



Laying Out the Stakes in Afghanistan

By *MAX FISHER* on November 18, 2009 5:06pm

As President Obama nears his decision on how many additional troops to send to Afghanistan, pundits are taking the opportunity to explain the stakes. Earlier predictions [placed](#) Obama's decision just before Thanksgiving, but he may be signaling a later [date](#) to announce his decision. Earlier this week, he [told](#) NBC's Chuck Todd, "I will announce my decision over the next several weeks... I'm confident that at the end of this process we will be able to present to the American people in very clear terms what exactly is at stake." Whenever the decision comes, these are the factors that lie in the balance:

- American National Security Slate's [Fred Kaplan evaluates](#)** al-Qaeda's ability to launch another attack on America. "It is, of course, this assumption that makes Americans at all interested in the fate of Afghanistan. The main rationale for staying in the war has always been that if Kabul fell to the Taliban, al-Qaida terrorists would once again move in and use the country as a 'sanctuary' or 'safe haven' from which to plan attacks on the United States, as they did on Sept. 11, 2001."
- Indo-Pakistan Nuclear War** The New Yorker's [Steve Coll reminds us](#) that the Taliban is "determined to wage war against India's secular, Hindu-dominated democracy." The Lashkar-e-Taiba, which carried out the bloody attacks in Mumbai, is one of the "Punjab-based, ardently anti-Indian Islamist groups" that make up the Pakistani Taliban. Successes by the Afghanistan Taliban would greatly empower such groups to launch more and bigger attacks. India would have no choice but to respond with military force, which "would present, repetitively, the problem of managing the role of nuclear weapons in a prospective fourth Indo-Pakistani war."
- Afghan Human Rights** The Huffington Post's [Malou Innocent weighs](#) the human rights impacts of our presence versus our departure. "When some people in Washington hear that nation-building in Afghanistan is not a precondition to making America safer, or that prolonging our presence undermines America's security, the argument for remaining then shifts to preserving the security and human rights of the people of Afghanistan," she writes. "The rationale for intervening in Afghanistan was not the Taliban's human rights abuses."
- Breaking Corruption Cycle** Foreign Policy's [Thomas Ricks approvingly recounts](#) a speech by author and military consultant David Kilcullen. "There are two real options in Afghanistan: Either tell the Kabul government we are pulling out, or put in enough troops to actually break [the cycle of corruption](#), which he said would be a minimum of about 40,000. 'We either put in enough to control, or we get out.' The worst thing we could do, he added, is put in enough troops to get more people killed but not enough to do anything to break change the behavior of corrupt officials."
- Costs and Exit Date** [Spencer Ackerman points out](#) that both are absent from General Stanley McChrystal's war plan. "What it doesn't contain is a sense that the war has to operate within certain parameters. The closest McChrystal comes to a timeline is writing that 'failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) -- while Afghan security capacity matures -- risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible.' But that's not the same thing as saying the war will *end* if those 12 months pass with Taliban momentum intact. And nowhere does it say that the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan that he commands has to operate within a budget of X billion dollars. Meanwhile, pretty much every other policy discussion operates within precisely that framework of time and expense."

The Debate

[What If We Fail in Afghanistan?](#) *Steve Coll*, The New Yorker

[All Or Nothing](#) *David Kilcullen*, Foreign Policy

[Afghan Human Rights](#) *Malou Innocent*, The Huffington Post

[Obama's Real Afghanistan Decision](#) *Fred Kaplan*, Slate

[How This War Ends](#) *Spencer Ackerman*, The Washington Independent

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