tallies roughly \$23 billion per year – over \$5 billion in aid and assistance and the remainder to support 8,400 troops. Nearly 2,400 American troops have been killed in Afghanistan; over 150 of them murdered in so-called insider attacks.

By nearly any measure, Afghanistan could be exhibit A in President Trump’s concerns about the wisdom of nation-building.⁴ America has cause to leave.

The reasons to continue supporting Afghanistan, however, are more compelling. The place remains attractive as a safe haven for international terrorist groups that would like protected space to plot attacks against America and its allies. The country is surrounded by nuclear powers that do not get along. State collapse could bring even worse than a Taliban return to power.

Neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban are likely to win outright while international support continues for both sides. Given the chronic problems in Afghanistan, western governments may grow tired of bankrolling a corrupt government engaged in a never-ending conflict. That could lead to state collapse and a return to the 1990s-style chaos that al Qaeda exploited. Simply putting the status quo on autopilot is the path of least resistance but could pose the highest risk to U.S. interests.

The most realistic prospect for a favorable and durable outcome is a gradual peace process that respects the dignity and sacrifices of Americans and Afghans and prevents the return of terror safe-havens. To bring this about, America needs a more focused approach.



Afghanistan has made major advances in education and human rights since 2001. U.S. service members and an Afghan Girl Scout speak Pashto together in August 2010. (Tech. Sgt. John Barton/U.S. Air Force)

Way Forward – Focused Engagement

The United States wins if international terrorist groups cannot use Afghan territory to launch large-scale terrorist attacks against the homeland and U.S. allies. To support America’s interests in Afghanistan and the region, this paper recommends a strategy of *focused engagement*. This approach increases the probability of a successful outcome while limiting the risks and costs of withdrawal or open-ended commitment.

To bring the war to a successful conclusion, the United States must focus on three objectives:

1. *Stabilize the battlefield* by improving U.S.-Afghan strategic alignment, enforcing conditionality for political and security sector reform, and supporting an enduring commitment;
2. *Promote Afghan sovereignty and reduce destabilizing regional competition* by obtaining and supporting an Afghan commitment to regional neutrality, penalizing states that enable the Taliban and other militant groups, and rewarding peaceful outcomes;
3. *Advance a peace process* to bring the war to a successful conclusion that protects U.S. interests and respects the service and sacrifices of the American and Afghan people.

To implement this new approach, the Trump Administration needs to reverse the growth of White House micromanagement. President Trump should *decentralize authority to a U.S. civil-military command in theater*,⁵ while retaining NSC-level oversight.

The Trump administration must avoid a rush to failure. Given nearly 40 years of conflict in Afghanistan, a peace process may require more than a decade to produce a general cease-fire and a series of conflict-ending negotiations. Progress in governmental reform, regional diplomacy, and confidence-building measures should provide the evidence needed for America’s continued support.

Before moving forward, the Trump administration should ensure the Afghan government is sincere about bringing the war to a successful conclusion and respecting American support and sacrifices. This report offers some potential tests.

This approach cannot guarantee success, but it is more likely to protect American interests at acceptable cost than either withdrawal or open-ended and unconditional commitment. A tougher approach toward those taking advantage of U.S. support – or using it for malign activity – also can help America restore some lost credibility and self-respect.

This report is organized in two main parts. Part I offers an overview of the Afghanistan situation, posits three strategic options, and recommends a new way forward. Part II delves deeper into the state of play in Afghanistan and the region, explores the potential reactions to the new strategy, assesses the risks to success, and offers ways to address them.



An Afghan woman speaks to celebrate International Women’s Day in Kabul. (Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kleynia R. McKnight/U.S. Navy)

I. Focused Engagement

Situation

The Obama administration's strategy in Afghanistan has not worked as intended. Without a course correction, U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region are at high risk of being undermined. This paper examines the reasons the current strategy is not working, presents a fresh analysis of the situation in Afghanistan and the region, evaluates alternative courses of action, and offers pragmatic recommendations to implement a new approach.

This report has benefited from expert assessments obtained during three working group sessions, discussions with senior U.S. and Afghan military and civilian officials in Kabul, and substantial feedback during the research and drafting processes.⁶ This report draws insights from former U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan, former commanders of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), current and former senior civilian and military officials from Afghanistan, the United States, and the United Kingdom, aid and development experts, and a wide array of scholars and scholarship.

The status quo is not sustainable

The Obama administration defined U.S. interests in Afghanistan as 1) preventing return of a terrorist safe haven capable of supporting attacks against the U.S. homeland and allies, and 2) enabling the Afghan government to govern and secure itself with limited international assistance.⁷

The administration's strategy post-2014 was to draw down U.S. engagement to an embassy-centric presence in Afghanistan by the end of 2016, while building capacity in the Afghan government and security forces

and working with Pakistan to end Taliban sanctuary on Pakistani soil. This approach has failed slowly and expensively. The deteriorating situation prompted President Obama to alter withdrawal time lines.⁸

The Department of Defense maintains 8,400 troops in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF) and to conduct counterterrorism operations. The former is a NATO mission known as Resolution Support (RS); the latter is a U.S. mission called Freedom Sentinel.

The cost per deployed U.S. service member in Afghanistan, per a recent report, is \$2.1 million per year, amounting to \$17.6 billion annually for 8,400 troops.⁹ The United States provided nearly \$4 billion in security assistance funding for 2016, and plans \$3.45 billion for 2017.¹⁰ Government capacity-building and economic assistance totaled an additional \$1.67 billion in 2016.¹¹ Total cost of support in Afghanistan is roughly \$23 billion per year. Total U.S. appropriated relief and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan (\$115 billion to date) exceeds the post-World War II Marshall Plan (\$103.4 billion).¹² A total of 3,521 international troops have been killed in Afghanistan; 2,385 – 68 percent of them – have been Americans.¹³

To resolve the impasse from the disputed 2014 Afghan presidential election, the United States brokered the National Unity Government (NUG) – a power-sharing arrangement between the rival camps with Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah Abdullah in a newly created chief executive role. The U.S. and Afghan governments recently have agreed that a political settlement with the Taliban is the best way to achieve a favorable and durable outcome.¹⁴

To encourage support for counterterrorism, the United States provides \$422.5 million to Pakistan in economic and development assistance and \$319.7 million in security assistance.¹⁵ For regional cooperation the administration supports the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (the United States, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan)¹⁶ and the Heart of Asia process.

The Obama administration's approach relied on four implicit assumptions:

- The Afghan government has the will and ability to reform sufficiently to win the battle of legitimacy in contested or Taliban-held areas.
- Pakistan, with enough U.S. support and pressure, will compel the Taliban to negotiate.
- The Afghan Taliban have little support in Afghanistan and are animated primarily by the presence of U.S. forces; U.S. troop drawdown will undermine the



A memorial ceremony for Sgt. Thomas Z. Spitzer, killed in combat operations in Helmand province, is held at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan in July 2014. To date, 2,385 U.S. troops have been killed in Afghanistan. (Cpl. Joseph Scanlan/U.S. Marine Corps)

Taliban will to fight and make them more amenable to negotiate peace.

- The Afghan government will make the compromises needed for a negotiated outcome.

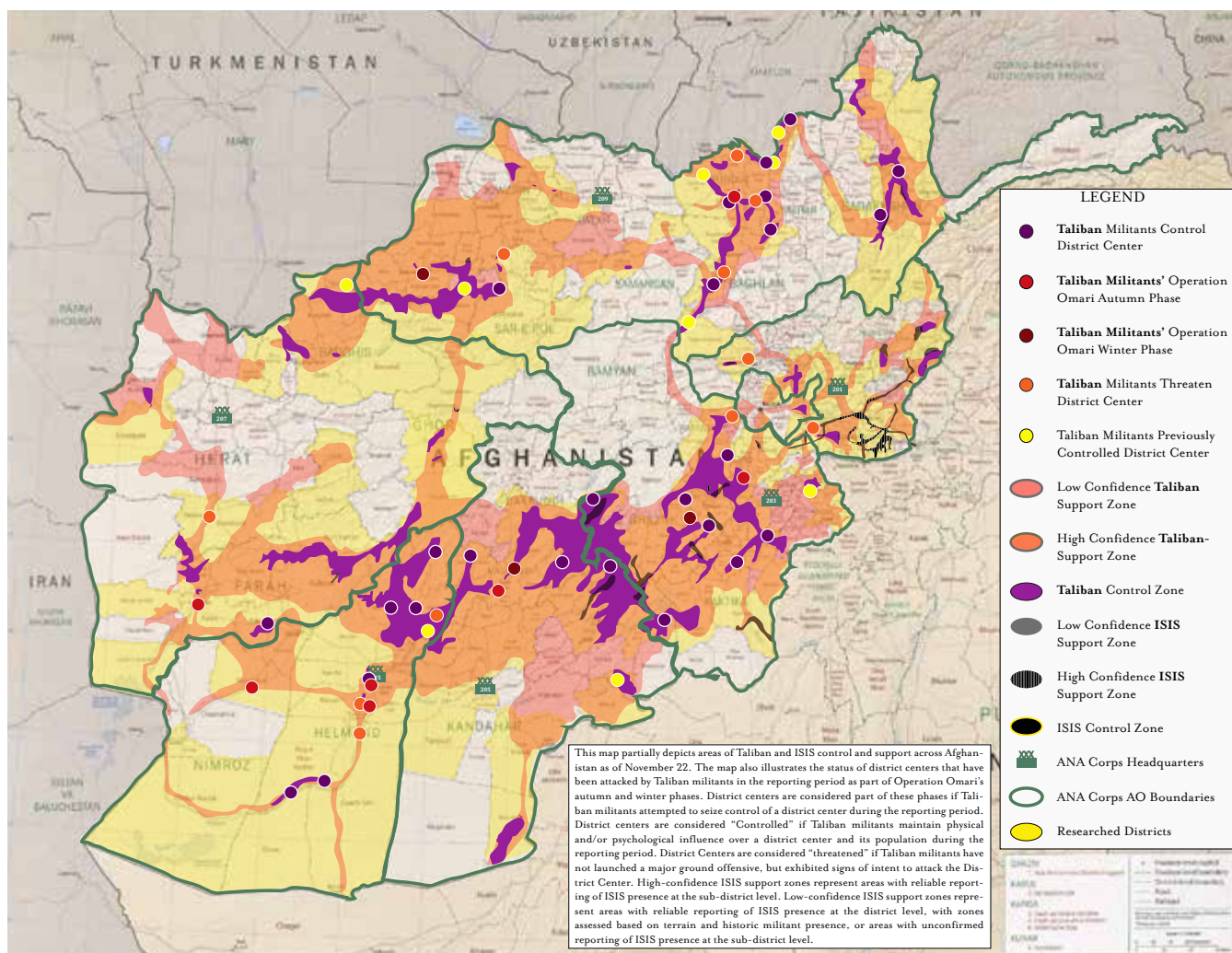
As discussed in greater detail in Part II A (State of Play), these assumptions are not valid. Rather than incentivizing political and security-sector reform, regional cooperation, and a peace process with the Taliban, the United States has unwittingly reinforced political gridlock and corruption in Afghanistan, promoted hedging by regional actors, and created belief among Taliban senior leaders that their territorial gains will continue.

