

Afghanistan: Deciding the Future of the Not Quite “Forgotten War”

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The Obama Administration is in the process of making one of the most important decisions it will make in its final year, one that will shape its legacy for the future: whether and how the United States should support the Afghan government in its continuing war against the Taliban, ISIS, the Haqqani Network, and other violent Islamist extremists.

The Obama Administration is making this decision very quietly. The fact that it launched a drone strike that killed Mullah Akhtar Mansour—the head of the Taliban—in Pakistan, shows that the Administration does not consider the War in Afghanistan to be the “forgotten war.” At the same time, the war has been dropped from the list of “top issues” on the Defense Department’s website, and has received virtually no attention from the candidates for the upcoming presidential election. The War in Afghanistan is now being treated more as a lingering afterthought than as an actual war.

“Creeping Decrementalism:” Easing Away from an Earlier Strategy Leading to Defeat and Failure

The Administration has already had to accept the fact that its poorly planned and poorly executed efforts to first surge U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009, to withdraw them at the end of 2014, and finally to virtually eliminate a U.S. advisory mission by the end of this year, has been a total failure. This withdrawal plan has never taken account of the real world conditions on the ground, or the limits of the Afghan forces that were rushed into being ready for such a mission. These are troops who were forced into their mission only a decade after the United States first intervened in 2001, and were only given the proper funds and trainers as recently as 2011-2012.

The Administration never took full account of the support Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were giving al Qaida and the rebels. It never looked realistically at what would happen if U.S. airpower was not available, and it failed to provide enough U.S. or NATO advisors after 2014 to support Afghan forces at the combat unit level.

It became all too clear during the brief “surge” of U.S. forces that they were concentrated in the wrong place, and were unable to produce anything like the decline in enemy attacks that resulted from the “surge” in Iraq. It became equally clear in 2014 that the Taliban and Haqqani Network were major resurgent threats, and it has become brutally clear since U.S. combat forces formally left at the end of 2014 that the Afghan Army cannot hold all the major population centers and key lines of communication—much less the Afghan country side—without U.S. advisors, the quiet, direct U.S. combat support of critical elite Afghan forces, and U.S. air support. It is even more clear that the Afghan police lack the paramilitary capability to survive on their own, and that the Afghan government cannot protect its local governments, or even sometimes its provincial governments.

The end result is that the United States has been forced to keep committing air power and Special Forces on the ground in spite of plans to end active U.S. participation in combat at the end of 2014. The full data on these efforts is not public—particularly the extent to which U.S. “boots on the ground” are being committed to combat, at least at the advisory and forward support level.

The Continuing Role of Combat Air Power

In the case of air power, however, the U.S. Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) states on its web site that, “Air strikes continue to enable the success of Coalition and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan counter-insurgency operations across Afghanistan, as well as providing round-the-clock armed coverage for ground forces. Air refueling, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) sorties provide critical support to the operations. Additionally, the Coalition's train, advise and assist mission continues to increase the capability of the Afghan Air Force and there is no better example of this transformation than the A-29 light attack aircraft.”

The same AFCENT website also provides a table showing that the United States still flew 5,774 close air support sorties in 2015 (down from 12,978 in 2014), and 1,272 more as of March 31, 2016—although only a surprisingly small number of such sorties released a weapon. It also shows that the United States flew some 20,666 additional ISR sorties in the area in 2015, and 5,124 more as of March 3, 2016. The United States also flew airlift sorties that transported 6,900 tons of cargo and 78,000 passengers in 2015, and 1,800 tons of cargo, and 23,200 passengers in the first three months of 2016. The numbers for 2016 seem to include activity outside of Afghanistan, but do exclude operations for Iraq and Syria.

(<http://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/03%20-%2031%20March%202016%20Airpower%20Summary.pdf?ver=2016-04-09-055912-003>.)

The number of U.S. unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) strikes against Taliban, Al Qaida, and other threat targets affecting the Afghan conflict is harder to estimate. A study by Bill Roggio in the Long War Journal indicates, however, that such strikes have declined from a peak of 117 in 2010 to 64 in 2011; 46 in 2012; 28 in 2013; 24 in 2014; 11 in 2015; and 3 through 22 May 2016—including the strike that killed Mullah Akhtar Mansour in Pakistan.

The number of strikes has been affected by an increase in care to avoid civilian casualties and anger, but they have also become more precise and focused on key leadership targets. They remain a key tool in denying the leadership of the Taliban and other threat elements “sanctuary” in Pakistan as long as the ISI and other elements in Pakistan tolerate or support such threats.

(Bill Roggio, “Charting the data for US airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004 – 2016,” *The Long War Journal*, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes>, February 22, 2016.)

Continuing “Boots on the Ground”

The United States has also kept troops in Afghanistan. The majority are advisors, but others are combat troops—including Special Forces and partners of the Afghan Army’s

elite counterterrorism unit and forces that support Afghan troops in the field in emergencies—although they are nominally supposed to be deployed as forward advisors.

