CIPS WORKING PAPER JULY 2009

Running out of Time:
Arguments for a New Strategy in Afghanistan

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The 30,000 troops reinforcement officially announced by the U.S. government is a sign that the Afghan crisis is, at last, being taken seriously in Washington. Yet, the situation has now degenerated to such a degree that what can accurately be described as the first NATO war could be lost in a few years, largely because of large-scale mismanagement and disinterest from 2001 to 2007. The momentum is on Taliban's side and the geographic progression and growing audacity of the insurgency are putting tremendous pressure on the international coalition (the Taliban are by far the most important group; the second one, Hizb-I Islami, is mostly based in the East). The Taliban are in control of areas just an hour's drive away from Kabul, undermining the internal and international legitimacy of the Karzai government and the prospect of institution building. The situation in the northern provinces is becoming difficult and a geographical extension of combat would put the international coalition in a dire situation since the coalition troops are already spread thin. Since 2005 or 2006 the Afghan population's general assumption has been that

At a glance...

- *Even with the addition of more US troops this year, there has been a startling lack of strategic innovation in the Afghanistan mission.*
- *The Taliban is a predominantly indigenous phenomenon in Afghanistan, and the presence of NATO troops is fueling the insurgency.*
- *There is very limited time to change the dynamics of the conflict. NATO should focus on redeploying its forces to the cities and to more stable areas of the country where it has a chance of making a difference, as a step towards eventual NATO withdrawal.*
- *More attention should be paid to strengthening the central government of Afghanistan rather than reinforcing the periphery.*

This paper is a co-production of CIPS and the Center for International Governance Innovation.

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the international coalition is going to fail the same way the Soviets (and, before them, the British) failed to control Afghanistan. This belief has gained ground as the war has dragged on, with increasing casualties for the international coalition, which lost almost 300 men in 2008, and altogether more than 1,000 men and women since 2001.

ISAF deaths in Afghanistan

Year	US	Other	Total
2008	155	139	294
2007	117	115	232
2006	98	93	191
2005	99	31	130
2004	52	6	58
2003	48	9	57
2002	49	20	69
2001	12	0	12
Total	644	420	1064

Source: http://icasualties.org/oef/

After years of denial, the international coalition is confronting a difficult choice: Should it continue with the status quo, which is unthinkable, or should it reinforce its troops and accept more casualties and a higher financial burden, hence allowing less time for a strategy to work? In any case, the choices made now would at best produce some results in the next few years (the next global assessment will probably be in summer 2010). The United States will not easily send more troops to a country with a growing insurgency, at least not without a clear reason to believe it would be beneficial. Recent statements by Robert Gates have indicated a reluctance to send more troops after this year's reinforcement. In addition, we are approaching the maximum possible investment for European countries. In fact, the prospects of national withdrawals — as in the cases of Canada, Netherlands and the Czech Republic — are growing. If the dynamics are not radically altered in the next two or three years, it will be practically impossible to stop the insurgency.

The 30,000 troops reinforcement announced in January 2009 was not, in itself, a new strategy. In fact, the lack of strategic innovation on the side of the international coalition is striking, and the difficulties in Afghanistan are in large part due to a failure to understand the country's social and political dynamics. There has been too much of a focus on the question of the number of troops and not enough on how to use them and where to send them. The danger is that we will continue the same strategy that has failed since 2001. What we know about the places to which the bulk of the reinforcements will be sent in 2009 — namely, the southern and eastern provinces — is not encouraging. As we will see, these troops will be sent to areas in which the Taliban are already extremely strong and in which long-term institution building has the lowest chance of working. Meanwhile, the Taliban are progressing in other provinces and near the cities, threatening the core of the Karzai government's control. The Kabul area, which should be of the utmost priority, is not receiving enough attention.

The strategy suggested in this paper is centered on the idea of focusing the military effort on limited areas in order to prepare for a decrease in the number of troops in the next few years, opening the way for an eventual withdrawal of all fighting troops. Of utmost importance is the recognition that the time frame for a change in the dynamics of the war is now very short; if the international coalition is not able to dramatically reverse the course of events in Afghanistan in the next two or three years then it will be difficult to send more troops and, ultimately, to withdraw without allowing a Taliban come-back.