The Afghan government evolved during the Karzai administration (2001–2014) into an entrenched predatory kleptocracy whose elites have amassed fabulous wealth at U.S. taxpayer expense. Predatory behavior by officials,

warlords, and elites has fueled support to the Taliban and other insurgent groups that kill American and Afghan soldiers and Afghan civilians.¹⁷ The NUG has been too divided against itself to govern effectively. The Afghan National Security and Defense Forces fight bravely when well led and supported, but poor leadership and widespread corruption have damaged performance. They remain critically dependent on international funding and support. The government has lost considerable territory to the Taliban and has been unable to recover battlefield initiative.

The Pakistanis are highly unlikely to turn against the Afghan Taliban, and the United States lacks the leverage to compel them to do so. Even under an aggressive U.S.-led sanctions regime in the 1990s, Pakistan was supporting insurgencies in Afghanistan and Kashmir while advancing its own nuclear program. The fear that

Afghanistan Partial Threat Assessment as of November 22, 2016



Source: Institute for the Study of War, "Afghanistan Partial Threat Assessment," 22 November 2016.

India will use Afghanistan as a platform to destabilize or even partition Pakistan underpins Islamabad’s strategic rationale. Pakistan’s malign activity brings India and Afghanistan closer together, creating a destructive cycle. Iran, China, Russia, and Central Asian states also vie for influence in Afghanistan, creating a new version of Great Game competition that is tearing Afghanistan apart.

Meanwhile, al Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province (the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan) presence has increased since 2014. Although their current threat to the United States and its allies may be low, continued growth poses much higher risks. General John Nicholson, the commander of international forces in Afghanistan, assesses that 20 of the 98 designated global terrorist groups are present in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.¹⁸

The United States bears its share of the blame. Micromanagement from Washington has led to damaging bureaucratic silos, sluggish decision-making, and a host of implementation problems. Poor financial controls and accountability have enabled the gross misuse of American resources. Civilian casualties sorely have damaged the credibility of the international mission. Regional diplomacy, trying in vain to accommodate the interests of all parties, has failed to deter destabilizing actions by predatory neighbors. Poorly coordinated peace and reconciliation efforts have undermined trust and increased resentment. These problems have led to local perceptions that the United States does not want peace in Afghanistan.¹⁹

Continuing the incremental drawdown is likely to reinforce these negative trends, while an open-ended and unconditional commitment risks trapping the United States into bankrolling a kleptocratic and dysfunctional government fighting a never-ending war. The Afghan

government is so dependent upon U.S. support that major cuts could lead to state collapse.

Fortunately, the Obama administration stabilized its troop presence through 2017 and encouraged donors at the recent NATO summit in Warsaw and donor conference in Brussels to extend their commitments. These factors offer the incoming Trump administration the opportunity to modify its strategy and improve the prospects of a favorable and durable outcome.

Strategic Options

The United States wins if international terrorist groups cannot use Afghan territory to launch large-scale terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland and its allies. The Trump administration has three broad options to support America’s interests in Afghanistan and the region:²⁰ A) *Withdraw*: complete the Obama troop drawdown and continue financial and diplomatic support to the Afghan government; B) *Status quo*: maintain the current troop levels, policies, and centralized strategic management practices; and C) *Focused Engagement*: intensify political engagement toward a favorable and durable outcome by decentralizing authority, enforcing conditionality, and updating current levels of support. A fourth option – to “resurge” U.S. forces and capabilities into Afghanistan – is unrealistic due to the high costs, competing global priorities, and low prospects of success.

Option A (*Withdraw*) reduces near-term costs to the United States but heightens the likelihood the Afghan state will collapse or cede much of the south and east to the Taliban. Mitigating the risk of al Qaeda safe havens in those areas requires the ability to conduct surveillance and kinetic strikes, and could also require U.S. concessions to the Taliban and accepting regional solutions that may not align with American preferences.

Option B (*Status quo*) maintains current support levels for Afghanistan and centralized management from Washington, but heightens the risk of expensive failure. This approach retains tight levels of White House control, but limited bandwidth and other global crises probably will keep pushing Afghanistan to the back burner. The result of such micromanagement has been limited engagement on matters such as political reform, a peace process, and regional diplomacy – and often poor integration of U.S. efforts. Washington simply cannot keep pace with such a dynamic conflict. This approach will prevent the near-term collapse of the Afghan government but traps the United States in an expensive and indefinite commitment while critical strategic threats remain inadequately addressed.



U.S. and Afghan National Army soldiers attend a school opening ceremony in Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in September 2011. (Lance Cpl. Anthony Quintanilla/U.S. Marine Corps)

The chronic political and diplomatic problems, noted in the “State of the Conflict” section, that are undermining the prospects of success in Afghanistan probably will not resolve themselves. The status quo may lead to increased fragility of the Afghan state. Not unlike the 1975 Vietnam denouement, Congress eventually could pull funding out of frustration with the endemic government corruption and theft of U.S. resources while American troops remain trapped in a never-ending conflict. This scenario could lead to state collapse and a potential multi-party civil war, as occurred after the Soviets pulled funding in 1992 from the Najibullah regime. *Placing U.S. engagement on auto-pilot is the path of least resistance but may have the highest risk of catastrophe.*

This paper recommends **Option C (Focused Engagement)** – intensify political engagement toward a favorable and durable outcome by stabilizing the battlefield, reducing destructive regional competition over Afghanistan, and setting conditions for a sustainable peace process. The Trump administration should also empower a U.S. civil-military command in Kabul to implement this approach. This patient strategy is likely to prove less costly than either withdrawal or an open-ended commitment. Before implementing this approach, the Trump administration should test the U.S. and Afghan government’s will to succeed. This report offers ways to do so.

Focused Engagement

This strategy is designed to move the war toward a peaceful conclusion that advances U.S. interests at acceptable and sustainable costs. Under current levels of U.S. and international support to Afghanistan, the Taliban will be unable to overthrow the Afghan government. No reasonable amount of additional support, however, is likely to force them to sue for peace. Given these uncomfortable realities, a gradual peace process that resolves the conflict and protects U.S. interests is the best avenue toward a favorable and durable result.²¹ This process must have local, national, and regional dimensions, and must be resilient to spoiler actions.

To make the conditions ripe for a peace process, the United States needs to help stabilize the battlefield into a stalemate that is advantageous to the Afghan government, and foster efforts that make peace a realistic alternative.²² An advantageous stalemate occurs when both parties recognize that neither side can defeat the other, the Afghan government controls most of the country, and the costs to each side of attempting future gains far outweigh the benefits.

To bring the war to a successful conclusion, the United States must focus on three objectives in order of priority:

1. Stabilize the battlefield by improving U.S.-Afghan strategic alignment, enforcing conditionality for political and security sector reform, and supporting an enduring commitment.
2. Promote Afghan sovereignty and reduce destabilizing regional competition by obtaining and supporting an Afghan commitment to regional neutrality, penalizing states that enable the Taliban and other militant groups, and rewarding peaceful outcomes.
3. Advance a peace process to bring the war to a successful conclusion that protects U.S. interests and respects the service and sacrifices of the American and Afghan people.

To implement this approach President Trump should empower a U.S. civil-military command in Kabul with the necessary authority to direct and manage all U.S. efforts in this dynamic, complex, and competitive environment – an environment that exceeds Washington’s ability to keep pace.²³ This arrangement will improve U.S. performance in Afghanistan while retaining critical National Security Council (NSC)-level oversight.

Stabilizing the battlefield is the top priority. The Afghan government must prevent further erosion of territory and regain some battlefield initiative. Key elements of this effort are political and security-sector reform, better governance at national and local levels, and improved U.S.-Afghan strategic alignment. This must include sometimes painful conditionality so the Afghan government fulfills its responsibilities and uses American support wisely. These steps will help an enduring commitment become sustainable.

Regional diplomacy is the second priority. The United States should promote Afghan sovereignty and reduce the destabilizing regional competition by supporting Afghan regional neutrality coupled with regional commitments for non-interference in Afghan affairs. A regional process should monitor these commitments and agree on an enforcement mechanism. Graduated penalties will raise the price to Pakistan and others of supporting militant groups, while a support agreement with Pakistan based on a peaceful outcome should encourage results and avoid rewarding duplicity. The top two objectives are designed to bring about a battlefield stalemate in which the Afghan government has the advantage.

A stalemate is not enough to begin negotiations. All parties need to perceive that a viable path towards peace exists. This is unlikely to develop organically. Since neither party is likely to capitulate, a third-party actor will be needed to facilitate a peace process. This “peace custodian” or intermediary can be a senior envoy from the U.N. or non-aligned government, supported by a capable staff, who is viewed as credible by the Afghan government and Taliban. The process will require local, national, and regional dimensions. The peace custodian will need to carefully build and manage a peace process, foster dialogue, and develop credible paths toward conflict resolution that avoid the rush to failure or counterproductive attempts at power-sharing deals.

Focused Engagement is underpinned by the following assumptions. Policymakers should direct the intelligence community to help assess the validity of these assumptions periodically. If one or more are found to be invalid, the United States will need to reassess and perhaps choose Option A or B instead.

- The United States can apply conditionality that results in the Afghan government making reforms that appreciably strengthen its performance, its legitimacy in contested areas, and its willingness to engage in a realistic peace process.
- Regional actors would be amenable to Afghanistan being in a declared neutral or non-aligned status that is backed by U.S. (and international) support.
- Penalties will not compel Pakistan to turn against the Afghan Taliban, but Pakistan will not appreciably increase levels of instability in Afghanistan.
- The factors above plus enduring U.S. military support will stabilize the battlefield.
- The Taliban will move toward a peace process once they recognize that they are no longer making battlefield gains (the Taliban’s strategic decision-making, however, will move slowly).
- A credible third-party peace custodian can develop feasible and acceptable paths for a peace process that protects U.S. interests.

The best-case outcome under Option C is an advantageous stalemate in which the Afghan government retains control of roughly 65 percent of the country, including Kabul and major cities, while the Taliban controls or contests 35 percent or less. It depends on both sides recognizing that the cost of attempting future gains outweighs the benefits and thus becoming more amenable to negotiations. This may or may not occur after the 2018 or 2019 fighting season, when both the Afghan government and Taliban have tested the status quo and determined they can no longer achieve important gains at acceptable costs.

America must avoid a rush to failure. Given the realities of nearly 40 years of continuous conflict, advancing far enough in a peace process to see tangible reductions in violence and serious conflict-ending negotiations could take a decade or more. The difficult work of initiating dialogue and taking small confidence-building steps should begin as soon as possible. Now is the time to lay sound foundations for a peace process.

