

Afghanistan, Iraq, and US Strategy in 2009

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A time traveler from 2007 would be shocked by the degree of consensus in today's defense debate. Just two years ago, a bitter partisan split over Iraq dominated American politics and fueled a major Republican defeat in midterm elections. Today, by contrast, the basic outlines of US policy for both Iraq and Afghanistan are matters of substantial bipartisan consensus. Most Democrats, most Republicans, and the military all agree that there should be withdrawals from Iraq, reinforcements for Afghanistan, a buildup of indigenous Afghan security forces, an application of classical counterinsurgency (COIN) methods for US forces in Afghanistan, and pressure on Islamabad to counter Taliban safe havens in northwest Pakistan. Likewise, most now agree that the Bush Administration's ambitions for modern, centralized democracy in Afghanistan were over-optimistic and will need to be scaled back at least for a long time; that negotiations with elements of the Taliban coalition could be useful in shrinking the opposition by inducing key components to stand down; and that progress in such negotiations will be limited until reinforcements turn the military tide. A number of official strategy reviews are ongoing, but the broad directions of the US war effort are thus matters of widespread agreement already, and are unlikely to be challenged fundamentally by any of the reviews now underway.

For now, the debate is mostly over the details. And some of these details are very important. In particular, the *pace* of withdrawals from Iraq and buildups in Afghanistan is contested, and could strongly affect outcomes in either theater. There are also a number of key elements of the emerging consensus policy for Afghanistan that have been understudied and deserve closer scrutiny than they have yet received, including the sustainability of a larger Afghan security force; the integration of military and political strategies; tribal outreach; and the role of economic development assistance.

The biggest questions, however, lie on the horizon. A small but growing minority is calling for withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan rather than reinforcing them. Comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam are becoming more common, as are references to quagmires, Russian defeats, or British failures. Newsweek's February 9 cover is headlined "Obama's Vietnam."¹ If security trends in Afghanistan improve

¹ Note, though, that the subtitle reads "How to Salvage Afghanistan:" *Newsweek*, Vol. CLIII, No. 6. Note also, however, that the inside subtitle reads "Quagmire in the Making," without a question mark: p. 5.

quickly, this nascent antiwar movement will remain small. But violence in Afghanistan is likely to get worse in the near term, not better. Indeed, a reinforced US posture employing classical COIN techniques is likely to increase near term casualties on both sides, much as it did in Iraq in 2007. Classical COIN trades higher losses in the short run for stability and decreased violence in the longer run; where it works, this is a good bargain. But even when it works, it looks bad early. And this will promote a growing debate over the wisdom of the US commitment to Afghanistan and thus a dispute over more fundamental issues than those in play today.

Given this, my testimony is intended to serve two purposes. I begin with the fundamental debate to come: is the war in Afghanistan worth waging? I argue that the antiwar position has merit, but that the case for reinforcement is stronger. I then turn to the largest of the questions now under active debate: how quickly should resources be transferred from Iraq to Afghanistan? Here I argue that slow is best – that gradual transfers make sense, but rapid ones risk more than they promise. And the most important near term improvement we could make in Afghanistan could well be a “political surge” with an emphasis on pressuring the Karzai government to reduce its corruption and reform its administration, but without requiring near-term troop counts that will be hard to provide without undermining the prospects for stability in Iraq. Success in Afghanistan is worth pursuing and will eventually require larger reinforcements, but in the near term it may be necessary to make do with smaller forces than we would like while working much harder to compel real political reform in Kabul.

I. Is the War in Afghanistan Worth Waging?

The first question – is the war in Afghanistan worth waging – rests on three sub-issues: what is at stake, what will it cost to pursue those stakes, and what is the likelihood that the pursuit will succeed?

The Stakes

The stakes in Afghanistan are high, but not unlimited. The United States has two primary national interests in this conflict: that Afghanistan not become a haven for terrorism against the United States, and that chaos in Afghanistan not destabilize its neighbors, especially Pakistan.

We invaded Afghanistan in the first place to destroy the al Qaeda safe haven there, and its use in the 9-11 attacks clearly justified this. But al Qaeda central is no longer based in Afghanistan, nor has it been since early 2002. Bin Laden and his core operation are, by all accounts, now based across the border in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The Taliban movement in Afghanistan is clearly linked with al Qaeda and sympathetic to it, but there is little evidence of al Qaeda infrastructure within Afghanistan today that could threaten the U.S. homeland in any direct way. If today’s Afghan government collapsed, if it were replaced with a neo-Taliban regime, or if the Taliban were able to secure real political control over some major contiguous fraction of Afghan territory then perhaps al Qaeda could re-establish a real haven there. But this risk

The issue’s reporting focuses on means of avoiding failure, but the context is growing concern with the prospect of failure.

is shared with a wide range of other weak states in many parts of the world, from Yemen to Somalia to Djibouti to Eritrea to Sudan to the Philippines to Uzbekistan or even parts of Southeast Asia, Latin America, or central, west, or North Africa, among other possibilities. And of course Iraq and Pakistan fit the description of weak states whose failure could provide havens for al Qaeda. Many of these – and especially Iraq and Pakistan – offer bin Laden prospects superior in important ways to Afghanistan's. Iraq and Pakistan, for example, are richer and far better connected to the outside world than is primitive, land-locked Afghanistan with its minimal communications and transportation systems. Iraq is an Arab state in the very heart of the Middle East. Pakistan, of course, is a nuclear power. Afghanistan does enjoy a historical connection with al Qaeda, familiarity to bin Laden, and proximity to his current base in the FATA, and it is important to deny al Qaeda sanctuary on the Afghan side of the Durand Line. But its intrinsic importance is no greater than many other potential havens – and probably smaller than many. We clearly cannot afford to wage protracted warfare with multiple brigades of American ground forces simply to deny al Qaeda potential safe havens; we would run out of brigades long before bin Laden ran out of prospective sanctuaries.

