

U.S. Policy in Afghanistan



U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Chad Runge, October 2009.

Introduction

Why are U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan?

In the weeks following September 11, 2001, the United States identified Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network as responsible for the terrorist attacks. Al Qaeda was based in the country of Afghanistan with the support and approval of Afghanistan's extreme Islamist government known as the Taliban. President Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and dismantle al Qaeda.

The Taliban government refused to meet the conditions of the United States, although it claimed it would put bin Laden on trial if offered conclusive evidence of his guilt.

On October 7, 2001, the United States began a dramatic and swift military campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda. The United States and its ally, the United Kingdom, unleashed some of their most powerful and advanced weaponry as well as small groups of ground forces in support of a campaign led by various Afghan warlords opposed to the Taliban regime. The campaign overthrew the Taliban government and eliminated al Qaeda's base of operation in Afghanistan. Experts believe that many al Qaeda members as well as Osama bin Laden escaped into neighboring Pakistan. With the support of the United Nations, Afghanistan created a new constitution in 2004 and has held legislative and presidential elections.

U.S. and NATO military forces remain in Afghanistan in an effort to quell escalating violence by Taliban forces while the country attempts to construct a government that can provide security for

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its people. Today, there are 65,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and 40,000 from the United States' NATO allies.

Life for Afghanistan's citizens is difficult. Continued poverty, a lack of infrastructure, and civilian casualties at the hands of the Taliban and NATO forces have tested the patience of many. Insurgent attacks increased from 782 in 2005 to approximately 3,200 in 2008 and have continued to escalate. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated that Taliban insurgents have the momentum in Afghanistan.

What role does Pakistan play?

After September 11, 2001 the U.S. government worked quickly to gain the cooperation of Pakistan—cooperation that was necessary to conduct military operations against neighboring Afghanistan. While Pakistan had previously supported the Taliban, the Pakistani government agreed to allow some U.S. troops to be based in Pakistan and supported the campaign against the Taliban government in Afghanistan. U.S. foreign aid to support Pakistan's military and security has averaged more than one billion dollars a year since 2001. The United States sees Pakistan and its new, democratically elected government as a key ally, but there are some issues that complicate the relationship.

Many security experts believe that remnants of the Taliban government and al Qaeda have taken refuge in the Northwest Frontier Province and tribal areas in Pakistan and are behind the increased violence in Afghanistan. Some observers believe that elements of the Pakistan intelligence services still provide support to the Taliban.

The United States has pressed Pakistan's government to act against suspected al Qaeda and Taliban members. In 2009, Pakistan's military launched a large-scale offensive designed to destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan. U.S. military forces have also conducted strikes against suspected Taliban and al Qaeda compounds in Pakistan.

During his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama argued that the war in Afghanistan should be the highest military priority of the United States. U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, who is in charge of operations in Afghanistan, has proposed that the United States increase its forces in Afghanistan. President Obama and his advisors are reassessing U.S. policies in Afghanistan, a task complicated by political unrest there following a flawed presidential election. The choices are hotly debated in the United States and international opinion is also divided, especially in the thirty-four countries with soldiers in Afghanistan.

What follows are three different policy options for the United States in Afghanistan. It is important to understand that no one option as it is framed here reflects the views of any one organization or national leader. It is your job to sort through the three options, think about their concerns and values, discuss these with your peers, and then frame an "Option 4" that reflects your own views. When you have done this, we encourage you to read the papers, listen to the views of others, think about the ways in which you agree and disagree, and continue to shape your own views.

Recommended News Coverage

- **BBC: Afghanistan** includes a timeline - 1919-present. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/topics/afghanistan>>
- **Council on Foreign Relations: U.S. War in Afghanistan** <http://www.cfr.org/publication/20018/us_war_in_afghanistan.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby_type%2Finteractive>
- **Aljazeera: Afghanistan Elections 2009** <<http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/afghanistanelections2009/>>
- **The Online NewsHour: Afghanistan and the War on Terror** <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/in-depth_coverage/asia/afghanistan/>

OPTION 1: Launch a Counterinsurgency Against the Taliban in Afghanistan

The most pressing problem facing the United States is the insurgency led by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban sheltered al Qaeda, the terrorist organization that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. Now the Taliban are trying to regain power and, if successful, they will again provide protection to al Qaeda. We cannot afford to divert our attention from this battle in Afghanistan. The United States must defeat the Taliban completely to prevent al Qaeda from regaining its safe haven in Afghanistan, once again enabling it to threaten the United States and the West or U.S. allies.

We must increase our troop presence in Afghanistan if we want to stage a successful counterinsurgency operation against the Taliban there. As we have learned in Iraq, we will need to increase our military presence in Afghanistan. In Iraq we also learned that increased troop numbers do not mean that the United States should increase its use of force. An effective counterinsurgency strategy means focusing more on building support by protecting the people from the brutal tactics of the Taliban than on killing the Taliban insurgents. Providing this protection will help to build the trust of the Afghan people. So too will building more schools and roads, supporting Afghan efforts to rebuild a productive economy, and creating a safe society in which their brand-new democracy can begin to grow.