Before moving ahead with Option C, the Trump administration should ensure the Afghan government is sincere in bringing the war to a successful conclusion and respecting American support and sacrifices. The following are key initial tests:

1. Development and implementation of a credible U.S.-Afghan strategy to bring the war to a successful conclusion.
2. Declaration of assets by Afghan government officials at deputy minister and above, army corps commanders, and provincial governors and chiefs of police – and immediate penalties, including suspension of duties and freezing assets, for undeclared assets.
3. Enacting a transparent appointment process that discourages factionalism, eliminates purchase-of-position schemes, and ensures key positions are filled.
4. Conducting periodic performance review boards with U.S. participation, to assess outcomes and hold Afghan officials accountable for results in governance and security.
5. Acceptance of and cooperation with enhanced U.S. and international monitoring efforts.
6. An Afghanistan government declaration of regional neutrality.

Implementation

1. *Stabilize the battlefield* by improving U.S.-Afghan strategic alignment, enforcing conditionality for political and security sector reform, and supporting an enduring commitment. Continued military support is not sufficient for success. The Afghan government needs to stop losing ground and public support. Political and security-sector reform are urgently needed. Political gridlock and powerful spoilers, however, will continue impeding reforms unless addressed. An enduring commitment should be predicated on the Afghan government enacting the six steps above. The U.S. and Afghan governments should: Develop and support a coordinated Afghanistan–U.S. war strategy that better aligns interests, threat perceptions, and civil-military efforts.*
 - » Support Afghan government reforms, particularly regarding high-priority efforts such as appointments, war management, good governance, and economic reform.*
 - » Enforce conditionality.²⁴ Incentives (rewards and penalties) should promote institutional reform and discourage spoiler activity. International indices, such as Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index, should be used to measure progress.*
 - » Support periodic governance and security-force leadership reviews that improve accountability for results. Support monitoring and whistle-blowing mechanisms. Evaluate and avoid U.S. actions that unwittingly promote kleptocracy.*
 - » Enhance monitoring and evaluation capabilities to better assess use of U.S. resources and support and to track flows of illicit finance.*
 - » Assess current levels of troops and battlefield support for Resolute Support to determine whether the means are adequate to enact the strategy. For instance, the United States should ensure each Afghan Army corps has the appropriate complement of advisors and consider adding a team of brigade-level advisors to each corps. This is likely to lead to a modest increase in troop levels.*
 - » Sustain counterterrorism efforts (Freedom Sentinel) by U.S. and Afghan forces, but integrate them into the broader strategy and ensure they are aligned with strategic priorities.*
 - » Assist the Afghan government in supporting the large numbers of refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs). A well-coordinated effort will strengthen the credibility of the Afghan government.*
 - » Enhance strategic-level advising for select ministers and deputies by contracting former U.S. or international officials with relevant seniority and experience.
 - » Focus counter-corruption and anti-corruption efforts on state-destroying behaviors, such as purchase-of-position, predatory “rent” extraction, and illicit activity.²⁵
 - » Create a coordinated Afghan–U.S. strategy for security-sector reform that outlines agreed benchmarks, conditionality, and monitoring.
 - » Withhold funding for U.S. programs and assistance that cannot be adequately monitored and evaluated.
 - » Conduct a thorough review of U.S. and international contracts – and remove contracts and contractors that promote dependency and capacity-substitution.
 - » Foster Afghanistan economic self-reliance by supporting top priority initiatives in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF);
2. *Promote Afghan sovereignty and reduce destabilizing regional competition.* The United States has attempted in vain to find ways to address the conflicting interests of regional actors and has gone extraordinary lengths to accommodate Pakistan. Unfortunately, destabilizing competition for influence in Afghanistan continues. There seems little chance to finesse the concerns of all actors. Instead, the U.S. and Afghan governments should find internationally recognized ways to put Afghanistan off-limits as a client of regional powers, such as a declaration of regional neutrality backed by the United States and the international community, coupled with clear commitments by regional actors to non-interference in Afghanistan. At the same time, the United States needs to take a much tougher stance on states that enable militant groups to destabilize their neighbors.
 - » Encourage and back an Afghan commitment to regional neutrality and clear commitments by regional actors to non-interference in Afghanistan.*
 - » Build on the Heart of Asia process to develop a regional mechanism to monitor these commitments and support enforcement.²⁶ *
 - » Implement graduated penalties on Pakistan (and others as necessary) for the use of or neglect toward

* Denotes new actions that should begin in the next 12 months



A young girl in a refugee village outside of Farah City looks on as Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah delivers humanitarian assistance. These intergovernmental teams joined civil and military functions to help train, advise, and assist Afghan government leaders at all levels. (HMC Josh Ives/U.S. Navy)

militant groups that threaten its neighbors. Such penalties could include suspending major non-NATO ally status, designation as a state impeding counterterrorism efforts, suspension of security assistance, targeted actions against specific individuals and organizations for supporting militant groups, discouraging future IMF bailouts, and designation as state sponsor of terrorism.*

- » Develop an agreement with Pakistan for assistance and support based on a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This should reduce the risk of retaliation for the above penalties, while discouraging duplicity. Such a package could include: resumption of security assistance, enhanced economic assistance, trade agreements, support to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts for former militant groups, and consideration of a civil-nuclear agreement.
 - » Cultivate the strategic partnership with India; include India in multilateral discussions about Afghanistan.
3. *Advance a peace process* to bring the conflict to a favorable and durable end. A negotiated outcome must respect the service and sacrifices of Americans and the aspirations and sacrifices of the Afghan people. A peace process will not develop organically. The United States needs to provide necessary encouragement to the process while avoiding a rush to failure or a peace-at-any-price mentality. Progress on Objectives 1 and 2 provides strategic endurance and leverage to avoid bad

deals or flawed approaches. Given the complexity and intensity of the conflict, a third-party peace custodian or intermediary accepted and trusted by the combatants likely will be needed to carefully build and manage the process. The process must include regional, national and local dimensions. This effort may require a decade or more.

- » Ensure the U.S.–Afghan strategy addresses realistic ways to bring about a favorable and durable negotiated outcome and provides coordination mechanisms.*
- » Find and empower a credible third-party peace custodian (intermediary) to build and manage the process, coordinate informal dialogue, initiate graduated confidence building measures, and develop pathways toward a peace process. As noted above, this peace custodian should be a senior envoy from the UN or a neutral country with a capable staff who is recognized by the Afghan government and Taliban as the authorized facilitator for a peace process.*
- » Encourage discussions about peace at regional, national, and local levels, to include facilitating conditions for Taliban leaders to engage in such dialogues.*
- » Develop a coordinated approach to prevent and manage spoiler activity.

* Denotes new actions that should begin in the next 12 months

- » Avoid rushing into power-sharing deals, problematic cease-fires, and early high-profile demands that heighten the risk of cynicism.
 - » Avoid entrapment. Powerful elites on all sides have incentives to resist reasonable compromise and encourage perpetual conflict.
 - » Encourage substantive participation by Afghan women at the most senior levels of the process; women's involvement significantly increases a peace agreement's chances of success.²⁷
 - » Encourage small steps that build confidence and work toward a sustainable process.
4. *To implement this approach, the Trump administration should decentralize authority to a U.S. civil-military command in theater.* Many of the strategic risks to success are cross-cutting issues that develop and fester along the seams and fault-lines of bureaucratic silos. Implementing the ways above requires high degrees of agility, nuance, and local understanding in a dynamic, complex, and competitive environment. The Washington-based NSC does not have the bandwidth to do this. The NSC must play the more productive role of providing oversight and holding the civil-military command in Kabul accountable for results.
- » Empower a presidentially appointed, Senate-confirmed official in Afghanistan with the authority to direct and manage all U.S. government efforts (including military); provide with necessary civil-military staff, resources, and authorities to develop and implement strategy and be accountable for success (this will require careful study of Title 10, 22, and 50 authorities).²⁸ The Combined Joint Interagency Task Force model, with the proper authorities, can provide a useful framework.*
 - » To address potential interagency friction or perceptions of favoritism, this Kabul-based strategic headquarters could report to the President through a single cabinet official or Deputy National Security Advisor.*
 - » Direct the civil-military headquarters in Kabul to develop a coordinated U.S.-Afghan war strategy aligned with NSC policy guidance.*
 - » Develop measures of success for Objectives 1–3 that provide a productive balance between empirical results and subjective evaluations.*

- » Manage U.S. peace process efforts in Kabul rather than Washington.*
- » Focus the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan efforts on regional diplomacy (Objective #2).*

There are no quick-fix solutions. This strategy likely will require several years to see major advancements, but it is the best option available for a favorable and durable outcome at acceptable cost. Unconditional support will continue promoting perverse behaviors. Even the strongest possible conditionality, however, cannot compel the Afghan government to reform overnight or Pakistan to turn against the Afghan Taliban. The Trump administration should avoid rushing to failure in pursuit of short-term game-changers that plagued the Obama administration. Strategic patience will be a useful ally. Uncertainty of U.S. commitment to a successful outcome likely will amplify the hedging strategies that are prolonging the conflict.

If the Trump administration is unwilling to decentralize authority and enforce conditionality that ensures the Afghan government meets its requirements, it should consider whether the United States would be better off bearing the near-term consequences and managing the risks of Option A (withdraw) than perpetuating the higher costs and associated risks of Option B (status quo).



During the implementation of ISAF counterinsurgency strategy, additional forces were positioned in the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan in April 2010. U.S. Army Lt. Col. Brian Pearl and Afghan National Army Lt. Col. Kohistani speak with the local elders. (Spc. Victor Egorov/U.S. Army)

* Denotes new actions that should begin in the next 12 months

II. State of Play, Reactions, Risks

State of Play in Afghanistan and the Region

This section presents the current situation in Afghanistan and the wider region, including the interests of the United States, major terrorist groups, the Afghan government, and regional actors. It also outlines likely outcomes in the region.

U.S. Interest Analysis in Afghanistan and the Region

The United States has seven interests in Afghanistan and the region, ranging from vital to important.²⁹ These interests are analyzed below by the probability of failure (i.e., that the specific interest will not be protected) and the likely level of risk (low–moderate–high) to the United States if failure does occur.³⁰

U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

1. Prevent terror safe havens in Afghanistan capable of supporting large-scale strikes against the United States and allies (Extremely Important (EI));
2. Prevent the overthrow of the Afghan government (Important (I));

U.S. Interests in the Region³¹

3. Prevent nuclear confrontation in South Asia (Vital [V]);
4. Prevent nuclear proliferation; especially prevent terrorists from acquiring a usable nuclear device (V);
5. Prevent terror safe havens in the region capable of supporting large-scale strikes against the United States and allies (EI);
6. Advance strategic partnership with India (EI);
7. Advance U.S. influence and credibility (I).

