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## Negotiating a Ceasefire to the Afghanistan Study Group War

*Judah Grunstein | Bio | 15 Sep 2010*

Thought a political settlement to the insurgency in Afghanistan was going to be hard to come by? Should be a cakewalk compared to negotiating a ceasefire to the firefight that's been going on this week between the authors of the [Afghanistan Study Group report](#) and its critics. But since I hate to see people I like and whose work I admire engaged in such a bitter argument, I'll give it a try.

The [initial withering assault by Joshua Foust](#) can be found here, as well as more constructive criticism from [Michael Cohen here](#), and [Andrew Exum here](#). This [follow-up post by Foust](#) has links to all the principals' responses, as well as further criticism from other informed observers.

In the interests of transparency, my professional editorial relationship with Foust, Exum and Cohen has developed into friendships with all of them, and I've also edited and ran articles on the WPR front page by Justin Logan, Bernard Finel and Steve Clemons (and gladly would again).

Also in the interests of transparency, I've only read excerpts of the ASG report, mainly because I, like most of the report's critics, am in agreement with regard to its broad conclusions (i.e., the excerpts I have read): The current approach to Afghanistan is not working, and there is a mismatch between resources applied and strategic interests involved.

The major criticism of the report has been that its analysis is based more on Washington tropes than on ground-level knowledge of Afghanistan and the war effort, and that as a result, its policy recommendations do not offer a realistic or effective alternative to the current failed approach. Its authors defend themselves and the report against these charges by either denying their accuracy or arguing that the report is meant more to influence the current policy debate on a "big picture, grand strategy" level than to present a detailed action plan.

Unfortunately, as Exum already noted, this bruising debate is taking place out in the public arena, instead of in a conference room during an early draft stage of the document, because it seems clear to this sympathetic (to all sides) observer that these differences are not only reconcilable, but potentially complementary.

To my mind, the problem that the debate reveals, and that no one has addressed so far, is the degree to which Afghanistan now represents policy paralysis: We cannot achieve our goals with our current approach, but we can neither afford the costs that a fully resourced approach would entail, nor accept the risks that a more limited approach would expose us to. What's more, because of the uncertainty of outcomes in Afghanistan, you could interchange the verb clauses of that sentence in all the various permutations, and it still holds up.

Unfortunately, that paralysis, combined with the kind of internecine fighting going on now over the ASG report, favors the default position, which is the current approach. And that's before Gen. David Petraeus has even begun his anticipated campaign to either postpone the July 2011 troop drawdown or request even further U.S. troop commitments.

Clearly, the ASG report was an effort to shore up the argument that the risks involved with downsizing our footprint in Afghanistan are manageable. I happen to agree with that premise, even if I probably could not

defend it to the satisfaction of the report's critics any better than the ASG report did.

My hunch, though, is that everyone is partly right here. The report's authors underestimated the degree to which this kind of document has to win over the issue and area experts in order to enjoy credibility among the non-experts (like myself) who follow this debate. And its critics overestimate the degree to which the "in the weeds" reality on the ground is going to influence either the political debate in Washington or public opinion in general. In U.S. politics, as in counterinsurgency, perception and narrative are the most powerful tools to drive fence-sitters into picking a side. Petraeus understands that when it comes to COIN tactics, both in-theater and domestically. Until opponents of the U.S. military commitment in Afghanistan demonstrate a similar understanding, it will be very difficult to transform popular dissatisfaction with the war into support for ending it.

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