This paper is organized in three parts: the first part examines the definition of reasonable goals given the balance of power and resources, the second part proposes a reorganization of the international coalition troops to halt the momentum of the Taliban, and the third part discusses strengthening Afghan partners.

What Is Possible? An Assessment of the Balance of Power

The official positions of the international coalition are becoming difficult to explain to the public. They are also fueling opposition to the war, and they reveal contradictory assumptions. Three official statements sum

up NATO's positions. First, "negotiations can occur only with the moderate Taliban," excluding the top-ranked Taliban — notably Mullah Omar and, of course, al-Qaida. More than negotiations, NATO is willing to grant amnesty to insurgency groups, provided they disarm completely. On paper, this policy looks fine, except for the fact that nobody has convincingly defined who constitutes the "moderate Taliban." The Taliban have never been divided and it is common knowledge that NATO's hearts and minds effort has not produced any results. Moreover, the Taliban leadership has consistently refused to negotiate with President Karzai, who is probably offering negotiations only to distance himself from the United States, with an eye to the election of August 2009.[1] The second NATO proposition, "there is no military solution," is a reasonable assessment but seems in part to contradict the first proposition as well as the international coalition's constant military reinforcement.[2] The third NATO proposition, "no withdrawal before the Taliban are, if not exactly defeated, at least no more a 'strategic threat' to the Afghan government," is problematic in the sense that the growing foreign military presence, far from weakening the Taliban, has fueled the insurgency. In addition, the international coalition's operations have not helped in building Afghan institutions that can take the lead in the foreseeable future. This point is central, and I will return to it.

The current strategy can continue only if the international coalition is planning a long-term (20 year?) and significant military presence in Afghanistan, with a high number of casualties — probably several thousand — and no clear exit policy. This proposition grossly overestimates the resources of the international coalition, and underestimates the political constraints the western countries are facing and the resources of the insurgency.

Constraints on time and resources for the international coalition Since 2001, the international coalition has managed the war with two contradictory assumptions. First is the idea that it is possible to succeed in Afghanistan with very limited resources. This assumption was partly due to a false perception that the Taliban had disappeared in Afgahanistan following the swift military victory in 2001. The demands of the Iraq war in 2003 made further troop commitments to Afghanistan even more unlikely. Further, policymakers initially believed that they could hold the territory of Afghanistan with only a few thousand US soldiers and that ISAF should be based only in Kabul. Consequently, the country was and still is wide open to infiltration from Pakistan-based Taliban. The second assuption was that international coalition resources were potentially unlimited; hence the only answer to the degradation of security has been, at least until 2009, to send more troops to face the growing insurgency. Here, the tendency of any institution to ask for more resources, especially when things are going wrong, can be recognized. In fact, the question of a change in the strategy had not been discussed before the end of 2008, even though the deterioration of security began as early as 2002/03.

The result has been more troops without any meaningful change in strategy. The illusion that the Afghan war can be won on the cheap is now long gone. But the notion that new resources will always be available to stop the extension of the Taliban still persists. In fact, I would argue that even if additional resources were made available, they would soon not be sufficient. If we review the recent history of counter-insurgency by western countries, it is clear that neither Europe nor the U.S. could stomach staying decades in Afghanistan with 300 international coalition troops deaths a year. Betting that addition troops will lead to a decrease in the casualties is risky since, from what the NATO says itself, there are not enough resources to win militarily against the Taliban. Indeed, what has been sold to the public in Europe or Canada as a peace-building operation has become a counter-insurgency war, and may not end in the foreseeable future. This war is now so unpopular that the Canadians will be out in 2011, as

1 Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai, "Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgecy: A Pragmatic Approach Toward Peace and Reconciliation", United States Institute of Peace, www.usip.org.

