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Overcoming Inertia

Why It's Time to End the War in Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in Afghanistan has become America's longest war not because U.S. security interests necessitate it, nor because the battlefield realities are insurmountable, but because of inertia. Policymakers have shied away from hard truths, fallen victim to specious cognitive biases, and allowed the mission to continue without clear intentions or realistic objectives.

Although the American people are substantially insulated from the sacrifices incurred by this distant war, the reality is that the United States can't win against the Taliban at a remotely acceptable cost. Almost two decades in, the insurgency is as strong as ever, and the U.S.-backed Kabul regime is weak and mired in corruption. And while official assessments of the conflict have long acknowledged it as a stalemate, top military leaders have consistently misled the public and advised elected civilians to devote greater resources to achieve victory.

In refusing to end the war, policymakers have

succumbed to the sunk cost fallacy, believing that redoubling efforts would make good on spent resources and ensure that costs already borne were not expended in vain. They also have entertained the spurious notion that withdrawing from a lost war would harm America's credibility. But the most pervasive myth that has prevented policymakers from ending the war is that a victorious Taliban would provide a haven for transnational terrorist groups to launch attacks against the United States. Not only does this exaggerate the terrorism threat, but it ignores the Taliban's evident disinterest in once again making Afghanistan a home base for international jihadists.

There has been progress on negotiations, and a full political settlement built around a cease-fire and a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan is within reach—but only if policymakers are willing to make significant concessions to the Taliban and to dispense with erroneous rationales for continuing the fight.

“The United States can’t win against the Taliban at a remotely acceptable cost.”

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, President Barack Obama told an interviewer:

It is very easy to imagine a situation in which, in the absence of a clear strategy, we ended up staying in Afghanistan for another five years, another eight years, another 10 years. And we would do it not with clear intentions but rather just out of an inertia. Or an unwillingness to ask tough questions.¹

In the subsequent decade, the war in Afghanistan has been notable principally for the inertia Obama was concerned about. NATO allies have gradually faded away as the long war has become ever longer, leaving the United States to determine the end of the conflict on its own.

America, too, could leave or pull back. In previous conflicts, when the strategic rationale had gone stale or when the costs exceeded the expected benefits, the United States withdrew its forces from active hostilities, as it did in Somalia in 1993 and in Lebanon in 1983. And although the Vietnam War went on far too long, the United States withdrew from that stalemate in 1973. In each of these cases, withdrawal was the wise choice. But the United States seems to think it owns the war in Afghanistan. Consequently, the “tough questions” that are either ignored or answered with knee-jerk, unexamined responses include: Why are we still there, and should we still be there?

In the words of Lord Salisbury: “Nothing is more fatal to a wise strategy than clinging to the carcasses of dead policies.”² This paper first sets out a group of propositions relating to some of the kinds of tough questions Obama suggested should be asked. In the process, it assesses why the United States has continued for so long to pursue its dead policies in Afghanistan. With these considerations in mind, it then lays out a plausible negotiation strategy for ending the war and for withdrawing American troops. The strategy is based in part on the experience with the U.S. war in Vietnam.

10 POLICY PROPOSITIONS

In the quest for Obama’s clear strategy, we offer 10 propositions to scrutinize the justifications for the war and to clarify the stakes.

1. The United States Can’t Win against the Taliban at a Remotely Acceptable Cost

The proposition that the United States can’t win in Afghanistan has long been appreciated, even at official levels. Six months before President Trump announced in August 2017 that he would send additional troops to Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, then commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that “the current security situation in Afghanistan [is] a stalemate.”³ Five months later, Laurel Miller, who was acting special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan until June 2017, said in an interview, “I don’t think there is any serious analyst of the situation in Afghanistan who believes that the war is winnable.”⁴ A year after that, Lisa Curtis, deputy assistant to the president and senior director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council, told an audience at the U.S. Institute of Peace that “no one believes that there is a military solution to this conflict.”⁵

The Trump administration’s policy response of increasing troop levels in Afghanistan and leaving the strategy essentially unchanged fits a pattern going back to the George W. Bush administration. In his January 2008 State of the Union address, President Bush announced a troop surge in Afghanistan, sending an additional 3,200 marines, along with tens of billions of additional taxpayer dollars, to “fight the terrorists and train the Afghan Army and police.”⁶ Progress proved elusive, however, and later that year a classified National Intelligence Estimate assessed the situation in Afghanistan to be “bleak,” noting that “the Afghan government has failed to consistently deliver services in rural areas,” that the Taliban and other insurgent groups were beginning to fill the void, and that “the Taliban have effectively manipulated the grievances of disgruntled, disenfranchised

tribes.” It further maintained that even if the Afghan army and police could be trained into an effective force of several hundred thousand, that improbable development would still be “insufficient if Pakistan remains a safe haven for insurgents.”⁷

In 2009, the Obama administration produced yet another comprehensive internal review of the war that, according to Obama’s deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes, concluded the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan “couldn’t succeed.”⁸ By 2010, briefers were pointing out to top generals that no counterinsurgency on record had succeeded when the insurgents had access to a deep cross-border sanctuary. They did add, however, that one could hope the situation in Afghanistan would prove to be an exception.⁹

But Obama had campaigned on recommitting to the war in Afghanistan. Citing the need to “keep the pressure on al Qaeda” and for “a military strategy that will break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity,” he increased troops by nearly 70,000,¹⁰ reaching a total of about 100,000 by 2011. In 2016, Obama warned that “the security situation in Afghanistan remains precarious” while acknowledging that the “Taliban remains a threat” and had even “gained ground in some cases.”¹¹ He then passed the buck to Trump, leaving roughly 8,400 American troops in Afghanistan without a clear mission or a resolution to the conflict.

A 2019 report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction proves a continuation on a theme going back to the earliest years of the war. Despite 18 years of trying to quell the Taliban insurgency and to build an independent and competent Afghan government, army, and police force, “Afghanistan remains one of the world’s poorest and most dangerous countries,” with the security forces still “not able to protect the population from insurgents in large parts of the country.”¹²

History demonstrates that indigenous armed groups tend to be more committed to their country than foreign military occupiers. Afghans in particular have a long history of

resisting intruders, ousting the British twice in the 19th century and once in the 20th century and pushing out the Soviets at the end of the 1980s. Afghanistan’s landlocked geography, mountainous terrain, and porous borders complicate attempts at military domination from the outside while giving an advantage to guerilla insurgents.