The United States did not cut its approximately 10,000 advisors in half by the end of 2015, and no longer has any plans to virtually eliminate the rest by the end of 2016. The President did decide in the fall of 2015, however, that he would retain deployed troops in Afghanistan through 2016, and keep 5,500 troops into 2017—effectively ensuring that he would hand over active U.S. participation in the Afghan War to his successor.

A March 18, 2016 article in the *Washington Post* by Dan Lamothe notes that, “The NATO mission in Afghanistan, Operation Resolute Support, currently includes about 12,800 troops, including some 6,900 Americans, according to statistics released by the coalition. The majority of the other 2,900 U.S. troops are devoted to a separate but related mission, Freedom’s Sentinel, that focuses heavily on counterterrorism.”

These United States manning data, however, has a touch of “smoke and mirrors” because the 9,800 total often used in the press does not count many military personnel who are not classified as having a “permanent change of station.” Nor does that number count the combat forces who are working with elite Afghan units, or any related civilians and contractors.

President Obama had to act because his “transition” plan was a failure. He did so because UN reports from 2014 to the present made it brutally clear that Afghan civilian casualties had risen sharply, and were occurring in a wide range of new areas, and that an increasing number of areas had become too unsafe for aid workers and other civilians to operate. He did so because it became clear from statements by U.S. commanders that Afghan Army and police casualties—while exact numbers seem to be classified—were too high to be sustainable, and that Afghan forces had major problems in executing operations and problems with attrition and desertion. He did so because the Afghan government steadily lost real-world control of the countryside, of towns and key roads, and of the safety and security of whole provinces in some cases.

The Current Review

It has been clear from various press sources during the last month that the President is now holding another review of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. The same article in the *Washington Post* reports that,

The U.S. military’s new top officer in the war in Afghanistan met with military chiefs from NATO nations Wednesday, offering in a closed-door meeting his assessment of a conflict that is nearly 15 years old.

Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr.’s presented his assessment behind closed doors to dozens of senior military officers, including Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Army Gen. Curtis “Mike” Scaparrotti, the new supreme allied commander of NATO. Nicholson did not appear at a news conference afterward, but Scaparrotti said that after hearing the war commander’s plan, Scaparrotti is in favor of an approach that would remove additional forces only as conditions on the ground allow.

“It’s a means to realize our objective of a stable and secure Afghanistan that is not a haven for terrorists any longer,” Scaparrotti said. “I think that’s what I take away from General Nicholson’s report, and I think it’s important that the [military chiefs] also heard it today.”

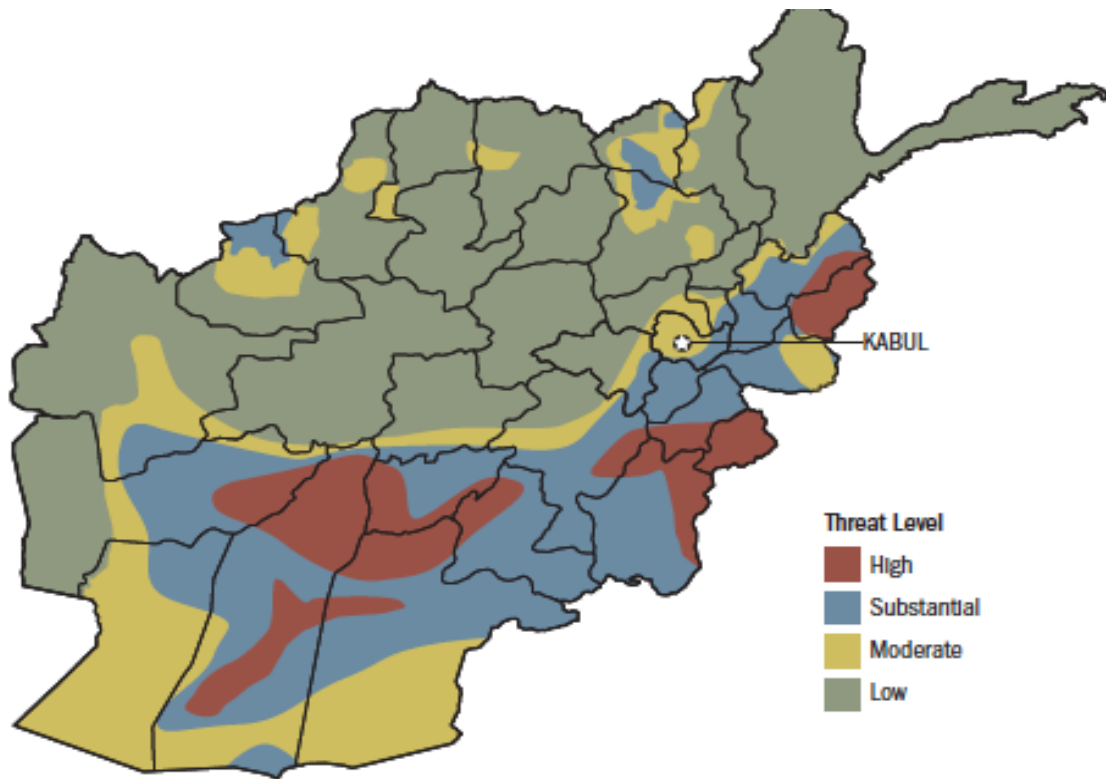
[\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/18/top-nato-commanders-signal-support-for-keeping-troops-in-afghanistan/.\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/18/top-nato-commanders-signal-support-for-keeping-troops-in-afghanistan/)