2 As General Petraeus put it: "The challenge in Afghanistan, as it was in Iraq, is to figure out how to reduce substantially the numbers of those who have to be killed or captured. This includes creating the conditions in which one can have successful reconciliation with some of the elements fight ing us. Progress in reconciliation is most likely when you are in a position of strength and when there are persuasive reasons for groups to shift from being part of the problem to becoming part of the solution." http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&page=3.

well as the Czechs. Other countries that are providing a marginal number of troops could be tempted to exit the conflict early. Germany, Italy, France and UK, the main providers of non-U.S. troops, face strong political constraints and will probably not send more troops, at least not many more (the French have already refused to send more troops). In addition, Defense Secretary Robert Gates' regular calls to allies to send more troops do not change the fact that the growing intensity in combat and the relative numerical importance of the U.S. troops imply de facto a marginalization of the non-U.S. armies. More European troops in what is increasingly an American war is not likely.

Even if there were to be a major reinforcement after the 2009 surge, the insurgency will not be defeated militarily. It may be recalled that in the 1980s, the Soviet Union lost the war with more than 100,000 soldiers despite a much stronger Afghan state and an ideologically motivated Afghan army at its disposal. Even if the comparison has its limits, the Soviet case strongly suggests that the international coalition troops will not likely have enough resources to fight the insurgency in all provinces (a trend which is at present very perceptible). Even a strong reinforcement of international coalition troops will not be enough to defeat the Taliban, because they have a sanctuary in Pakistan. The limited resources of the coalition imply two things. First, a radical change in the strategy is needed to avoid a defeat; all frontal tactics will probably fail, something I will explain in more detail in the second part of the paper. Second, time is playing clearly against the coalition, and the next two or three years will be decisive. Instead of reassuring the Afghans and ourselves about a "long-term commitment", we have to recognize that the current situation is not sustainable.

Time constraints are the major reason to be skeptical about Afghanistan's neighbors being a key element in the solution. Considering that the border area is now largely out of control, even if (and it is a big if) the Pakistani institutions (civil government, military headquarters, ISI) were unanimously trying to regain the control of these areas, it is quite likely that the result on the ground would not be acceptable for years. Yet, the international coalition must change the political momentum in the next two or three years or it will be too late to stop the generalization of the insurgency.

The direct U.S. attacks on Pakistani soil were intended to put pressure on the Taliban, but failed to put Taliban activities in Pakistan under control and contributed to the general degradation of security on the border. The U.S. strikes have been fueling the insurgency locally; hence it is in contradiction to the fact that the allies have very limited resources and little interest in having an extension of the war on the Pakistani side of the border. The transformation of the border areas from a Taliban sanctuary to a war zone is not necessary a good thing for NATO. The Taliban and their local allies in Pakistan are powerful enough to threaten the logistical lines of NATO. In sum, there has been too much emphasis on Pakistan as the key to the Afghan conflict. Here, I see the traditional tensions between the two countries reflected in Western analysis and, more recently, the weight of the local U.S. commander operating on the border with Pakistan, understandably frustrated by the insurgency cross-border activities.

Understanding the Taliban The major intellectual obstacle faced by many Western experts has been their failure to take the Taliban's threat seriously. Outsiders' flawed perceptions of the movement help explain their inability to understand the Taliban's strategic style and resources. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Taliban are part of a larger, deep-rooted fundamentalist movement in Afghanistan; they have a resilient model of organization and their influence is not necessarily restricted to Pashtun areas.

Moreover, the Taliban are not an "external" phenomenon to the Afghan society, they are not alien to the Afghan culture and society. The movement had — and still has — a social base in the country and in the neighboring Pakistan. The fall of the Taliban in 2001 was framed as "liberation" and a return to normalcy after years of oppression, but this framing overlooked

the sections of Afghan society in which they were still popular. In particular, the "liberation" argument misrepresented the fact that the Taliban are far from being the only fundamentalist movement, political party or intellectual trend in Afghanistan. Fundamentalist values (distinct from Islamist ones) have a real and probably growing appeal in Afghan society. A series of incidents have shown that the Afghan Supreme Court or Members of Parliament share the same fundamentalist interpretation of shariat as the Taliban (a case in point being the instance of a young Afghan who was condemned to death in 2008 because he allegedly made a disrespectful comment about the Koran).