Military occupations fail far more often than they succeed even when active armed resistance is absent.¹³ Foreign-imposed regime change succeeds only in the rarest circumstances and often only in the short term; over the long term, it is more likely to lay the groundwork for future civil war than to stabilize or democratize, particularly so in an underdeveloped tribal society such as Afghanistan.¹⁴

Graeme Smith, a Canadian journalist who was stationed in Afghanistan, suggests that the counterinsurgency theory applied there has been, to put it mildly, “flawed.” The essential notion was that American soldiers, not knowing either the culture or the language and on a one-year tour of duty, “could walk into the world’s most conservative villages, make friends, hunt their enemies, and build a better society.” But “none of that,” he concludes, “proved successful.”¹⁵ Instead, the Taliban was finding that the notion of attacking foreign invaders regularly rallied tribesmen to their cause.¹⁶

Even in the early years, the war scarcely went smoothly, and things got much worse.¹⁷ In the wake of the successful 2001 U.S. invasion, an international coalition and anti-Taliban Afghan groups established a new government, many Afghans returned to their tortured country, and many countries sent aid and assistance. The coalition managed to provide a fair amount of security, particularly in the capital, Kabul, but much of the country continued to be run by, or plagued by, entrepreneurial warlords who were following traditional modes of conduct.

The Bush administration worked closely with bands of warlords and strongmen that opposed the Taliban but were notorious among the Afghan people as violent and corrupt thugs.

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With continued U.S. backing after the fall of the Taliban, this group eventually came to populate the new Afghan government. It should be little wonder, then, that the Kabul regime fell short of the functioning democratic state envisioned. Washington also erroneously conflated the Taliban and al Qaeda while refusing, sometimes over the wishes of its clients in Kabul, to allow moderate or defected members of the Taliban to join the government.¹⁸

Forced by the invasion into exile in Pakistan, the Taliban gradually regrouped, and by 2006 it had reignited a civil war in Afghanistan. The group soon controlled substantial areas in the south that were mostly inhabited by ethnic Pashtuns. Its operators were essentially free to come and go from base areas in the Pashtun section of neighboring Pakistan. The long, remote international border simply can't be closed.¹⁹ Moreover, Pakistan was inevitably drawn into the fight. The United States has provided Pakistan with more than \$34 billion in economic and security assistance since 2002.²⁰ However, most Pakistanis—74 percent in 2012—view the United States as an enemy.²¹

Over the years, corruption has increased in Afghanistan. In one index on corruption, the country ranked 172 on a list of 180 countries.²² The current vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum, has been “accused, along with nine of his top security officials and bodyguards, of kidnapping, torturing and raping a political rival, Ahmad Ishchi, who was then in his early 60s.” Although seven of Dostum's bodyguards have been sentenced to years in prison for the crime, Dostum and his top aides have escaped prosecution.²³ A government study in 2012 estimated that of the almost \$100 billion in reconstruction aid that had been doled out by then, 85 percent had been siphoned off (including by American contractors) before it could reach its intended recipients.²⁴ In 2010, “Afghan soldiers died of starvation at the National Military Hospital because pervasive bribery left the facility stripped of supplies.”²⁵

There also have been major training failures. After seven years of buildup, some 200,000 Afghans were under arms, but only

one battalion of 1,000 was deemed capable of carrying out operations independently.²⁶ And by 2016, top American commanders were noting that, after a decade and a half of training by the United States at enormous cost, the Afghan army was still not ready, in part because it still lacked effective leaders. To set things right, they said, would require the United States to keep working at it for, variously, several more years, decades, or generations.²⁷

The Taliban now holds more territory than at any point since 2001, and the regime in Kabul ranks as one of the worst in the world on corruption and respect for human rights.²⁸ The Department of Defense estimated Afghanistan's security funding requirement to be about \$6.5 billion for fiscal year 2019, of which the Afghan government pledged to cover only \$500 million. According to Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI), ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Afghan security forces “would disintegrate” without U.S. economic and military backing.²⁹

As it's gained and held land, particularly in the south of the country, the Taliban has set about trying to prove, with considerable success, that it can govern with more effectiveness and less corruption than the U.S.-supported entity in Kabul.³⁰

It is common to see the cause or initial impetus of the Afghanistan fiasco in the early decision of the Bush administration to divert the focus of policy from Afghanistan to Iraq. But, as analysts Michael Mandelbaum and Steve Coll suggest, the notion of successfully using social engineering in Afghanistan was flawed from the start.³¹ In particular, it seems likely that the Taliban revival would have happened and proceeded apace whether Americans were there in greater numbers or not: the development was essentially unstoppable.

In Vietnam, the United States had not been able to break the will of the communists even though it delivered horrific punishment that, by any reasonable historical standard, should have overwhelmed enemy resistance.³² In contrast, in Afghanistan, the Taliban only needs to maintain a comparatively low level of violence.

They can hit and run, retire to Pakistan for refreshment, and then come back to inflict more damage. If they can't be cut off, they can likely continue the effort forever, or until the hated foreign invader gets sufficiently tired of the contest and goes away—whichever comes first. As in Vietnam, the key issue is one of patience and will. The Taliban has nowhere else to go; the Americans do.

The American military failure in Afghanistan is hardly unique. Indeed, for all the very considerable expense, the military has won no wars since World War II—especially if victory is defined as achieving an objective at an acceptable cost—except against enemy forces that essentially didn't exist. The American military triumphed in comic opera wars over tiny forces in Grenada and over scarcely organized thuggish ones in Panama and Kosovo. And the Iraqis hardly presented much of a challenge in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. More recently, there has been a successful war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) insurgent group, an opponent that proved to be spectacularly self-destructive.³³ However, the principal American contribution has been in air support; others have done the heavy lifting. There are also a few wars in which it could probably be said that the United States was ahead at the end of the first, second, or third quarter—Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. But the outcomes of these—as seen in Afghanistan in full measure—were certainly less than stellar: exhausted stalemate, effective defeat, hasty withdrawal, and extended misery.

