



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

How Afghanistan Ends: A Political-Military Path to Peace

by Linda Robinson

This paper presents a scenario for resolution of the Afghan conflict in a manner that achieves U.S. objectives in Afghanistan.¹ This scenario takes the current U.S. approach as the starting point and adds 1) a more detailed theory of the conflict that highlights the political effects that must be achieved; 2) emphasis on bottom-up measures that can produce momentum in the short term, and 3) a political diplomatic strategy embraced and pursued in concert by the Afghan government, the United States and key international partners. Finally, the paper identifies requirements for a smaller follow-on military force to pave the way for a long-term advisory and assistance effort.

At the NATO summit in Lisbon in November, the United States and the rest of NATO achieved an important consensus with Afghanistan on the way ahead. All parties agreed on the goal of Afghan forces taking the lead for security by the end of 2014, with the transition beginning in 2011. NATO also formally committed to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan beyond 2014.²

For this transition to succeed, Afghanistan and its partners need to agree on the political requirements for a successful drawdown. A significant degree of consensus has been forged regarding the “bottom-up” measures, and their implementation has begun. There is far less agreement on the “top-down” political diplomatic strategy to be pursued. While the U.S. administration has voiced general support for the Afghan government’s reconciliation policy and its declared “redlines” that the Taliban sever its ties with Al Qaeda, abandon armed struggle and support the constitutional order, it has not forged a more detailed consensus with the Afghan government and the other partners supporting Afghanistan. This paper argues that an internationally supported process will assist Afghanistan in achieving an enduring resolution of the conflict, and that such a resolution is the best means to ensure that the country does not once

¹ For the U.S. objectives and supporting objectives, as well as the administration’s most recent quarterly assessment mandated by the U.S. Congress, see <http://www.fas.org/man/eprint/wh-afpak.pdf>

² In his statement on November 20, 2010, in Lisbon, President Obama said: “Here in Lisbon we agreed that early 2011 will mark the beginning of a transition to Afghan responsibility, and we adopted the goal of Afghan forces taking the lead for security across the country by the end of 2014. This is a goal that President Karzai has put forward. I’ve made it clear that even as Americans transition and troop reductions will begin in July, we will also forge a long-term partnership with the Afghan people. And today, NATO has done the same. So this leaves no doubt that as Afghans stand up and take the lead they will not be standing alone.” See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/11/20/president-obama-nato-and-today-we-stand-united-afghanistan>

again become a terrorist safe haven. In his book *How Wars End* Gideon Rose notes that the United States has historically devoted scant attention to planning and implementation of the conflict termination phase of wars and has borne the attendant costs and risks as a result.³

Most insurgencies end through negotiations and agreed political measures rather than through military action alone.⁴ The complex nature of Afghanistan's conflict means that the best process for resolving it is also likely to be complex. Rather than positing a grand bargain to be achieved by all participants sitting at one table, this paper outlines a multilayered process to address the various drivers of the conflict at the appropriate level.

A Theory of the Conflict

A dominant theory of Afghanistan's conflict holds that the government's corruption and abuses are central drivers of the insurgency.⁵ This paper does not dispute that assertion but notes that there are other drivers as well. Moreover, combating corruption is a long term process. What the policy should aim for is steady improvement by the Afghan government. A cooperative approach with the Afghan government is required to make progress on all four of these drivers.

A second and equally significant driver of conflict is local disputes among tribes, sub-tribes and other factions, exacerbated by the lack of effective dispute resolution mechanisms. The marginalization of some groups by others has been a chronic source of conflict. Inclusivity is the operative principle for conflict resolution at the local level.

Third, the Taliban insurgency feeds on and derives some degree of support from conservative, largely rural Pashtuns in the south and east of the country where the conflict is concentrated. The underrepresentation of southern Pashtuns in the security forces and the perception that they are dominated by Tajiks increase tensions among the two ethnic groups. While public opinion polls show no more than 15 percent support for the Taliban nationwide, there is nonetheless a need to understand who the insurgents represent and what they want in order to enable them to join the political process.⁶

Fourth, Pakistan's insecurities lead it to provide sanctuary and support to insurgent groups. This driver is often reduced to its primary physical manifestation, i.e., the sanctuary that Afghan insurgents enjoy in neighboring Pakistan, but the enduring solution lies in addressing the motivations for the provision of that sanctuary.

The conflict in Afghanistan thus has local, national and regional dimensions that must be addressed to resolve the conflict and prevent the country from reemerging as a terrorist safe haven. One of the key unknowns to be discovered in the negotiating process is the degree to

³*How Wars End*, by Gideon Rose (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

⁴ See for example the tabulation in the monograph *How Insurgencies End*, by Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, RAND, 2010, pp. 180-181. Forty of 73 insurgencies have been settled through negotiations that resulted in some combination of power-sharing arrangements, elections or referenda; 61 of 73 settled insurgencies as well as three quarters of ongoing insurgencies included some combination of those measures, ceasefires or amnesties.