The originality of the Taliban is not their ideology, but their organization. To understand it, one must to go back to their mobilization in the 1980s, during the fight against the Soviet Union. At that time, there were several thousand commandant (local leaders) in Afghanistan. Their influence varied substantially, ranging from Ahmed Shah Masud, who commanded an army of thousands, down to a village notable at the head of a handful of mujahidin. Some commanders adopted a clerical model of organization that sprang directly from the involvement of ulema. Administration was conducted according to principles of Islamic law. Official posts were given in principle to ulema or to their taliban, who were normally pupils of the same madrasa. (In Helmand and Ghazni provinces, this model was dominant and it is no surprise that the Taliban are still dominant there.) On a more general level, the Jihad against the Communists introduced a revolutionary change in the role of the religious class. The ulema and mullah became political leaders, a social innovation perpetuated by the Taliban. As a consequence of this organizational structure, the Taliban are a network still dominated (at least at a decisional level) by ulema and mullahs, generally trained in the same Pakistani madrasas (notably the Haqqaniya madrasa for the top Taliban leaders). This explains why the Taliban were less affected by the defeat in 2001 than most observers had believed: their potential for organization and their ability to mobilize transnational resources was still largely intact. The movement

Why were the Taliban defeated in 2001?

In 2001, the Taliban were not defeated because of a popular Afghan uprising against them. There was no significant popular revolt against the Taliban during the American bombings. This does not necessarily mean that they were popular, but that opposition to Taliban was not organized, except for Masud's heirs in the North and the militia of Dostum. Nor were the Taliban defeated because of a tribal uprising. The Pashtun tribes in the southern and eastern part of Afghanistan had some real quarrels with the Taliban (in particular the Taliban's ban on the cultivation of opium) and were actually bribed by the CIA (opium was again planted even before the end of the American bombings). But the tribes defected from the Taliban after the defeats in the north, not before. They were not instrumental in the defeat of the Taliban.

Why then were the Taliban defeated? Quite simply, they were defeated because they adopted a poor military strategy. They did not evacuate the cities, especially in the north of the country where the population was generally opposed to them. In trying to maintain control over the cities the Taliban concentrated their troops and offered a target for the American air power. The first defeats in the north initiated a well-known phenomenon in Afghanistan: a general panic where Taliban fighters just went home (and, at least in the south, nobody stigmatized them). The Taliban had weak levels of military organization and the Pakistani officers who had a central role in the Taliban army were evacuated by Islamabad in September 2001. In conclusion, the defeat of the Taliban is strictly a military one, and was due to the lack of professional military organization.

kept its ideological and organizational coherence even in 2001 when it was defeated by the United States. Today, there is no split inside the Taliban even at a regional level due to the solidity of these networks. Even the two shura in Quetta and Peshawar do not constitute competing factions.

Finally, there is a common tendency to assume that support for the Taliban is essentially ethnically based. To be sure, a look at a map of Taliban activities indicates that most of the fights have occurred in the Pashtun-populated eastern and southern provinces. In addition, the cadres of the insurgency are mostly Pashtun. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that all Pashtuns are not pro-Taliban and, more importantly, that the movement is able to recruit from other ethnic groups.

In addition, the discourse of Jihad is a key element explaining how the Taliban supersedes ethnic affiliations and builds transnational solidarity. (I was in Peshawar during the autumn 2001 and witnessed how the local population thought very naturally of the war against a foreign non-Muslim power as a Jihad). The framing of the war is a key element in mobilizing people, and the ulema — and, hence, the Taliban — have the most credibility to make Jihadist appeals, which can be used as an instrument to open the north to the Taliban and help them mobilize transnationally. To some extent, this has already happened. The Taliban is no longer constrained to its initial base in the eastern and southern provinces.