Overall, the near-term probability of failure on each of the seven interests is low under the status quo. Failure on #2 (prevent the overthrow of the Afghan government) is likely if significant cuts in donor support precipitate a financial crisis that unravels the Afghan government and results in a protracted multi-party civil war. This would heighten the probability of failure on interests #1 or #5 (prevent terror safe havens in Afghanistan or the region) and damage U.S. credibility (#7). The probability of terrorists acquiring a usable nuclear device or materials is low if the Pakistan military remains intact. Pakistan, however, has much room to improve its nuclear security regime.³²

This interest analysis suggests that the current levels of resource commitments to Afghanistan (8,400 troops and the top recipient of U.S. foreign assistance, at \$4.71 billion for Fiscal Year 2017) might not be commensurate, if open-ended, with its relative importance to U.S. interests and the probabilities of high-risk scenarios. Policies that show clear steps toward reform and a favorable and durable end to the conflict are more likely to be sustainable.

Top 6 Recipients of U.S. Aid and Assistance

RECIPIENT	SECURITY (USD)	OTHER AID & ASSISTANCE (USD)	TOTAL (USD)
Afghanistan	3.67 billion	1 billion	4.67 billion
Israel	3.1 billion	--	3.1 billion
Egypt	1.31 billion	150 million	1.46 billion
Iraq	808 million	332.5 million	1.14 billion
Jordan	367.6 million	632.4 million	1 billion
Pakistan	319.7 million	422.5 million	742.2 million

Source: Max Bearak and Larzaro Gamio, "Everything you ever wanted to know about the U.S. foreign assistance budget," The Washington Post, October 18, 2016

Note: Does not include costs of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

The Conflict in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan is complex and multidimensional. Grievances, scrimmages for power and influence, and struggles for control of resources animate local conflicts. The Taliban and Afghan government fight each other for the right to rule, while dealing with significant threats to internal cohesion. Both are frustrated with their main external backers. Regional actors compete to increase their own influence and deny it to their rivals. Donor fatigue could prove fatal to either side, but the Afghan government seems at higher risk of losing external support due to donor fatigue.

Several longitudinal studies suggest that an insurgency that enjoys both internal support and external sanctuary has a very high probability of success. Conversely, a government with chronic legitimacy problems, and that cannot seize and retain key territory from the insurgency, has a very low probability of winning.³³ Afghanistan faces both problems, neither of which seem likely to change soon. This renders a near-term victory by the Afghan government highly unlikely. Durable international support for the Afghan government, on the other hand, makes an outright Taliban victory highly unlikely.

Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban's insurgency seeks to overthrow and replace the Afghan government.³⁴ They will use terrorist tactics, violence, and coercion, as well as efforts at persuasion and shadow governance, in pursuit of this aim. Their focus has been on returning to power in Afghanistan, not fomenting international terrorism.³⁵ Letters obtained during the May 2011 bin Laden raid suggest that Taliban senior leader ties with al Qaeda degraded after 2001.³⁶ A recent report to the U.N. suggests this trend may be reversing.³⁷ The Haqqani Taliban and various local Taliban commanders reportedly maintain strong ties with the terrorist group.³⁸

The Taliban has durable sanctuary in Pakistan, sufficient external backing, and enough support in Afghanistan to sustain the insurgency indefinitely. Their control of territory is the largest since 2001. The Department of Defense estimates the Taliban control 10 percent of the country and contest 25 percent more.³⁹

The Taliban has durable sanctuary in Pakistan, sufficient external backing, and enough support in Afghanistan to sustain the insurgency indefinitely.

Others see Taliban-controlled and -contested territory closer to 50 percent or greater.⁴⁰ Most Taliban are Pashtun, but most Pashtuns are not Taliban. The Taliban have taken several areas in northern Afghanistan,

including parts of Badakhshan – the only province they never controlled while in power. They reportedly have gained inroads with some non-Pashtun communities.⁴¹ Their main sources of funding include foreign donors, local taxation and extortion in Afghanistan, and the drug trade.⁴² They are responsible, per the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, for most of the Afghan civilian casualties over course of the war.⁴³

The Taliban's relationship with Pakistan is aptly described by scholar Stephen Tankel as "coopetition."⁴⁴ The Taliban and Pakistan share interests in destabilizing the Afghan government, but each is wary of the other. The Taliban fears being perceived as a Pakistani puppet.⁴⁵ The latter fears the Afghan Taliban will foment instability in Pakistan. Pakistan will crack down on Taliban leaders who take actions that may threaten Pakistan's interests but otherwise seems to permit a free hand as long as the Taliban are destabilizing Afghanistan.⁴⁶ The desire to limit Pakistani pressure was a major reason the Taliban sought a political office in Doha, Qatar. Pakistan reportedly was furious at the move.⁴⁷ Pakistan's strategic calculus will be discussed below.

To support their objectives, the Taliban have sought to build relationships with the international community. From their base in Doha, the Taliban political commission has held or traveled to talks with the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and many others across Asia.⁴⁸ From 2010 to 2012 the Taliban engaged in exploratory talks with the U.S. government. These efforts have been designed to build the Taliban's international legitimacy, gain concessions, and influence the withdrawal of international forces and support from the Afghan government. The Taliban have noted publicly that they see the war in external (against the United States) and internal (Afghanistan) dimensions.⁴⁹

Inside Afghanistan the Taliban have increasingly accompanied violence and coercion with efforts to gain public support. They have established various commissions (military, political, cultural, etc.) to govern the movement and increasingly sophisticated provincial commissions aimed at local governance. They developed a code of conduct (Layha) to enforce standards

across the diverse movement.⁵⁰ Their Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha statements since 2009 have been deliberately crafted for appeal among Western and Afghan elite audiences, discussing issues ranging from corruption and

technocratic governance to education, civilian protection, and women's rights. Their stated positions in such issues often compare favorably with U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia and often are consistent with positions taken by the Afghan government. These statements are written by the more cosmopolitan political commission. Whether such pronouncements are sincere or cynical propaganda, and the extent to which they are shared across the disparate movement, remain to be tested.

The death of the reclusive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar led to succession struggles and some splits in the movement.⁵¹ Omar's Deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who had been running the organization in the former's name since mid-2013, had himself declared the new Taliban Amir in July 2015 after a hasty process. This created major controversies within the movement and a significant splinter faction led by Mullah Rassoul. Mansour reportedly had authoritarian tendencies, which grated against many Taliban senior leaders. He was killed in a June 2016 U.S. drone strike in Pakistan after spending a significant amount of time in Iran. Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, Mansour's deputy, who has much stronger religious credentials, was elected leader and reportedly is having some success in healing splits. Some observers suggest he is returning the normative shura-based consensus approach to decision-making; others believe Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence is becoming more involved to compensate for Haibatullah's shortcomings.⁵²

Some mid-level leaders have expressed concerns about the strategic direction of the movement and about commanders becoming too powerful and independent. "The structure of the Emirate as it once existed," one mid-level leader reported, "is no longer with us." An analyst who interviewed multiple mid-level commanders called the emerging problem "Afghan warlordism with a Taliban face."⁵³ With Taliban leaders becoming overly powerful, the "hard-line movement," notes journalist and regional expert Abubakar Siddique, "finds itself mired in growing turmoil."⁵⁴

Despite their increasing control of territory, the Taliban are currently unable to secure major cities or overthrow the Afghan government. This situation is likely to endure if current levels of international support and assistance continue. Taliban senior leaders, meanwhile, show little sign of wanting to negotiate peace. Although some reportedly want to begin a peace process as soon as possible, others remain convinced of outright victory or of continued battlefield gains.⁵⁵ They believe their position will strengthen over time as U.S. and international support declines incrementally. Given the

Taliban's tendency for consensus decision-making, such differences of opinion are likely to reinforce the status quo – continue the insurgency and delay a peace process.

Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) has been the other major insurgent group in Afghanistan. HiG leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar signed a peace agreement with the Afghan government in October 2016.⁵⁶ This is an important step, but its applicability to peace with the Taliban is tenuous. On the positive side, it shows the Afghan government can negotiate an agreement and a militant group can keep its commitments (so far). It also has generated an important conversation about peace among the Afghan polity that was tragically missing from earlier U.S.-led reconciliation efforts with the Taliban. By 2016, however, the group was a bit player in the violence. Its cousin Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan has long been in the government. Without external support and with only limited funding, HiG's prospects were limited.

Al Qaeda, Islamic State Khorasan Province, and Pakistani Taliban⁵⁷

The major terrorist groups in Afghanistan are al Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K). Al Qaeda aims to re-establish a safe haven in Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Al Qaeda's presence, while growing, remains limited. It does not appear able to conduct major planning, recruiting, training, or strategic communications within Afghanistan. The U.S. military command in Afghanistan reported dismantling a major al Qaeda training camp in 2015. Despite the Afghan Taliban's senior leader efforts to distance themselves from the group, al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri pledged loyalty to Omar's successors. The Taliban are unlikely to sever ties with al Qaeda while the conflict continues. The latter likely aims to prove its utility to the Taliban in hopes of gaining more options for safe haven.

IS-K controls small parts of Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.⁵⁹ It mostly consists of re-branded Pakistani Taliban groups that have retreated into Afghanistan and some disaffected Afghan Taliban.⁶⁰ Despite reportedly limited support from ISIS, IS-K has managed to stage high-casualty producing attacks in Kabul and Jalalabad. It aims to stoke sectarian conflict against the mainly-Shia Hazaras.⁶¹ The Afghan government, the international coalition, and the Taliban fight against IS-K. Its presence reportedly declined in 2016.⁶² While Afghanistan is not likely a natural place for IS-K to grow into a major threat, militants displaced out of Syria and Iraq could seek refuge in Afghanistan and Pakistan. State collapse in Afghanistan followed by a protracted multi-party civil war could prove beneficial to IS-K.

Various groups from the disparate Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have retreated into Afghanistan's east and southeast, from where they conduct attacks against the Pakistani state. The Karzai government had begun providing support to the TTP in retaliation for Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban. TTP senior leader Latif Mansour was apprehended by ISAF on the way to meet with President Hamid Karzai.⁶³ The current Afghan government seems less inclined to support TTP, but is less able to prevent it from using Afghanistan as a base of operations.⁶⁴ This situation fuels Pakistan's belief that Afghanistan, supported by India, aims to destabilize Pakistan.

Afghan government

The U.S. relationship with the Afghan government is beset with what political scientists call principal-agent problems.⁶⁵ These problems result from issues such as misalignment of interests, inadequate monitoring, and behaviors that increase dependency and prolong conflict. There exists no coordinated strategy to bring U.S. and Afghan interests into better alignment. Predatory and rival elites pose a greater existential challenge to the government than do the Taliban (at least while international forces remain).⁶⁶ The reduction in forces and oversight mechanisms has reduced U.S. visibility on Afghan use of American resources and support, making conditionality even more challenging. The more the United States supports the fight against the Taliban, the less the Afghan government has incentive to undertake difficult reforms and tackle predatory elites. At the same time, significant cuts in American funding or support could be fatal for the Afghan government and state.

