

How Should the U.S. Execute a Surge in Afghanistan?

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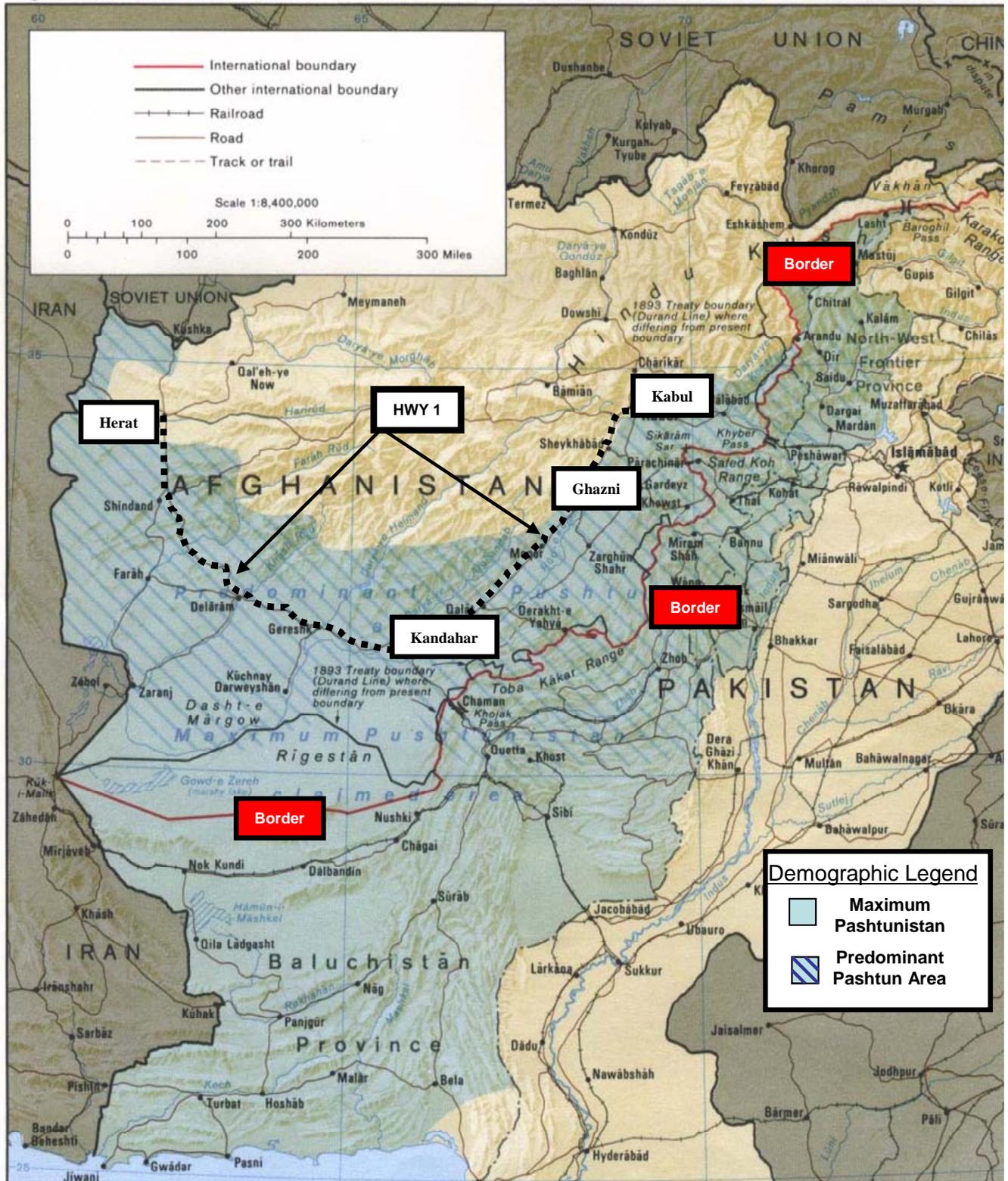
Introduction

In the fall of 2006, the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated to a level worse than at any other period during the previous three years of U.S. occupation. Violence was on the rise and attacks by insurgents continued to increase even after the top Al Qaeda leader in Iraq, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, was killed by U.S. forces. Calls for a drawdown of U.S. troops gained considerable support in Washington as policymakers questioned whether long-term stability in Iraq was achievable or if continued U.S. presence would merely add to the growing number of casualties. Reinforcing the perception that U.S. forces were not making sufficient gains was the release of a Marine Corps intelligence report stating that the struggle against Sunni insurgents in Al Anbar Province could not be won militarily.¹

U.S. military commanders concluded that the best way to improve the security situation in Iraq was to adopt a more proactive “clear-hold-build” strategy supported by a significant increase in the number of ground combat units. This increase in forces, often referred to simply as “the surge”, introduced five additional combat brigades into Iraq that provided the means to wrest the initiative from the enemy. It allowed U.S. forces to simultaneously conduct large-scale operations to clear enemy safe havens, train Iraqi security forces, and disrupt insurgent lines of communication without having to leave key urban areas unprotected. In less than a year, the surge helped reduce the number of enemy attacks, increased the support of the Iraqi people, improved the security situation throughout the country, and all but defeated the insurgency.