How to Use International Coalition Troops

The use of violence by foreign troops is fueling resentment against the government in Kabul and helping the insurgency to mobilize Afghans. International coalition forces are less and less welcomed, especially in Pushtun areas where civilians have complained of foreign-harassment. Predictably, military operations result in civilian casualties,[3] which are all the more resented because the United States has (until recently) neither acknowledged them nor paid compensation. In addition, the war in Afghanistan marks a new phase in practices condemned by international law: poor treatment (and, in some cases, torture) of prisoners; and refusal to recognize the legal status of combatants, even those from recognized Taliban units. The growing intensity of the fight, whatever the tactical results, is playing in favor of the Taliban, validating Jihad as the popular interpretation of the events and creating unity between otherwise disparate groups against the occupant.

Moreover, the international coalition's operational results have been very poor to date. Local tactical successes do not conduct to long-term results. The locations where the international coalition troops have been most active (namely, the eastern and southern provinces) are those where institution building has also been weakest. After years of fighting, the withdrawal of the international coalition from those provinces would lead to the immediate collapse of the government, making the proposed transition to the Afghan army simply impossible. For example, more troops in Helmand province did not create the conditions necessary for building an Afghan state apparatus. In recent years, when some kind of local balance has been achieved, it has often been in the favor of the insurgency (which can freely move in the countryside) and has required the continued presence of foreign troops (such as in Helmand and Uruzgan). In this context, have Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) ever been able to win hearts and minds and to prepare the ground for an Afghan government to take over? It is more likely that they have been preempting the building of Afghan institutions at a local level. Further, one of the major weaknesses of the current strategy is the use of Soviet-style operations in which a large number of troops often sweep an area (for example the central valley in Wardak), but do not stay on to control the villages. Predictably, the Taliban return immediately after the troops leave and the net security gain is null.

Despite this poor record, current plans are to send

3 There has been a dramatic increase in the use of air power from an average of 5,000 pounds of munitions per month in 2005 to an average of 80,000 pounds per month since June 2006, peaking at 168,000 pounds in December 2007, see Graham, Stephen, "UN Official: 62 Percent More Afghan Civilians Killed in Fighting", Associated Press Worldstream, July 30, 2008.

reinforcements to the south and east to protect the circular road from Kabul to Herat. U.S. forces are expected to be deployed in Kandahar city and along vital Highway 1 between Kandahar to Kabul, and in neighboring Helmand province. Here we see a contradiction with the strategic goals. If the surge is mostly aimed at giving the coalition the means to secure territory (according to the classical counter-insurgency doctrine), there are not enough troops to do it. It is likely that the surge will fuel the resentment of the population, which is already hostile to the foreign presence, and extend the insurgency's influence. In addition, it is extremely difficult in these areas to secure territory and return it to Afghan allies, for at least two reasons. First, in the southern provinces, the Taliban are very well embedded in the population and it will be difficult to secure areas where the local population is working with the insurgency. Second, the Afghan army will have special difficulties in taking control because these are the most difficult areas of Afghanistan.

We must address this underlying problem in the rationale for more troops: Is a growing foreign presence the most important factor explaining the progression of Taliban? If so, we have to fundamentally rethink the use of international coalition troops both in terms of their role and their whereabouts.

A New Framework for the Use of International Coalition Troops From 2009 onwards, the international coalition should progressively reorganize its forces in two directions. First, the coalition is obviously not functioning well. Instead of the building of cohesion on the ground and politically, the war is undermining the relationship between allies. The political constraints are such that efficiency on the ground is not the first argument taken into account. With the exception of the British and possibly the French, the non-U.S. troops are generally not well suited to a counter-insurgency war and their functions and geographical organization must be changed. NATO needs to abandon organization by zones and should implement a more functional organization based on missions. Most non-U.S. troops should be assigned to non-fighting missions, especially the formation of the police and the military.

Second, the new strategy must focus on concentrating troops in order to avoid fighting in places where fighting will not make a difference. In a somewhat counter-intuitive way, the foreign troops are more useful in places in which the Taliban insurgency is still (relatively) weak and in which the government has some support, because this allows for the building of Afghan institutions at a quicker pace. In the southern and eastern provinces, the strategy should be more defensive, aimed at containment and not rollback, at least in the short term.

