

Plan A-Minus for Afghanistan

The strategy in Afghanistan, as outlined by President Obama in his December 2009 West Point speech and earlier March 2009 policy review, still has a good chance to succeed.¹ Described here as “Plan A,” it is a relatively comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy, albeit one with a geographic focus on about one-third of Afghanistan’s districts. Directed at defeating the insurgency or at least substantially weakening it, while building up Afghan institutions, it has reasonable prospects of achieving these goals well enough to hold together the Afghan state and prevent the establishment of major al Qaeda or other extremist sanctuaries on Afghan soil.

Nevertheless, the strategy is not guaranteed to succeed, for reasons having little to do with its own flaws and more to do with the inherent challenge of the problem. Critics of the current strategy are right to begin a discussion of what a backup strategy, or a “Plan B,” might be. The most popular alternative to date emphasizes targeted counterterrorism operations, rather than comprehensive counterinsurgency—especially in the country’s Pashtun south and east where the insurgencies are strongest. It is difficult to describe this plan in detail, as its various proponents would each naturally counsel different specifics. But it seems fair to say that the most popular alternative would emphasize the use of drones and commandos in the entire Pashtun south and east of Afghanistan, confining any remaining counterinsurgency efforts to Kabul, other parts of the Shomali plain near the capital, and points north and west (that is, mostly beyond the Hindu Kush mountains).² It can be called Fortress Kabul.

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The United States should have a debate over Plan B, but the above version is highly problematic. Its proponents are serious people motivated by serious considerations—they worry that the current war is not winnable, or at least that it is not winnable at costs commensurate with the strategic stakes they perceive in Afghanistan. Yet, it would be troubling if the U.S. debate in 2011 was forced to choose effectively between this kind of backup plan and the current robust counterinsurgency approach. Even more to the point, it is *already* highly troubling—and counterproductive to U.S. interests and to NATO's prospects on the battlefield—that many around the world appear to *perceive* the Obama administration as already giving serious consideration to a backup strategy like Plan B.

There is a better way if a fallback option is needed. Rather than conceding at least one-third of the country to extremists and reducing NATO forces quickly, the United States should tie its force drawdown to the growth and maturation of Afghan security forces. Under this plan, described here as “Plan A-,” U.S. and other foreign forces would have to keep fighting hard in Afghanistan for 2–4 more years, even as they gradually passed the baton to Afghan forces, but the United States would not need to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, and would not tie its downsizing to the stabilization of all key terrain.

Mixed Results in 2009–2010

Plan A has produced some good results: the Afghan economy is improving, there are many committed reformers in the government—especially in a number of key

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ministerial positions and key governorships—and the Afghan people strongly prefer to avoid a return of Taliban rule or civil war.³ Kabul is reasonably safe and, as General David Petraeus has emphasized, is under Afghan lead control rather than the control of NATO and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The country's north and west are somewhat less secure than before, but hardly seem vulnerable to takeover by an extremist Pashtun movement.⁴

Having said that, prudent strategists cannot count on Plan A to succeed. The problems go well beyond President Obama's shaky commitment to sustain the mission after July 2011. His promise to begin downsizing troops by that point has produced a good deal of criticism from the right in the U.S. domestic debate, and has admittedly also worried many Afghans and Pakistanis who interpret his ambiguous rhetoric to mean that the United States might head for the exits come mid-2011. Whatever their motivations, Obama's words from the West

Point speech, which promised a gradual withdrawal beginning summer 2011, have caused more harm than good, even though he never endorsed a rapid withdrawal next year.⁵

Those words are not the only vulnerability the United States faces. Security trends remain for the most part mediocre in the south and east of the country, as the U.S.-led force buildup of 2010 has in general not convinced insurgents to lay down their arms as many hoped it would. This failure to establish positive momentum, bad enough on its own terms, contributes to further doubts in the region about whether the insurgency really can be defeated, leading numerous parties to then hedge their bets. The corruption-ridden Karzai government is clearly another big problem—beyond the ability of the United States or NATO to directly control—and continues to disappoint Afghans.