⁵ Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, November 2010, Report to Congress in accordance with section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended, p. 62. The International Security Assistance Force has formed CJIAF Shafafiyat ("Transparency") to lead anti-corruption efforts. The degree to which ISAF is at odds with the Afghan government over this issue is detailed in the report, pp. 63-64.

⁶ In 2002, Lakhdar Brahimi, the special representative of the U.N. Secretary General for Afghanistan from October 2001 through December 2004, suggested outreach to Taliban members who were potentially willing to join the political process. He wrote later that he regretted bitterly not arguing for this more forcefully, as the means to forestall renewed war. "A New Path for Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2008.

which the Taliban insurgency has a coherent posture or is a disparate franchise motivated by discrete issues. The Taliban insurgency is historically focused in southern Afghanistan and its senior leaders are largely based in Quetta. Two other component parts of the insurgency have distinct characteristics: the Hezb-i-Islami faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyr, which has already offered to negotiate and is viewed as the most opportunistic element, and the Haqqani network, based largely in Pakistan's North Waziristan agency.

Gaining Momentum from “Bottom up” Measures

Emphasizing “bottom up” measures can generate significant momentum that will in turn propel progress on the broader political diplomatic front. Such measures are likely to have the most rapid and direct impact due to the rural nature of the insurgency and the currently limited reach of the government. They are culturally appropriate measures that reflect the historical forms of social organization in Afghanistan.

This is not an argument for expedient measures in lieu of long-term solutions, but rather for clarity regarding what results may be achieved relatively quickly and which require longer term effort, such as anti-corruption or most state-building efforts. The bottom up measures must be designed and implemented in manner compatible with the long term goals and programs.

Military operations are essential to set the conditions for the political diplomatic strategy to work by persuading the insurgents that they cannot win militarily. The manner in which military operations are carried out must be precise to minimize the counterproductive effects. Capture of insurgents is preferable to killing them, not only because bloodshed can lead to more recruits to the insurgent ranks, but because captured insurgents provide valuable intelligence. Captured insurgents, including insurgent leaders, may also prove to be “reconcilable” and may lead significant numbers of insurgents to lay down their arms. A blend of enemy-centric and population-centric measures can create significant pressure in a relatively short time.⁷

Local defense forces are needed to provide security in rural areas, where 76 percent of the population lives, given the currently limited numbers of both Afghan and coalition forces. The current program for local defense forces is called Afghan Local Police (ALP). Afghanistan's centralized security forces have never reached down to the local level. As the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) grow toward their planned end strength of 300,000, these local forces fill a critical gap. The Afghan government has approved the formation of 68 ALP units of 250 to 350 personnel each, 25-30 of which are to be in place by year's end.⁸ These local forces have a defensive rather than offensive mandate and function as community watch groups to extend security to Afghanistan's isolated clusters of mud-walled compounds. The program is overseen by the Ministry of Interior (MOI), with training and mentoring provided by U.S. troops (in this initial phase by special operations forces). Their leaders and members are vetted and confirmed by local leaders convened in shuras. The ALP is also intended as a feeder program to increase and broaden the recruitment base for the permanent security forces. In addition, 72 Afghan

⁷ The approach applied in Iraq in 2007-08 was a blend of population- and enemy-centric measures. See summary of tactics, pp. 324-326, in *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (NY: Public Affairs, 2008) by this author.

⁸ Unclassified briefings by U.S. officials and Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan (Section 1230), pp. 67-69.

Special Forces teams are being trained by year's end to provide additional village level security and protection for governance and development programs.

The ALP program subsumes an earlier pilot effort called the Afghan Public Protection Force and improves upon earlier experiments with such local security forces. Some earlier incarnations pitted one tribe or sub-tribe against another and/or employed them as offensive strike forces. The community based groups in the current program are defensive in nature, vetted by local leaders, and overseen by Afghan government officials. Safeguards such as ongoing oversight and mentoring, biometric registry, and their incorporation into institutionalized police forces or dissolution within five years are intended to ensure they do not become wayward militias controlled by warlords. While the program is still nascent, communities have embraced the ALP in the eight locations where it has been introduced, and some have spontaneously formed groups to defend against insurgent attacks.⁹