The more important U.S. interest in Afghanistan is indirect: to prevent Afghan chaos from destabilizing its Pakistani neighbor. With a population of 173 million (five times Afghanistan's), a GDP of over \$160 billion (over ten times Afghanistan's) and an actual, existing, functional nuclear arsenal of perhaps 20-50 warheads, Pakistan is a much more dangerous prospective sanctuary for al Qaeda, and one where the likelihood of government collapse enabling such a sanctuary may be in the same ballpark as Afghanistan, at least in the medium to long term.² Pakistan is already at war with internal Islamist insurgents allied to al Qaeda, and by most measures that war is not going well. Should the Pakistani insurgency succeed in collapsing the state or toppling the government, the risk of nuclear weapons falling into al Qaeda's hands would be grave indeed. In fact, given the difficulties terrorists face in acquiring usable nuclear weapons, Pakistani state collapse is by far the likeliest scenario for a nuclear-armed al Qaeda.

Pakistani state collapse, moreover, is a danger over which the United States has limited influence. The United States is now so unpopular in Pakistan that we have no meaningful prospect of deploying major ground forces there to assist the government in counterinsurgency. U.S. air strikes can harass insurgents and terrorists within Pakistan, but the inevitable collateral damage arouses harsh public opposition that could itself threaten the weak government's stability. U.S. aid is easily – and routinely – diverted to purposes remote from countering Islamist insurgents, such as the maintenance of military counterweights to India, graft and patronage, or even support for Islamist groups seen by Pakistani authorities as potential allies against their Indian neighbor. U.S. assistance can – and should – be made conditional on progress in countering insurgents, but harsh conditionality can induce rejection of the terms, and the aid, by the Pakistanis, removing our leverage in the process. The net result is a major threat over which we have very limited influence.

² On the size of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, see Federation of American Scientists, Pakistan Nuclear Weapons, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/pakistan/nuke/> (accessed 7 February 2009). It is widely believed that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are stored in a disassembled condition, but that the components can be reassembled into working weapons quickly.

If we have few ways to make Pakistan any better, we should at least avoid making it any worse. With so little actual leverage, we cannot afford to make the problem any harder than it already is. And failure in Afghanistan would make the problem in Pakistan much harder.

The Taliban are a transnational Pashtun movement that is active on either side of the Durand Line and sympathetic to other Pakistani Islamist insurgents. Their presence within Pakistan is thus already an important threat to the regime in Islamabad. But if the Taliban regained control of the Afghan state, their ability to use a state's resources as a base to destabilize secular government in Pakistan would enable a major increase in the risk of state collapse there. Much has been made of the threat Pakistani base camps pose to Afghan government stability, but this danger works both ways: instability in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to secular civilian government in Pakistan. And this is the single greatest stake the United States has in Afghanistan: to prevent it from aggravating Pakistan's internal problems and magnifying the danger of an al Qaeda nuclear sanctuary there.

These stakes are thus important. But they do not merit infinite cost to secure. Afghanistan is just one of many possible al Qaeda sanctuaries. And Afghanistan's influence over Pakistan's future is important, but incomplete and indirect. A Taliban Afghanistan is a real possibility in the long run absent U.S. action, and makes Pakistani collapse more likely, but it does not guarantee it. Nor would success in Afghanistan guarantee success in Pakistan: there is a chance that we could struggle our way to stability in Afghanistan at great cost and sacrifice only to see Pakistan collapse anyway under the weight of its own errors and internal divisions.

The Cost

What will it cost to defeat the Taliban? No one really knows; war is an uncertain business. But it is very hard to succeed at COIN on the cheap. Current U.S. Army doctrine is very clear on this:

[M]aintaining security in an unstable environment requires vast resources, whether host nation, U.S., or multinational. In contrast, a small number of highly motivated insurgents with simple weapons, good operations security, and even limited mobility can undermine security over a large area. Thus, successful COIN operations often require a high ratio of security forces to the protected population. For that reason, protracted COIN operations are hard to sustain. The effort requires a firm political will and substantial patience by the government, its people, and the countries providing support.³

Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus, COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources.⁴

In fact, the doctrinal norm for troop requirements in COIN is around one security provider per fifty civilians in the population to be secured.⁵ Applied to the population of

³ *The U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), (republication of: Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Afghanistan, this would imply a need for around 650,000 trained soldiers and police. Not all parts of Afghanistan are equally threatened; it is widely believed that the north and west of the country are much safer than the south and east. Even if one assumes that only half the country requires active counterinsurgency operations, however, this still implies a need for something around 300,000 counterinsurgents. Ideally most of these would be indigenous Afghans. But there is reason to doubt that the Afghan government will ever be able to afford the necessary number of troops; if any significant fraction of this total must be American then the resources needed will be very large.⁶ And the commitment could be very long: successful counterinsurgency campaigns commonly last ten to fifteen years or more.⁷

At least initially, the casualties to be expected from such an effort would also be heavy. In Iraq, a force of 130,000-160,000 U.S. troops averaged over 90 fatalities per month during the most intense period of COIN operations in January to August of 2007. Depending on the troop strength ultimately deployed and the intensity of the fighting, it is not implausible to suppose that casualty rates in Afghanistan could reach comparable levels. And it may well take longer for those losses to reverse and decline in Afghanistan than in Iraq; it would be prudent to assume that fatality rates of perhaps 50-100 per month could persist for many months, if not years.⁸

The Odds of Success

In general, the historical record of great power success in COIN is not encouraging. The political scientists Jason Lyall of Princeton and Isaiah Wilson of West Point estimate that since 1975, the success rate of government counterinsurgents has been just 25 percent.⁹ Given the costs of trying, this success rate offers a sobering context.