The U.S. government's tendency to operate in bureaucratic silos exacerbates the problems. No one is in charge in Afghanistan of managing and coordinating U.S. military, political, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, and other efforts. These operate largely on their own, directed from parent agencies in Washington. Such "silos" of activity leave cross-cutting vulnerabilities that have been ably exploited by Afghan elites. The inability to prioritize and integrate elements of national power on the ground has undermined initiatives such as anti-corruption, political and security-sector reform, reconciliation, socio-economic development, and regional diplomacy.⁶⁷

The Afghan government has been unable or unwilling to make reforms necessary to win battle of legitimacy in contested and Taliban-controlled areas. The government gradually self-organized into a predatory kleptocracy during the Karzai years.⁶⁸ A disputed election outcome

in 2014 led to a U.S.-brokered NUG led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.⁶⁹ Under the U.S.-brokered agreement, electoral reform, parliamentary and district council elections, and a Constitutional Loya Jirga were to be completed within two years.⁷⁰ None were, and the negotiations between the two camps on a way forward are said to be making little progress.

Reform remains gridlocked between these rival factions.⁷¹ Even if they can agree on reforms, key legislation is likely to be blocked by a highly corrupt Parliament.⁷² The task is made even more difficult by political agitation from former President Karzai, who maintains powerful coalition of former officials, tribal elders, and power brokers.⁷³ Political opposition groups have blossomed.⁷⁴ The Council for Protection and Stability of Afghanistan, also known as Sayyaf's Council, is made up mostly of former cabinet officials in the Karzai government and supporters of Dr. Abdullah's presidential bid. This group is likely to protect the status quo. Its response to the August 2016 dispute between Ghani and Abdullah was even-handed. Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi's New National Front of Afghanistan, however, has been outspoken in calling the NUG concept a failure and for Afghanistan "to have a new start." Many former jihadi leaders, meanwhile, run informal chains of patronage, especially in the security ministries, that lock in the warlords' privileges and profits while blocking reforms. Abdur Rashid Dostum, the Afghan First Vice President, allegedly imprisoned and tortured a political rival in December 2016.⁷⁵

No one is in charge in Afghanistan of managing and coordinating U.S. military, political, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, and other efforts."

Afghanistan thus has ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world for the past nine consecutive years.⁷⁶ The government, nonetheless, has taken some important steps. It reportedly has filed corruption charges against eight Afghan National Army general officers and is investigating others.⁷⁷ The Ministry of Finance has made advances in revenue collection, meeting International Monetary Fund targets for first time in history.⁷⁸ Afghanistan, however, slipped from 182 to 183 on the World Bank's ease-of-doing-business ratings.

Afghan women have made major gains since 2001 in areas such as protection, maternal health, political rights, and economic empowerment.⁷⁹ Afghan women now serve in the

Afghan army and police, albeit still in small numbers. Unfortunately, violence against women remains a major problem.⁸⁰ Threats against women's rights activists reportedly are on the rise.⁸¹ In many parts of the country, women remain unable to work outside the home. They are exceptionally affected by civilian casualties.⁸² The top problems facing women, a recent survey reports, include illiteracy, unemployment, and domestic violence.⁸³ A descent into a 1990s-style civil war is likely to have disproportionately adverse consequences for Afghan women. President Ghani has made the protection and empowerment of women a top priority of his administration. The Afghan government should heighten women's role in peace efforts. A recent report argues that a peace agreement is "35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years if women participate in its creation."⁸⁴

Donor fatigue is a major risk. To date, aid conditionality and mutual accountability efforts by U.S. and international donors have had minimal results.⁸⁵ Applying sufficiently compelling conditionality to generate reforms is difficult. Reform also can be politically dangerous for the government if powerful elites feel their position threatened. According to a study on "Capability Traps," the Afghan government is unlikely (except under best-case scenarios) to make sufficient progress toward good governance, stability, and self-reliance for decades. The best-case scenario shows Afghanistan would take 14 years to reach the median

level of developing-world governance capability; at Afghanistan's pace of change from 2002–08, the forecast grows to 80 years.⁸⁶

Dependency should give donors some leverage. The Afghan government is completely dependent on foreign aid, which is roughly equivalent to the entire \$19.2 billion GDP.⁸⁷ Afghanistan ranks in the top six of the world's most aid-dependent countries.⁸⁸ The \$4b per year ANDSF are bankrolled almost entirely by donors – mostly the United States. After double-digit annual GDP growth between 2002 and 2012, economic growth increased only marginally from 1.3 percent in 2014 to an estimated 1.5 percent in 2015. Many Afghan elites have amassed substantial fortunes from the war economy.⁸⁹ Donors could do more to create a constructive mix of incentives for reform while helping the government manage spoiler activity from powerful elites.

Education has been a bright spot in Afghanistan's development. In 2001, roughly 800,000 children were in school – nearly all of them boys. As of 2016, approximately 8 million children are enrolled in school – a third of them girls. It is one of the greatest advances in education in modern history. Still, Afghanistan experiences significant problems with student and teacher absenteeism. The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), a U.S. government watchdog, has questioned the enrollment numbers.⁹⁰ Corruption in the education sector, like elsewhere in government,



Afghan National Police assemble in formation prior to a clearance operation in Helmand province. (Cpl. Adam Leyendecker/U.S. Marine Corps)

is a major problem. Still, thousands of Afghans have graduated from high school and universities across Afghanistan and the world. Many, albeit too few, serve in government and business. They have potential to reform the Afghan political economy as they move into the senior ranks.

With over \$1 trillion in estimated mineral wealth, Afghanistan has the potential to become self-reliant.⁹¹ Much mineral wealth, however, remains bound to the illicit economy controlled by powerful actors.⁹² Lack of infrastructure and engineering expertise prevent the government from turning minerals to economic benefit. In addition to security concerns, demands for bribes and “facilitation fees” turn away Western businesses who could help. The World Bank ranks Afghanistan 177 of 189 in terms of regulation quality and efficiency for investment, with no improvements during the past year.⁹³ The Afghan government has developed the ANPDF that outlines a five-year plan toward self-reliance.⁹⁴ Although its assumptions and forecasts for economic growth are unrealistic, several of the major reform initiatives are critical in developing a sound foundation for future growth.

Afghanistan is the world’s leading producer of opium; powerful elites, Taliban, and government officials benefit from the poppy trade.⁹⁵ The UN Office on Drugs and Crime notes that the amount of land in Afghanistan devoted to poppy cultivation is up 10 percent in 2016 to its third highest level in over 20 years.⁹⁶ Eradication and alternative livelihood efforts have been ineffective and sometimes counterproductive. Legalization is unworkable in the current environment.

Afghanistan is highly dependent on Pakistan for access to the sea. Initiatives such as the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) pipeline will take time

to come on line.⁹⁷ The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement continues to face implementation challenges.⁹⁸ Afghans recently have expressed interest in expanding, with India’s help, access to the Iranian port of Chahbahar as a way of reducing Pakistan’s economic leverage.⁹⁹ Afghanistan’s lucrative customs revenues have had difficulty making their way to government coffers due to widespread corruption among customs officials and the Border Police.¹⁰⁰ Massive refugee flows include many educated Afghans, creating a brain drain that threatens to undermine future stability and economic growth.¹⁰¹

Security Situation

The United States and Afghanistan, despite nearly 16 years of fighting, never have developed a coordinated strategy to win the war or bring it to a successful conclusion. The problem has contributed to the misalignment of interests and undermined coordination on issues such as reconciliation, regional diplomacy, political reform, and military operations. The Afghan government’s military campaign, described as “disrupt, fight, hold,” is reportedly written by advisors and not tied to an overall strategy.¹⁰² It appears strategically defensive, as nothing in the construct suggests efforts to seize and retain key territory controlled by the Taliban.

The Afghan National Army shows little interest in counterinsurgency.¹⁰³ It orients instead on the perceived conventional threat from Pakistan. It believes it is the police’s job to secure the population. However, the police in many areas are corrupt and ineffective.¹⁰⁴ Some are predatory. This has been a particular problem with some Afghan Local Police units.¹⁰⁵ The high cost of the army has prompted the government to recruit other pro-government militias to supplement the security forces – some have improved security; others tend to aggravate conflict.¹⁰⁶ Poor performance and predatory behavior leave areas vulnerable to the Taliban. When the Taliban threaten key areas, the army can conduct impressive tactical operations to deny Taliban control. The troops soon return to bases, however. Too often, predatory pro-government actors return. Data from the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan suggest the ANDSF has eclipsed the Taliban in civilian casualties during ground engagements, due mostly to the use of artillery, mortars, and other explosive ordnance in populated areas.¹⁰⁷ The cycle tends to exhaust the population, contributes to large numbers of IDPs, and damages government legitimacy.¹⁰⁸

At current levels of support, the ANDSF can prevent the overthrow of Afghan government and prevent



Afghan Scouts salute at the closing ceremony of their travel safety training day at a Kabul orphanage. (Tech. Sgt. Joseph Prouse/U.S. Air Force)



President Barack Obama meets with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other officials at the Presidential Palace in Kabul during his first presidential visit to the region in March 2010. (Pete Souza/DoD Flickr)

Taliban from securing major population centers.¹⁰⁹ The ANDSF are steadily losing ground in the countryside, however.¹¹⁰ Afghan Special Operations Forces continue to perform very well, but are over-utilized. Leadership at ministerial levels remains weak and often corrupt, which has a trickle-down effect in the army and police. Military officials in Afghanistan observe that general-purpose army forces in the 201, 203, and (to a lesser degree) 205 Corps have performed relatively better than their counterparts in the 207, 209, and 215 Corps.¹¹¹ Part of the reason may be the 12-month-long partnering and advising relationships from U.S. Army units since 2009 for the first three corps. The latter have enjoyed only six-month relationships from non-U.S. Army units. The most extreme problems to date have been in the 215 Corps in Helmand, which had no advisors in 2015. The corps nearly collapsed due to poor leadership, incompetence, and corruption. It had to be reconstituted and retrained over the winter. RS has pulled forces from other units to give the 215th a permanent cadre of advisors.