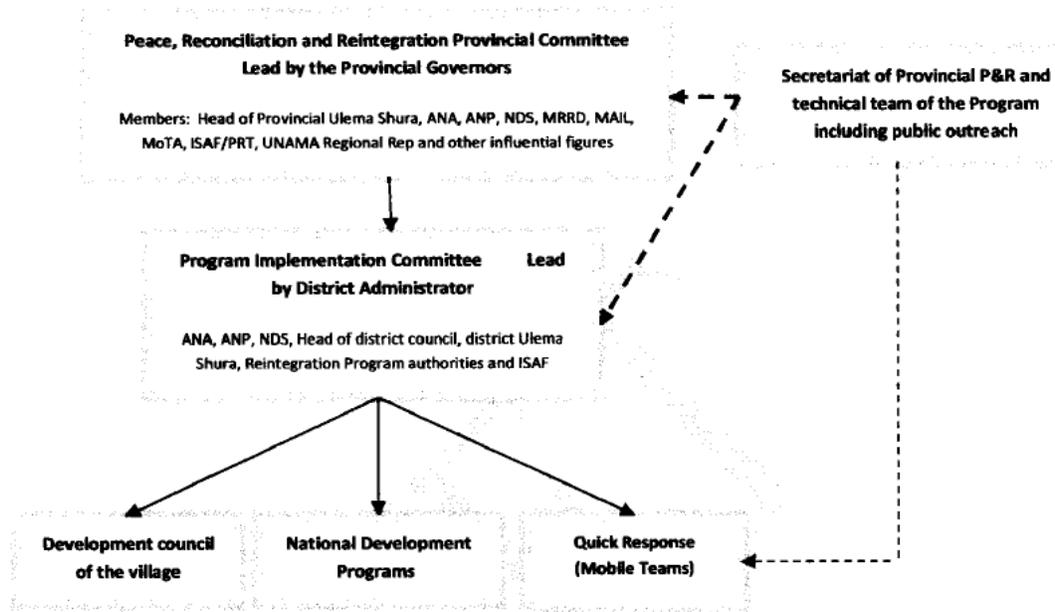
For this initiative to be effective, these small and lightly armed defensive forces must be able to call on Afghan and coalition units for protection and quick reaction forces as needed. A concentric scheme of layered security will enable these units to survive and provide grassroots level security; their first line of security is the coalition and Afghan units they are partnered with, augmented by Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan National Army (ANA), and other ISAF coalition units located in the area. If the program produces the intended results with the first 68 units in key areas, the Afghan government will be more likely to expand it as security conditions require. If an adequate protective mantle is provided for these local defense forces, this initiative may play a major role in securing the countryside and providing protection for fighters who abandon the insurgency, as such programs have done in other rural insurgencies.

Reintegration initiatives, which commonly refer to the effort to incorporate low to mid-level insurgents into society, have to date been marked by a high level of recidivism.¹⁰ In order to be successful, reintegration programs must protect those who abandon the fight and provide them the means to earn a livelihood. The international community has pledged \$260m for the new initiative and U.S. Commander's Emergency Response Program funds are available as well. In addition, Afghan and other officials interviewed for this paper believe that successful reintegration requires reconciliation with the insurgent leadership as well as a long-term stabilization program.

⁹ "Year In Review," National Training Mission-Afghanistan, November 2009-2010, p. 24.

¹⁰ An estimated 7,000 reintegrated insurgents took up arms again after the Peace Through Strength program failed to provide the necessary guarantees or conditions. For a summary of previous reintegration efforts in Afghanistan including the pitfalls of such programs, see "Golden Surrender? The Risks, Challenges and Implications of Reintegration in Afghanistan," by Matt Waldman, Afghan Analysts Network Discussion Paper 04/2010, April 22, 2010.

Provincial Structure for Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration Program



The Afghan government approved the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program by presidential decree on June 29, 2010. Oversight of APRP has been delegated to provincial governors, who have begun to form reintegration committees. Since the inception of the program, and particularly since the naming of a High Peace Council by the Afghan president, overtures from low- and mid-level insurgent fighters have increased significantly. Several hundred captured fighters have been released and returned to their communities with pledges from the elders to ensure they do not return to the fight. The APRP design envisions that former fighters will either be reintegrated at the local level or accepted into national training programs. Development funds will be provided to the entire district through the community development councils or other mechanisms established by the National Solidarity Program where such councils do not exist. Finally, the program includes an essential grievance resolution process to ensure that the community accepts the reintegrated fighters and that underlying issues are addressed.

The sustained pressure of combat operations targeting insurgent strongholds in the south and east over the winter is expected to alter the calculus of low and mid-level insurgents. Combined with the carrots of the reintegration program, this should begin to generate a groundswell of reintegration. If mid-level commanders decide to stop fighting, reintegration alone may produce a dramatic reduction in the number of fighters and the level of violence. Taliban commanders inside Afghanistan who were interviewed by a researcher at Harvard University's Carr Center expressed the view that their senior leadership based in Pakistan is controlled by the Pakistani government.¹¹ This nationalist sentiment might be an important

¹¹ "The Sun in the Sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents," by Matt Waldman, Crisis States Research Centre Discussion Paper 18, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, June 2010.

fissure between those on the frontlines of the insurgency and those in Pakistan. Addressing the issues of concern to the mid-level commanders might pacify some areas and reduce the complexity and difficulty of negotiations with Pakistan-based insurgent leaders.