Moreover, the surge's recent success in reducing Iraqi violence does not imply that similar methods will necessarily yield similar results in Afghanistan. As many have noted, Afghanistan and Iraq are very different military, political, and economic environments.¹⁰ The nature of the underlying conflict is also very different: Iraq had been

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶ See Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, "From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (November/December 2008), pp. 30-44.

⁷ Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: RAND, 2008), p. 10.

⁸ The financial costs are also likely to be large. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the war in Afghanistan cost \$34 billion in FY 2008, and projects that this figure will increase in coming years: Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 15, 2008), RL33110, pp. 6, 19.

⁹ Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67-106 at 69-71. For all counterinsurgencies since 1900, they find a government success rate of 40 percent; hence the odds have been getting worse over time. See also Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 93-128, and Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), which finds "strong actors" winning only 45 of 100 asymmetric conflicts between 1950 and 1998: p. 97 .

¹⁰ See, e.g., GEN David Petraeus, remarks at the US Institute of Peace, January 8, 2009; reported by Armed Forces Press Service, January 9, <http://www.defenselink.mil/News/newsarticle.aspx?id=52604>; GEN

an ethno-sectarian civil war of identity with secondary factional, tribal, or ideological elements; Afghanistan has been chiefly an ideological and factional war with secondary ethnic elements. Methods that work in identity wars do not necessarily make sense in ideological conflicts, and vice versa.¹¹ Perhaps most important, the surge, while *necessary* for success in Iraq, was not *sufficient* to bring this about. Its effects were due in large part to a powerful interaction between a new U.S. approach and a major change in Sunni alignment stemming from their defeat in Baghdad's sectarian warfare over the course of 2006. This realignment would have failed without the surge's protection, but without the realignment the surge would never have been enough to suffocate the insurgency on its own. Taken together, the surge and the Sunni realignment powerfully reinforced one another's effects. But the surge without the Sunnis' 2006 Baghdad defeat – which we did not cause – would probably not have worked.¹² The surge's dependence on the particulars of Iraq's 2007 strategic landscape thus counsels great caution in extrapolating from its success in 2007 in Iraq to Afghanistan in 2009 and beyond: the experience in Iraq does not prove that we have now discovered a universal key to unlocking counterinsurgency problems in all places and times. There are thus important grounds for caution and concern about the prognosis in Afghanistan.

Nor are current conditions in Afghanistan encouraging. Orthodox COIN theory puts host government legitimacy at the heart of success and failure, yet the Karzai government is widely seen as corrupt, inept, inefficient, and en route to losing the support of its population. Ultimate economic and political development prospects are constrained by Afghanistan's forbidding geography, tribal social structure, lack of infrastructure, and political history. The Taliban enjoy a cross-border sanctuary in the FATA that the Pakistani government seems unwilling or unable to eliminate. Violence is up, perceptions of security are down, casualties are increasing, and the Taliban is widely believed to be increasing its freedom of movement and access to the population. And only some of these challenges are things we can affect directly: we can increase security by deploying more U.S. troops, we can bolster the economy to a degree with U.S. economic aid, and we can pressure Karzai to reform, but only the Afghans can create a legitimate government, and only the Pakistanis can shut down the safe havens in the FATA. We can influence these choices, and we must do so – to a much greater degree than we have so far. But we cannot guarantee reform ourselves, and to date neither ally seems ready to do what it takes.

But this does not make failure inevitable. The poor track record for COIN generally is due partly to the inherent difficulty of the undertaking, but most see poor strategic choices by many counterinsurgents as a major contributor to failure. Strategies and methods can be changed – it is possible to learn from experience. And the U.S. military

David McKiernan, DoD News Briefing at the Pentagon, October 1, 2008, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4297>.

¹¹ See Stephen Biddle, "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon: The Perils of Refighting Vietnam in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 2-14.

¹² For a more detailed analysis, see Stephen Biddle, "Iraq After the Surge," statement before the House Armed Services Committee, 110th Congress (2nd Session), January 23, 2008; also Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*, PublicAffairs (New York: Perseus, 2008).

has learned a great deal about COIN in recent years. The new Army/Marine counterinsurgency doctrine is the product of a nearly unprecedented degree of internal debate, external vetting, historical analysis, and direct recent combat experience.¹³ None of this makes it a magic silver bullet for COIN success, and in important ways it makes underlying assumptions about the nature of counterinsurgency that made it an awkward fit for conditions in Iraq.¹⁴ But those same assumptions make it a much stronger fit for Afghanistan, which is precisely the kind of war the manual was built around.

One of the doctrine's remaining shortcomings, moreover, is a problem the new Administration seems likely to address. The new doctrine assumes a very close alignment of interests between the United States and its host government: the manual assumes that our role is to enable the host to realize its own best interest by making itself into a legitimate defender of all its citizens' wellbeing, and that the host will see it this way, too.¹⁵ In many ways, the previous Administration shared this view, offering assistance with few conditions or strings on the assumption that developing our allies' capacity for good governance was all that would be needed to realize better performance. In fact, though, many allies – notably including Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf, have had much more complex motives that have led them to misdirect our aid and fall short of our hopes for their popular legitimacy. Some students of counterinsurgency have thus emphasized the need for conditionality in our assistance to reduce this problem of moral hazard: we should not assume that allies share all our interests, and we should impose conditions and combine carrots with sticks in order to push reluctant hosts toward behavior that could better realize our hopes for their broader legitimacy and thereby damp insurgencies.¹⁶ The incoming Administration has made it very clear that they intend to combine bigger carrots with real sticks in the form of prospective aid withdrawals should the recipients fail to adopt needed reforms. This is an important step forward in our ability to compete for hearts and minds with effective host governance.