2. The U.S. Military Must Provide Honest Assessments of the War

The war has persisted despite the telltale signs of mission failure in part because of the culture in the Department of Defense and how it interacts with politics at the national level. In their public portrayal of the war, military leaders have rather persistently depicted a rosier picture than the facts warranted.³⁴ In 2014, Gen. John Campbell told National Public Radio that the good news of progress in Afghanistan

“sometimes [doesn't] make the media,” that “the Afghan security forces [are] really stepping up their game,” and that he was “excited about the future here.”³⁵ Such optimistic pronouncements from the military are common: it was in 2013 that Gen. Joseph Dunford talked about “the inevitability of our success.” In 2011, David Petraeus said that American forces had “reversed the momentum of the Taliban.” In 2010, Gen. Stanley McChrystal predicted that “success is still achievable.”³⁶ In 2008, Gen. David McKiernan insisted that “we are not losing in Afghanistan.”³⁷

Overly optimistic portrayals are partly a result of institutional habits and a view about civil-military relations that calls for focusing on tactical and operational facts on the ground while leaving broader strategic and political assessments of the war to elected leaders. Some military leaders publicly misrepresented the course of the war to avoid the hit to troop morale they expected would result from more honest and critical presentations.³⁸ Others felt strongly that negotiations with the Taliban should only occur from a “position of strength,” which they believed was always just around the corner.³⁹ But sometimes the deception was more flagrant: media reports revealed in 2011 that commanders tasked with briefing congressional delegations in Afghanistan deliberately misled members of Congress about the progress of the war.⁴⁰

After his second deployment to Afghanistan, Army Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis (now retired) spoke out publicly against this kind of distortion. He wrote two reports, one classified and one unclassified, and briefed members of Congress on his conclusions.⁴¹ “Senior ranking U.S. military leaders have so distorted the truth when communicating with the U.S. Congress and American people in regards to conditions on the ground in Afghanistan that the truth has become unrecognizable,” he wrote, adding that “if the public had access to these classified reports they would see the dramatic gulf between what is often said in public by our senior leaders and what is actually true behind the scenes.”⁴²

Elected officials are often deferential to

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military leaders and national security advisers. This is partly due to the superior subject area expertise of military and national security professionals, but it is also because going against such advice can be politically costly.

When Obama entered office in 2009, the senior military leadership strongly favored a troop surge in Afghanistan. According to Vali Nasr, at the time a senior adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Department of State, the White House was “ever afraid that the young Democratic President would be seen as ‘soft’ if he went against the military’s recommendations.⁴³ Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security adviser, says that the administration’s Afghanistan policy review was “shaped by leaks from the military designed to box Obama into sending more troops into Afghanistan.”⁴⁴ One member of Obama’s National Security Council, a colonel who was also an Iraq war veteran, told the president that, if he were to “defy [his] military chain,” the top brass may resign in protest.⁴⁵ “No Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it,” advised Leon Panetta, then CIA director.⁴⁶ Obama’s secretary of defense, Robert Gates, described the troop surge recommendations as “the classic Henry Kissinger model . . . You have three options, two of which are ridiculous, so you accept the one in the middle.”⁴⁷ Obama expressed frustration at this. In the end, advisers presented him with four options, two of which were indistinguishable. “So what’s my option?” Obama asked. “You have essentially given me one option.”⁴⁸ He complained to journalist Bob Woodward that the military was “really cooking the thing in the direction that they wanted . . . They are not going to give me a choice.”⁴⁹

Trump faced similar pressure to recommit to the war in Afghanistan. The advice Trump received from his military and national security advisers was overwhelmingly supportive of continuing the mission—and of adding another 4,000 troops. According to Woodward’s account, Trump did push back at first, exploding:

You guys have created this situation. It’s been a disaster. You’re the architects of

this mess in Afghanistan. You created these problems. You’re smart guys, but I have to tell you, you’re part of the problem. And you haven’t been able to fix it, and you’re making it worse.

Moreover, he added, “I want to get out, and you’re telling me the answer is to get deeper in.”⁵⁰ But in the end, Trump succumbed to the military request.

The U.S. military has a strong parochial interest in avoiding the perception that the war in Afghanistan has been lost and therefore in ensuring it receives additional resources to continue fighting in it. But the problem extends beyond the Department of Defense. The professional foreign policy class in Washington, concentrated in the various national security agencies of the executive branch, is subject to a powerful bias in favor of action over inaction and troop surges over withdrawal.⁵¹ As a result, the advice presidents receive from this expert community tends to reflect these biases. But that expert consensus seems to exist only in the White House’s Situation Room and is frequently at odds with official assessments of the war, with the views of many specialists in academia, and with the perspective of the general public.⁵²

3. A Taliban Victory Would Not Present a Serious Terrorism Threat to the United States

By far the most common justification for remaining in Afghanistan is the safe-haven myth: the fear that if the Taliban take over the country, they would let al Qaeda reestablish a presence there, leaving the terrorist organization to once again plot attacks on the United States. That is, it is effectively contended that although 9/11 was substantially plotted in Hamburg, Germany, just about the only reason further attacks haven’t taken place is because al Qaeda needs a bigger territorial base of operations and that that base must be in Afghanistan.⁵³

Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who worked on Afghanistan policy under Obama as special envoy to South Asia, explained in

2009 that “the fundamental difference between Afghanistan and Vietnam is 9/11. The Vietcong and the North Vietnamese never posed a threat to the United States homeland. The [perpetrators] of 9/11 who were in that area still do and are still planning. That is why we’re in the region with troops.” If the Taliban returned to control in Afghanistan, Holbrooke maintained that “without any shadow of a doubt, al Qaeda would move back into Afghanistan, set up a larger presence, recruit more people and pursue its objectives against the United States even more aggressively.” That, he insisted, is “the only justification for what we’re doing.”⁵⁴

Virtually all promoters of the war stress this notion. Obama applied it in 2009.⁵⁵ And, in 2017, Petraeus, a retired general who had commanded American forces in Afghanistan, ardently contended in an article written with the Brookings Institution’s Michael O’Hanlon, that:

America’s leaders should not lose sight of why the U.S. went to, and has stayed in, Afghanistan: It is in our national interest to ensure that country is not once again a sanctuary for transnational extremists, as it was when the 9/11 attacks were planned there. We have been accomplishing that mission since the intervention began in October 2001. Although al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan is diminished, it could rebound if given the opportunity. Islamic State could expand its newfound Afghan foothold as well.⁵⁶