ISAF forces are likely to play only a supporting role in the reintegration initiative, but ground units can nonetheless be critical facilitators and protectors of those who choose to stop fighting.¹² In some cases those who wish to leave the insurgent ranks may prefer to seek protection from an ISAF or other non-Afghan entity. More likely it will be Afghans—traditional leaders whether maliks, elders or mullahs, NDS intelligence personnel, Afghan local police—who are the conduit for contacts and discussions. The primary role of ISAF should be to provide protection to those who stop fighting and assist in providing alternative livelihoods. This program, if energetically implemented in tandem with other aspects of the strategy, can have a major impact in reducing the size and scope of the 30,000-strong insurgency.

Inclusive local governance is vital to achieving stability at the grassroots. It requires balanced representation, participation and distribution of benefits among the principal constituent groups in the key areas of the conflict. ISAF has identified 83 key districts as the geographical areas most critical to the trajectory of the conflict, most of them in the south and east where the conflict is concentrated. The means to achieve this inclusivity or balance of power among the key groups may be the formal government structures in some locations, but more likely it will involve traditional shuras or interim mechanisms such as the community development councils. The need to rely on traditional or interim structures for local decision-making stems from the dearth of government officials in most of the key districts; building formal government structures will take time.¹³

The key principle is that acknowledged tribal, socioeconomic, religious and/or ethnic leaders convene to ensure that the major groups are represented and their concerns addressed in an equitable manner. The chief difficulty is identifying capable local leaders trusted by the population, as Maj. Gen. Nick Carter (UK), the outgoing commander of Regional Command South, acknowledged. He relied on the provincial governor to identify key figures to form a stable and inclusive governance solution in the critical Arghandab district north of Kandahar City. The formula was complex: a well-regarded member of one branch of the Alikozai tribe was named district governor, and a respected member of another Alikozai branch became chief of police. Alikozai leaders in turn reached out to Ghilzai and other minority tribes to ensure they were represented on the district shura council, and elders were persuaded to return to the war-torn area once dominated by the Taliban.¹⁴ Another means of identifying influential individuals as well as principal grievances of a community is the district stabilization framework, which has been adopted for implementation in Regional Command South.¹⁵

Extending more representation, participation or benefits to some groups will necessarily require some redistribution. Shuras and other mechanisms can be used to reallocate resources

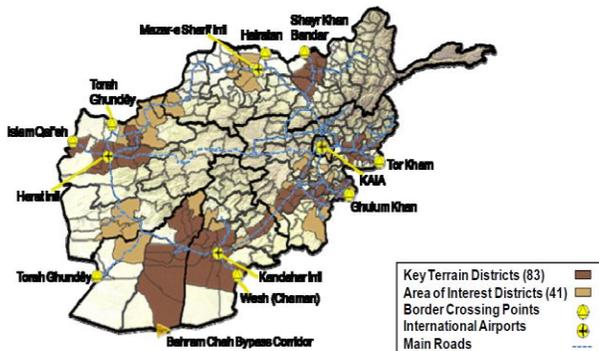
¹² Joint Force engagement with adversaries is addressed in the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations Activity Concepts, 8 November 2010, Part III, Joint Engagement Concept,

¹³ See for example “Afghan Government Falters in Kandahar,” by Joshua Partlow, *Washington Post*, November 3, 2010. In Kandahar city proper, only 40 of 120 government officials in critical posts were present for duty, and only 12 of 44 in four key districts outside the city (Panjwayi, Zhari, Dand and Arghandab).

¹⁴ DOD News Briefing with British Army Maj. Gen. Carter, October 28, 2010. Transcript at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4707>

¹⁵ Remarks by Michelle Schimpp, Deputy Director of the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs, USAID, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 14, 2010.

and institute anti-corruption and transparency measures as a way to reduce the power of some actors and increase legitimate governance over time. While reducing the dominance of some actors is necessary to achieve the desired balance, care should be taken not to create new intra-Pashtun rivalries or over-empower other actors who may then become the next “malign powerbrokers.” In this view, inclusivity is the more important effect to achieve in the short term.



A Political Diplomatic Strategy

“Bottom up” measures can generate momentum and advance conflict resolution at the local level, but they are not in themselves sufficient to achieve enduring stability. Despite the localized, networked character of the insurgency, many diplomats as well as researchers who have talked with Taliban leaders believe that an end to the war is not possible without a process that engages the senior leadership of the Taliban.¹⁶ Such a process is required to address national-level drivers of conflict and ensure that local pacts’ cumulative effect is conducive to national stability. In addition, a process is needed to take into account the regional drivers of instability, in particular the security concerns of Pakistan and India since tensions between the two are the primary regional driver of instability. A deliberate process can in itself play a reassuring function to allay the concerns of the many competing interests as well as address the legacy of thirty years of war in a systematic fashion. While any process will reflect Afghan proclivities, some of the mechanisms employed in other conflicts or political transitions may be useful in Afghanistan. This is likely to be a multiyear process.