The forces implementing that doctrine are also much improved over their ancestors in Vietnam, or even their immediate predecessors in Iraq in 2003-4. In fact, the U.S. military of 2009 has adapted into an unusually proficient counterinsurgency force. No large human organization is perfect, and there is important room for improvement. But relative to many great power counterinsurgents, the current U.S. military combines stronger doctrine with unusually extensive COIN combat experience, unusually systematic training, and resources for equipment and materiel that would dwarf most historical antecedents'.

¹³ On the vetting and development process, see *U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, pp. xlvii-xlviii.

¹⁴ In particular, the doctrine presumes an ideological struggle for the allegiance of an uncommitted public, rather than a highly mobilized ethno-sectarian war of identity, as Iraq has been: for details, see Jeffrey Isaac, editor, "The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 347-50 at 349-50.

¹⁵ See, for example, *U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, pp. 7-8, 25, 35, 37-39, 47 (e.g., paragraph 1-147: "Support the Host Nation").

¹⁶ For a more extensive discussion, see, esp., Daniel Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 79-115.

Perhaps most important, we are blessed with deeply flawed enemies in Afghanistan. Afghans know the Taliban; they know what life was like under their rule. And polling has consistently suggested that few Afghans want to return to the medieval theocracy they endured before. Most Afghans want education for their daughters; they want access to media and ideas from abroad; they want freedom from thugs enforcing fundamentalism for all under the aegis of a Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Of course, these preferences are secondary to the need for security. And many are secondary to the desire for basic services such as courts free of corruption or police who enforce the laws without demanding bribes first. But because most Afghans oppose Taliban rule, we enjoy a strong presumption in favor of the government as long as that government can be made to provide at least basic services competently. The Taliban face an inherently uphill battle to secure compliance with their policies that a reasonably proficient government does not. And in a struggle for hearts and minds this is an important advantage.

The Taliban, moreover, are far from a unified opposition group. By contrast with the Viet Cong of 1964, for example, where a common ideology bound the leadership together and linked it to its fighters, the neo-Taliban of 2009 are a much looser, much more heterogeneous, much more divided coalition of often fractious and very independent actors. There is a hard core of committed Islamist ideologues, centered on Mullah Omar and based in Quetta. But by all accounts much of the Taliban's actual combat strength is provided by an array of warlords and other factions with often much more secular motivations, who side with the Taliban for reasons of profit, prestige, or convenience, and who may or may not follow orders from the Quetta Shura leadership. We often lament the challenges to unity of effort that flow from a divided NATO command structure, but the Taliban face difficulties on this score at least as severe as ours and potentially much worse: no NATO member is going to change sides and fight for the Taliban, but the Taliban need to be constantly alert lest one or more of their component factions leave the alliance for the government side. And this makes it very difficult for the Taliban to mount large-scale, coordinated offensives of the kind that would be needed to conquer a defended city, for example – such efforts would be very hard for any one faction or any one commander to accomplish without closely-coordinated assistance from others, yet such coordination can be very hard to achieve in such a decentralized, factionalized leadership structure.

The Taliban also face major constraints in extending their influence beyond their ethnic base in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban is an explicitly Pashtun movement. Yet Pashtuns make up less than 45 percent of Afghanistan's population overall, and constitute only a tiny fraction of the population outside the south and east. Afghanistan is not primarily an ethno-sectarian war of identity, as Iraq has been – most Taliban are Pashtuns, but most Pashtuns are not Taliban (in fact the government is itself run by Pashtuns such as Hamid Karzai). Afghanistan is a war fought over the Taliban's ideology for governing, not the hope for a Pashtun government. But whereas the government has members from many ethnic groups and a presumptive claim to the loyalty of all citizens, the Taliban has a much more exclusivist identity and is radically unpopular and unwelcome outside its regional ethnic base. This in turn will make it hard for them to conquer the north and west of the country, and acts as a limiter on their expansion in the near term. (It is worth noting that even in their first rule, the Taliban

never completely secured the north – it was the unconquered “Northern Alliance’s” hold over contiguous territory in that part of Afghanistan that provided allies, a base, and a jump-off point for the American Special Forces who teamed with them to topple the Taliban in 2001.)

This combination of a proficient U.S. military and a Taliban enemy with important weaknesses and vulnerabilities gives us an important *possibility* for successful counterinsurgency. This is obviously not a guarantee. There are major obstacles in Afghanistan, and even if there weren’t, social science cannot offer that kind of certainty. If anyone thinks the new doctrine is an infallible cookbook for COIN success then they are mistaken. But neither is defeat in Afghanistan inevitable. Great powers do not always fail in COIN; the U.S. is an unusually experienced counterinsurgent force today; the Taliban have serious problems of their own; and astute strategic choices can make an important difference.

Assessment

The stakes, costs, and odds here make Afghanistan a closer call on the merits than some would assume. Reasonable people could argue that a combination of an uncertain prospect of victory with high costs and a limited ability to secure the real stake – a stable Pakistan – make COIN in Afghanistan too unpromising to expend the lives and dollars needed. Ultimately any such calculation is a value judgment: analysis can clarify the costs and the benefits, but rarely can the analytical merits predetermine whether the expected risk to human life is worth the chance of securing a stake.

But in making that value judgment it is important to keep in mind the gravity of the ultimate stake in Afghanistan. A nuclear al Qaeda is a truly cataclysmic prospect. And Pakistani state collapse is a perhaps uniquely dangerous pathway to this. COIN in Afghanistan is indeed an indirect and imperfect means of preventing this. If we had better levers to mitigate this risk, then an expensive, difficult, protracted Afghan COIN campaign might be less necessary: we could compensate for the perils of cross-border destabilization from a Taliban Afghanistan in some other way. But there are very few other ways. War in Afghanistan is an unattractive option, but so is the alternative. Given this, counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, with all its warts and perils, may nevertheless be the strongest means at our disposal to affect the risk of Pakistani nuclear weapons falling into al Qaeda hands.