More within U.S. control, but not much easier to solve, is the manner in which NATO's logistics system for supplying troops in the field contributes to the system of corruption empowering some individuals, families, and tribes, while embittering others. The very act of implementing the U.S. strategy thus creates dynamics that can help strengthen and enlarge the insurgency. These inherent weaknesses in the U.S. strategy may not be able to be remedied on any reasonable time frame, and may therefore prevent the achievement of success in Afghanistan. As such, even as the United States attempts to make Plan A work, backup thinking is needed.

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Fortress Kabul and Its Problems

However, Plan B—focused on targeted counterterrorism operations—would likely amount to a soft partition of the country, with a Tajik-dominated rump Afghanistan of perhaps 18–20 million people, and some 60–70 percent of the country's land area, constituting the essence of the surviving state. Hazara, Uzbek, and Pashtun minorities would remain within the relatively safe zones, but most Pashtun areas and most of the 12–14 million Pashtuns living in contemporary Afghanistan would be on the outs—in a large swath of land effectively conceded to the Taliban (or to civil warfare) which would likely include most or all of the present-day provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan, Nimroz, perhaps parts of Farah and Daykundi, and a few other central areas.⁶ As Bob Woodward's book *Obama's Wars* starkly underscores, critics of current U.S. strategy have several key sympathizers in the White House, and they may still have considerable influence with the president in ongoing and future policy debates about Afghanistan.⁷



Among other consequences, Plan B may encourage many Afghan fence-sitters in the current conflict to keep hedging their bets. It may convince many in the Pakistani army to keep up support for the Haqqani network and Quetta Shura Taliban as backup plans of their own. They fear a premature U.S. withdrawal either leading to complete chaos in Afghanistan or, just as bad from a Pakistani perspective, an Afghan regime dominated by the former Northern Alliance and thus too friendly to India.

Since he has rejected this option twice already, Obama clearly has no particular sympathy for such a Plan B, nor is he likely to develop affection for it in the coming months. Yet, some of the best U.S. strategists of both parties are on record supporting this kind of plan, and U.S. public and congressional support for the existing war effort continues to wane. The president's words about his future commitment—such as his phrase in his August 31, 2010 Oval Office speech that the U.S. drawdown next summer would be “conditions based”—are not clear enough. After all, it is possible that what he means by those words is that if conditions are bad, the United States will stop reinvesting in a failing mission, and get out of Afghanistan quickly.

The president should therefore signal sooner rather than later that he understands the downsides of this “counterterrorism-plus” or Fortress Kabul approach. To begin, after adopting any such Plan B, the strategy for taking on

any al Qaeda or other extremist bases which might be set up in Pashtun Afghanistan would not be very promising. It would be similar to the “light footprint” strategy attempted under George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, which led to the very resurgence of the Taliban that now afflicts Afghanistan.

Long-range counterterrorism strikes are almost oxymoronic, since they cannot succeed without intelligence that can be gained only by access to the local population. Just when the United States is putting more pressure on Pakistan over that country’s safe havens, and has raised the possibility of using a “hammer and anvil” strategy (with Pakistani forces closing in on the FATA from the east and NATO/Afghan forces closing in from the west) against various extremist groups near the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it would be relenting on the pressure. Not only al Qaeda, but also Pakistan’s own Taliban, with its ambitions of destabilizing that nuclear-armed state, and the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group, with its ambitions of attacking India and perhaps provoking Indo–Pakistani war, could take refuge in this general “Pashtunistan” region of Afghanistan.

Those who assert that the Afghan Taliban may no longer have sympathy for these other extremists base their hopes on a thin reed. Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden continue to work together to send terrorists to the United States, as illustrated by the foiled 2009 New York metro attack planned for the eighth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The three U.S. citizens led by Najibullah Zazi, who have pleaded guilty to the plot, were referred to al Qaeda after initially approaching the Taliban to fight in Afghanistan. The Taliban were active recruiters for an al Qaeda attack on the U.S. homeland, and it is not clear why the Afghan Taliban would become more moderate at the very moment it defeated NATO and reclaimed control of its historical heartland.⁸ Moreover with Plan B, the die would be cast for civil war in Afghanistan, as the Tajik-dominated northern state and the Taliban-run Pashtun belt would likely wind up fighting furiously, over Kabul in particular. Plan B may wind up as the only option, if all else fails, but it is more likely to lead to a defeat of NATO and its Afghan allies than to be a sound strategic choice for the United States.