The security situation in Afghanistan has steadily deteriorated since 2006 largely due to the lack of forces required to execute an effective counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. As the U.S. struggles to find a viable solution to this problem, calls for an Iraq-type surge of forces to help stabilize security and set conditions for political and economic improvement in Afghanistan have increased. President Bush and Defense Secretary Robert Gates have both acknowledged that additional forces are needed in Afghanistan but have not specifically outlined how many or what type.² Although the goal of executing a surge in Afghanistan would be similar in nature to that of Iraq, the challenges presented by a larger, rural-based population with unique tribal dynamics, a harsher geography, and an enemy operating from bases outside the country will require a different focus and force structure.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Border



Security is Paramount

Insurgencies are similar to snowflakes in that no two are exactly alike. However, the principles used to defeat an insurgency whether executed by the Romans in Gaul, the British in Malaya, or the U.S. in the Philippines, remain much the same even though the methods used to implement them often differ. A counterinsurgent force rarely wins by using military action alone and must bring together all elements of national power if it hopes to defeat the enemy. If political efforts are ineffective due to poor leadership, if the economic situation is plagued by high unemployment and widespread poverty, or if information channels convince the population that the insurgency is justifiable, the counterinsurgent force is likely to lose regardless of how many troops it employs or what military success it may achieve.

Military efforts do play a critical role in establishing and maintaining security in order for other elements of national power to flourish. Historically, creating a secure environment during an insurgency is resource intensive, particularly in the number of ground combat forces required to fight insurgents and protect the populace. U.S. Army COIN doctrine places the optimal density ratio of security forces to the population at approximately 20:1,000³, though this number may deviate due to factors such as the proficiency and mobility of security forces, and the size and strength of the insurgency itself. Although a surge may provide the means to achieve a 20:1,000 density ratio in key areas, it is only temporary in nature. It does, however, provide valuable time to train, equip and employ additional indigenous forces to assume an increased security role once the surge period ends.

The inability to provide sufficient security is a challenge that counterinsurgent forces have faced throughout history and one that has directly led to the failure of COIN efforts on numerous occasions. If counterinsurgent forces cannot maintain persistent presence in key areas, insurgents will quickly recognize this shortfall and use the opportunity to seize control of unprotected areas. Fearing for their safety, people living in these areas will refuse to cooperate with counterinsurgent forces, withhold information on insurgent whereabouts, and not participate in programs offered by the government. This was a problem that routinely plagued U.S. forces in Iraq prior to the surge.

The Surge in Iraq

Although U.S. forces maintained a fairly sizeable presence in key urban centers such as Baghdad, Ramadi and Mosul prior to the surge, security forces in these areas were still incapable of preventing insurgents from terrorizing and intimidating the local populace. National army and local police recruitment drives frequently received a lukewarm response and economic efforts led by Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) were often slowed to a crawl when Iraqi contractors refused work due to poor security conditions. Iraqis were never quite sure if U.S. forces were going to remain in an area, and many of those who chose to cooperate paid dearly for it when the Americans departed and the insurgents returned.

The flow of additional forces into Iraq during the surge provided an opportunity to further expand security coverage in key urban centers while enabling other COIN efforts to flourish. As surge forces moved into areas dominated by insurgents and established a permanent presence, Iraqis soon realized that the U.S. was serious about improving security and began to actively turn against the insurgency. Movements such as the Sunni Anbar Awakening

Council proved essential in helping to defeat Al Qaeda and reduce insurgent activity in key areas, but would not have worked if U.S. forces had been unable to provide sufficient security. By the summer of 2007, the U.S. finally had enough forces available to clear enemy-held areas, hold them to prevent insurgents from returning, and begin the rebuilding process.