As the various parts of **Figure One** illustrate, there is no unclassified consensus as to the level of the threat influence and control, and recent Taliban and other enemy gains in given areas. If they are compared with the UN casualty data in **Figure Two**, however, it is brutally clear that the recent course of the fighting has greatly increased the threat influence and control. The key issue is not tactical victories, but the areas that threat can intimidate and control, its presence near key lines of communication, and its ability to take key population centers over time.

They are also only part of the data on Taliban and other threat gains that make it clear why such a review of U.S. strategy, and the size of the U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan, is critical if the Afghan government is not going to lose critical parts of the country, if not the war.

The problems in carrying out a meaningful review, however, lie in President Obama's tendency to delay hard decisions and doing too little, too late. They lie in a Congress that is good at partisan complaint, but never seems to hold strategy hearings that come to grips with detailed net assessments, hard issues, real plans, real resources, and real measures of effectiveness. The end result is that the same failures in leadership by the President and the Congress that have led to "creeping incrementalism" in Iraq have led to simply slowing the decline in U.S. efforts in Afghanistan—substituting "creeping decrementalism" for "creeping incrementalism."

Figure One: Comparative Assessments of the Threat in Afghanistan: Part One

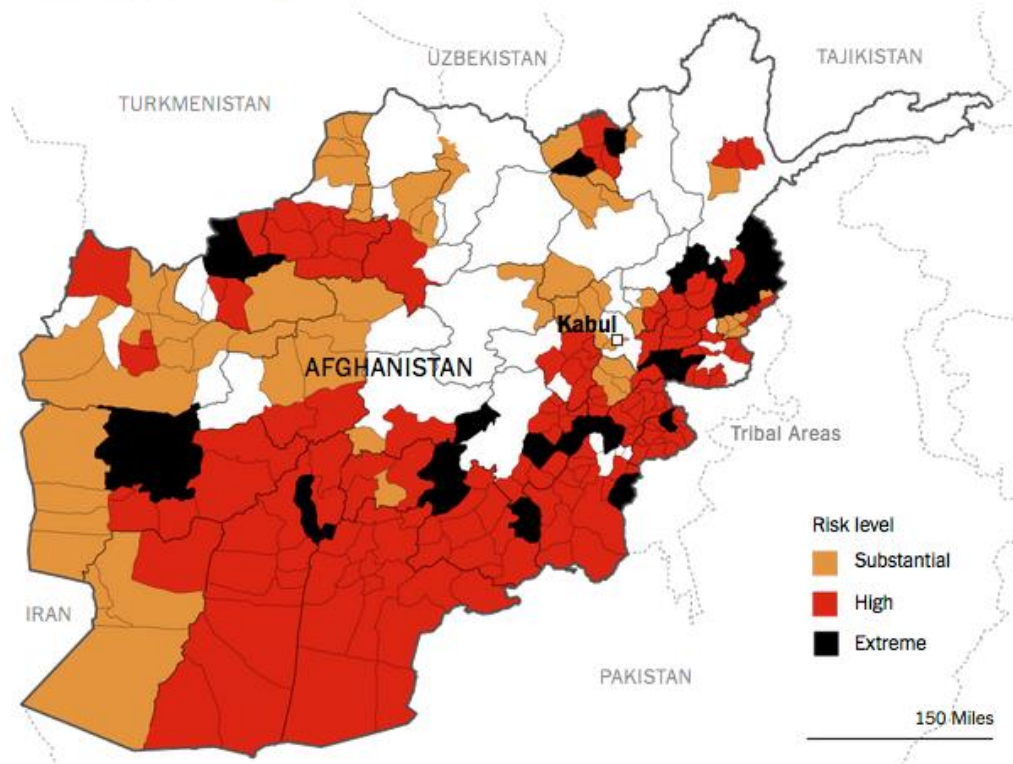


Source: Die Bundesregierung (German federal government), 2014 Progress Report on Afghanistan, 11/2014, p. 19.

Source: Die Bundesregierung (German federal government), 2014 Progress Report on Afghanistan, 11/2014, p. 19.; UN Security Council, *The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security* reports, 12/9/2014, p. 5; 9/9/2014, p. 6; 6/18/2014, p. 5; and 3/7/2014, p. 5.; and SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2015, p. 93.