The ANDSF are suffering historically high casualties. From March to August 2016, roughly 4,500 Afghan soldiers and police were killed and more than 8,000 wounded.¹¹² In August alone the ANDSF suffered about 2,800 casualties, more than a third of them fatal.¹¹³ Army recruiting has kept pace with overall attrition, but a roughly 30 percent turnover each year undermines mastery of tactics, equipment, and critical skills. The police are having recruiting problems, reportedly falling even further behind in sustaining authorized strength. The U.S. Commander in Afghanistan blames corruption and bad leadership for poor performance and morale challenges.¹¹⁴ These problems can lead to “ghost soldiers” – those who exist only on the rolls

for pay purposes. The military command in Kabul has recently dropped 30,000 alleged ghost soldiers from the rolls.¹¹⁵ Efforts to reform leadership and introduce merit-based appointments largely have foundered in the face of powerful incentives to perpetuate the kleptocracy, patronage pressures, and other malign political and economic influences. Such problems, according to a recent study, are sadly normal for security-force assistance missions.¹¹⁶

In addition to funding, the ANDSF are highly dependent on U.S. firepower and expertise.¹¹⁷ The Obama administration recently gave the U.S. military greater latitude to strike Taliban targets. This has helped stall major Taliban attacks. More aggressive U.S. combat support also runs the risk of lowering incentives for needed reforms.¹¹⁸ Predatory elites can use threats as leverage to gain concessions from the government, confident the U.S. will prevent major Taliban gains or political instability. The deployment of sophisticated Western equipment and logistical and management systems, meanwhile, has increased reliance on contractors and advisors to manage them. Given current requirements, the ANDSF are unlikely to be self-reliant for decades.¹¹⁹



U.S. Air Force Maj. Loren Coulter and an A-10C Thunderbolt II serve at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. (Senior Airman Willard E. Grande II/U.S. Air Force)

Afghan Foreign Policy and Regional Actors

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in a tough neighborhood. In many ways, a new “Great Game” has been afoot among regional actors to gain controlling influence in Afghanistan and deny it to rivals. Such competition often has been encouraged by Afghan leaders to extract support and concessions while playing one power against the others. It also has led to destabilizing actions by external powers. The competition for influence is most acute between India and Pakistan. As noted above, the latter permits Taliban sanctuary on its soil and both provides and enables support to the insurgency. India has historic ties to former Northern Alliance figures and has been clear in its support for the Afghan government since 2001.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have a historically antagonistic relationship.¹²⁰ The so-called Durand Line, marking the border between the Afghan and British Empires and later the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been disputed by the Afghan government.¹²¹ Afghanistan was the only country in the UN not to recognize Pakistan as a sovereign country in 1947. Friendly relations existed during the Taliban regime. Pakistan was one of three countries to recognize that government and the only one with an Embassy in Kabul. Even still, the Taliban would not recognize the Durand Line. Afghan nationalists have been vocal about regaining territory lost from the Durrani empire, which includes Pashtun areas in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as Baluchistan.¹²²

The Pakistani military, which runs the country’s national security affairs, thus fears encirclement by India and eventual dismemberment. Pakistan forces have fought and lost three wars against India. The Pakistanis’ nuclear arsenal serves as a strategic deterrent. They are reportedly developing tactical nuclear weapons to offset India’s conventional force advantages. Pakistan has a history of using militant groups to advance its strategic interests in Afghanistan and India-controlled Kashmir. Pakistan’s military accuses India and Afghanistan of fomenting violence in FATA and Baluchistan by supporting the TTP and Baluch separatists. The fear is that a stable, hostile Afghanistan could serve as a platform to promote instability in and an eventual break-up of Pakistan. In this view, destabilizing Afghanistan prevents the worst-case scenario. Making Afghanistan a client state is Pakistan’s best-case scenario. Pakistan has yet to formulate an alternative relationship with Afghanistan between client state and chaos.

Early in his administration, President Ghani made significant efforts to improve ties with Pakistan, aiming to assuage its national security concerns and enlist its support in beginning a peace process. These initiatives met with major backlash in Afghanistan, particularly when Pakistan did not meet expectations of Afghan elites to turn against the Afghan Taliban.¹²³ Anti-Pakistan rhetoric is a politically popular and unifying narrative in Afghanistan, which President Ghani has embraced. The Afghan government is actively strengthening ties with India to counter Pakistan.¹²⁴

Pakistan is achieving its aims in Afghanistan at relatively low cost to itself but high cost to Afghanistan and the United States. Since 2001 the United States has provided over \$20b in military, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Pakistan.¹²⁵ Current outlays of \$742.2m annually, include \$319m in security and over \$422m in economic and humanitarian assistance.¹²⁶ Despite years of U.S. encouragement and support, Pakistan has been unwilling to turn against Afghan Taliban and force them to negotiate.¹²⁷ Pakistan’s ties to the Haqqani Taliban (a designated terrorist organization) are even closer, supporting the group in exchange for assistance in checking the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistan is in a very difficult war with the latter. One study suggests that nearly 28,000 Pakistani civilians and service members have been killed in terrorism and related violence from 2001 to 2015; the toll on militants reportedly is much higher.¹²⁸ Pakistani officials blame this human cost on the U.S. war on terror.

Although experts dispute the extent of the Afghan Taliban’s agency, there is little doubt that the insurgency is advancing Pakistan’s interests.¹²⁹ So-called “soft conditionality” to induce Pakistan to change its strategic calculus has been ineffective. Members of the U.S. Congress have grown increasingly frustrated.¹³⁰ Still, Pakistan seems resilient to the kinds of sanctions the United States has been willing to impose. Even under the aggressive U.S. sanctions regime of the 1990s, Pakistan managed to support insurgencies in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Punjab, while developing a nuclear arsenal.

Under the circumstances, Pakistan has little reason to turn against the Afghan Taliban. China, Pakistan’s all-weather friend, remains a critical hedge against declines in U.S. support. Pakistan wants U.S. support and backing, but such support has not been more compelling than prevention of a stable, hostile Afghanistan.

India is a rising power. As the world’s largest democracy that shares U.S. concerns with China and Pakistan, India seems a natural long-term partner with the United States. The Bush administration signed a nuclear agreement with India in 2006, much to Pakistan’s alarm. The acceleration



Members of the second all-female officer candidate class in the Afghan National Army graduate in November 2011. (Mass Communication 1st Class Elizabeth Thompson/U.S. Navy)

of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan during those negotiations was probably not coincidental. The Obama administration sought to strengthen ties.

India's actions in Afghanistan have aimed to help the government and limit Pakistani influence.¹³¹ India's relationship with Afghanistan provides leverage over Pakistan, and potential options to address Pakistan's use of asymmetric groups to foment violence in Kashmir and attacks on strategic targets in India. Higher terrorist violence in Afghanistan since the 1990s often has correlated with lower terrorist violence in Kashmir. India's support to opening Iran's Chahbahar port to trade with Afghanistan reduces Pakistan's leverage. Some in Pakistan view this as a national security threat.¹³²

Iran wants to prevent a hostile, Gulf-Sunni-Arab-backed regime in Afghanistan.¹³³ The United States and Iran share some common interests in Afghanistan, including a reduction in narco-trafficking and prevention of a Taliban return to power. Iran long has supported its Shia co-religionists among the Hazara community and has ties to former Northern Alliance figures. It has invested heavily in schools and economic development in western Afghanistan. It reportedly has developed relationships with the Afghan Taliban, including alleged support for one of its break-away groups, as a hedge for the future.¹³⁴

China views Central Asia as a potential area for cooperation with the United States.¹³⁵ The Chinese have a major economic interest in access to mineral resources in Afghanistan and Central Asia; they recently opened a train route to Hairatan in Afghanistan's northern Balkh

province and are developing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.¹³⁶ Beijing is closely allied with Pakistan and has a difficult relationship with India. Instability in Xinjiang province among the Uighur community concerns China. It has declared the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) a terrorist group and seeks support from Pakistan and Afghanistan in preventing a growth in ETIM capabilities. China likely fears U.S. presence in Afghanistan as part of broader containment strategy, but it may fear more the consequences of U.S. departure.

Russia likely sees opportunity in Afghanistan to advance its efforts in undermining NATO and the United States.¹³⁷ Moscow seeks to regain influence in the Central Asian states, formerly members of the Soviet Union. It claims an interest in preventing terrorist activity against Russia by militant groups from those areas and Afghanistan. Continued instability in Afghanistan arguably dissipates U.S. attention from Russian activities elsewhere.

As a hedge against declines in Western backing, the Afghan government is seeking alternative sources of military support, particularly from India and Russia.¹³⁸ This policy, of course, feeds Pakistan's insecurities. Both President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah have been successful in convincing the United States and other Western countries that they are good strategic partners intent on reform and good stewardship of donor support. Recent commitments at the 2016 NATO Conference in Warsaw and Donor Conference in Brussels suggest these efforts have been successful with U.S. and other Western leaders, but such commitments require appropriations from an increasingly skeptical Congress and Parliaments.

Prospects for a Favorable and Durable Outcome

An outright victory in Afghanistan is improbable. As the longitudinal studies noted above suggest, an insurgency that has sustainable internal support and external sanctuary and backing tends to be successful. A host-nation government unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and insurgent-controlled areas tends to lose. Afghanistan has both problems, and neither seems likely to change in the near term. A decisive victory would require change in both variables.

An alternative is a negotiated outcome in which U.S. national security interests are protected. This requires the Afghan government to enter a peace process at higher leverage than the Taliban. The United States and others long have supported efforts toward peace, but these have foundered due to lack of vision, poor coordination, and the fears and interests of combatants.

Loose talk of a “peace deal” raises anxieties among many Afghans who recall how such power-sharing arrangements after the fall of the Afghan communist regime (the Peshawar Accords in 1992 and Islamabad Accords in 1993) led to and exacerbated the Afghan Civil War. That conflict destroyed Kabul and other parts of the country, led to gross violations of human rights by warlord groups, and brought about the rise of the Taliban.¹³⁹

The conflict is not yet “ripe” for negotiations. Leading peace scholar I. William Zartman argues that a conflict is “ripe” when two conditions are met: 1) when both sides perceive there to be a mutually hurting stalemate; 2) there exists a credible, compelling way out of conflict.¹⁴⁰

The gradual withdrawal of international troops has boosted the Taliban’s confidence that their prospects for the future will continue to improve.

Neither condition is currently present. Although neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban is likely to win outright, each believes its leverage will improve over time. Despite efforts from the United States and others to promote a peace process, no actor with sufficient credibility has outlined a compelling vision and path toward a negotiated outcome that all parties believe could satisfy their interests.

The Taliban have little reason to negotiate an end to the conflict. Their internal and external support is unlikely to diminish. Taliban efforts to take over major cities have been repulsed with heavy casualties on both sides. They are gaining ground, however, and control districts surrounding key cities such as Kunduz, Lashkar Gah, and Tarin Kot; they also twice temporarily seized

control of Kunduz City and nearly captured Lashkar Gah in summer 2016. Some analysts suggest the ongoing leadership challenges have resulted in greater degrees of “warlordism” within the Taliban.¹⁴¹ The gradual withdrawal of international troops has boosted the Taliban’s confidence that their prospects for the future will continue to improve.

Although some Taliban leaders have been advocating peace, hardliners (who tend to have stronger links to the fighting ranks) believe that outright victory remains possible. Even if that proves overly optimistic, they believe that continued military action will improve their leverage over time. Why negotiate for 30 percent of the loaf when you might be able to get 50 percent or more in couple of years? Given the Taliban’s focus on maintaining unity and consensus, continued split opinion on whether to negotiate is likely to reinforce the status quo: keep fighting while opening avenues to gain domestic and international political legitimacy.

Despite the deteriorating security situation, President Ghani also has limited political space for reconciliation.¹⁴² His efforts to improve relationships with Pakistan were severely criticized by key figures in the former Northern Alliance, who have historic ties to India, Iran, and Russia, and by members of the former Karzai government. They insist that the Taliban is a Pakistan-controlled terrorist organization, not an insurgent group. As such they reject the notion of negotiations.