An Afghan national reconciliation process is the most propitious mechanism for pursuing a negotiated settlement. United Nations or other international facilitation of this process is desirable to increase confidence among the parties and suggest means to achieve the declared goals. While a regional conference or process has been proposed as another possible reconciliation mechanism, the most direct stakeholders and rightful arbiters of a settlement are the Afghan people.¹⁷ Therefore, an “inside out” process is recommended, with Afghan interlocutors at the center of the process, aided by international facilitation. In addition, however,

¹⁶ Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) of the United Nations in Afghanistan, recognizes both aspects. He said “the Afghan Taliban has a range of interests and activities of about six miles. They are very local. They don’t go to Kabul.” Yet he believes that “Reintegration is the cart. The horse is the reconciliation.... The massive movement, the actual change will take place with the horse, the reconciliation.” *Afghanistan: Towards a Sustainable Political Process*, International Peace Institute, September 30, 2010. See also “Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects” by Antonio Giustozzi, *A Century Foundation Report*, June 2010.

¹⁷ See “Is a Regional Pact to Stabilize Afghanistan Possible?” by Tom Gregg, *Center on International Cooperation*, New York University, July 2010, p. 11. The author is also indebted to James Shinn for sharing a draft paper with extensive analysis of the regional dimensions of the conflict.

a coordinated, parallel effort is needed to ensure that the regional dimensions of the conflict are addressed as well. This may result in a regional security accord to codify the understandings reached to support an internal settlement. Finally, either separately or as a “Group of Friends,” key outside parties can bring to bear their influence to induce compromise or allay fears to arrive at a settlement.

Some elements of a political diplomatic approach are already taking shape. President Hamid Karzai has advocated outreach to insurgents throughout his tenure, and his position was broadly endorsed in a consultative “peace jirga” in June 2010. Some Taliban leaders were removed from the United Nations terrorist sanctions list. In October Karzai appointed a High Peace Council, a diverse group of 70 warlords, notables and former Taliban leaders, headed by former Afghan president (1992-96) and Northern Alliance leader Burhanuddin Rabbani. While some criticized the composition of the group, Rabbani and others represent at least some of the key factions whose tacit or active acceptance of a political solution will be required for its implementation.

A more substantive and inclusive process is desirable. President Karzai’s approach has been criticized as excluding nonviolent opposition and civil society groups. Their inclusion will help guarantee that Afghans broadly accept the eventual outcome. Since the parties to a negotiation must necessarily agree to the structure and process, President Karzai must be persuaded that it is in his interest to establish a broader, more structured process that identifies and addresses the core political issues in a systematic manner. Current and former Afghan and other officials who know him well say he is inclined to rely on personal relationships and personal contacts to convince insurgent leaders to reconcile. They characterize his approach as one of offering positions in exchange for his own security in power. “That kind of arrangement will completely destroy the prospect of good governance in Afghanistan,” one former senior Afghan official said.¹⁸ Providing personal assurances will be necessary to persuade the parties to arrive at an agreement, but the key to a lasting accord will be to address substantive issues with the needed structural reforms, rather than merely mete out shares of power or territory.

Facilitation can help overcome the climate of fear and mistrust. The UN SRSG de Mistura has formed a Salaam Support Group to aid the High Peace Council. De Mistura, who assumed charge of the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) last spring, secured a more tightly focused mandate from the UN Security Council that enables him to prioritize support to both Afghan national dialogue and regional dialogue. (U.N. Security Council Resolution 1917 reduces UNAMA’s priorities from nine to four.) Given the deep climate of mistrust and the complexity of the required negotiations, some diplomats and experts believe that the key required ingredient is a facilitator who Karzai knows and trusts and who is also acceptable to the Taliban. Some believe that person is Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN SRSG from 2001-07. Brahimi and de Mistura may be able to develop an effective working relationship and constructive division of labor to function as the principal facilitators of an accord.

Interlocutors. The principal insurgent group is the Taliban proper, often referred to as the Quetta Shura Taliban. Former diplomat and Taliban expert Michael Semple argues that 70 to 80 percent of the negotiating effort should be focused on the Taliban.¹⁹ By contrast, the Haqqani

¹⁸ Interview on background with former senior Afghan official, November 2010.