“Plan A-Minus” and a Gradual NATO Drawdown

Tying troop drawdowns to the growth and maturation of Afghan security forces is a better option, should it become clear that Plan A cannot achieve its goals. Afghan security forces now number more than 260,000 and are due to grow to 305,000 by next fall. Further growth to 400,000 would be possible by late 2012 or 2013, and should be adopted as a formal goal by ISAF as soon as possible. That number should largely suffice for Afghanistan’s needs—based on metrics for the ratio of troops to population and the nature of the threat, which is most severe in

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the south and east—though it might also be complemented by the less-formalized (but still government-controlled) Afghan Local Police now being developed at the community level to provide security in remote areas.⁹

The particulars of NATO drawdowns should not be set to a firm timeline, and Congress should not appropriate funds for 2012 against any binding plan to reduce troops by an inflexible schedule. Battlefield conditions must influence the details of the

process, but the rough contours of such an approach could be sketched out in advance. Under this plan, U.S. forces would start to decline by late 2011, or certainly by 2012, and be reduced by 20,000 to 30,000 troops a year thereafter.

Nevertheless, make no mistake about it, this plan is still demanding. That is why it is described as “Plan A-” rather than a different form of Plan B. Some may wonder what distinguishes it from Obama’s existing approach. Since the latter has not been clearly specified in all ways, it is difficult to say, but the shortest answer is that Plan A- would not make comprehensive progress across all 125 or so current key terrain districts a precondition for initiating a drawdown. As such, it would not be open-ended in duration. Drawdown trajectories would be tied primarily to the growth and maturation of Afghan security forces—though again, some flexibility would be retained.

Plan A is clearly preferable to Plan A- if the former works. It would less likely concede even modestly sized sanctuaries to extremists for a substantial period of time. However, Plan A may not work. If violence continues to increase, the Karzai government fails to make further progress at reform, and especially if the sanctuaries for insurgents remain largely unaddressed within Pakistan, there will be a case for reappraisal. Perhaps the most significant factor of all in choosing between Plan A and Plan A- should be U.S. confidence that its presence is no longer sustaining corruption and stoking the insurgency. If the United States is having such unhelpful effects, beginning a withdrawal might improve rather than worsen the prospects of at least modest success. The United States should not withdraw quickly, however, because the Afghan army and police, while improving, are not yet ready to prevent an insurgent victory on their soil in the short term. It is also because the new training effort for Afghan forces requires intensive partnering in the field—that is, patrolling and fighting together.

But under Plan A-, if some parts of the country proved difficult to stabilize in the next couple of years, the United States could view them as longer-term challenges primarily for Afghan forces rather than NATO militaries. That is both this strategy’s central appeal, and its central risk. Afghanistan would in

effect have its own “Federally Administered Tribal Areas,” perhaps of roughly comparable population to the FATA regions of Pakistan which Islamabad is gradually seeking to stabilize. Those areas already cleared by ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would not be conceded back to the insurgents, but operations in areas not yet cleared might in some cases be delayed. The number of “key terrain districts” that ISAF sought to control and stabilize might decline modestly from the present number of about 125, and the transition from an ISAF lead role to ANSF leadership might be accelerated in places.