Trump reflected that thinking when he authorized an increase of troops to Afghanistan in 2017. His “original instinct,” he noted, was “to pull out,” but, as noted earlier, he had been persuaded by the military (whose record on predicting events in Afghanistan has been rather miserable) to believe that “the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable.” Noting that “the worst terrorist attack in our history, was planned

and directed from Afghanistan because that country was ruled by a government that gave comfort and shelter to terrorists,” Trump was sure that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists . . . would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11th.”⁵⁷ On one occasion when Trump expressed skepticism about the need to deploy additional forces, his then secretary of defense, James Mattis, reportedly told him, “Unfortunately, sir, you have no choice,” adding that it was imperative in order “to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square.”⁵⁸ When Trump was subsequently asked, “Can you explain why 17 years later we’re still there?” he replied: “We’re there because virtually every expert that I have and speak to say [sic] if we don’t go there, they’re going to be fighting over here. And I’ve heard it over and over again.”⁵⁹

This key justification for staying in Afghanistan—indeed, the *only* one, according to Holbrooke—has gone almost entirely unexamined. It fails in several ways.⁶⁰

First, it is unlikely that a triumphal Taliban would invite al Qaeda back because its relationship with the terrorist group has been strained from the start. In 1996, Osama bin Laden, an exile from Saudi Arabia and Sudan, showed up in Afghanistan with his entourage. As Lawrence Wright makes clear in his prize-winning book *The Looming Tower*, the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda was often very uncomfortable. Although quite willing to extend hospitality to their well-heeled visitor, the Taliban insisted on guarantees that bin Laden refrain from issuing incendiary messages and from engaging in terrorist activities while in the country. Bin Laden repeatedly agreed but also frequently broke his pledge.⁶¹

At times, the Taliban had their troublesome “guest” under house arrest, and veteran correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave said he was “stunned by the hostility” that Mullah Mohammad Omar, the top Taliban leader, expressed for bin Laden during an interview.⁶² A senior Taliban official recalls that bin Laden was “a pain in the backside.”⁶³ As Vahid Brown, of the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S.

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Military Academy at West Point, New York, puts it, relations were “deeply contentious, and threatened by mutual distrust and divergent ambitions.”⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Riyadh tried for years to get the Saudi renegade extradited, and it appears to have been close to success in 1998. However, the deal fell through after the Americans bombed Afghanistan in response to two al Qaeda attacks on a pair of U.S. embassies in Africa in August 1998.⁶⁵

Bin Laden’s 9/11 ploy not only shattered the agreement but also brought armed destruction on his hosts.⁶⁶ The last thing the Taliban would want, should it take over Afghanistan, is an active terrorist group continually drawing fire from the outside. As Richard Barrett, the United Nation’s former Taliban and al Qaeda monitor, put it in 2009, if the Taliban regain power, “they don’t want al Qaeda hanging around.”⁶⁷ Moreover, unlike al Qaeda, the Taliban has a very localized perspective. They have never been interested in conducting international terrorism. They are primarily concerned with governing Afghanistan as they see fit free from outside interference.

The main Taliban fighters in Afghanistan are quick to point out that they are running their own war, and it seems clear that al Qaeda plays only a limited role in their efforts. “No foreign fighter can serve as a Taliban commander,” insisted one Taliban leader in 2007.⁶⁸ And, in 2010, the American commander of U.S. detention centers in Afghanistan said that fewer than 6 percent of his prisoners came from outside the country and that most were from Pakistan: “This is a very local fight,” he observed.⁶⁹ The then CIA chief Panetta estimated in 2010 that there were “maybe 60 to 100, maybe less” al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan.⁷⁰

An extensive 2008 study of the Taliban operation in Afghanistan included al Qaeda as part of the coalition but mentioned it only very occasionally when discussing the details of the insurgency.⁷¹ And there have long been reports that the main Taliban leaders are very hostile to the foreign militants and have explicitly distanced themselves from al Qaeda.⁷² As for the Islamic State’s branch in

Afghanistan, the Taliban has actively fought them on the battlefield almost uninterruptedly for years, making a Taliban-sponsored safe haven for that group unlikely.⁷³

Second, it is not at all clear that al Qaeda would even want to return to ravaged, impoverished, insecure, and factionalized Afghanistan even if it were invited. It would have to uproot itself from Pakistan, where it has been operating for more than a decade, and reestablish itself in new, unfamiliar territory. It’s difficult to see how an Afghan haven would be safer than the one al Qaeda occupies now. In fact, Douglas Saunders of Canada’s *Globe and Mail* reports that most allied commanders in Afghanistan whom he had talked with think it “very unlikely” that al Qaeda would establish a base there even if the Taliban were to take over.⁷⁴

Third, if al Qaeda were to return, the United States would still be able to bomb and raid in response to a clear and present threat to U.S. security. Indeed, it might well be in a better position to do so in Afghanistan than in Pakistan. American efforts to go after al Qaeda in Pakistan are hampered by concerns about the sensitivities of the Pakistanis and by the fact that Pakistan can retaliate by cutting off or cramping logistics lines. The constraints on taking potential future military action in an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban are much less formidable. Also, American planners and forces would know the turf better, as they have been occupying the country for nearly two decades. Thus, al Qaeda would be unlikely to find much sanctuary in Afghanistan.

And fourth, the safe-haven argument is based on the ill-founded assumption that the presence of al Qaeda leaders in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in the lead-up to 9/11 was essential for the success of the attacks. In fact, it seems to have had little, if any, operational utility. Al Qaeda operatives planned and coordinated the 9/11 attacks not just in Afghanistan but also in Germany, Malaysia, and the United States. Technological innovation and increasingly widespread access to the internet has

only made instant communication across borders, oceans, and time zones easier in the ensuing years. A territorial haven in remote, landlocked Afghanistan wouldn't be much help to jihadists plotting to attack the West. Terrorist groups seek inconspicuousness, to have no return address against which their enemies can retaliate.⁷⁵

The notion that terrorists need a lot of space and privacy to hatch plots of substantial magnitude in the West has been repeatedly undermined by such tragic terrorist episodes in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015, and Brussels and Istanbul in 2016. None of the attackers in those incidents operated from a safe haven, nor were their plans coordinated by a group within a safe haven. Al Qaeda Central has not really done all that much since it got horribly lucky on 9/11, and the patent inadequacies and incompetence of the group would scarcely be erased by uprooting itself and moving to new foreign turf.⁷⁶ Its problems do not stem from failing to have enough territory in which to operate or plan.

