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Tell Me Why We're There? Enduring Interests in Afghanistan (and Pakistan)

POLICY BRIEF

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In 2009, the Obama administration will attempt to deliver on campaign promises to change the Afghan war's trajectory. In April, the Strasbourg NATO summit will determine the alliance's role in shaping the future of the country and the region. By the fall, Afghans will have voted for their president for only the second time since 2001, an event which may irrevocably set the country's course. By the end of this summer's fighting season, the war in Afghanistan will not yet be won, but it could well be lost.

After seven years and the deaths of more than a thousand American and coalition troops, there is still no consensus on whether the future of Afghanistan matters to the United States and Europe, or on what can realistically be achieved there.

Afghanistan does matter. A stable Afghanistan is necessary to defeat Al Qaeda and to further stability in South and Central Asia. Understanding the war in Afghanistan, maintaining domestic and international support for it, and prosecuting it well requires three things: a clear articulation of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, a concise definition

of what the coalition seeks to achieve there, and a detailed strategy to guide the effort.

U.S. interests in Afghanistan may be summarized as "two no's": there must be no sanctuary for terrorists with global reach in Afghanistan, and there must be no broader regional meltdown. Securing these objectives requires helping the Afghans to build a sustainable system of governance that can adequately ensure security for the Afghan people—the "yes" upon which a successful exit strategy depends.

No Terrorist Sanctuary and No Regional Meltdown

American neglect of Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet defeat contributed to Al Qaeda entrenching there. The United States and Europe cannot again allow Al Qaeda or its associated movements to have the open support and protection of a state. The efforts of the past seven years have largely eliminated unfettered Al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan, and the country must not be allowed to return to the condition it was in on September 10, 2001. The problem, however, has become even more complex: collusion among Al Qaeda, the Taliban, narco-traffickers, and criminal gangs presents a real and growing threat to the region.

Squeezed by American military operations, many in this shadowy alliance have shifted to Pakistan's

cities and frontier areas, beyond easy reach of the coalition. American efforts now focus on Pakistan as a launching pad for militants fighting in Afghanistan. But the problem runs both ways: A failed Afghanistan would become a base from which Taliban and Al Qaeda militants could work to further destabilize Pakistan, and the ultimate prize in that contest would be not another ridge or valley, but Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. This scenario could spark a cascading regional meltdown, even spiraling into a nuclear confrontation between Pakistan and India. Because the threats of terrorist sanctuary and regional instability emanate from territory shared by Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistan must also be helped to accomplish the two no's within its own borders. The two countries are inextricably linked, and America's safety depends on their future.

A Sustainable System of Governance

A nation's goals and objectives can change during a war. Coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 with the objective of toppling the Taliban government and defeating Al Qaeda. The Bonn Agreement and subsequent accords expanded Afghan and coalition aims far beyond these original objectives. After seven years of strategic drift, coalition warfare has failed to persuade many Afghans that it is wise or safe to commit themselves and risk their families lives' to defy the Taliban. Just as ominously, the lack of demonstrable progress is weakening popular support for the mission in many NATO nations.

The United States, the Afghan people, and their coalition partners must agree on an achievable end state, determine the intermediate objectives required to meet it, and allocate the resources necessary to achieve them. This end state should be something more than merely fighting terrorists, but also something more realistic than a prosperous and modern representative democracy: a

sustainable system of governance that can provide adequate security for the Afghan people. In order to achieve this, the coalition and its Afghan partners must seek to build a state that reconciles a degree of centralized governance with the traditional tribal and religious power structures that hold sway outside Kabul. An internal balance between centralized and traditional power centers—not central government control everywhere—is the key to

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Afghan stability. Achieving this will require more military forces, but also a much greater commitment to good governance and to providing for the needs of the Afghan people where they live. The coalition will need to use its considerable leverage to counter Afghan government corruption at every level.

An Integrated Regional Strategy to Get There

The desired ends in Afghanistan—no terrorist sanctuary and no regional meltdown—and the way to cement those ends for the long term—helping the Afghans build a system of governance that can provide them security—require a comprehensive, integrated, and sequenced set of means. In a word, they need a strategy.

A comprehensive strategy will be intrinsically regional, recognizing that even a perfect campaign in Afghanistan will fail if an unstable Pakistan continues to provide sanctuary to militants. An integrated strategy will unify the efforts which are

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too often treated independently: counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, counter-insurgency, and state building. They are different strands of the same rope. A sequenced strategy must accommodate the different time frames of our objectives: immediate counter-sanctuary to disrupt the planning of another 9/11 and very long-term state-building to stabilize the region and reduce the chances of a meltdown. Bridging these efforts requires an effective counterinsurgency strategy implemented by Afghans and Pakistanis with international help over the next 5 to 10 years.

America, its allies, and its Afghan and Pakistani partners have met with some success in disrupting the terrorist sanctuary and laying groundwork for long-term state-building. The coalition is failing, however, to build the counterinsurgency bridge. Its hallmarks must be protecting the Afghan and Pakistani people and delivering good governance. Nothing will sap the insurgency’s power as effectively over the long term as a positive, tangible alternative to Taliban rule that is based on physical security, the provision of basic services, and accountable, non-predatory governance.

The new administration will have to balance many competing demands. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, its main priority must be not only to create, resource, and implement a strategic vision, but also to explain its importance to Americans frustrated with protracted war and massive spending at a time of great domestic need. A clear and realistic focus on core, enduring interests is essential, and long overdue.

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