One appeal of this alternative, relative to Plan B, is that it could be adopted as a logical extension of the current effort without any need to publicly acknowledge a setback. An even more important rationale is that NATO’s strategy for improving the Afghan army and police is now beginning to work. In fact, many changes in recent months within the effort to build the Afghan army and police offer grounds for hope, including: tripling the ratio of trainers to army and police recruits; approximately doubling pay for the typical Afghan soldier or policeman (finally outbidding the Taliban’s salaries); roughly doubling the length of training regimens; creating specialized courses for non-commissioned Army officers, as well as for special branches such as artillery and logistics; deploying most graduates of Afghanistan’s prestigious military academy to the field rather than Kabul (at least 95 percent of the class of 2009 stayed in Kabul—by last count, at least 95 percent of the class of 2010 is still in the field); creating literacy courses for 25,000 Afghan security personnel at a time; and paying soldiers and police by electronic banking (and training them to access it) to reduce the skimming of salaries by commanding officers.

NATO’s strategy for improving the Afghan army and police is now beginning to work.

Best of all, perhaps, is the above-noted partnering concept. This is really a form of apprenticeship. Prior to 2009, most Afghan security forces received a modest amount of training, were quickly formed into units, and then dispatched to the field to fend largely for themselves. Under generals Stanley McChrystal and Petraeus, as well as generals William Caldwell and David Rodriguez, that has radically changed. The basic idea now is to team Afghan units with NATO partners which would normally be within one echelon of each other in size (ideally, for example, a NATO battalion would work with a larger Afghan brigade). Partnering presently involves some 90 percent of all Afghan army units in the field. About three-fourths of all such ISAF sister units are co-located with their Afghan partners or based close to each other.¹⁰ Only about a quarter of police units have such help, but those numbers are growing.

Partnering radically improves training. It also boosts confidence among Afghans since they patrol with ISAF/NATO units that can quickly call in reinforcements or airpower if ambushed. And it also helps ISAF carry out anticorruption efforts on the ground, since ISAF personnel can witness the behavior of Afghan commanders in real time and report misbehavior up the Afghan chain of command to Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak or the new Minister of Interior Bismullah Khan Mohammadi. There is progress from this system already. NATO's new evaluation system for the Afghan army, which also evaluates anticorruption measures and leadership, now rates half of all Afghan army battalions (or "kandaks") as a "3" or above on a scale of 1–5. The equivalent of a "C" is not a great grade, but it is not bad as an interim result.¹¹

The Afghan police are further behind, but also making headway. Interior Minister Mohammadi has recently reassigned at least 27 police commanders to improve performance. He is also now famous for showing up unexpectedly at police posts to bolster morale—and to check on the performance of his units.

There are, of course, still numerous problems with the Afghan security forces. These include not only the ongoing corruption already discussed, but also high attrition to the elite Afghanistan National Police Force. These problems may require the security forces to be used less intensively in coming months. There are considerable sectarian rivalries present, as the International Crisis Group usefully detailed last spring,¹² but the sectarian tensions within the armed forces have not fueled war on the streets like they did in Iraq (or the Balkans or Great Lakes region of Africa or other places where ethnicity truly turned violent). The demographics of recent recruits are roughly in balance with those of the population writ large, even if a somewhat disproportionate number of Tajiks are in key leadership positions. There is a shortage of southern Pashtuns, but the Afghan government has introduced some new approaches to recruiting, including a promise that southern recruits can serve their first tour in their home province if they like.¹³

To be sure, no strategy could succeed by emphasizing *only* the army and police, so it would make sense, even under the proposed Plan A-Minus, to continue to strengthen other ministries and pursue other lines of effort such as economic development. If the army and police were reformed and strengthened, but the rest of the Afghan government failed to improve, the prospects for a cohesive Afghan state would be poor. But the security forces do hold considerable promise, and they also can enable ISAF/NATO troop reductions.

A Better Back-up Plan

Plan A still has a good chance in Afghanistan. Robust counterinsurgency, concentrated in the Pashtun belt, may succeed in largely defusing the insurgency

while building up Afghan institutions including the army, police, and other parts of the government. There is more promising news of late than most realize. Having said that, responsible strategists must ask the question of what the United States should do if the current approach in Afghanistan fails. Victory cannot be assured simply through resolve; the current strategy may face challenges that prevent accomplishing its core goals.