4. Defeat in Afghanistan Would Not Necessarily Destabilize the Region

Some commentators argue a U.S. withdrawal would result in regional destabilization. One justification for continuing the war, in particular, is that a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan would somehow destabilize Pakistan, perhaps leading to terrorists or other militants seizing its atomic arsenal.

Actually, though, Pakistan has essentially been harboring the Taliban and generally enjoys good relations with it—and did before 9/11.⁷⁷ Therefore, a Taliban takeover that brought stability—in the sense of freedom from civil war—to Afghanistan might just as well serve to help stabilize Pakistan.

Other regional players, including Iran, India, China, and Russia, would likely adjust their policies toward Afghanistan following a U.S. withdrawal, in some cases in ways that could benefit American interests. Moscow has recently cultivated a diplomatic relationship with the Taliban, and this seems calculated to

irritate Washington, to expedite negotiations predicated on U.S. withdrawal, and perhaps to hedge against more radical jihadist groups at loggerheads with the Taliban.⁷⁸ China worries that Islamic militant groups in Afghanistan could pose problems in its restive eastern province of Xinjiang, and it also plans to incorporate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative, meaning there is a strong preference for a functioning, stable Afghan government. Beijing has proven perfectly capable of managing its alliance with Pakistan while cooperating with Moscow on security issues in the broader Central Asian region.

A recent report published by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service contends that “most of Afghanistan’s neighbours want to prevent the US from maintaining a long-term military foothold in their backyard” and that there is “some level of regional agreement about the need to prevent the spread of instability” with multiple countries “seeking to facilitate peace negotiations, in part to curb the escalating violence on their doorstep and secure a stake in an eventual political settlement.”⁷⁹ This suggests a confluence of interests among many regional powers and the United States—an opportunity policymakers in Washington should seize upon.

Whatever happens following a U.S. withdrawal, the regional players are likely to increase their investment of energy and resources in Afghanistan in ways that address their somewhat overlapping (albeit occasionally conflicting) interests. In short, Afghanistan would become someone else’s problem.⁸⁰ If that problem were to worsen over time or cause substantial instability beyond Afghanistan’s borders, the country’s neighbors would surely suffer the consequences, and they would deal with them long before the United States must. Widespread regional destabilization is a rather low-probability consequence of withdrawal.

5. Efforts to Reduce Opium Production Are Unnecessarily Complicating and Futile

The heroin trade accounts for an estimated 60 percent of Taliban revenue, roughly

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\$200 million annually.⁸¹ Up to 85 percent of the world’s opium is produced in Afghanistan, and drug traffickers cooperate with the Taliban, providing the group with weapons and cash in exchange for protection of trade routes. In addition to fueling the insurgency, Afghanistan’s opium exports contribute to a slew of problems around the world, such as empowering international drug gangs and increasing rates of addiction.⁸² The Kabul government is the other major beneficiary of the opium trade, and many corrupt Afghan officials have become quite wealthy by helping administer it. “In the district of Garmsir, poppy cultivation not only is tolerated, but is a source of money that the local government depends on,” the *New York Times* reported in 2016. “Officials have imposed a tax on farmers practically identical to the one the Taliban use in places they control.”⁸³

It is widely accepted that the insurgency cannot be defeated so long as the drug trade persists. The United States has spent years and more than \$8 billion trying to quash this critical source of sustenance for the insurgency, with tactics including prohibition, crop eradication, and bombing buildings suspected of being heroin laboratories. However, the effort has failed. Opium production increased by a staggering 87 percent from 2016 to 2017, to 9,000 metric tons—“the most in Afghan history,” according to the Brookings Institution’s Vanda Felbab-Brown.⁸⁴ In 2014, the special inspector for Afghanistan concluded that “by every conceivable metric, we’ve failed. Production and cultivation are up, interdiction and eradication are down, financial support to the insurgency is up, and addiction and abuse are at unprecedented levels in Afghanistan.”⁸⁵

The Taliban relies on the heroin trade out of need, not out of preference or indifference. In a condition of peace, however, they would no longer feel that need. Indeed, in 2000, after about four years of being in power, the Taliban famously imposed an outright ban on all opium cultivation, which reduced the harvest by 94 percent.⁸⁶ The results of that effort are instructive: because farmers in other countries

responded to the continued demand, the street price of heroin both in Europe and the United States did not change.

Outside the context of the counterinsurgency campaign, the drug trade out of Afghanistan does not pose a direct threat to the United States. Trying to eradicate or control opium production throughout the war has been a failure, and seeking to do so following withdrawal would simply continue an exercise in futility.⁸⁷

6. Efforts to Ensure Women’s Rights Are Unlikely to Work

Thanks in part to deliberate efforts of the United States over the course of the war, Afghan women are better off than they were under Taliban rule. Women at least nominally have the right to vote and to equal treatment; they hold prestigious positions in education and law; they work in healthcare and as private-sector entrepreneurs. Women in Afghanistan hold 63 out of 320 parliamentary seats.⁸⁸

Najia Nasim and Megan Corrado, executive director and director of advocacy at the nonprofit advocacy group Women for Afghan Women, criticized Trump’s “concession-filled diplomacy” as dismissive of the rights of Afghan women, who will suffer repression when the U.S. military is no longer there to support the Kabul government and to thwart the Taliban.⁸⁹ Mariam Safi, director of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies in Kabul, and Muqaddesa Yourish, a commissioner on Afghanistan’s Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, similarly warned that withdrawal “will jeopardize for Afghans the future of hard-won gains such as constitutional rights, freedoms of citizens and democratic institutions.”⁹⁰