II. How quickly should resources be transferred from Iraq to Afghanistan?

To wage war effectively in Afghanistan will require troops and equipment now committed to Iraq. How quickly can they be shifted from the latter to the former?

There are several constraints here. Logistics, for example, is a potential limiter: the current basing and transportation infrastructure in Afghanistan cannot immediately accommodate a large increase in U.S. troops. Some months will be needed to build the facilities needed for a sustained deployment in such an austere, remote theater.

The most important constraint, however, is the competing demand for U.S. troops in Iraq. To resolve these demands requires answers to three key questions: how important are the relative interests at stake in the two theaters; how sensitive are outcomes in each

theater to U.S. resource investments; and how volatile is the situation in each theater – how quickly could events turn for the worse or the better if resources were provided or withheld?

The relative importance of Iraq and Afghanistan

It is sometimes argued that Iraq, as a war of choice, is less central to U.S. interests than Afghanistan, where bin Laden organized the 9-11 attacks. This may well have been true in 2001 or 2003. But the situation is very different today. As noted above, al Qaeda central is now based in Pakistan, not Afghanistan, and the latter's influence on the former, while important, is indirect and incomplete. And our invasion of Iraq destabilized the country – and potentially the region – creating several major threats to U.S. interests in the process that did not exist to nearly the same degree prior to the invasion, but which now loom large for U.S. strategy.

In particular, the U.S. retains two primary interests in Iraq in 2009. The first is humanitarian. Having launched a war of choice in Iraq, we thus bear a heavy responsibility for the loss of innocent life that may follow from that decision. In Afghanistan, war was forced upon us by Osama bin Laden; in Iraq we may (or may not) have been justified in our choice to wage war in 2003, but we had a wider range of meaningful alternative options at our disposal than we did in 2001. And as such, our responsibility for using our resources in ways that reduce the conflict's humanitarian costs is greater than in Afghanistan. Of course we should always conduct operations in ways that limit collateral damage and the loss of innocent life, whatever the theater. In Iraq, however, there is an unusually strong normative case for expending resources and bearing burdens we might not in other places if by doing so we can limit the damage of a war for which we bear more than usual responsibility.

The second primary U.S. stake in Iraq is that the war not spread beyond Iraq's borders. Iraq by 2006 had become an unusually intense ethno-sectarian civil war. Such wars create many problems, but one of the most dangerous is contagion: they have a strong tendency to spread, drawing in their neighbors to an expanded conflict that can dramatically increase the war's damage and loss of life. Of the 142 civil wars fought between 1944 and 1999, for example, fully 48 saw major military interventions by neighbors.¹⁷ This is always tragic, but for Iraq it could be disastrous: a war engulfing Iraq's neighbors could plunge one of the world's most important energy producing regions into chaos.

Today, Iraq is in the early stages of a negotiated settlement to its civil war in which the former Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias are observing ceasefires (and in which al Qaeda in Iraq has been marginalized and restricted to a handful of remaining sanctuaries). The continuation of this settlement, and its maturation into real stability, is the best possible insurance against the danger of a wider war in the Persian Gulf. Such settlements, however, are notoriously fragile early on: of 23 such ceasefires between

¹⁷ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman and Stephen Long, "Civil War Intervention and the Problem of Iraq," manuscript and supporting dataset. (Note that these data code as a "civil war" any internal conflict with at least 200 battle deaths; other coding rules with other criteria will imply other, often smaller, counts of wars but similar counts of interventions. Hence the intervention rate cited above is best regarded as lower bound.)

1940 and 1992, 10 collapsed into renewed warfare within five years of the settlement.¹⁸ Failure is not inevitable, but the fact of a ceasefire in most of Iraq today is no guarantee of enduring peace.

And if Iraq should return to violence, the risk of a re-ignited Iraqi conflict spreading may be greater than in most such wars. Each of Iraq's neighbors has vital interests in Iraq, and the threats to those interests posed by Iraqi civil warfare grow over time. Left to their own devices, civil wars such as Iraq's can take a decade or more to burn themselves out. With some luck, Iraq's war could do this without spreading. But it is also distinctly possible that an increasingly virulent combination of refugee flows into neighboring states; the internal destabilization created by ill-housed, ill-fed, dispossessed and politically radicalized refugee populations; fears of regional domination by Iranian-supported Shiism; cross-border terrorism by Iraqi factions (especially the Kurds); and growing military capacity for intervention fueled by an ongoing regional arms race could eventually produce irresistible pressures for Syrian, Jordanian, Saudi, Turkish, or Iranian state entry into the war. And if one of these states intervened, the resulting change in the military balance within Iraq would increase the pressures on the others to send troops across the border as well. The result could be a region wide version of the Iran-Iraq War sometime in the next decade, but with some of the combatants (especially Iran) having probable access to weapons of mass destruction by that time.

Of course nothing about Iraq is a certainty, and the probability of regionalization is not 1.0. But neither can it safely be excluded. If one considers the entire available empirical record of civil wars and outside interventions since 1944, controls for the unique features of the Iraqi case, and projects to possible restarted civil war durations of five to ten years, the best available estimates of the probability that the war spreads to two or more of Iraq's neighbors could be as high as 25 to 60 percent.¹⁹ Averting such a gamble is perhaps the most important – and continuing – U.S. strategic interest in Iraq.

How sensitive are outcomes to U.S. resource investments?