Figure One: Comparative Assessments of the Threat in Afghanistan: Part Two
UN OHCA Estimate of Areas of Risk in Afghanistan: 9/2015

More than half of the districts in Afghanistan are rated by the United Nations as having either a substantial, high or extreme level of risk.

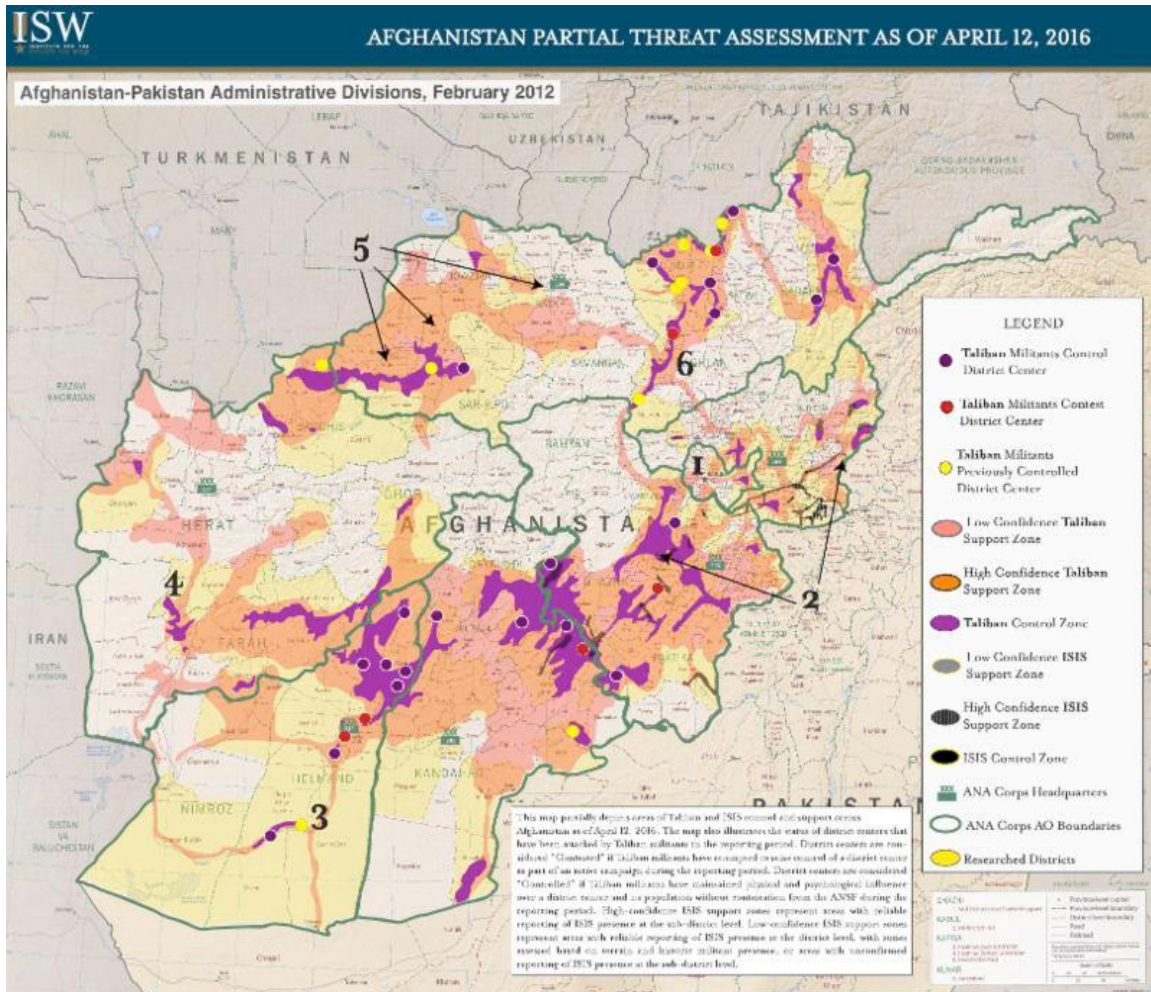


Source: United Nations
By The New York Times

Note: Districts with extreme threat levels either have no government presence at all, or a government presence reduced to only the district capital; there were 38 such districts scattered through 14 of the country's 34 provinces. In all, 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces had some districts where the threat level was rated high or extreme.