However, while Afghanistan has progressed on many normative metrics over the course of the nearly two-decade nation-building effort, those gains are quite limited. According to the United Nations, Afghanistan ranks 153rd out of 160 countries for gender equality.⁹¹ In a 2017 index, Afghanistan tied with Syria for the worst place in the world to be a woman.⁹² As the Canadian intelligence study notes, while

“there was no freedom for women in Taliban Afghanistan,” that was also the case “at the end of 2018—after nearly 18 years of international engagement.” The study stresses that “the reality is that Afghanistan was and is a deeply conservative culture governed largely by ancient traditions that are also reflected in their interpretation of Islam and its edicts.”⁹³

Any retreat on women’s rights following a U.S. withdrawal would be heart-rending and tragic. However, advancement, perhaps halting, is more likely to take place in a condition of peace than of war. And if the post-9/11 experience has demonstrated anything, it’s that wars to remake foreign societies into liberal democracies are generally ineffective. In any case, the suggestion that women’s rights are a vital objective in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is hard to square with the countless other places where human rights and democracy are absent or substantially circumscribed. It is not clear why respect for human rights is vital to American interests in Afghanistan but not in Saudi Arabia, for example.

7. Costs Already Borne in Afghanistan Do Not Justify Additional Investments

Proponents of continuing the mission also maintain that the United States must fight the war until it achieves a clear victory because anything less would derogate the steep costs in blood and money that America has already devoted to the mission. In other words, it is argued, sunk costs necessitate continued investment.

Trump exhibited this kind of thinking when he announced his troop surge: “Our nation must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives.”⁹⁴ Similarly, in critiquing Obama’s gradual drawdown of troops from Afghanistan in 2015, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) emphasized sunk costs: “All of us want the war in Afghanistan to be over, but after 14 years of hard-fought gains, the decisions we make now will determine whether our progress will endure and our sacrifices will not have been in vain.”⁹⁵ That same year, former

general Petraeus and Michael O’Hanlon implored Obama to “protect our investment in Afghanistan,” noting that “the investment to date” has been “well over 2,000 American lives and nearly \$1 trillion in expense.”⁹⁶

Particularly in limited counterinsurgency wars, decisionmakers are often more sensitive to potential future losses than equivalent gains. This can produce a greater willingness to take uncertain gambles to avoid total defeat. Loss aversion, as it is called, often manifests in the form of the sunk cost fallacy, in which actors seek to make good on spent resources by redoubling their commitment to ensure that the costs were not expended in vain. Successive last-ditch efforts across three administrations to flood Afghanistan with more troops and resources in the hope that greater effort would enable America to eke out a “win” are consistent with the presence of this fallacy. Unfortunately, this cognitive bias poses as a serious strategic argument as it pushes people to double down and become entrapped into additional net losses.

A decision about where and whether to devote resources should be based on whether the investment will add future value, not on sunk costs. Rational policymakers should be quick to abandon expensive ventures that lack a decent chance of yielding better returns. They should also give greater weight to opportunity costs and thus be more open to exploring alternatives.

8. Policymakers Should Not Be Overly Concerned about “Salient Failures”

“Failure salience,” according to political scientists Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, refers to the “tendency to remember and learn more from perceived negative outcomes than from perceived positive outcomes.”⁹⁷ The Obama administration’s withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011 and the subsequent rise of ISIS became a salient failure frequently cited to discourage withdrawing from Afghanistan. In 2017, Trump was persuaded to stay the course as a result. “As we know, in 2011, America hastily and mistakenly withdrew from Iraq,” Trump

“A decision about where and whether to devote resources should be based on whether the investment will add future value, not on sunk costs.”

“Fear of a loss of credibility has been another major impediment to withdrawal.”

said in his speech announcing the troop surge in Afghanistan. “The vacuum we created by leaving too soon gave safe haven for ISIS to spread, to grow, recruit, and launch attacks. We cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq.”⁹⁸

A more incisive lesson to draw from the rise of ISIS is that prolonged military occupations tend to generate violent resistance movements. ISIS is an outgrowth of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which emerged from the Sunni insurgency that rose up to fight occupying U.S. forces. Its leadership consists of veteran AQI insurgents and former Baathists in the Saddam Hussein regime. It never could have filled the vacuum left by the United States’ withdrawal without the initial spark provided by the invasion. Moreover, any “vacuum” was created far more by staggeringly inept policies of Iraqi politicians and by the unwillingness of the Iraqi army (trained by the United States for \$20 billion) to fight.⁹⁹

Given the state of both U.S. and Iraqi politics, America’s withdrawal was inevitable, and the end of 2011 was as auspicious a time as any to do it. But, negative experiences have a profound impact on the psyche. Drawing a causal connection between the American withdrawal and the emergence of a rapacious terrorist army prone to spectacular atrocities and harboring vast territorial ambitions may serve as a compelling argument for some against withdrawal from Afghanistan, but it is an argument based on a misunderstanding of a separate case with entirely different actors, dynamics, and context.

9. Concerns about Humiliation and about Preserving American Credibility in the Event of a Withdrawal Are Misguided

Fear of a loss of credibility or standing has been another major impediment to withdrawal. As Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, put it earlier this year, an abrupt exit “would cast further doubt on America’s willingness to sustain a leading role in the world.”¹⁰⁰ The real cost of withdrawing from Afghanistan, according to Edward Luce, a

columnist for the *Financial Times*, “is to the US’s global standing.”¹⁰¹ Bing West, military historian and a former Reagan official, contends that it would be “a disaster for the prestige, influence, and self-image of America if Kabul fell in a manner similar to Saigon in 1975.”¹⁰² Even negotiating with the Taliban to eventually bring American troops home, former U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker claims, is tantamount to “negotiating the terms of our surrender.”¹⁰³

These concerns are essentially baseless. To begin with, states tend to assess the credibility of other states’ security commitments based on perceived national interests in discrete situations rather than on extrapolations of policies in different regions and contexts.¹⁰⁴ NATO countries will not interpret a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a signal that Washington is ready to relinquish its security commitment to Europe any more than they did when the U.S. abandoned Vietnam. As for “America’s willingness to sustain a leading role in the world,” polling data strongly suggests that fighting a lost war for almost 20 years is doing more to sap the public’s enthusiasm for overseas ventures than a timely withdrawal ever could.¹⁰⁵ The same goes for so-called standing. The unending quagmire has arguably tarnished America’s international reputation, but it is not clear that this has negatively impacted national security sufficiently to justify a continued occupation amid a simmering civil war at a cost of tens of billions of dollars per year.