Instead of allocating troops to places in which the insurgency is strong, the priority must be to send troops where they have a reasonable prospect of securing a well-defined territory. The strengthening of the insurgency in Ghazni, Wardak and Logar provinces, together with the Taliban's progression on the road from Kabul to Jalalabad is now a major threat. This should not come as a surprise; the trends were evident two or three years ago. Yet, no action was taken then — and now the insurgency will be very impossible to defeat there. Kabul, for political and logistical reasons (the control of the north-south and east-west roads), should become a priority.

Withdrawal as a Change in Dynamics To this day the idea of a withdrawal has been seen as something that would result from the defeat or the marginalization of the Taliban. Withdrawal, in other words, would take place after a NATO victory. Yet, even without a change in strategy, there is no evidence to suggest that it will be possible to gain decisive advantage over the insurgency. As we have seen, the presence of foreign troops is the most important factor explaining Taliban's success outside their stronghold, allowing them to trace a continuum between the international coalition and former occupants. If combat troops are going to stay, there is little chance for the situation to quiet down. Decreasing the number of troops and the intensity of fighting must itself be an ongoing part of the strategy. Perhaps this could even be the key element in changing the political dynamic in Afghanistan, break-

ing the Taliban's momentum and legitimizing the Afghan government.[4] An initially limited and controlled withdrawal is the main weapon that can be used to change the current trends. It is not realistic to wait for a "stabilization" (whatever this means) to begin a progressive withdrawal.

The Afghan partner: From Social Engineering to Limited Institution Building

Historically the Afghan state has never, in itself, possessed the means to ensure its continued existence. It has been militarily and financially supported by external powers ever since its formation. At the same time, however, those foreign powers that have tried to directly control the country have failed. In other words, historical experience shows that to be influential in Afghanistan, foreign powers should remain outside the country.

This history notwithstanding, instead of approaching institution building in a modest and focused way, the goals of the international coalition, bordering on social engineering, were set high: democratization, rebuilding of Afghan economy, applying Western/universal values, liberating women, etc. While such policies were intended to encompass all aspects of society and politics, the resources provided to achieve them were grossly limited. One of the major causes of the present failure is the inability to focus on specific policies that could result in the quickest possible withdrawal of foreign troops. The resulting lack of security is the reason that many development programs have proven to be ineffective. According to the Afghan Ministry of Education, about 651 schools have been closed in southern provinces and 141 teachers and students have been killed since the beginning 2008 and 173,000 students dropped out of schools.

A Process of De-institutionalization? The Failure of Social Engineering Is the current fragmentation of Afghanistan a transitory process or a long-term one? Put another way, how can the international community make a success of the "state-building process" now underway in Afghanistan? I would argue that we are witnessing a process of de-institutionalization: the weak and limited but nonetheless functioning political center which existed at the end of the Taliban régime has now disappeared. In 2000, orders from Kabul were more likely to be obeyed in Kandahar, or even Shiberghan, than today.

The failure of institution building in Afghanistan is mainly due to two factors. First, Karzai lacks the social and political coalition he needs for support. More precisely, he was not able to build a broad social and political coalition after coming to power. In the Loya Jirga convened in the spring 2002, the U.S. envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, pushed aside the former king, Zahir Shah, and imposed Hamid Karzai as the new president. Without local support, Karzai remains extremely isolated and his authority has never really extended beyond the capital. In addition, there has never been a consensus on how the country should be organized in the future. How can one find common ground between the ex-communist Dostum, the Shiite of the Hezb-i wahdat, the former Islamists in the Jamiat, and hardline fundamentalists like Sayyaf? The interpretation of the Shariat, an accepted basis for the jurisdictional system, is much debated. The more liberal-minded Karzai and the UN-supported NGOs are clearly in the minority.[5] To impose western values in Afghanistan has been a failure and has only prevented Karzai from extending his political base. Finally, even if Karzai is a scion of an aristocratic Pushtun family, the Pashtuns as a group have lost access to state resources, and are suffering the most from foreign military operations.
The second reason for the failure of Afghan institution building is the absence of centralization, a process that is critical for the building of a sustainable Afghan regime. In 2002-03, there was a tentative effort towards greater centralization. This process failed due to the resistance of the periphery under the control of local leaders, lack of support from the international coalition, and Karzai's own hesitation.