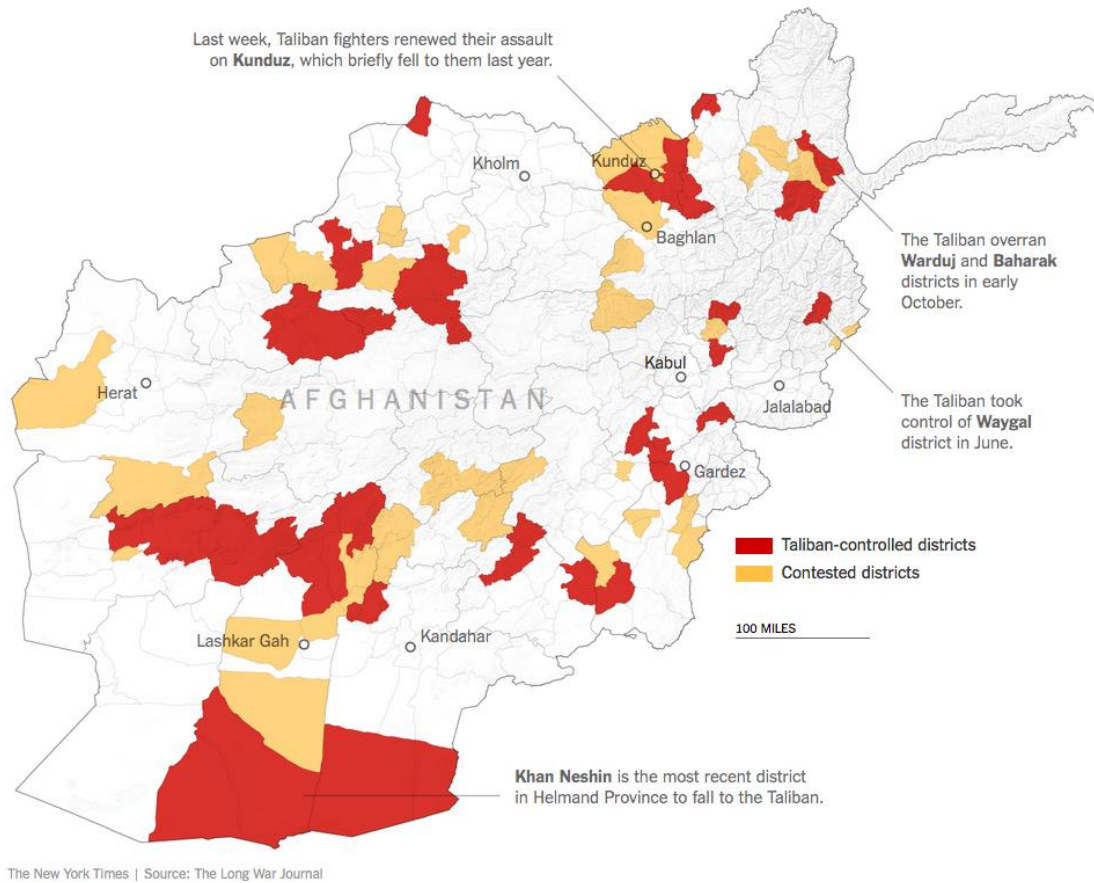
Source: Rod Norland and Joseph Goldstein, "Afghan Taliban's Reach Is Widest Since 2001, U.N. Says" New York Times,, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-united-nations.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>

Figure One: Comparative Assessments of the Threat in Afghanistan: Part Three
Institute for study of War Estimate



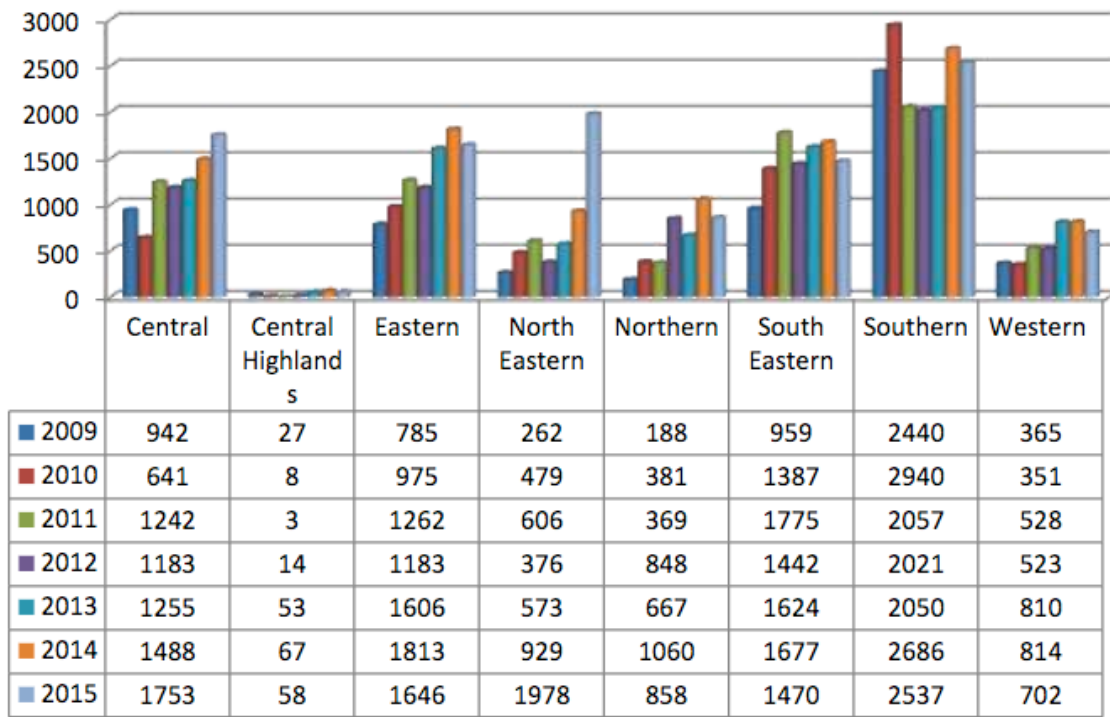
Caitlin Forrest with Harleen Gambhir, "Afghanistan Partial Threat Assessment: April 12, 2016," Institute for the Study of War,
<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/12%20APR%20AFG%20MAP%20FINAL%20PDF%20smaller%20FINAL.pdf>

