



Will the U.S. Win in Afghanistan?

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We ask several leading foreign policy thinkers about America's prospects in the conflict.

Last fall, a two-part question circulated throughout the Pentagon: Can the United States win in Afghanistan? Will the United States win in Afghanistan?

In this case, "win" meant accomplishing the strategic objectives of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, as presented in President Obama's December 2009 [speech](#) at West Point: disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan through "a military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan."

The consensus among civilian and military staffers and officials was that while roughly half thought the U.S. military could win in Afghanistan, almost nobody believed that it would. This disconnect has created an uncomfortable situation where some of the people who design, refine, and implement U.S. strategy in Afghanistan simply do not believe it will ultimately succeed.

Today, the Obama administration acknowledges setbacks, such the increase in attacks by Afghan security forces on U.S. and ISAF troops, the Taliban's suspension of the negotiating process with the United States, and the alleged murder of sixteen civilians in the Kandahar province by an Army staff sergeant. Nevertheless, the White House affirms that its Afghanistan strategy is working. Two weeks ago, General John Allen told the House Armed Services Committee, "I am confident that we will prevail in this endeavor." On Saturday, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta [proclaimed](#): "In Afghanistan we've also made a turning point. The level of violence has gone down...We've seen the Taliban weakened so that they've been unable to establish and organize efforts...The bottom line is it's working."

Public opinion [polls](#) show that the American public is increasingly skeptical of the U.S. war strategy in Afghanistan and the likelihood of its success. The majority of Americans think the United States is not winning the war in Afghanistan (62 percent), that the war is going "somewhat" or "very" badly (68 percent), and that all U.S. troops should be withdrawn earlier than the 2014 (55 percent). The vast majority of Americans now oppose the war (72 percent), an increase of 21 percent since President Obama entered the White House.

With less than twenty months until U.S. troops are scheduled to be withdrawn, we asked several foreign policy experts who focus in Afghanistan to address this question:

"The Obama administration's stated objectives in Afghanistan are to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven, prevent the Taliban from overthrowing the government, and build up Afghan security forces in order to transition U.S. combat forces out of the country by 2014. Based on the current strategy, do you think that the Obama administration will achieve its goals?"

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- [*Andrew Exum*](#), Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security

I may lose my think-tanking license for writing this, but my honest answer to the question is that I simply do not know. I have been traveling to and studying Afghanistan for a decade now, and the more I learn about the country and the conflict there, the less confident I am in my ability to know anything certain about what will or will not happen as a result of U.S. actions.

I believe Afghanistan may be a case in which the president's policy will succeed but not the strategic goals associated with that policy. It may be possible, in other words, to continue to disrupt and dismantle al-Qaeda while failing in the effort to create a stable Afghan government.

The question asked specifically if the United States could prevent the Taliban from overthrowing the government, and the answer to that question is probably yes. My suspicion, [which has been unchanged since 2009](#), is that the people of Afghanistan will suffer for the foreseeable future from a proxy war fought between elements supported by United States and its allies on the one hand and elements supported by Pakistan's security services on the other hand. The United States can ensure the Taliban and its supporters across the Durand Line do not win that war. But it will be very difficult to minimize the suffering of the Afghan people, who have surely already endured more than their fair share of pain.

- [*Jamie M. Fly*](#), Executive Director, Foreign Policy Initiative

The Obama administration's (and America's) ability to meet those goals will depend in large part on the decisions that President Obama makes in the coming months. If he follows the reported advice of Vice President Biden and others in his administration who favor an early announcement of additional troop withdrawals in 2013, the strategy will be seriously compromised. With the surge forces that the President sent to Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 set to return home by the end of this September, our commanders on the ground are already being forced to make do with lower force levels than they would have preferred.

In the coming months, we will see if the gains that have been achieved at great cost in American lives in areas like Helmand and Kandahar hold as we hand over more control to Afghan security forces. The situation in the east along the border with Pakistan remains uncertain and the

administration does not appear to have a coherent Pakistan strategy that would enable success in Afghanistan.

These uncertainties have led General John Allen to say that he will not be able to adequately assess required troop levels for 2013 until the end of this year after the surge forces are withdrawn and the fighting season comes to an end.

Over the last three years, the Obama administration has pursued what appears to be a schizophrenic policy toward Afghanistan. Despite his decisions early in his administration to double down and send tens of thousands of additional troops, the President and his top advisors are clearly uncomfortable with a war that they believe to be a political liability.

If the war is lost, it will be lost in Washington, not on the battlefield. Our men and women in uniform can succeed, but only if they are given the resources and time to do so.

- *Colonel Gian P. Gentile, Professor of American History, United States Military Academy at West Point*

For the last eleven years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan the American Army has displayed a conspicuous and troubling tendency to fall in line with an American Way of War: A Way which sees any problem in war solved by an optimal operational solution discovered by the army's senior officers, especially its higher ranking generals. In Vietnam it was search and destroy; in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan it has been hearts and minds counterinsurgency.