While U.S. forces consolidated gains in key urban areas, they simultaneously conducted large-scale operations to clear insurgent safe havens in other parts of the country that had often been ignored in the past. Although insurgents had been able to move forces and equipment freely through much of the countryside prior to the surge, they soon found their lines of communication disrupted with few places left to seek sanctuary. The border areas, which had long been used to smuggle foreign fighters and equipment across in support of the insurgency, also began to receive increased attention as additional forces became available. When elements of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) arrived in western Iraq in December 2006, they immediately tightened security along the Syrian border, reduced attacks along major military supply routes (MSR), and helped clear insurgent forces from the city of Rutbah.⁴

The improved security situation also helped increase the number of Iraqis that were willing to join army and police forces. Although 2006 was officially designated as “The Year of the Police”, 2007 saw local and national police numbers grow more dramatically in conjunction with the surge.⁵ Iraqi police, combined with increasingly capable Iraqi army units, began to assume a more active and effective security role. A domino effect took place as the increased number of U.S. forces improved security, which convinced more Iraqis to support the stabilization process, which resulted in more intelligence being collected, which ultimately left the insurgents nowhere to hide. The surge had, in just over one year, helped stabilize the security situation in Iraq, rejuvenated the Iraqi people, spurred economic growth, and set conditions for increased political dialogue.

Afghanistan is Not Iraq

The decision on how to approach a sustained Afghan commitment involves more than just a duplication of Iraq surge principles. General McKiernan, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, recently stated, "Afghanistan is not Iraq and a far more complex environment than I ever found in Iraq."⁶ There are similarities that should be considered, however, and the differences do not negate the transferability of certain operational concepts learned from the Iraq surge.

Multi-National Corps- Iraq (MNC-I) and Combined Joint Task Force-101 (CJTF-101) Afghanistan both seek the same strategic end state, have identified a similar center of gravity, and support a clear-hold-build COIN strategy. In both countries, the U.S. seeks to consolidate the successes of democratic elections and ensure that terrorists and insurgents cannot exploit misgoverned space.⁷ Both commands have identified the tolerance or support of the population as the center of gravity, and have learned from previous experience that clearing insurgent-dominated areas is meaningless if persistence presence cannot be maintained. Despite these similarities in strategy, the challenges presented by a predominantly rural population with strong tribal loyalties, a historically weak central

government, and large, porous border make the operational environment in Afghanistan much more challenging.⁸

There are approximately 42 million Pashtuns spread throughout the region with over 14 million living in Afghanistan.⁹ These Afghan Pashtuns serve as the center of gravity for the Taliban, or in Maoist terms, the “sea” that supports 10,000 – 15,000 hardcore insurgents.¹⁰ While most of the population in Iraq is concentrated in or around urban centers, 77% of the population in Afghanistan is dispersed throughout rural areas.¹¹ Thirty years of conflict has fragmented the traditional tribal structure which inhibits the type of broad tribal reconciliation found in the Iraqi Awakening Councils. In a recent interview, General McKiernan stated that tribal relationships were extremely complex and wrought with the potential of increasing conflict.¹²

With the center of gravity dispersed across the rural villages of southern and eastern Afghanistan, duplicating the traditional role of strong Pashtun governance...such as maintaining security and consensus...is difficult. The U.S. diplomatic strategy for building a structure of governance began with the selection and legitimate election of a national leader, President Hamid Karzai, who is Pashtun. The extension of governmental power from Kabul, through the Provinces, and down to the district level is foreign to Afghan history and culture because the Afghan coalescing identity is tied to the district level with bottom-up governance. The Taliban understand the importance of coercing or influencing the Pashtun population in the rural districts and focus most of their attention on these areas. In July 2008, the Taliban operated in 130 Pashtun districts and from June to August 2008 temporarily overran 41 districts.¹³

While Taliban activity is directed at the rural districts, their lines of communication transit across an ambiguous and unsecured border. Two-thirds of Pashtuns live in Western Pakistan along a 2,430 kilometer border with Afghanistan. The operational problem centers on the Pashtun population extending across the border which provides the Taliban protection and freedom of movement. This artificial supra-Diaspora is the original source of the Taliban religious-political movement and is unlike any operational problem faced in Iraq. The extension of the insurgent network into Pakistan also restricts U.S. / NATO ability to relentlessly pursue the enemy and deny them safe haven.

Afghanistan’s large rural population, unique tribal dynamics, and geographic factors do present a different set of challenges and issues than those faced in Iraq. Additional forces deployed to help improve the security situation in Afghanistan, however, would still be focused on accomplishing the same primary goals as the surge in Iraq. These include establishing persistent presence amongst the population, denying the enemy safe haven, and increasing the number of indigenous security forces.