Figure One: Comparative Assessments of the Threat in Afghanistan: Part Four
New York Times Estimate



Source: New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html>, April 29, 2016.

Figure Two: UN Estimates of the Growth of Civilian Deaths and Injuries by region and Expansion of the Fighting in different Regions During the Transition Period from 2009 to end 2015



UNAMA, “AFGHANISTAN ANNUAL REPORT 2015 PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT,” http://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_annual_report_2015_final_14_feb_2016.pdf, p. 8.

Key Military Decisions

If this review is to be meaningful, key changes need to be made. In purely military terms, the United States needs to stop focusing on setting total manning levels, which today cannot even put an effective train and assist mission into every Afghan corps, and instead concentrate on the level of military support, and resources needed to support Afghanistan. The United States needs to stop focusing on one or two year intervals, and honestly ask how long U.S. support will be needed, and decide whether the United States is willing to make a lasting commitment based on the actual combat conditions on the ground.

In this process, a clear focus is required on the following items:

- The real-world combat capability and readiness of Afghan forces at every level, and their real-world needs, instead of either down playing them, or providing constantly changing and unrealistic assessments.
- The real-world capability of threat forces not only at the tactical level, but in terms of their ability to operate at the local levels, control or influence civilian populations, and compete for control and loyalty with the Afghan government.

- The ongoing real-world covert role of Pakistan in support of the Taliban, al Qaida, and other threats.
- The size of the U.S. and allied train and assist mission that the Afghan forces really need, and the fact that putting advisors into combat units—at least the Kandak level—is almost certainly needed in spite of the manning numbers and risk of additional casualties.
- The size of the U.S. and allied ISR, and combat air support mission needed to support Afghan military and police forces. Support from U.S. and allied airpower is critical to ensure that the Taliban and other threats cannot concentrate on and defeat Afghan Army forces that cannot easily redeploy or reinforce at any meaningful distance and police forces with minimal paramilitary capability; and that can provide support in a crisis when a key population center or key block of Afghan forces is threatened.
- How the U.S. military assistance effort can help the Afghan central government work around the level of incompetence, gross corruption, and impact of Afghan power brokers from the top of the Ministries of Defense and Interior to the field, and ensure the proper allocation of forces, use and flow of resources, and reinforcement and resupply in emergencies.
- The probable costs of an effective U.S. military effort, and of putting more Americans at risk in terms of casualties; honestly assessing the cost of a truly effective effort in dollars and blood, and presenting an honest budget proposal rather than the meaningless assessment now in the FY2017 OCO request.

