

Ask the Experts: Will America 'Win' in Afghanistan?

by Micah Zenko
April 3, 2012



An Afghan National army soldier keeps watch as a U.S. helicopter flies overhead in Khan Neshin district of Helmand province (Courtesy Reuters/Ahmad Masood).

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(62 percent), that the war is going "somewhat" or "very" badly (68 percent), and that all U.S. troops should be withdrawn earlier than the 2014 (55 percent).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?"

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 **inseparate 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.