Establishing Persistent Presence

A key component of the surge in Iraq was to use additional ground combat forces to establish and maintain permanent presence in major population centers. While urban neighborhoods were the central focus in Iraq, establishing security in the rural Pashtun villages must be the main effort for any Afghan surge. To accomplish this at the district level, U.S. and NATO forces must reside in the villages and live amongst the Pashtun population.

With competing demands limiting the number of U.S. ground forces available, a surge in Afghanistan will not be able to achieve the doctrinally recommended security force density ratio. The number of U.S. / NATO forces is currently estimated at 47,600,¹⁴ with Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) forces comprising an additional 127,000 personnel.¹⁵ These estimates include forces operating throughout Afghanistan and indigenous forces assessed as having only limited capability. Establishing a 20:1,000 security force density in the Pashtun areas alone would require over 280,000 personnel. As such, surge forces will need to concentrate on specific, critical areas in order to establish localized superiority and regain the initiative.

With the Taliban operating in 105 districts and 13 Pashtun provinces as of September 2008¹⁶, it is essential to prioritize where the limited number of surge forces should be used to help provide security. Taliban activity is heavily focused around the districts along Highway 1, the key artery connecting Kabul with Kandahar and Herat. Approximately 50% of the Taliban attacks reported occurred in Ghazni, Kandahar, Helmand, and Farah, important provinces that connect the Pashtun South with the rest of Afghanistan.¹⁷ The districts along Highway 1 with an active Taliban presence essentially provide a “roadmap” for how and where surge forces should be deployed. Because the Taliban rely on the support of the Pashtun population along this primary road network, denying this support will improve security in the urban areas as well as the transition districts. However, achieving security in these districts will also require surge forces to limit the movement of the Taliban to and from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Denying Insurgents Safe Haven: The Border

The relentless pursuit of insurgents to deny them safe haven was another key principle that made the Iraq surge strategy effective. Without a more secure border, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be defeated. The freedom of movement currently enjoyed by the Taliban along the border essentially negates the U.S. advantage of tactical mobility and severely limits the ability to aggressively pursue the enemy. The safe haven provided by the ungoverned space inside the FATA makes the border the central problem in trying to deny the Taliban a base of operations.

An ambiguous and porous border gives the Taliban the ability to move freely amongst the Pashtun population. The lack of indigenous security enables the Taliban to recruit, train, plan, and conduct operations in relative safety. Effective military and security presence is lacking at most border crossings, particularly those found amongst the rural Pashtun populations. The road from Peshawar, Pakistan, through the Khyber Pass and onto Jalalabad is a crucial lifeline for Afghans, yet it contains countless passes and trails used by the Taliban for infiltration.¹⁸ Throughout the Hindu Kush and Safed Koh mountain ranges, passes limited to transit by pack animal and four-wheel drive vehicles also provide a myriad of infiltration points.¹⁹ Given the disposition of the Pashtun population along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, surge forces must focus on limiting Taliban ability to influence the Afghan Pashtuns.

A surge strategy will bolster the number of security forces operating within the border region and help improve their tactical mobility. The strategy would include the development of a

border security zone centered on a system of tiered, in-depth, joint border stations. The security forces and joint border stations would extend tactical patrolling along multiple satellite stations enhancing friendly lines of communication and inhibiting Taliban freedom of movement. Joint border stations would also serve as tactical coordination sites for U.S., Afghan and Pakistani security forces.

Reclaiming the tactical mobility advantage within a system of joint border control stations will serve as a forcing function of economic development in the rural districts that the Taliban rely on for safe movement. The security zone will create the conditions to further develop ANA and ANP capabilities and increase access by PRTs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). However, achieving long-term persistent presence and the development of an effective border security zone are heavily dependent on the rapid expansion and effective employment of the ANA and ANP.

Increasing Indigenous Security Forces

Since early 2003, the development of Afghan security capacity has been a key line of operation to the military end state. As the COIN strategy transitioned to clear-hold-build, the importance of the ANA and the ANP greatly increased, but the decision to increase force size and resource trainers has not kept pace with the insurgency. In September 2008, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the increase of total ANA end strength to 162,000 by 2010.²⁰ This planned end strength will greatly increase the density of security forces to the population, but the feasibility of fielding this force is questionable without a surge to resource the required embedded trainers. As of April 2008, the United States had only resourced 46% of the required embedded trainers (1019 of 2,215).²¹ While the plans for a more capable ANA are ongoing, the ANP is currently incapable of providing security in the majority of Pashtun districts.