¹⁹ Semple was Deputy Special Representative of the European Union to Afghanistan in 2004-07 and is author of *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009). He has held extensive discussions with Taliban leaders.

group has less of a base in the Afghan population, although its founder Jalaluddin Haqqani was a famed anti-Soviet mujahedeen leader from the Zadran tribe of the Loya Paktia region (Paktia, Khost and Paktika) of southeastern Afghanistan. Today his son Siraj leads the group from its base in Miran Shah in North Waziristan, Pakistan.²⁰ Various Afghans describe it as a predatory, criminal group that has the closest ties to Al Qaeda and to Pakistan's intelligence service, and note that the current generation of Haqqanis may be closer to Arab countries and donors than to Afghans. The group is also responsible for numerous mass casualty attacks on both Afghans and foreigners in Afghanistan.

Pakistani intelligence reportedly promotes the idea of making the Haqqani group the dominant power in Loya Paktia. While this might provide Pakistan with the security of a known proxy in control of its western border, such an arrangement would not likely be acceptable to the Northern Alliance, which might well rearm in response, possibly with support from India.

The much smaller Hezb-i-Islami faction (HIG) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyr has a scattered presence in eastern and northern provinces. It met with Afghan government officials in March to offer a peace proposal, albeit on terms not acceptable to the government, and numerous fighters have laid down their weapons. It is generally assumed that Hekmatyr is primarily interested in securing a significant government position for himself.²¹

Content of an accord. Exploratory meetings have been conducted with various interlocutors, but it will take time to determine the actual (as opposed to declared) negotiating position of the principal Taliban insurgent leaders. It is difficult to predict the content of a negotiated settlement, or indeed the balance of issues that can be dealt with locally versus in a national pact, but several experts on the Taliban believe that they have become significantly more pragmatic since their ouster in 2001.²² The Taliban's principal demand has been the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Combat troops are scheduled to depart in 2014, although some training, assistance and counterterrorism presence is likely to remain. The Taliban also have demanded the strict application of Sharia (Islamic law), but Giustozzi notes that the Taliban have in recent years ceded to local commanders' discretion matters such as allowing schools, girls' attendance at schools, music, and other diversions that were once banned.

Reforms to create a more inclusive political process might be sufficient to induce a significant portion of the Taliban leadership and their marginalized rural base to make peace. A model of governance that balances central authority with local autonomy, such as prevailed in era of King Zahir Shah, would be appeal to many Pashtuns as respecting their equities nationally and in Kandahar. Consolidation of the current 34 provinces into eight would rectify the current weighting of power toward the center at the expense of the regions. To widen participation in key decisions, budgetary and other powers could be shifted to the elected provincial councils (and away from the provincial governors, who are appointed by the central government).²³ Guaranteeing equitable southern Pashtun representation in the security forces is also essential. These changes could be made by legislation without altering the constitution. Constitutional

²⁰ "The Haqqani Network," by Jeffrey Dressler, Afghanistan Report 6, Institute for Study of War, October 13, 2010.

²¹ "Afghan Hezb-e-Islami Hold Peace Talks in Kabul," BBC News, 22 March 2010, accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8579380.stm>.

²² See *Decoding the Taliban*, by Antonio Giustozzi, ed., (UK: C Hurst and Company, 2009), and his Century Foundation paper. Semple also holds this view.

²³ The author is grateful to Michael Semple for suggesting these reforms.

reforms that enhance inclusiveness should not necessarily be out of bounds provided they do not threaten the rights of women or minorities.

Another step could be to grant Taliban leaders a role in dispute resolution and the judiciary, while barring the draconian practices of the former Taliban rule. Semple notes that the government is already Islamic in name, sharia is acknowledged in the constitution, and some practices many in the west consider objectionable, such as forced virginity tests, are currently a feature of Afghan life. The question is whether a series of face-saving measures such as re-affirming the Islamic character of the society would provide what amounts to cover for those who wish to reconcile.

Any concessions made to either Pashtun or Taliban constituencies would need to be agreed to by Afghanistan's Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara groups to ensure a stable resulting balance. An eventual pact could be submitted to a national referendum. District elections could be held at a time and in a manner that served an incorporating function as part of the accord's implementation. In addition, a truth and reconciliation commission could be part of a settlement to document and publicize crimes, abuses and grievances of 30 years of war. Such commissions have played important roles in countries emerging from war or as part of democratic transitions, such as South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and El Salvador.

Pakistan is the key regional factor in the conflict. While a great number of countries surrounding Afghanistan have a stake in the outcome of the conflict, regional diplomacy to bolster efforts to end the war should focus in the first instance on Pakistan and India with the aim of ensuring that a political settlement does not give rise to increased competition or zero sum behavior at Afghanistan's expense. It may be tempting to see the best achievable outcome as a Kabul government closely aligned with and backed financially by India, but this could further destabilize the region. Pakistan would view such an arrangement as confirmation of its worst fears of encirclement and be even more inclined to undermine the Afghan government through armed proxies and other means. A government in Kabul that is seen as not under the sway of either India or Pakistan provides the most stable outcome.