More U.S. resources for Afghanistan are *insufficient* to realize our primary interest there – the stability of Pakistan – but they may be *necessary* for this. Certainly a failed Afghanistan or a Taliban reconquest would make Pakistani stability much less likely. And to avert failure in Afghanistan will eventually require, *inter alia*, much more substantial U.S. investments there, including more troops. It may be possible to buy time through Afghan political reforms achieved via focused U.S. pressure on the Karzai government without a large near-term military reinforcement (see below). And near-term defeat in Afghanistan seems unlikely even without an immediate troop buildup (see below). But in the long run, the prognosis is poor without much larger security forces in

¹⁸ Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Biddle, Friedman, and Long, "Civil War Intervention and the Problem of Iraq." The lower figure assumes five years of post-reignition civil warfare in Iraq; the higher figure assumes ten years. The results are derived from a probit analysis of 142 civil wars fought between 1944 and 1999; the computed probit coefficients were then used to perform a monte carlo simulation of potential interventions in Iraq given the specific values on the probit model's independent variables for Iraq and each of its neighbors. For a complete discussion of the method, data, and findings see *ibid*.

Afghanistan, many of which will have to be American. Afghanistan could fail even with U.S. reinforcement, and more than just troops will be needed for a decent chance at success. But without additional U.S. resources, the Karzai government's ability to control its borders, control its territory, and prevent infiltration of Taliban and other Islamist fighters into Pakistan would be very limited, with potentially very dangerous consequences across the border.

Iraq, too, has important and continuing needs for U.S. troops. But those needs are very different in nature. Whereas U.S. troops' role in Afghanistan would be counterinsurgency warfighting, their role in Iraq is increasingly that of peacekeepers.

Negotiated civil war settlements such as Iraq's often fail, but where they do not, it is often due to the presence of outside peacekeepers. Ethno-sectarian identity wars aggravate deep seated inter-group fears and distrust; even when the shooting stops it can take years for rivals' expectations of one another to change and for retaliatory incentives to fade. Left to their own devices, spoiler violence can easily lead to escalatory spirals as groups who fear for their security at the hands of rivals take action themselves in self-defense. Indigenous government security forces can help, but they can also make matters worse where one group feels threatened by government forces under the control of their rivals – in Iraq, for example, many former Sunni insurgents remain deeply distrustful of Iraqi security forces under the command of a Shiite-led government. In such settings, outside peacekeepers reassure the parties that their rivals will not exploit them if they let their guard down or delay retaliation. Even if widely disliked themselves, outsiders are rarely seen as prospective genocide threats (as internal rivals often are); this enables outsiders to play a transitional stabilizing role that internal actors can find difficult to perform without stimulating fear of oppression.

In Iraq today, the only prospective peacekeeping force is the U.S. military. We may not be loved, but we are tolerated well enough to act as stabilizers where needed. And in fact, most of the activities of U.S. ground forces in Iraq today amount, in effect, to peacekeeping: enforcing ceasefire terms, damping escalatory spirals, reassuring wary former combatants that their willingness to stand down will not be exploited by their erstwhile enemies.

Peacekeeping of this kind can be labor intensive. In fact, the troop levels normally preferred for such missions are little different from those sought for COIN warfighting: about one peacekeeper per 50 civilians, or far more troops than we now have in Iraq. But such missions have sometimes been accomplished with much smaller forces. In Liberia, for example, 15,000 UN troops stabilized a ceasefire in a country of three and a half million; in Sierra Leone, 18,000 UN troops sufficed in a country of 6 million.²⁰ It would be a mistake to assume that such small forces can always succeed in a potentially very demanding mission, and more is always better. But it would also be a mistake to assume that only an impossibly large force will suffice.

The ideal duration of such missions can be long. But rarely are initial, relatively large, peacekeeping deployments maintained at that level for their entirety. As inter-

²⁰ For Liberia, see the UNMIL website: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmil/facts.html> . For Sierra Leone, see the UNAMSIL website: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unamsil/facts.html>

group tensions and expectations of hostility recede, peacekeeping deployments can often be thinned gradually and progressively without reigniting violence. In the Balkans, for example, large early peacekeeping deployments were reduced slowly to levels of less than half their initial strength within four years of the ceasefires in Bosnia and Kosovo without a return to warfare.²¹ This Balkan analogy would imply a safe peacekeeping drawdown trajectory for Iraq that would leave around 60,000 U.S. troops in the country by 2011.

A U.S. troop presence of 60,000 through 2011 would create obvious tension with the terms of the recent status of forces agreement negotiated with Iraq. Perhaps conditions in the country by 2011 will enable deeper drawdowns – or even the complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces as called for in the agreement – without a significant danger of renewed violence. And either way, Iraq is a sovereign nation; if they ask us to leave then we should and we must. But from the standpoint of stability alone, experience elsewhere suggests that a longer presence by a larger U.S. force than now foreseen in the status of forces agreement would offer useful insurance against a renewal of violence and the risk that this violence eventually crosses Iraq's borders.

As in COIN, there are no guarantees in peacekeeping – this is an insurance policy that sometimes fails. In Angola and Rwanda, for example, outside peacekeeping forces failed to prevent renewed warfare. Conversely, there is no certainty that even a precipitous U.S. withdrawal would spur a return to civil war. But on balance it seems reasonable to conclude that stability in Iraq remains sensitive to the presence of U.S. forces, and is likely to continue to be for at least several years to come.

How volatile are the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq?

If both Afghanistan and Iraq are important and if both demand substantial U.S. deployments, then something important and valuable will have to be sacrificed; we do not have the forces to do everything we would like to do simultaneously. This places a premium on our assessment of the relative volatility of the respective situations: can we survive increased risk in the short term in one theater while meeting the other's demands, or is one situation or the other so close to failure that near term sacrifices would be fatal? Both theaters face some risk of near term failure, but where is this danger greater?