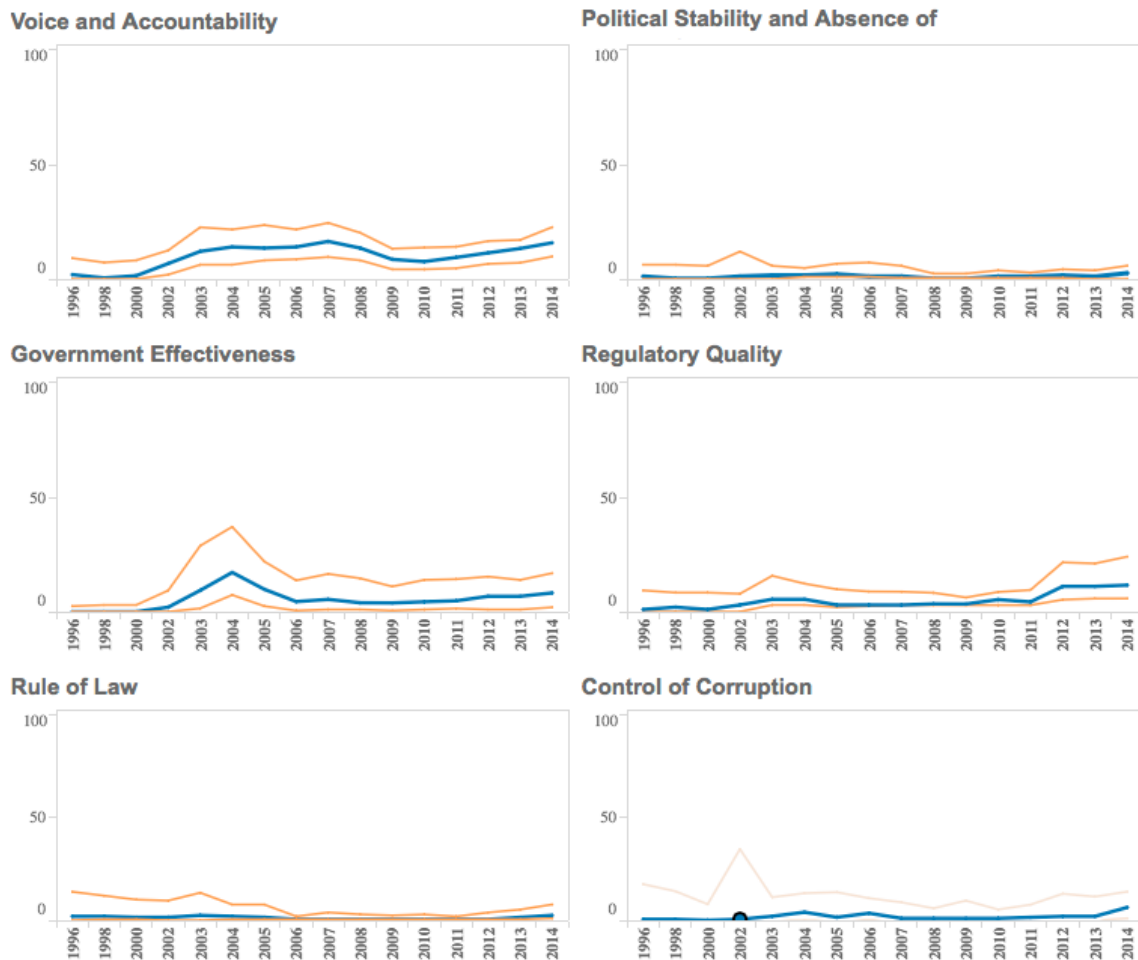
Ideally, these would all involve decisions that the President would make public, would present to Congress, and would leave open for debate by his potential successors. This does, however, raise the question as to whether anyone is prepared to put a positive bipartisan concern for the U.S. national interest before destructive partisan political opportunism. Unfortunately, the answer seems to be grimly obvious.

Conditionality and Possible Withdrawal

The United States also needs to address the fact the war cannot be won by a divided and self-paralyzed Afghan central government, which the World Bank and Transparency International rank as one of the least effective, and most corrupt in the world—one in which the reform of governance and the economy consists of nothing more than a decade of empty promises.

The World Bank rates are shown in **Figure Three**, and have consistently been some of the worst in the world, regardless of the U.S. invasion in 2003, and the leadership that has followed. Aside from a brief burst of progress in the initial period after the defeat of the Taliban, Afghanistan has reverted to ineffective governance, a lack of stability, high levels of violence, a failed rule of law, and some of the highest levels of corruption of any government in the world. In fact, Transparency International rates the Afghan government as the 166th most corrupt country out of 168 countries, making Afghanistan the third most corrupt country in the world. (Transparency International <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#reports>.)

Figure Three: World Bank Assessments of Afghanistan's Ineffective and Corrupt Government



Source: World Bank, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#reports>, accessed May 22, 2016.

No major counterinsurgency campaign can be won by military means alone. There must also be the kind of politics that win broad popular support, and sufficient popular unity. Today, Afghanistan may display the veneer of democracy, but it is effectively governed by self-seeking, rival power brokers—many tied to their narrow area of self-interest. These power brokers often have their own security forces; exploit government and aid funds; and compete with the Taliban for income from Afghanistan's narco-economy.

This need for effective leadership and governance is particularly true after the massive, sudden cut in military spending—and some aspects of aid funding—in Afghanistan as outside forces withdrew in 2014. The Obama Administration failed to heed warnings from the World Bank and IMF that a rapid transition and withdrawal could trigger an economic crisis in a country that the World Bank's in-country team had already estimated to have seen a declining level of popular wealth since 2008.

Quite aside from the steadily deteriorating security indicators, a World Bank study found in May 2016 that,

Afghanistan is a deeply fragile and conflict affected state. It has been in almost constant conflict for over 35 years since the Soviet invasion of 1979. Today the country is at a crossroads in its development with economic growth down sharply and poverty incidence stubbornly high. Afghanistan faces tremendous development challenges. Gross domestic product (GDP) per-capita is among the lowest in the world, poverty is deep and widespread, and social indicators are still at very low levels.

...Despite good economic growth between 2007 and 2011, Afghanistan's poverty rate continues to stagnate. With increased unequal growth distribution the country experiences the effects of unemployment and natural disasters. For strong economic growth and stable job creation Afghanistan will need to secure adequate donor assistance and private sector involvement across all geographic regions in the country.

