

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *The Right Direction on Afghanistan*

Paul R. Pillar  
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Although [Christopher Preble is right](#) that [Secretary of Defense Panetta's statement](#) about NATO forces transitioning out of a combat role in 2013 is long overdue and leaves important unanswered questions about U.S. troops in Afghanistan during the next three years, this transition is definitely a step in the right direction. Some of the questions that still need to be asked involve why *any* further costs and casualties should be incurred to obtain some result that is ill-defined and may not be achievable anyway. But as each week on the calendar goes by, the difference between the most prudent possible withdrawal from this expedition and what the Obama administration seems to have in mind gets less and less. The war in Afghanistan has long been an endeavor that, having missed the obvious off-ramp following the ousting of the Taliban from power and the rousting of al-Qaeda from its Afghan haven in the early weeks of the war, continues because we couldn't seem to find any other off-ramp. We stay in it because we're in it. [Preble references one of his own pieces](#) from three years ago in which he appropriately asked, has the war "become an interest in itself? (That is, we must win the war because it is the war we are in.)" For an almost caricatured illustration of how this indeed is how the war has come to be seen, see the [response by Kori Schake](#) to this week's announcement by Panetta:

*The White House appears set to use progress against al-Qa'ida as justification for accelerating an end to the war in Afghanistan. Since the president has concluded that we aren't fighting the Taliban, just al-Qa'ida, no need to stick around Afghanistan until the government of that country can provide security and prevent recidivism to Taliban control. The president will declare victory for having taken from al-Qa'ida the ability to organize large scale attacks, and piously intone that nation building in Afghanistan is Afghanistan's responsibility. This policy will not win the war in Afghanistan.*

Yes, nation building in Afghanistan is Afghanistan's responsibility. And yes, the war has been about fighting al-Qaeda. Maybe memories have dulled over ten years, but that's how this expedition began. Had something to do with a terrorist attack in the late summer of 2001.

Here's Schake's definition of a win in Afghanistan: "It is the enemy ceasing to contest our objectives that constitutes winning." That's pretty much in the same spirit as saying we must win the war because it is the war we are in. It leaves unclear not only what our objectives are but, at least as important, whether they should be our objectives in terms of U.S. interests that are or are not at stake.

This being a political silly season, there is of course other sniping at the administration's announcement. If Barack Obama does something, then by definition it must be wrong in Republican eyes. Presumed Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, trotting out one of his favorite terms to apply to the president, says it is "naïveté" to announce in advance any drawdown of troops. This is an odd stance given that Romney himself has endorsed a withdrawal of nearly all U.S. and NATO troops by 2014. As [Jay Bookman](#) observes, the only way to interpret Romney's comment is as "meaningless noise on the campaign trail" from someone who is trying "to pump himself up as a strong-willed military leader." When asked earlier how he would end the war in Afghanistan without negotiations with the Taliban, which he has rejected, Romney said, "by beating them." No further word from the former Massachusetts governor on just how he would do that.

The concept of beating the Taliban is put in perspective by findings that came out this week in an [internal NATO report](#) based on interrogations of thousands of captured Afghan fighters. The report indicated that the Taliban does not feel as if it is being beaten. Moreover, it is getting help from those whose cooperation NATO would need to prevail: elements of the Afghan army and the Pakistani intelligence service. The report also indicated that neither aggressive raids nor the surge of U.S. troops spurred the Taliban into talks.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the interrogations was that the Taliban rejects dealing with al-Qaeda. The specific reasons cited were that such dealings would invite Western forces to target the Taliban and that al-Qaeda no longer has much to offer these days. The Taliban is an insular group that has never shared al-Qaeda's goals despite a previous alliance of convenience. Short of any international terrorist connection, the United States has no significant interest in the internal organization of Afghanistan and no reason to continue fighting a war over it.