These influential leaders believe that with enough U.S. pressure, Pakistan will turn against the Afghan Taliban and compel them to sue for peace. They question

why Washington has not applied such pressure. They calculate that the United States never intends to leave Afghanistan, a belief that militates against both reform and peace.¹⁴³ Many Afghan elites have grown very rich from the conflict. The recent peace process with *Hizb-i-Islami*, however, offers opportunities for discussion about the potential for peace with the Taliban. The Afghan government’s bargaining position declines as its control of territory erodes.

Regional actors may believe they benefit more from continued conflict than forcing the Afghan government or the Taliban to the peace table. Pakistan is unable or unwilling to turn against the Afghan Taliban and force them to negotiate.¹⁴⁴ India does not want to see a peace agreement that increases Pakistan’s influence and

reduces its own. China is unwilling to compel Pakistan to turn against the Taliban. Regional diplomatic mechanisms are insufficient to address collective problems. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization does not include India, Iran, and Pakistan as full members.¹⁴⁵ The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation does not include China, Iran, or Russia. The U.S.-backed Heart of Asia process has been an important platform for dialogue, but it has been unable to address collective problems and concerns.

The United States has been unable to advance a peace process or to convince Pakistan to turn against the Afghan Taliban. The gradual draw-down of U.S. and international forces has unintentionally fueled hedging strategies that have further entrenched conflict and mutual suspicion. Most actors recognize the value of peace, but no one trusts others enough to take risk to bring it about. They each prefer the status quo to perceived riskier alternatives.

Likely reactions to Focused Engagement

This section outlines the likely reactions of various actors to a *Focused Engagement* strategy. Identifying these is important in helping the United States anticipate and adapt to potential threats, challenges, and opportunities.

- *Afghan government* reformers are likely to welcome more effective conditionality. Those deeply invested in the kleptocracy will attempt to block reforms. Some may threaten violence against Afghan and international reform advocates, and may seek to manipulate or even bully American officials. Key Afghan leaders likely will resist the idea of regional neutrality unless the United States agrees to back it. Afghan senior officials also may seek to circumvent the U.S. leadership in Kabul by seeking private meetings with the President and cabinet secretaries.
- *Taliban* hard-liners will continue fighting until battlefield gains are no longer cost-effective. Empowering a peace custodian to advance dialogue and chart ways forward are likely to help pragmatists in the Taliban make a more convincing case within the leadership that a peace process is a viable alternative. Defection remains unlikely.
- *Pakistan* likely will aim to use its control of ground and air lines of communication as leverage to prevent or ease sanctions. Its fears that Afghanistan will become a client-state of India will encourage Pakistan to continue fomenting violence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's strong ties to China help check India. As a hedge against deteriorating relations with the United States, Pakistan could be seeking stronger ties to Russia. A regional process dominated by Russia, China, and Pakistan could be the latter's best chance of gaining controlling influence in Afghanistan. It might be willing to accept Afghanistan neutrality if a credible regional management mechanism is in place. If so, it could be more amenable to a peace process.
- *India* will continue offering encouragement and economic and diplomatic support to the Afghan government, but is unwilling to shoulder the security load. It also might be amenable to Afghan neutrality and a peace process. It likely will seek stronger coordination with the United States in response to growing coordination between the United States, China, and Russia.
- *China* is likely to see economic opportunity in a stable Afghanistan and has viewed Central Asia as a potential place for cooperation with the United States. The Chinese reportedly are frustrated with what they see

as ineffective U.S. efforts and will meet with Russia and Pakistan in Moscow to discuss the creation of an alternative regional group. They are in contact with the Taliban. A peace process that begins to reduce violence also may be helpful in China's efforts against ETIM. The Chinese are unlikely to force Pakistan to turn against the Afghan Taliban and would likely veto any sanctions efforts from the UN Security Council.

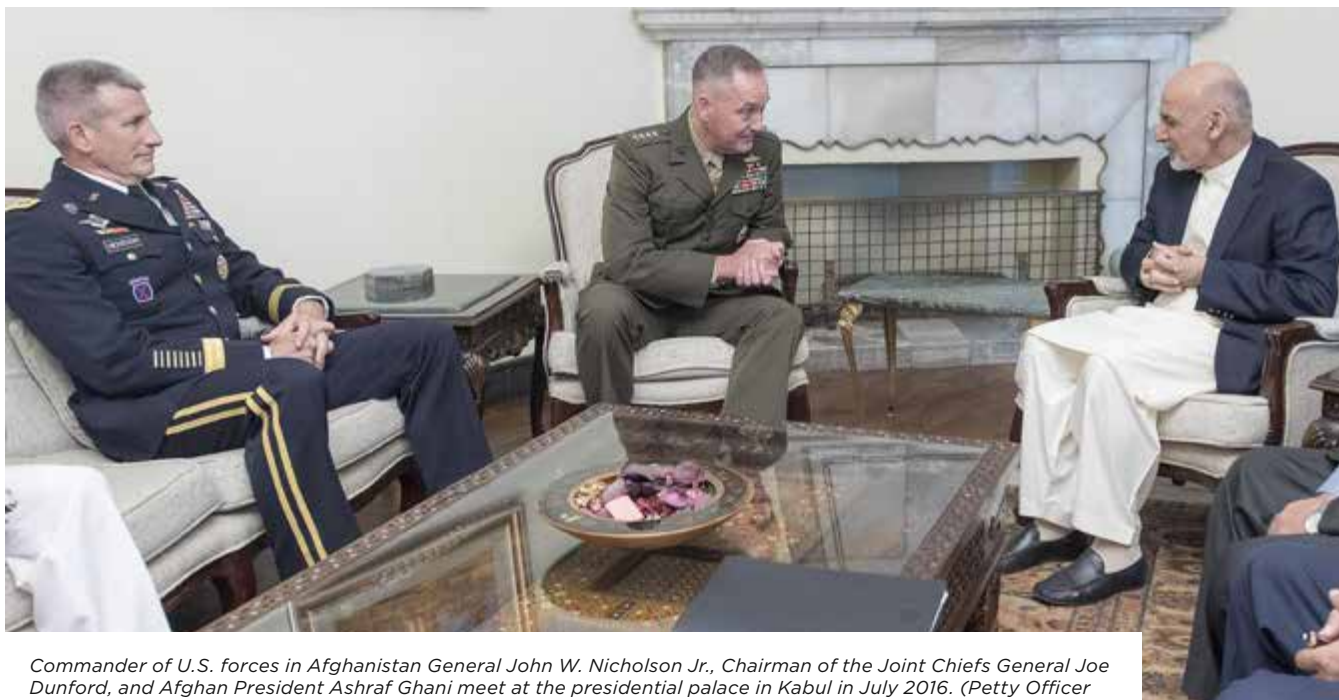
- *Iran* also could benefit from a more peaceful Afghanistan, particularly if a peace process can begin to address narcotics trafficking. The Iranians also would benefit from greater volume of goods going through their port of Chahbahar. They are likely to remain concerned about the presence of U.S. military aircraft and special operations forces in Afghanistan and may prefer instability in Afghanistan to occupy U.S. military attention. They will maintain ties to the Taliban as a hedge. Iran has strong ties to both Russia and India – its alignment with either one regarding Afghanistan could tip the balance of power.
- *Saudi Arabia* sees Afghanistan through the lens of its own conflict with Iran. The Saudis remain strong supporters of Pakistan to secure their interests in Afghanistan and to limit Iranian influence. Private donors from Saudi Arabia reportedly provide substantial funds to the Taliban.¹⁴⁶
- *Russia* has welcomed U.S. difficulties but could see Afghanistan as a platform to improve relations with the Trump administration – potentially by offering an alternative regional platform and approach to stability and counterterrorism in South and Central Asia. As noted above, the Russians reportedly are working with China and Pakistan to develop an alternative regional group in response to what they perceive to be failing U.S.-led

efforts. A stronger alignment with China and Pakistan gives Russia much greater clout in Central and South Asia, and can serve as a balance for all three against strengthening U.S.–India ties. Russia is in contact with the Taliban. A peace process could reduce the flow of narcotics through the Central Asian states but could prompt militant groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to refocus on Central Asia and Russia.

- *The Central Asian states* are unlikely to offer bases as alternative counterterrorism platforms for the United States. Their concerns about domestic security could encourage them to prefer that groups such as the IMU remain focused on fighting in Afghanistan rather than at home. A peace process could reduce the flow of narcotics through the Central Asian states.
- *U.S. interagency*: The designation of a civil-military strategic leadership in Kabul will grate against bureaucratic norms and may result in major turf battles. Some leaders may seek to use cabinet-level officials to circumvent or reverse unpopular decisions. Congress may be reluctant to adapt Title 10, 22, and 50 authorities.
- *Coalition partners* should welcome improved conditionality but may express concerns about empowering a U.S. civil-military command. The Resolute Support mission command should remain dual-hatted NATO and U.S. Forces Afghanistan and may need to be reduced to three-star so enough U.S. military staff can support the civil-military command. National capitals will aim to coordinate capacity-building and development efforts with the civil-military command.



After an increased number of anti-Afghan forces' attacks, ANSF and ISAF forces visited an eastern region of the Kunar province and met with village elders. U.S. soldiers return fire after an attack. (Staff Sgt. Gary A. Witte/U.S. Army)



Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan General John W. Nicholson Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joe Dunford, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani meet at the presidential palace in Kabul in July 2016. (Petty Officer 2nd Class Dominique A. Pineiro/U.S. Navy)

Risks to Success and Mitigation Measures

This section identifies the major risks to a successful outcome under *Focused Engagement*. It uses the interests and likely reactions of various actors to identify potential ways U.S. aims and efforts can be undermined. Beneath the description of the risks are measures that can prevent a given risk from materializing or mitigate the impact if it occurs. Anticipating all risks is impossible. Decentralizing authority in ways outlined in *Focused Engagement* will help the United States adapt to emerging risks and capitalize on unforeseen opportunities.

1. *Divergent U.S.-Afghan interests and strategies.* The United States and Afghanistan never have developed a coordinated war strategy. This has masked often divergent interests, views of threats, and strategies on issues ranging from governance and political reform to security and economic development. It also has contributed to internal coordination problems within the Afghan government and the ANDSF. Continued divergence likely will perpetuate the war's intractability, frustrating moral hazards, and increasing costs to the United States.
 - » The new administration should first direct the U.S. country team to develop a coordinated strategy with the Afghan government to bring the war to a successful conclusion. Inability to develop a coordinated strategy will make *Focused Engagement* unviable and should raise serious questions on the wisdom of Option B (*Open-Ended Status Quo*).
2. *Resistance to reform.* Powerful spoilers are likely to undermine these efforts, and may even resort to threats or acts of violence. Corrupt actors take advantage of major information asymmetries to mask malign activities. To make progress on reform, the United States should:
 - » The administration should direct the Intelligence Community to measure periodically the validity of the assumptions underpinning *Focused Engagement*.
 - » Increase monitoring activities in Afghanistan to better detect misuse of U.S. resources.
 - » Assess reform efforts using internationally recognized indices rather than subjective evaluations and promises of good intentions.
 - » Empower the U.S. leadership in Kabul with authorities and capabilities to enforce conditionality. The administration should avoid allowing elites to bypass U.S. leaders in Kabul and lobby officials in Washington.
 - » Coordinate sub-national governance and ANDSF leader performance evaluations with the Afghan



Second Lieutenant Niloofar Rhmani, the first woman to complete undergraduate pilot training in more than 30 years, prepares to receive her pilot's wings in May 2013. (Senior Airman Scott Saldukas/U.S. Air Force)

government, to include imbedding monitors in units and developing internal whistle-blowing mechanisms. This could be the most effective way to identify and reduce predatory kleptocratic behaviors.