- ... The poverty rate remained stagnant at 36 percent despite good economic growth between 2007 and 2011. The highest poverty incidence is found in the rural areas, where livelihoods are dependent on agriculture.
- Inequality increased with unequal distribution of growth. The SCD identified lagging regions in the Northeast, East, and West Central regions in the country that appear to have fallen behind due to remote access, climatic shocks, lower aid and fragility.
- Economic growth fell sharply to 1.5-2 percent in 2014 and 2015 as private sector confidence slumped and a fiscal crisis unfolded.
- International development aid contributed to growth and jobs in high-conflict areas, however it did not contribute to raising productivity.
- Unemployment, natural hazards, lack of access to services, and violence are the main factors behind the high rate of poverty in Afghanistan.
- Development challenges are further amplified by growing insecurity, uncertainty, and declining aid.

Critical constraints

- Fragility and conflict: the major constraint to development progress is the prevailing insurgency and civil conflict; weak state institutions and dysfunctional societal relations affect almost every aspect of development.
- Demography and geography: pressures of high population growth and a young population are exacerbated by large numbers of returning internally displaced persons or refugees; there are significant disparities in employment generation and access to services, including the widespread exclusion of women from economic participation.
- Declining aid: declining aid will require additional efforts to develop new sources of growth, expand effective service delivery, mobilize revenues and prioritize spending.

Key priorities

- Strong economic growth and job creation: to reduce poverty Afghanistan will require, strong, inclusive economic growth and stable job creation with private sector involvement across all geographic regions in the country.
- Improved prioritized service delivery: continued progress in expanding service delivery is key to addressing critical constraints, with a focus on identifying opportunities to improve effective service delivery, and strengthening capacity and accountability of the public sector.
- Support fiscal stability: significant action is essential to revenue mobilization, securing adequate donor assistance, and expenditure prioritization in order to restore fiscal stability and address the medium-term challenge of reducing dependence on external aid.

(World Bank, "Afghanistan Systematic Country Diagnostic: An Analysis of a Country's Path toward Development, May 9, 2016, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/05/10/afghanistan-systematic-country-diagnostic-an-analysis-of-the-countrys-path-toward-development>, and

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2016/02/25973259/afghanistan-systematic-country-diagnostic>.)

The economy and security situation have also lead to a massive “brain drain” of well-educated Afghans and of a “capital flight” from the country.

The Taliban, Haqqani Network, Hekmatyer faction, and rising elements of ISIS all have their own weaknesses and divisions. The death of Mullah Omar and drone killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour may divide and weaken the unity of the Taliban and the overall mix of threat forces, but it may also make it more extreme and committed. A weak and ineffective Afghan central government gives the Taliban no incentive to negotiate seriously, if at all. As cases like Cambodia and Nepal has shown, weak and ineffective central governments can also find peace negotiations to be an extension of war by other means and lose the peace as easily as they can lose the war.

There needs to be a clear civilian component to a joint U.S. civil-military plan for Afghanistan, *and it needs to be clearly conditional* on well-defined Afghan actions—with equally well-defined milestones—that show that the Afghan government can stop the steady loss of public support reflected in Asia Foundation and Lead Inspector General polls, and can steadily deal more effectively with governance, corruption, and other civil problems revealed in Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), World Bank, IMF, and U.S. Department of Defense reporting. Half an effective plan is not better than none. It is simply a waste of U.S. and other outside aid and military resources.

The Option of Full U.S. Withdrawal

This leads to the final key element of a proper U.S. strategic review: Whether it is in the U.S. strategic interest to stay. No matter how sympathetic one may be to the Afghan people, past expenditures of money and blood are not a reason to waste them in the future.

The United States has limited strategic resources, and a surplus of areas where it can use them productively. Humanitarian concerns are only valid when honest strategic triage shows they have priority and that the expenditure of those resources will produce the desired result. The ethics and morality of aid and intervention are determined by results, not by need or good intentions.

And, from a brutally practical viewpoint, both Afghans and supporters of continued U.S. efforts in Afghanistan need to realize that there is a good case for U.S. withdrawal if the Afghans make it impossible for others to help them by failing to help themselves.

From a purely selfish viewpoint, there may be a good strategic case for U.S. withdrawal,

- Afghanistan is no longer the key center of extremism and terrorism—or even home to al Qaida Central—which now operates largely out of Pakistan.
- The United States has no broader plans for a major role in central Asia, no national interest in pipelines or “New Silk Roads,” and no real economic interests in this region, when compared to many other regions.
- A U.S. and allied departure would create a strategic vacuum that Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan would have to compete to fill at their expense, and probably trigger rivalries between them that would to some extent limit the problems they present to the United States.

- Whatever Putin may have gained from intervening in Syria; he might well more than lose from the impact of a sudden U.S. departure from Afghanistan.

This kind of “realism” is so self-seeking, however, that it creates risks of its own. An effective U.S. strategy to support a more effective Afghan government is the preferred option, but the United States now needs to show that it has both an effective civil and military strategy, and that this strategy is explicitly and fully contingent on having a strategic partner that will act to make it work.