Pakistani support for a negotiated settlement is vital since it has the ability to derail any accord through continued backing for insurgent groups. Pakistan primarily backs Afghan insurgent groups as a hedge against the consolidation of a pro-Indian government in Kabul. Even if some of Pakistan's concerns are more perception than reality, finding ways to allay them will reduce its incentive to support insurgent activity and armed proxies.

Normalization of Indian-Pakistan relations would benefit both countries and pave the way for a more stable and prosperous region, but few South Asia experts see much chance of that in the near term.²⁴ While a wider entente may be a long way off, the more modest objective of an Afghanistan that is not viewed as under the sway of either India or Pakistan might be achievable if all parties can be persuaded to take a few important steps. A formula might include these four measures:

India offers more information about its activities in Afghanistan to allay Pakistani concerns and agrees to a mechanism to demonstrate its ongoing commitment to transparency.

²⁴ "India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints," by C. Christine Fair, A Century Foundation Report, October 2010, p. 17-18, and *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?*, Ashley Tellis and Aroop Mukharji, eds., (Washington: Endowment for International Peace, 2010).

The continuing presence of the United States and other members of the international community in Afghanistan can be framed and structured to balance India's role and presence to allay Pakistani concerns about an Afghanistan dominated by India.

Afghanistan can offer, as part of a comprehensive agreement with Pakistan, to initiate a formal process of border demarcation consistent with its laws and legislative process. The Afghan government can justify this as a strategic initiative that will bring benefits to Afghans by adopting the European model that permits free flow of goods and people while recognizing formal borders and sovereignty.

A concerted campaign by countries with close ties to Pakistan may persuade it that its nuclear deterrent is sufficient defense against potential aggression by India. China, Britain and Saudi Arabia all wield significant influence and may be willing to offer inducements or assurances to help convince Pakistan to support an Afghan negotiated settlement. They may also credibly convey the likelihood of international isolation, sanctions, or retribution in the event of a terrorist attack that emanates from Pakistani soil.

Patience with Pakistan has worn thin in many quarters as of late 2010. There is little appetite for offering more extensive concessions to Pakistan to gain greater cooperation in shutting down Al Qaeda, Haqqani, Lashkar e Taiba and other armed militant activity emanating from its territory.²⁵ However, if Pakistan played a constructive role in resolving the Afghan conflict, it is possible that the United States would consider other steps that Pakistan seeks, such as opening its markets to Pakistani textiles and other goods, promoting dialogue to resolve the Kashmir dispute with India, and offering a civil nuclear cooperation deal comparable to the one concluded with India, provided that Pakistan adequately addresses proliferation concerns.²⁶

Moving from “Big COIN” to “Small COIN” to Security and Development Assistance

This paper's central argument is that momentum generated by the bottom-up measures and a robust political-diplomatic process can pave the way for a successful reduction in the U.S. military and ISAF coalition footprint and the shift to a “small” COIN effort led by the Afghan government by 2012. The counterinsurgency effort will likely continue in 2012-2014 even as political negotiations gain traction, but the main effort will become a civilian-led political and diplomatic one, with security and other military-conducted activities as the supporting effort. ISAF will downsize to an appropriately sized and led command, and it will ultimately transition into a security assistance office that will provide long-term training and advisory support to ANSF as part of the larger country team (embassy) development assistance program.

²⁵ Pakistan has alleged that India supports Baluch separatists from Afghan territory and that it has opened nine “consulates” in Afghanistan. The U.S. government might undertake to investigate some of the allegations in an effort to lay them to rest. Even if the claims are disingenuous, the U.S. effort might allay some of the Pakistani fears. The deep psychological insecurity that Pakistan feels with regard to India is likely to increase rather than decrease as India continues its rise, according to scholar Fair. The United States has pledged long-term aid and assistance to Pakistan to assure it of the U.S. commitment to a strategic partnership as well as to encourage needed reforms, but this effort has not persuaded Pakistan to end its reliance on armed proxies as a primary mode of ensuring its security and countering competitors. Pakistan has confronted armed groups that attack it (Pakistani Taliban) but not the Afghan Taliban or Haqqani group. Sir Hilary Synnott argues in *Transforming Pakistan* (London: IISS/Routledge, 2009) that only a sustained effort will persuade Pakistan to adopt an alternate approach to its external security and internal stability.

²⁶ See “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” by Rubin and Rashid, in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008.

The United States has committed to a “conditions-based” reduction in its forces beginning in July 2011. The initial reductions might be modest, particularly if conditions in the south and east require reinforcement by forces shifted out of areas that have progressed more rapidly. Total ISAF numbers will decline as other NATO forces depart in the coming year. Under this scenario, the bottom up measures will shrink the size and severity of the insurgency and begin a grassroots process of conflict resolution that will permit a reduction in forces. Conclusion of a national accord would provide a war-ending mechanism that would permit the COIN effort to shift to an assistance mission.