The worry Crocker expresses, that negotiating an end to the U.S. war in Afghanistan without a clear victory would be tantamount to a humiliating surrender, is common throughout history. Though the public defense of the Vietnam War emphasized liberating South Vietnam and preventing falling dominos of communist states, by 1965 the then assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, John McNaughton, had concluded that the initial security reasons that had gotten America into Vietnam had become “largely academic” and that the U.S. objective in Vietnam was now to “avoid humiliation.”¹⁰⁶ The tragic parallel to today’s

war in Afghanistan is hard to miss.

Concerns about credibility, prestige, and reputation can often drive states to adopt more aggressive and militarized approaches to foreign affairs.¹⁰⁷ However, there is little evidence that a perceived loss of prestige from overseas failures such as Vietnam and Afghanistan has a tangible impact on the nation's security, except to the extent that it incentivizes political leaders to persist in costly ventures. The University of Washington's Jonathan Mercer calls prestige an "illusion" that has "neither strategic nor intrinsic value."¹⁰⁸

Nor does the United States need to continue the mission because of fears about domestic political blowback. The American public accepted the capture of Saigon by the North Vietnamese in 1975 with remarkable equanimity in part because of the popularity of U.S. withdrawal and a rather sanguine view of the threat a Vietcong victory posed to their lives and livelihood.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, when the United States abruptly withdrew from Lebanon in 1983, and from Somalia in 1993, there seemed to be no lasting hit to America's influence or self-image. Nor did that happen when armed intervention in Libya in 2011 led to a calamitous civil war. All four debacles generated little political problem for the people who had presided over them.

10. The Most Compelling, and Perhaps Only, Reason to Stay in Afghanistan Is to Avoid a Humanitarian Catastrophe

The strongest argument for continuing the forever war in Afghanistan is primarily humanitarian: as after the fall of the communist regime, the country could descend into another catastrophic civil war. A low-intensity conflict followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but after Soviet aid to its clients in Kabul dried up in December 1991, the regime collapsed, insurgents stormed the capital, and Afghanistan descended into a brutal conflict that eventually brought the Taliban to power in 1996. Combatants, disciplined when confronting the Soviet invaders, disintegrated into dozens of squabbling and corrupt warlord

and bandit gangs, plundering the population they had once defended. According to Ahmed Rashid, they "abused the population at will, kidnapping young girls and boys for their sexual pleasure, robbing merchants in the bazaars and fighting and brawling in the streets." They "seized homes and farms, threw out their occupants and handed them over to their supporters," and they "sold off everything to Pakistani traders to make money, stripping down telephone wires and poles, cutting trees, selling off factories, machinery and even road rollers to scrap merchants."¹¹⁰

A similar fate could befall Afghanistan following U.S. withdrawal. Of particular concern is that in recent years, a branch of ISIS called Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has established a modest presence in Afghanistan. However, it has suffered repeated tactical failures, as both the Taliban and the United States have actively battled the group and disrupted its operations. IS-K has little to no support from the local population and has been further weakened by the rollback and defeat of the Islamic State's "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria.¹¹¹ Suggestions that the group would rise and ultimately pose a grave threat to the United States following a withdrawal of U.S. forces are dubious.

Other sources of fracturing following a withdrawal of American troops are certainly imaginable, but it should be remembered that even without Soviet troops, the regime the USSR set up in Kabul managed to survive for years as long as financial assistance was provided. Moreover, the risk of internal instability must be weighed against the costs and risks inherent in an indefinite war that seems to cause at least as many national security problems as it allegedly staves off.

In addition, the humanitarian argument for continuing the occupation in Afghanistan confuses the security mission with the expansive ambitions adopted after the invasion. Although the Bush administration was well known for a neoconservative orientation that emphasized democracy promotion through regime-change wars, it began (or sold) the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on national

“The risk of internal instability must be weighed against the costs and risks inherent in an indefinite war.”

“A negotiated settlement offers a better safeguard against a humanitarian catastrophe than simply continuing the occupation.”

security grounds and mostly adopted the normative missions about democracy and the rule of law later.¹¹² Leaders engaging in limited wars without decisive victories sometimes respond to that ambiguity by expanding their objectives. As Betty Glad and Philipp Rosenberg explain, “Once a belligerent has invested significant nonrecoverable resources in its attempt to win its original goal, the nature of its goals is apt to change.”¹¹³

And although the humanitarian situation could deteriorate following a U.S. withdrawal, it is by no means adequate under current American occupation. At present, an estimated 2 million children in Afghanistan suffer from acute malnutrition. The Taliban, as insurgents against the U.S. occupation, exact a very heavy humanitarian toll on the country and frequently kill and abuse the civilian population. And yet, 2019 marked the first year since the United Nations began documenting civilian casualties that U.S. and Afghan government forces killed more Afghan civilians than the Taliban and other insurgent groups.¹¹⁴

Ending the war through a negotiated settlement, therefore, offers a better safeguard against a humanitarian catastrophe than simply continuing the occupation. But it is not a risk-free solution.

NEGOTIATING A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT AND WITHDRAWING U.S. FORCES

Over the years, there have been sporadic efforts to find a negotiated solution to the war in Afghanistan.¹¹⁵ In his 2017 speech announcing an increase of a few thousand American troops to the war in Afghanistan, Trump laid out what he said was a plan for victory. But he then defined “victory” as something more akin to stalemate: preventing the Taliban from taking over and then perhaps negotiating.¹¹⁶

And in fact, the Trump administration has been quietly pursuing direct talks with the Taliban, with promising, if halting, results so far. The times may be propitious. The Taliban has set up what seems to be a strong

negotiating team led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who has been described as skilled and pragmatic.¹¹⁷ He had sought a peace deal a decade ago but was arrested by the security establishment in Pakistan, which at the time opposed negotiations.¹¹⁸ The fact that he and others have now been released, due in part to pressure by the American negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, is taken to be a sign that Pakistan is now in favor of negotiations, and the fact that he has been appointed their lead negotiator suggests that the Taliban is as well.¹¹⁹

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, lessons for a deal might be applied from the January 1973 agreement between the United States and the Communist Vietnamese that ended U.S. involvement. The Taliban, while open to talks, wants only to negotiate with the United States, not with what they call the “slave” regime in Kabul.¹²⁰ That is a condition similar to the one in Vietnam in which the United States pushed ahead with the 1973 agreement largely without substantial participation by the South Vietnamese regime. But as Khalilzad seems to have already accepted, for talks to move forward the United States must accept this condition and negotiate alone, at least at the start.