If Afghan security forces continue to improve, but trends in violence do not, the best approach may be a Plan A-Minus which emphasizes stabilizing a smaller number of key districts in Afghanistan, while building up the army and police according to current plans. The latter missions involve, importantly, partnering in the field between ISAF and Afghan units, so this plan is hardly a prescription for a rapid departure or an easy road ahead for U.S. and other foreign forces. But it would place a time limit on the operation that Plan A may not.

To be sure, the slogan that “we can stand down as Iraqis stand up” failed in a different recent conflict. Iraq was in civil war and the violence simply needed to be contained before anything else was possible. But Afghanistan is a far less violent place today than Iraq was in 2004–2007, and it suffers less from civil violence than a localized insurgency. So, a drawdown plan tied largely to the growth and maturation of the Afghan security forces may be more workable than a similar plan proved to be in Iraq. It is not the preferred option, and it carries risks, as any sanctuaries for extremists in Afghanistan would be undesirable. But it bounds those risks relative to the increasingly popular Plan B—also sometimes described as counterterrorism-plus—being discussed today in debates in the United States and the United Kingdom. Plan A-Minus may not offer the prospect of a “hammer and anvil” approach in broader Pashtunistan, with Pakistani and NATO/Afghan forces closing in from different directions, but it does offer hope of a gradually tightening vise on both sides, even if the process could be slow and uneven.

It is understandably important to President Obama to reassure Americans that, while the conflict in Afghanistan is hardly near its end, it will not become his Vietnam. But it is equally important that he find a way, sooner rather than later, to convey that under no plausible circumstances will he revert next year to a “counterterrorism-plus” approach. The new NATO emphasis on transferring primary responsibility for security to Afghans by the end of 2014 is a good start in this regard but further clarity is still needed. By bounding the future options for Afghanistan within the current strategy of comprehensive counterinsurgency and an alternative focusing somewhat more narrowly on the Afghan security forces, the United States can improve the odds of achieving at least a minimally acceptable outcome in Afghanistan. Among its other advantages, framing the debate roughly within these parameters would reassure Afghans and Pakistanis, who are now hedging against a rapid U.S. withdrawal that they fear will begin

next year. Framing the debate in this way could make them more likely to support U.S. and NATO efforts to achieve what remains a crucial strategic goal for the United States and its allies: to stabilize Afghanistan, and thereby prevent the reestablishment of what would be the largest and safest sanctuary anywhere on the planet for global extremist groups.

Notes

1. President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (speech, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, December 1, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.
2. See for example Robert D. Blackwill, "A de facto partition for Afghanistan," *Politico*, July 7, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0710/39432.html>; and the Afghanistan Study Group, "A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan" (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, September 2010), http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf.
3. For public opinion data, see www.brookings.edu/afghanistanindex.
4. General David Petraeus, interview by David Gregory, *Meet the Press*, NBC, August 15, 2010, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38686033/ns/meet_the_press-transcripts/.
5. President Obama, "Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009.
6. See ethnic maps of Afghanistan based on the Perry/Castaneda Library Map Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, reprinted in Michael E. O'Hanlon and Hassina Sherjan, *Toughing It Out in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2010), pp. 1–18.
7. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), pp. 159–160, 234–236.
8. Bruce Riedel, *The Search for al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2008), pp. 122–124; Antonio Giustozzi, "Conclusion," in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 293–300; and O'Hanlon and Sherjan, *Toughing It Out*, pp. 58–60.
9. Briefing slides presented to Michael O'Hanlon at Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan/NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (CSTC-A/NTM-A), Camp Eggers, Kabul, Afghanistan, September 10, 2010.
10. CSTC-A/NTM-A briefing slides, p. 44.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
12. International Crisis Group, "A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army," May 12, 2010, pp. 19–20, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190%20A%20Force%20in%20Fragments%20-%20Reconstituting%20the%20Afghan%20National%20Army.ashx>.
13. Although the armed forces include representative numbers of Pashtuns overall, only about 2.5 percent of security personnel come from the south, whereas a more appropriate target would be 10 percent. See CSTC-A/NTM-A briefing slides, pp. 15, 17.