The key issue here is not whether security trends are up or down in either theater. Everyone agrees that the trend today is up or steady in Iraq but down in Afghanistan. Rather, the real question is *how quickly could an uncertain situation reach a point of no return* if near-term troop levels were smaller than ideal, and how likely is this? In the longer term, an improving situation in Iraq should enable gradual shifts without great risk; the problem is the short run, where both Iraq and Afghanistan would ideally need the same troops, and the key issue is to assess the risk that shorting one theater or the other would create a problem from which we could not recover in the longer term.

Today, many would probably see Afghanistan as the greater risk of near-term failure. Some believe that the Afghan campaign is now teetering on the brink of defeat, whereas the situation in Iraq seems relatively stable in the near term. If so, then the safer

²¹ <http://www.nato.int/sfor/docu/d981116a.htm>

course would be to fight the near-term fire in Afghanistan as soon as possible and take risks as necessary with the slower-moving situation in Iraq.

Imminent defeat cannot be ruled out in Afghanistan; certainly the war there is going badly and getting worse. But quick defeat is nevertheless unlikely in Afghanistan. By contrast, Iraq is more volatile than sometimes assumed. And whereas the U.S. could probably recover from some continuation of today's downward trends in Afghanistan, a turn for the worse in Iraq could well be unrecoverable at this point.

I base this assessment partly on the views of the theater command in Afghanistan, partly on the importance of political frustration for adverse near-term trends there, and partly on an analysis of the nature of ongoing security risks in Iraq.

As for the first of these points, in a recent visit to Afghanistan in November 2008, I posed this question – how quickly could the situation there reach a point of no return if reinforcements were smaller or slower than ideal – to the ISAF senior leadership and staff in Kabul. None believed that defeat was imminent or would result from a delay in the preferred reinforcements. All argued that success required larger forces (among other needs). But none saw defeat as a realistic outcome in the next year or two regardless. In fact, the most pessimistic assessment I could solicit was a projection of stalemate; some actually argued that improvement was possible without additional forces if ISAF strategy and policy coordination were reformed.

Their view was based largely on the perceived weakness of the Taliban opposition. Poor governance by the Karzai regime and insufficient troop levels had created an opportunity for the insurgency, and the Taliban had proved strong enough to exploit this opportunity to reduce security in the country. But the Taliban's unpopular ideology, inconsistent motives and interests, restrictive ethnic identity, and inability to coordinate efforts made them, in GEN McKiernan's words, "less than the sum of their parts" and limited their ability to achieve theater success any time soon.²²

Moreover, there is reason to suspect that the Karzai regime's poor civil governance may be so central to the recent downturn that a near term "political surge" (to borrow David Kilcullen's phrase) could buy valuable time even before larger-scale military reinforcements become available, reducing the sensitivity of outcomes there to U.S. troop counts per se for a time. In fact, political change may be the most urgent piece of the politico-military improvements needed – and either way it can be undertaken without the kind of near-term opportunity cost against the Iraq effort that troop increases create.

In objective terms, violence in Afghanistan, though increasing, is still very low by the standards of most such conflicts. In Iraq, for example, civilian deaths per hundred thousand members of the population had already reached 30 by 2004, just one year into the war; in Afghanistan, the death count for 2008 was under six per hundred thousand, or less than one-fifth as great.²³ Malaya is commonly cited as an example of an insurgency

²² See Catherine Dale, *War in Afghanistan: Strategy, Military Operations, and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 23, 2009), pp. 20-21, which reports on the same series of interviews.

²³ Data from the Brookings Institute Iraq Index; civilian fatalities are for insurgent violence only and exclude estimated deaths from criminal activity: <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx>

turned around by successful government strategy; one year into the Malayan Emergency, the civilian death toll had already reached nine per hundred thousand, a rate 50 percent higher than Afghanistan's today; two years later the Malayan insurgents killed 20 civilians per hundred thousand, or a rate three times Afghanistan's today.²⁴ Vietnam, of course, was hardly a COIN success, but it certainly featured a much higher death rate than Afghanistan's to date: the Viet Cong in 1966 inflicted about 180 civilian deaths per hundred thousand, or about 27 times the Taliban's current rate.²⁵ In fact, the overwhelming majority of Afghans, when surveyed, report feeling safe in their neighborhoods today. Parts of Afghanistan are very violent, but much of it is not.

Yet support for the government is plummeting, even in relatively peaceful areas, creating an important opening that the Taliban have been exploiting. The reason may well be that perceptions of violence elsewhere in the country are catalyzing frustration with incompetent and massively corrupt governance to create anger with the regime – and its foreign supporters – creating an opening for the Taliban, notwithstanding its limited intrinsic appeal and military shortcomings. Reducing the violence will be necessary to create real stability and defeat the insurgency, and this will require more troops. But in the near term, even sizeable reinforcements that do not reform Afghan governance are unlikely to reverse the government's loss of political support. And we can, in principle, be much more effective in compelling reform from the Karzai government than we have been heretofore even without massive near term military reinforcement. This will require real political pressure on Karzai that combines promises of support and aid with threats to deny them in the absence of reform and demands that Karzai remove known offenders from his government. Nominal security conditions in the country are not yet so grave as to make such a program for better governance impossible in the absence of more troops – and more troops without such a program will do little to reduce public frustration with official corruption and incompetence.