The Vietnam agreement contained several elements that might be applied to the present, essentially stalemated, situation in Afghanistan. In this, Afghan forces are incapable of being able to seize, hold, and then coherently govern areas controlled by the Taliban while Taliban members recognize that a takeover of government strongholds, in particular the heavily populated capital area of Kabul, is likely to be extremely difficult.¹²¹

These elements would be built around establishing an initial cease-fire. Thus, for a time there would be a rather formal partition between Taliban-held areas and Kabul-held areas. Partition has been the effective condition for some time—indeed, it is how the country has traditionally been organized. There would be competition of governance in the two areas, but the war, a decades-long disaster for all involved, would be ended or at least substantially tempered.

Over time, the main Afghan forces might develop a degree of cooperation and coordination. A great deal has changed since the American invasion, and a wired-in generation has developed, particularly in Kabul. And at least some in the Taliban realize that a full return to the Islamic Emirate that existed there before the invasion is no longer possible.¹²²

According to the Canadian report, Taliban interlocutors “rarely if ever” still insist on “a settlement that restores an emirate form of government.” The leadership is “increasingly willing to state that they can accept some form of elected republic—often noting, paradoxically, that the main problem with elections now is the corrupt and chaotic way in which the Afghan government has administered them.”¹²³ In fact, even if the Taliban were to fully take over, some of the gains of the long American occupation might well be retained. The Taliban have indicated, for example, that they would agree to permit women’s education, which they previously denied.¹²⁴

A withdrawal of American military forces from the country, as in Vietnam, would also have to be a primary part of any negotiated deal; although, as in Vietnam, the United States could continue to supply the current regime using civilians and perhaps contractors to facilitate the process. There could also be an exchange of prisoners, including some Taliban members still held in Guantanamo.¹²⁵

In addition, the United States might require a pledge from the Taliban that it will not allow its territory to be used by international terror groups. They reportedly have been willing to guarantee that they would not provide a safe haven for international terrorism, including al Qaeda, and over the years, as noted earlier, they have generally maintained that their concerns are local, not international.¹²⁶ Some in the Taliban have been more resistant to the U.S. demand that they explicitly repudiate al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is scarcely a threat anymore, and the American demand for a wholesale denunciation seems to be something required simply for domestic purposes. Washington could therefore drop this

condition—it is essentially meaningless.

With an American military withdrawal, the Taliban would lose its chief recruiting and motivating device, and under a cease-fire, Afghans could set about trying to work out their own future. An agreement with the Taliban would not necessarily bring the end of all fighting because there are spinoff and independent insurgent elements throughout the country as well as independent areas controlled by warlords—though it is at least conceivable that some of these could be brought into the agreement. As noted, the Taliban for years has been fighting against ISIS militants in Afghanistan as well as against other fringe offshoots. That said, 95 percent of violent incidents in Afghanistan involve fighting between pro-Kabul forces and the Taliban, which suggests these other militant groups “are a negligible factor on the battlefield.”¹²⁷ With an agreement, the Taliban would likely continue to oppose these groups to the degree necessary, and they might even be willing to accept assistance from the United States (and/or regional powers) to do so.

Such a settlement might prove to be temporary. That is what happened in Vietnam when, after an interval of two years, communists launched an offensive and the U.S.-supplied South Vietnam military and government folded in 55 days as the United States wrung its hands from afar and then promptly, and with remarkably little obvious regret, moved on to other concerns. Later, the United States and the communist regime in now-unified Vietnam reconciled, commiserating with each other over their mutual concern about China.

However, the nightmare scenario is not a Taliban takeover or a further splintering of the country, but a descent into widespread and murderous civil war. There are no guarantees, but working against this outcome is the bone-deep exhaustion of the Afghan population with civil war, as seen in the overwhelming popularity of a short cease-fire between Taliban and government forces in June 2018 in which people in all areas and walks of life implored combatants on all sides to stop the fighting.¹²⁸ The Afghan people have endured

“At least some in the Taliban realize that a full return to the Islamic Emirate is no longer possible.”

“A Taliban victory does not present a serious security concern to the United States.”

40 years of war and are desperate for relief.¹²⁹

The fact is that to satisfy the pressing U.S. interest to end the war in Afghanistan, policymakers will have to make difficult and politically sensitive concessions. But if the nightmare scenario can be avoided, none of those accommodations exceed the costs of waging a perpetual, stalemated conflict in the country. The national security threats emanating from Afghanistan have been considerably exaggerated, and even the worst-case scenarios present only limited, manageable hazards to American interests that are not effectively mitigated by continuing the war or by stubbornly adhering to maximalist, and fanciful, definitions of victory.

CONCLUSION

The United States cannot win the war in Afghanistan on the terms stipulated by the three presidents who have waged it, at least not at an acceptable cost. Pretending that the Taliban can be defeated and that a constitutionally bounded, democratic, and competent Kabul-based government can be left in

its place is unrealistic. A Taliban victory might occur after an American military withdrawal, but this does not present a serious security concern to the United States. Particularly, the threat of a terrorist safe haven is minimal and based mostly on the myth that territorial harbors provide great utility in conducting transnational terrorist attacks. Moreover, fears of regional disintegration and destabilization are misplaced, as are concerns about a loss of credibility: there is good reason to expect stability to emerge following a negotiated withdrawal, and the war itself seems to inflict greater damage to America's image than defeat likely would. Narrower elements of the mission, including quelling the opium trade and securing a lasting human rights regime, have substantially proven to be futile over almost two decades of effort and are not objectives that the U.S. military, a tool for protecting the country from threats overseas, is well suited to addressing.

A negotiated settlement, with a formal cease-fire and a U.S. military withdrawal at the center of it, is the most reasonable and promising way of overcoming inertia and of avoiding the most undesirable outcomes.

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