This will not be an easy project. As the United States learned in Iraq, violence will likely increase in the short term as the Taliban and its supporters try to drive us out. But the results will be worth it. Afghans do not want a society where the Taliban rules through fear, represses women, and scorns education. They want a safe society where they can prosper and their children can be educated. The United States and its allies can and must create a safe and stable society that does not threaten its neighbors or the world.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 1

- Without an increase in U.S. and NATO military forces, the Taliban could regain control of Afghanistan. The United States will not be able to fight terrorism if the terrorists are given a safe haven from which to operate.
- An increase in military forces and a counterinsurgency strategy that protects the Afghan people will build local support, reduce violence, and increase stability.
- It is possible to defeat the insurgency and provide enough security so that Afghanistan's government will be supported by its people.

Questions for Students

- According to this option, what is the U.S. objective in Afghanistan and what U.S. policies will achieve that objective?
- How will these policies affect the United States?
- How will these policies affect Afghanistan?
- What are the two strongest arguments in favor of this option?
- What are the two strongest arguments against this option?

OPTION 2: Use Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Fight al Qaeda, Not the Taliban

The Taliban are not now and were never a true threat to the security of the United States. It is al Qaeda that remains the threat. In late 2001, the United States was able to drive the Taliban from power and force al Qaeda out of Afghanistan with a few thousand soldiers, air power, and local Afghan ground forces. Today there are 65,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and 40,000 from NATO members. By some estimates, there are at most one hundred members of al Qaeda left in Afghanistan—but there are more in Pakistan and they have been joined by the Taliban, united by their opposition to the United States and the West.

Meanwhile, violence in Afghanistan has increased since 2005 and U.S. and NATO soldiers are increasingly becoming targets. The increase has coincided with expansion of U.S. and NATO activity in the country. The Afghan government is corrupt and ineffective and U.S. support for it has only increased anger against the United States. It is unreasonable to believe that the United States can rebuild Afghanistan's society—even if it commits more troops and billions more dollars. All of this is happening in a country that is one and a half times the size of Iraq and has mountainous terrain that is ideal for guerilla warfare, something that Afghans have excelled at for centuries.

It is important to remember that the first concern of the United States must be its security and that of its allies. The United States should not send more troops to Afghanistan. Rather, we need a regional counterterrorism strategy that relies on air power, strategic use of the soldiers now deployed, and good intelligence to hunt down al Qaeda in the region. The situation in Afghanistan is only a piece of the security problem the United States faces today. The United States must demand more cooperation from Pakistan to defeat al Qaeda forces now operating in Pakistan.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

- Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan pose the primary threat to the security of the United States and its allies, not the Taliban in Afghanistan.
- The United States and its allies do not have the experience or capacity to rebuild Afghanistan and shouldn't try; an effort that fails would be worse than no effort at all.
- What remains of al Qaeda in Afghanistan is small and can be contained and eliminated without destroying the Taliban.
- A counterinsurgency strategy will have high costs in dollars and in lives and is likely to fail.

Questions for Students

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OPTION 3: Support a Regional Approach to the Problem of Afghanistan and Withdraw Our Troops

The greatest threat to the United States in Afghanistan is becoming trapped in an unwinnable war. The more soldiers the West sends to Afghanistan the more violence increases there. But this isn't the violence of Islamic extremism and terrorism that led to September 11. It is the violence of resistance against foreign occupation. Other empires have learned this lesson the hard way. The Soviets were forced to withdraw battered and bloody in the 1980s. At the height of its power in the nineteenth century, Britain failed in its attempts to occupy Afghanistan. No wonder some have called it "the graveyard of empires." The United States must heed these lessons of history and get out.

The United States and its allies will never succeed in either counterinsurgency or counterterrorism through military action in Afghanistan. A deepening war in Afghanistan will only become a quagmire that divides the United States. We already had that experience in Vietnam. If we try to remake Afghanistan in our own image we will fail. To continue down this path is a recipe for disaster.

We should not continue to invest billions of dollars and risk the lives of thousands of U.S. soldiers based on a dream that we can stabilize the current Afghan government. Nor should we delude ourselves that any U.S.-led military strategy in the region will succeed. The presence of our military is part of the problem. Instead we should encourage countries in the region, which all have a strong interest in a safe and stable Afghanistan, to take the lead in maintaining peace and security in their own backyard. While we might contribute our intelligence services to the cause of counterterrorism in the region, we should not maintain troops in the area. It is only counterproductive.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

- There is almost no chance of military success in Afghanistan.
- Cooperation with other countries, particularly Pakistan (but also India, Iran, and Russia), good intelligence work, and effective work at home to secure our country against terrorists threats from abroad are primarily what's needed to contain the security threat from al Qaeda.
- The cost to the United States of a military operation in Afghanistan will be far greater than it needs to pay to ensure U.S. security.

Questions for Students

- According to this option, what is the U.S. objective in Afghanistan and what U.S. policies will achieve that objective?
- How will these policies affect the United States?
- How will these policies affect Afghanistan?
- What are the two strongest arguments in favor of this option?
- What are the two strongest arguments against this option?

Framing Your Option 4: What should we do?

1. What should the objective of the United States be in Afghanistan and what U.S. policies will achieve that objective?

2. How will these policies affect the United States?

3. How will these policies affect Afghanistan?

4. What are the two strongest arguments in favor of your option?

5. What are the two strongest arguments against your option?