This is not to say that a “political surge” in the absence of much larger military reinforcements can avert stalemate; real success in Afghanistan requires both governance reform and security improvements, and the latter will be hard to provide without more troops. Stalemate, rather than success, is likely to be the best that can be accomplished pending major reinforcement. Nor would stalemate or unnecessarily slow progress would be cost-free in Afghanistan. Either would increase the cost in lives and treasure needed for eventual success, and either one would increase the risk of failure in the longer term. It is sometimes said that insurgencies win simply by avoiding defeat – which is to say that stalemate favors the insurgent – and there is much truth to this. The worse the situation at the time of reinforcement, the harder it will be to turn the situation around when that day comes.

But costlier success or diminished long-term odds are not the same as near-term failure. The latter is, in the view of the theater command, beyond the Taliban's capacity

²⁴ Data from Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), p. 682.

²⁵ Data from Ronald J. Cima, ed., *Vietnam: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1987); and assuming a South Vietnamese population of 19 million in 1966.

to bring about, and it may be possible to lower the odds further with a political surge even before an eventual major troop buildup.

In Iraq, by contrast, we would have very little ability to rescue the situation if current trends reversed and violence returned. It is hard to imagine much public tolerance in the United States for a “second surge” in the event that the first one proved insufficient to keep Iraq stable. Nor is it easy to see this succeeding even if tried. The first surge was heavily dependent on several favorable preconditions for success – and especially the strategic effects of Sunni defeat at Shiite hands in the 2006 Battle of Baghdad and the ensuing growth of the Sunni Awakening movement.²⁶ If large scale violence returned after a major U.S. drawdown, this would imply that the Battle of Baghdad’s effects had atrophied or been overtaken by events; the odds of a comparable piece of serendipity on this scale enabling a new surge to succeed in 2010 or 2011 would be long.

Potential stimuli for such a turn for the worse in Iraq are ubiquitous. Today’s ceasefire rests in large part on a tremendously disaggregate series of around 200 bilateral agreements, mostly between Sunni Sons of Iraq (SOI) groups and the U.S. military. This creates a wide array of opportunities for individual SOI leaders to see what they can get away with in stretching the terms of their agreements, or for innocent errors to be misinterpreted as hostile acts, or for government crackdowns on miscreants to be interpreted by others as the beginning of a broader campaign of sectarian repression, or for an opportunistic government to exploit divisions among its opponents to try to crush partisan rivals by force. Any such event could give rise to violence which could become catalytic and create an escalatory spiral if not responded to promptly and even-handedly by a disinterested party. Iraq’s provincial and national elections are opportunities for progress, but they are also potential flashpoints for violence if the losers fail to accept their defeat or if perceptions of vote-rigging or intimidation spread. Kirkuk poses a whole series of risks in the form of unresolved conflicts of interest between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomen. The return of potentially millions of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons involves a tremendous risk of instability as mostly-Sunni dispossessed return to homes and properties now destroyed or occupied by mostly-Shiite squatters and find little or no government capacity to adjudicate their claims, make good their loss, or even house, feed, or care for them. “Crises of rising expectations” in which early progress in economic or political development create demands for faster improvement than immature governments can meet are common in recovering societies, and can easily lead to frustration even where there is progress in service delivery if that progress is too slow; service delivery in Iraq has never been very impressive, and could easily fall short of the expectations of an impatient public.

Some of these flashpoints, such as Kirkuk, could lead to open warfare at unpredictable times or places should Kurdish Pesh Merga militia, for example, clash with government forces seeking to enforce edicts rejected by Kurds. Many others, however, would be likelier to take a subtler turn in which alienated groups quietly reopen the door to bomb making cells and covert insurgents, enabling al Qaeda in Iraq, for example, to return to parts of central and western Iraq from which it is now effectively banished, or enabling Jaish al Mahdi elements to operate once more under Shiite protection in the

²⁶ See references in note 12 above.

south. Even subtle, covert returns to violence, however, could quickly put Iraq back on a slippery – and steep – slope back to intense civil warfare as victims retaliate and fears return. Such a process is exactly how Iraq descended into intense civil war the first time around in 2004-6. The reestablishment of trust after civil warfare is a slow and fragile process; it is much easier to destroy than to restore once lost. If such a process is allowed to proceed very far unchecked it can place Iraq on a trajectory from which it would be very hard to recover, and this process could begin almost any time, and certainly very soon if U.S. forces were not in a position to respond while in its early stages.

Either Iraq or Afghanistan could thus clearly get worse in the absence of sufficient U.S. troops. But whereas we can probably recover from a degree of continued decline in Afghanistan, a failure to respond quickly to catalytic violence in Iraq could put the country on a trajectory from which recovery at this point would be very difficult. To an important degree, Iraq – though less violent than Afghanistan today – is thus probably more volatile.

Assessment

There are thus risks on all sides in shifting forces from Iraq to Afghanistan; no policy is without danger. On balance, however, the odds are that we can afford to wait in Afghanistan, whereas we may not be able to afford the consequences for U.S. interests if we withdraw too rapidly from Iraq.

How rapidly is too rapidly for Iraq, and how long must we wait for reinforcement in Afghanistan? Modest reductions in Iraq and reinforcements for Afghanistan are already ongoing, and can probably be tolerated without destabilizing effects for Iraq. Withdrawals much below the 10-12 brigade range in Iraq, however, should ideally await the aftermath of next year's national elections. As noted above, an analogy to the Balkans would suggest a safe withdrawal rate of something roughly on the order of 50 percent of the initial force over about four years from the time of ceasefire. Such a drawdown trajectory would make possible substantial reinforcements beyond the scale of those already announced for arrival in Afghanistan over the course of 2010 and 2011. Again, such plans are contingent on Iraqi approval for a slower withdrawal than the Status of Forces Agreement now foresees; this approval may not be forthcoming, in which case faster drawdowns will be required. But while this would be necessary under such conditions, it would not be conducive to stability. On balance, slower is thus better if it can be negotiated.