- » Enforce conditionality. Measures should include targeted sanctions against spoilers and blockers, financial penalties on the government for poor results, and benefits for exceeding expectations. Sanctions on spoilers could include measures such as denial of access, denial of travel visas, or freezing or confiscating assets gained through corrupt or illicit activities. The administration might need to seek legislation for additional measures. An unwillingness to enforce conditionality makes *Focused Engagement* unviable.
 - » Coordinate enforcement with allies and partners to reduce opportunities to circumvent penalties or play donors against one another.
- 3. Resistance to a peace process.** Many within the Afghan polity view peace with the Taliban as anathema. Most take this position on principle and from experience with atrocities during the Taliban regime. Others profit from ongoing conflict. Spoiler elites on all sides may seek to entrap the United States or use unreasonable demands and poison pills to derail the effort.
- » Support an internationally respected peace custodian to begin track 2 (nongovernment participants)

and 1.5 (mix of government and nongovernment participants) dialogues. Great care will be needed to select the right senior envoy for this role and to provide the necessary staff and support.

- » Encourage discussions about peace to focus on a long-term process rather than a “deal” among elites. A peace deal, for instance, seeks to gain a near-term agreement among elites on power-sharing. These have a long history of failure.¹⁴⁷ A peace process takes a longer-term view, using a careful and deliberate step-by-step approach to build confidence and political agreement. The Northern Ireland peace process used this kind of approach.
 - » Provide U.S. leaders in Kabul with authorities and support to advance the process and manage spoiler activity.
 - » Empower U.S. officials in Kabul to approach a peace process with strategic patience. Balance the desire to add a sense of urgency with the assurance of durable commitment to success. The confidence-building measure process can help U.S. officials assess progress and impact.
- 4. Pakistan retaliation.** Pakistan may threaten to shut down ground and air lines of communication in response to U.S. sanctions. To avoid this, the United States should:
- » Put in place a credible, internationally recognized way to put Afghanistan off-limits to regional security

and intelligence services, which can help address concerns of Afghanistan becoming a client state of India.

- » Negotiate a support package for Pakistan that gets enacted when the conflict in Afghanistan reaches a peaceful outcome or upon achievement of specific benchmarks toward peace.
 - » Strengthen U.S.–India relations and Indian inclusion in regional discussions of Afghanistan; avoid efforts to tie Afghanistan issues to Kashmir;
 - » Encourage the development of alternative routes into Afghanistan.
 - » Stay Strong. Pakistan may retaliate against penalties but is unlikely to shoot down U.S. aircraft. There is no evidence to suggest Pakistan is so fragile that the country will fail if penalties are applied. The Trump administration should avoid succumbing to blackmail.
- 5. *Regional dominance by Russia-China-Pakistan (RCP).*** A coordinated effort by the three to dominate regional diplomacy and control the outcome in Afghanistan likely will lead to a result that advances Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and undermines the interests of the United States, India, and the Afghan government. RCP might prefer a Taliban return to power over the current Afghan government.
- » A more aggressive and creative U.S. regional diplomacy oriented on an internationally backed and guaranteed regional neutrality for Afghanistan could prove a more attractive option for Afghan and various regional actors than RCP-supported control of Afghanistan by Pakistan.
 - » Strengthening the Afghan state along the lines of Objective #1 will improve Afghan government legitimacy and limit Taliban and Pakistani influence.
 - » Promoting a peace custodian to begin building the foundations for regional, national, and sub-national talks could reduce the attraction of regional actors and the Taliban toward RCP as an alternative.
- 6. *Political instability in Afghanistan.*** Political opposition groups may seek to exploit dissatisfaction, vast unemployment, and expanding poverty for political advantage or even to destabilize the Afghan government. Continued NUG gridlock and deteriorating security amplify the probability and risks of political instability.
- » Empower U.S. leaders in Kabul with authorities and support to enact appropriate mitigation measures.
 - » Encourage consensus modifications to the NUG agreement that allow the government to function more effectively.
 - » Support the Afghan government to enact near-term measures to address severe unemployment and poverty – particularly among returning refugees and IDPs.
- 7. *Militant displacement from Syria and Iraq into Pakistan and Afghanistan.*** As ISIS is rolled back in the Middle East, militants may look to Pakistan and Afghanistan for safe haven. Elements within Pakistan (both official and private) may encourage such displacement as a hedging strategy in case the Taliban move toward a peace process. The United States should:
- » Increase monitoring capabilities in the region so such displacement can be detected as soon as possible.
 - » Continue counterterrorism efforts to dismantle IS-K and al Qaeda.
 - » Enhance support for education, media, and civil society as ways to reduce extremist influence and raise public awareness.
- 8. *Predatory militias and civilian harm undermining Afghan government legitimacy.*** The Afghan National Army has become too expensive to expand and unwieldy to employ. The government has thus relied increasingly on militias to prevent further Taliban gains. Many of these are predatory, damage government legitimacy, and may motivate aggrieved people to support the Taliban. Meanwhile, the Afghan security forces are causing increased amounts of civilian harm. To counter this, the United States should:
- » Empower U.S. leaders in Kabul to apply appropriate penalties.
 - » Develop a coordinated game-plan with the Afghan government for responsible and sustainable ways to expand accountable security forces.
 - » Support the Afghan government in measuring, evaluating, and making amends for civilian harm. Such efforts have been shown to ameliorate the human and political impact of civilian harm.

- » Integrate civilian protection and civilian harm considerations into professional military education at all levels of the ANDSF.¹⁴⁸
- 9. *Bureaucratic turf battles.* The Trump administration should view this arrangement as a test case for interventions and work together with congressional committees to adapt, on a trial basis, Title 10, 22, and 50 authorities as needed. The president will need to hold cabinet secretaries accountable for avoiding interference in the operational chain of command.
 - » The NSC should focus on policy oversight and holding the U.S. leadership in Kabul accountable for results.
 - » NSC officials should empower the U.S. leadership in Kabul and avoid frequent or private meetings with Afghan officials. When the conflict ends and no longer requires a strategic headquarters in Kabul, normal counterpart relations would resume.
 - » Cabinet secretaries and their staffs should focus on providing resources, capabilities, and trained and ready people to the strategic headquarters in Kabul, much like the military services do for combatant commands.



The Purple Heart medal and combat field medic badge are pinned on U.S. Army Spc. Tamara Becker for her actions in overcoming an insurgent attack in 2011. Her convoy was ambushed twice in the Tangi Valley with rocket propelled grenades, small arms fire, and IEDs. She and 11 other service members were recognized. (Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chris Fahey/U.S. Navy)

Endnotes

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17. See Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015); Human Rights Watch, "'Today We Shall All Die': Afghanistan's Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity," March 3, 2015. For a recent example: First Vice President Abdur Rashid Dostum, a notorious warlord, imprisoned a rival and Dostum's men allegedly raped and tortured the prisoner. Sharif Walid and Pamela Constable, "Pressure mounts on Afghan vice president over brutality accusations," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2016.
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21. As outlined in the State of the Conflict section, this paper recognizes that a series of interconnected conflicts at local, national, and regional levels make up the broader conflict. This strategy is designed to address those interconnections.
22. Ripeness is a term of art used by I. William Zartman that refers to the conditions necessary to bring about negotiations: 1) a mutually hurting stalemate recognized by all combatants, and 2) a viable path toward a peace process. I. William Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 2001), 8–9.
23. See Dennis Blair, Ronald Neumann, Eric Olson, "Fixing Fragile States," *The National Interest*, August 27, 2014. "America's cumbersome approach to interagency operations in the field urgently needs reform, centered around more powerful ambassadors and coordinated in-country policy design."
24. Some benchmarks have been built into Afghan government agreements with the donor community, such as the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework and SMAF (Self-Reliance Mutual Accountability Framework). Conditionality is rarely, if ever, enforced. This needs to change.

25. This includes, but is not restricted to, narcotics trafficking. The Trump administration should avoid counternarcotics efforts that have a long history of adverse consequences. Since powerful actors on all sides of the conflict are heavily invested in the illicit economies, the most realistic way to address these issues is probably as part of the deliberate peace process.
26. The Heart of Asia process is a platform to discuss regional issues, particularly regarding security, political, and economic issues among Afghanistan and its neighbors.
27. Marie O'Reilly, "Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies," *Inclusive Security*, October 2015, 4.
28. See Dennis Blair, Ronald Neumann, Eric Olson, "Fixing Fragile States," *The National Interest*, August 27, 2014.
29. I will use the national interest taxonomy developed by the Commission on America's National Interests, "America's National Interests," Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, July 2000; Vital (V): conditions that are strictly necessary to safeguard and enhance Americans' survival and well-being in a free and secure nation. Extremely important (EI) national interests are conditions that, if compromised, would severely prejudice but not strictly imperil the ability of the U.S. government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation. Important (I) national interests are conditions that, if compromised, would have major negative consequences for the ability of the U.S. government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation. Less important or secondary (SI) national interests are not unimportant. They are important and desirable conditions, but ones that have little direct impact on the ability of the U.S. government to safeguard and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure nation.
30. Risk definitions: Low risk means the threat to the United States is small; ongoing monitoring and minor preventative action should be sufficient to address the threat. Moderate risk denotes the threat to the United States is larger but manageable with increased monitoring and preventative action. High risk entails a major, imminent threat to U.S. interests; prevention or mitigation requires major change to U.S. strategy.
31. These interests are broadly consistent with those identified by Thomas F. Lynch III: Vital Interest 1: Reducing the Risks of War on the Subcontinent; Vital Interest 2: Prevent Reset of International Terrorist Haven in the Region; Vital Interest 3: Constrain Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons on the Subcontinent; Major Interest 4: Nurture the Rise of India as a Strategic Partner. See Thomas F. Lynch III, "South Asia," in Richard D. Hooker Jr., ed., *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration* (Washington: National Defense University Press, December 2016).
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35. See, for instance, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr," September 19, 2009. Taliban Eid messages since reiterate similar themes.
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An Afghan National Army soldier participates in a live-fire training at Camp Shorabak in Helmand province in April 2013. (Cpl. Alejandro Pena/U.S. Marine Corps)



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