4 See Gilles Dorronsoro, *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan war,* Carnegie Endowment for international Peace, Washington DC, 2009.

5 The Chief of the Supreme Court had even called for a ban on cable TV and co-education.

After a tentative effort to take control of the periphery and marginalize local leaders, the Kabul government decided to let regional leaders exercise their power unrestrained. This failure to consolidate power only resulted in an accelerated process of corruption, which has become a major problem, causing current economic investments in Afghanistan to be short-term, and businesses not investing due to the risk of kidnapping and corruption.

The poor results of the centralization process have given rise to two ideas frequently advocated as fixes for the existing system. First, there is talk about the lack of a state tradition in Afghanistan and the need to think and act locally (illustrated by the building of an armed local militia in Wardak province to fight the Taliban). The results of this policy will be unclear for some time, but there is good reason to be less than optimistic. Local dynamics are in fact very difficult to predict, and some militias are more likely to end up working for the Taliban rather than for the government. In other places, depending on the social structures (tribal or non-tribal territory), militias could intensify opposition between tribes or political groups. For instance, a plan launched in 2006 to develop militia forces in the southern provinces not only failed but ended up fuelling the Taliban insurgency. Sheer Mohammad Akhunzada, former governor of Helmand province, recruited 500 men from local tribes and established a tribal militia to guard various locations in the province. The same methods were applied in Uruzgan, Zabul, southern Kandahar province and Musa Qala in Helmand province, but they all failed and the militias surrendered to the Taliban. Furthermore, if such a strategy is employed, local groups and regional leaders will be reinforced at the expense of the central government in Kabul, making the eventual withdrawal of foreign troops more difficult.

The second idea involves appeals for more accountability, based on the notion that corruption in the Afghan administration is a major obstacle to building institutions. Yet, trying to fix the corruption problem can have unintended consequences. For instance, greater accountability likely means closer control of the Afghan government, contradicting the urgent need to foster greater autonomy. At present, the Afghan government controls a relatively small part of the money that is currently being spent in major development policies (such as education and health). The Afghan government is currently a minor actor in the implementation of these development policies. It is the international organizations and NGOs that have a crucial role and are largely autonomous. The risk is that greater control will further install/entrench the Western countries in the Afghan government machinery, postponing indefinitely the autonomy of the Afghan government.

Back to Centralization The policy of centralization that failed in 2002-03 must be implemented again, on a new basis and with more resources, and in a much more focused way. The international coalition's very limited time and resources make it imperative to coordinate efforts on a few common policies. Non-essential policies must not be taken in consideration. For example, opium eradication is regularly on the western agenda mostly because of its impact on western societies. Narcotics eradication programs usually work in small areas, at least some of the time, but such local programs cannot be the basis for a general national program. Most of the time, narcotics programs simply lead to the rearrangement of resources, including the relocation of opium cultivation. In addition, contrary to some analyses, opium is not, in fact, a major source of finance for the Taliban. Even if it were, a serious eradication program would have dire consequences on the counter-insurgency policy, and no major effect on the Taliban.

As noted above, it is necessary to define essential institutions — and, perhaps more importantly, the territorial focus of international efforts. The monopoly of large-scale violence in strategic territories is the key consideration on which such judgments should be based. For years, the building of an Afghan security apparatus has not been a priority, as evidenced by the failure of the German (now Europol) program in train-

ing the police (implemented in fact by American DynCorp corporation) and compounded by the very low wages of the ANA soldiers and their lack of foreign trainers.[6] In addition, the country's programs of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and disbandment of illegal armed groups (DIAG) have also failed.