Few indicators highlight the district focus of the Taliban more than the sustained targeting of the ANP. The ANP are the most visible sign of the Afghan government at the district level and also the most vulnerable to attacks. During 2008, the ANP has sustained a casualty rate three times higher than the ANA.²² The development of the ANP has been a second priority to the ANA with a 39% fill rate for police mentors (921 of 2,358).²³ The lack of police mentors has slowed progress with zero police units assessed as fully capable of performing its mission as of April 2008.²⁴ The limited capability of the force which is primarily responsible for security of the rural Pashtun population signifies a major shortfall in the campaign plan. An Afghan surge must focus on further developing the ANP and enhancing their capability to provide effective presence in areas that have been secured.

The Surge in Afghanistan

The U.S. will not be able to achieve a 20:1,000 security force density ratio for an Afghan population well over 32 million, even with the help of NATO and Afghan National Security Forces. However, a surge could establish at least a 10:1,000 ratio in key parts of the critical Pashtun-dominated south and east regions until more ANA and ANP units could be fielded in sufficient numbers. Surging the equivalent of an additional eight brigades (approximately 25,000-40,000 personnel) over a one-year period would help disrupt insurgent freedom of movement, improve border security, expedite the fielding of indigenous security forces, and

restore the confidence of people living in these key areas. The positive effects resulting from the improved security situation in those regions would be felt throughout the country.

Three surge brigades should be assigned specifically to help clear and hold key Pashtun-dominated areas, focusing initially on the provinces of Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, and Ghazni. Unlike their counterparts in Bagram and Kandahar, U.S. forces operating in these areas would permanently reside in the villages to establish a continuous presence and gain the trust of the local populace. Their primary tasks would include controlling key lines of communication, conducting presence patrols, assisting PRT-led efforts, mentoring indigenous security forces, and protecting tribal leadership. Although some tactical mobility would be required, these forces would mostly remain local and be comprised largely of light infantry units heavily augmented by engineer and civil affairs personnel.

Three other surge brigades, supported by additional aviation, ISR, sustainment, and combat engineer assets, should augment current efforts to find, fix, and finish insurgent forces operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Additional border stations should be established at key points along the border from the Khyber Pass to Southern Paktika and along the Kandahar and Helmand southern borders with Baluchistan. These stations would be manned jointly by U.S. and Afghan forces with enough firepower and mobility to secure key lines of communication, monitor cross-border movement, and provide local defense.

The remaining two surge brigades should be used to help expedite and improve the training of Afghan security forces. A Military Police Brigade would be ideal for providing sorely needed mentorship to ANP units that operate in secure districts. The other brigade equivalent would be tasked to help fill the 2,800 ANA and ANP embedded trainer and mentor positions that currently remain unresourced. History has shown that the importance of filling these positions with mature, capable, professional personnel cannot be understated. Embedded trainers are the key to ensuring that the ANA evolves into a mobile force capable of pursuing and defeating the Taliban, and the ANP into a more reliable, effective force for maintaining local security.

Although military units will comprise the bulk of the surge forces, interagency personnel must also be sent to Afghanistan in greater numbers to address significant shortfalls in critical, non-military related areas. Additional State Department and USAID representatives are needed to help lead political and economic efforts while Department of Justice personnel can provide guidance and oversight in areas such as counter-narcotics, forensics, investigations, and sensitive-site exploitation. As was the case in Iraq, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents are essential for providing the proper training and guidance to personnel manning border stations and monitoring cross-border check points.

Surging 25,000-40,000 additional troops into Afghanistan over a one-year period will be challenging, but not impossible. The predominance of the surge capability will come from units that are no longer required to backfill forces in Iraq as the U.S. continues to drawdown forces and reduce presence there. While Army and Marine light infantry units will once again make up the majority of the additional ground forces, the Navy and Air Force can also assist directly by providing additional construction engineers, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) experts, medical personnel, military police, and PRT leadership in support of surge operations.

Conclusion

As the situation in Iraq continues to improve and indigenous forces assume greater responsibility for providing security in that country, the U.S. must redirect its attention and resources toward addressing the crisis that continues to build in Afghanistan. The rapidly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan can be attributed directly to the lack of persistent presence amongst the rural Pashtun population, the failure to prevent Taliban freedom of movement along the border, and the inability to train sufficient numbers of capable ANA and ANP personnel. By surging an additional eight brigades into Afghanistan, however, U.S. and NATO forces can quickly regain the initiative from the Taliban and improve the security situation dramatically. A surge would establish and maintain a continuous presence in areas currently dominated by the Taliban, allow security forces to relentlessly pursue the enemy, and support the training of additional Afghan army and police units to augment, and eventually replace, the surge forces. If the U.S. does not surge these additional forces into Afghanistan, security will continue to deteriorate, the Taliban will assume control over much of the country, political instability will follow, and the U.S. will face strategic failure.

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