Reducing the military footprint. U.S. support to other countries’ counterinsurgency campaigns does not have to be massive to be successful, as shown in El Salvador, the Philippines and Colombia. The mission, disposition and composition of the downsized U.S. force will be critical determinants of whether this transition occurs successfully. The U.S. force must continue to conduct and provide support for the bottom up measures that create momentum, enhance security and resolve conflicts locally. Transitioning abruptly to a sole focus on counterterrorism, or pulling back from the main fronts of the war in the south and east would put at risk the gains achieved in 2011. The forces that remain must be able to conduct an array of missions in support of Afghan and civilian partners. Thus, the needed force would:

- Continue to implement the bottom up approach rather than restrict its mission to only counter-terrorism, combat operations or ANSF mentoring;
- Be highly distributed with a much smaller command structure, principally located in the conflict zones of the south and east, to achieve the most effect and avoid relinquishing gains achieved in 2011;
- Be SOF-heavy and perhaps SOF-led, to continue the primary activities of partnering with ALP, ANSOF, PRTs, local community councils and local governments. Working with indigenous forces is a core mission for most U.S. special operations forces;²⁷
- Leverage these Afghan and civilian partners to achieve a 50% force reduction in U.S. forces to 50,000 in 2012, with a further 50% reduction to 25,000 in 2013.
- Transition to a 25,000-strong international peacekeeping or border monitoring force as part of the enforcement provisions of a negotiated settlement.
- Provide ongoing training and advisory assistance (noncombat) for some time after settlement is concluded.

Long-term assistance and partnership. A key feature of most successful political settlements is a long-term commitment of assistance to ensure security, political stability and economic recovery and development. In the case of Afghanistan, a long-term state-building program as outlined in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy will be essential to achieve enduring stability.²⁸ Without sustained aid, the risk is great that terrorists will once again exploit conditions to find safe haven. While the scenario outlined here envisions an end to a U.S. combat role by 2014, a decade of robust assistance will be a necessary part of a successful endgame.

The three main components of an aid program would be:

²⁷ The various competencies of special operations forces are not widely known; counterterrorism is frequently (and erroneously) considered to be their sole or primary mission. For an overview, see the author’s “Inside the ‘New’ Special Operations Forces,” *Proceedings*, July 2009.

²⁸ The ANDS is at <http://www.ands.gov.af/>

- **Security.** Long-term training, advice and assistance to ANSF. Building professional, competent security forces is a generational effort. The conclusion of the conflict will permit reevaluation of the required size of the ANSF.²⁹
- **Governance.** While this paper emphasized reliance on traditional and informal governance structures in the near term, strengthening Afghanistan's civil service, justice system and formal representative institutions are vital to long-term democratic development.
- **Economic development.** Economic assistance must be targeted to achieve three objectives: economic growth to create jobs, revenue generation to support institutional development, and investment in literacy (currently 28 percent) and education as the essential foundations for political and economic development.

While Afghanistan is now and will remain for the near term heavily dependent on international assistance to achieve its state-building goals, the objective is to channel that assistance into productive investments that galvanize self-sustaining economic growth, regional commerce, infrastructure, development of natural resources and investment from China, India and Russia – three of the worlds' fastest growing economies. Efforts are under way to create a detailed roadmap for Afghanistan's development and a mutually beneficial process of regional economic integration.³⁰

In summary, the path to peace in Afghanistan is by no means easy but it is not impossible. War- ending strategies require the application of both military and political-diplomatic means. While the endeavor entails a heavy investment, not all the costs outlined here are borne by the United States. It must continue to lead where necessary and support other key members of the international community to achieve the common objectives. The path outlined here demands progressively less from military forces and more from political and diplomatic practitioners.

Linda Robinson served as Senior Adviser to the Afghanistan-Pakistan Center of Excellence at US Central Command in 2009-2010. This paper draws on open-source research and over two dozen interviews with current and former officials from Afghanistan, the United States and other countries and organizations, as well as South Asia and functional experts. Special thanks are due to Clare Lockhart, Michael Semple, Simon Shercliff, Mary Beth Long, Michael O'Hanlon, Jim Shinn, Adib Farhadi and John Nagl.

²⁹ The composition of the security forces matters just as much: the current policy of forming blended kandaks (battalions) with a balance of Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara is a powerful means to reinforce national identity over time. Efforts to increase recruitment of Pashtuns from southern and eastern provinces are vital; reintegrated fighters should be permitted and even encouraged to enlist.

³⁰ See *Fixing Failed States*, by Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart (Oxford, 2008), "The Economic Imperative: Stabilizing Afghanistan Through Economic Growth," by Nathaniel Fick and Clare Lockhart, CNAS Policy Brief, April 12, 2010; *The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy*, by S. Frederick Starr and Andrew C. Kuchins, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2010, as well as the Kabul conference implementation plan.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).