Where are the territorial priorities? There is little prospect of the international coalition being able to rebuild institutions throughout the country, since the Taliban are solidly entrenched in southern and eastern provinces. Cities (as well as other places where there is a social support for the government) should be the main focus for rebuilding institutions. The social bases of the current war must be understood. For the most part, the international coalition (and, more importantly, the current government in Kabul) has support from the same social groups that supported the Communist party in the 1980s. The urban, modernist classes are enemies of the Taliban and support the government for the moment, at least passively. The government must therefore ensure that its policies are reinforcing its base. Secondly, there is the practical necessity of focusing on relatively small and densely-populated places, because the securitization of large areas is currently impossible.

Although the war is most intense in the south, the outcome of the war will be decided partly in the north where the Afghan state must be rebuilt. The Afghan National army is not only an important instrument for fighting the insurgency in the south, but is also critical to rebuilding the state in the north and avoiding a situation where the government controls only Kabul. The American protection for Rashid Dostum is an example of a policy which is making it very difficult for the Afghan state to be rebuilt in the north, even thought this is an area in which real institution building is possible (contrary to Kandahar, for example). The massacre of thousands of prisoners (up to 3,000, depending on the source) by Dostum, who played an important role in capturing the northern part of the country, was not properly investigated, and the amnesty law passed in 2007 has made it impossible to make further inquiries into the case. As a rule, no local leader should be allowed to control military forces numbering more than a few hundred or to extend influence beyond a province.

The second aspect of the international coalition's new strategy should be the political institutions. Emphasis on military building without an emphasis on political institutions could result in Afghanistan being a country in which the army remains the only functioning national institution. For example, (rarely mentioned) political parties are a key missing national institution in Afghanistan. The Parliament cannot work properly in the absence of political parties capable of building political programs and framing demands from the population. Assistance in rebuilding these parties should be a long-term objective that could be attained partially by way of new electoral laws and financial incentives.

Conclusions

Trying to remodel Afghan society and maintain a long-term military effort to defeat the Taliban is patently unrealistic. The Afghans' rejection of foreign troops and Western ideology has reached the point of no return. The international coalition must focus on fewer policies in order to prepare an exit strategy, to define the territory that could be secure from the Taliban, and to build limited but centralized Afghan institutions. In addition, this exit strategy must use the gradual withdrawal of troops as a major political weapon to curb the level of violence and to weaken the spirit of Jihad.

The original goal of the international coalition (destroying al-Qaida) is out of reach — and, in this sense, the war is already lost. The Afghan periphery and Pakistani borders cannot be secured for years to come. Radical movements will have a sanctuary, with or without the international coalition fighting in Afghanistan. A withdrawal could allow local dynamics to become decisive

6 General Accounting Office (GAO), Afghanistan Security (GAO-08-661), Washington DC, GAO, June 2008, quoted in J. Alexander Thier, ed., *The Future of Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2009: 25.

in Pakistan and Afghanistan, weakening the security of these radical groups. The failure of military control of Afghanistan should, in any case, lead the United States to find indirect ways to exert regional influence.

In sum, I recommend the following approach:

- adopt a new and more defensive posture, since the foreign presence and large scale operations are fueling the insurgency;
- rapidly decrease the number of foreign troops in order to change the political dynamic within Afghanistan;
- stop recurrent U.S. operations in Pakistan (they cannot offer a solution to the Afghan war; instead, they are worsening the situation on the border);
- return to the centralization process instead of reinforcing the periphery through the establishment of militias or protecting regional leaders; and
- give enough political space to the Afghan government to be autonomous.

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CÉPI Centre d'études en politiques internationales

CIPS Centre for International Policy Studies

CIGI The Centre for International Governance Innovation / Centre pour l'innovation dans la gouvernance internationale

This paper was first presented at a workshop at the University of Ottawa on January 20, 2009. The event, sponsored by the Sustainable Peacebuilding Network (www.statebuilding.org), was jointly organized by the Center for International Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa and the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo, Canada, with financial support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the International Development Research Centre. CIPS director Roland Paris and CIGI senior fellow Mark Sedra directed the workshop.