To be sure wars fought for a nation's existence like World War II--with the Allies goal of unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan--a military's operational framework can provide the solution in war. However, in limited wars of choice such as Vietnam and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan sometimes even with an optimal operational solution the wars can still be lost, or fought to a point to where they are no longer worth fighting. This seems to be the state of affairs in Afghanistan today. Yet instead of seeing the strategic reality that the war is no longer worth fighting, the American Army maintains its faith in an operational solution to save a war fought under a botched strategy.

That botched strategy has sought to achieve very limited policy aims--the reduction of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan--with a maximalist operational method of armed nation building. It represents the death of good American strategy and a waste of good American blood and treasure.

- [*Michael Wahid Hanna, Fellow, The Century Foundation*](#)

The core goals of the Afghan war are still within reach for the Obama administration, as they are not reliant on the actual defeat of the Taliban. Al-Qaeda's role in Afghanistan has been degraded materially and their effective presence is now *de minimis*. The Taliban are also not in a position to topple the central government and reassert political control over all of the Afghanistan.

However, the United States and its allies simply cannot defeat the Afghan insurgency. The insurgency has proven to be resilient and is able to take advantage of safe havens in Pakistan.

As such, the United States can achieve its core mission, albeit with a continuing but vastly diminished commitment post-2014. However, the only viable pathway for achieving a durable settlement without an ongoing U.S. presence remains a negotiated outcome with the insurgency. Short of this result, the United States will have an enduring military presence in the country. This is obviously a suboptimal outcome. Yet, we have not seen a truly committed approach to the political track, which remains parallel to military efforts.

It is incumbent that the United States expend political capital now to test the ultimate intentions of the Taliban leadership and their capacity to enforce a settlement, if one is reached. In turn, this will inform planning for the post-2014 environment. The war will not be won in that timeframe regardless of U.S. military strategy. Bearing this in mind, harmonizing political and military strategy represents a prudent approach with few downside risks.

In any event, plans for transition should continue unabated, as an extended presence under a Strategic Partnership Agreement is only conceivable or sustainable with a vastly reduced presence. And it is only if a political process fails that an American commitment to Afghanistan is defensible.

- [*Malou Innocent*](#), *Foreign Policy Analyst, CATO Institute*

The pervasive corruption in the Afghan government, the militant safe havens in Pakistan, and the "[crisis of trust](#)" between American soldiers and Afghan troops will likely prevent the Obama administration from achieving its goals. Fortunately, a sustained U.S. troop presence to deny al Qaeda a safe haven is unnecessary--in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Al Qaeda poses [a manageable security problem](#) that requires discrete operations, intelligence sharing, and surgical strikes when necessary.

Let us remember that in 2009, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, [warned](#) that without a surge of forces the conflict "will likely result in failure." The Obama administration tripled the American military presence and yet we have seen no meaningful turn around. A classified NATO report, "State of the Taliban 2012," [said](#) the Taliban's "strength, motivation, funding and tactical proficiency remains intact." And in [separate dissents](#) appended to the 2011 National Intelligence Estimate, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Marine General John Allen, and the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, [argued](#) that the Taliban have [shown no readiness](#) to abandon their political goals.

Slowly turning over portions of the country to Afghan security forces implies that threats to Afghanistan's internal security will be resolved or substantially diminished in the next eighteen months. Such problems will likely persist, but do not threaten vital U.S. security interests.

- [*Candace Rondeaux*](#), *Senior Analyst, Afghanistan, International Crisis Group*

There is not much to recommend the Obama administration's current strategy on Afghanistan. Barring a major course correction in U.S. policy on South Asia and a tectonic shift that unifies the increasingly divided Afghan political elite, Washington is unlikely to succeed in building up an Afghan security force capable of confronting the Taliban after 2014. Rife with factionalism, high attrition rates and low morale, Afghan security forces are ill-prepared to handle the threat from insurgent safe havens in Pakistan. They will be even less prepared if NATO proceeds with proposals to slash military aid to Afghanistan and to drastically reduce the number of Afghan security forces on the rolls by 2015 or 2017 without a comprehensive contingency plan for demobilization. Washington's effort to blunt the threat in South Asia through negotiations with the Taliban doesn't offer much hope either. Neither Obama nor President Hamid Karzai have been able to convince Afghan insurgents of the value of breaking ranks with their backers in the Pakistani military. The Pakistani military, meanwhile, has repeatedly demonstrated it is prepared to go to great lengths to control the negotiation process and to marginalize or even eliminate perceived defectors or their backers among Afghanistan's elites. Mullah Omar's Quetta shura, as a result, appears to be split over whether and how to proceed with their nascent talks with the U.S. Osama bin Laden is dead and gone but leading Taliban negotiators involved in the Qatar process have refused to publicly renounce al-Qaeda, saying that do so would be a betrayal of Islamic values. The Taliban are unlikely to overthrow the Afghan government wholesale but they don't have to for the White House strategy to fail--it already has.

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