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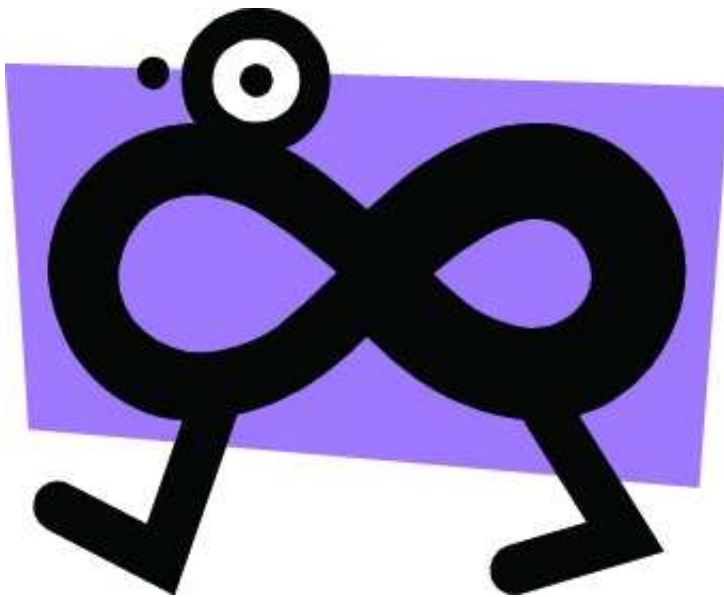
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Pulling a Fast One in Afghanistan

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[Christopher A. Preble](#) ^[2]



I have just returned from a discussion of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan hosted by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. The meeting of 25 or so journalists, think tankers, and current and former government officials featured introductory remarks by Gilles Dorronsoro, visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment, and FDD's Bill Roggio. FDD President, Cliff May, moderated the session. The meeting was officially on the record, but I'm relying solely on my hand-written notes, so I won't quote the other attendees directly.

I would characterize the general mood as grim. A few attendees pointed to the killing of a number of Taliban figures in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and reports of progress in Marja and the rest of Helmand province as evidence of progress. These gains, one speaker maintained, were sustainable and would not necessarily slip in the event that U.S. forces are directed elsewhere.*

Dorronsoro disputed these assertions. He judged that the situation today is worse than it was a year ago, before the surge of 30,000 additional troops. The killing of individual Taliban leaders,

or foot-soldiers, was also accompanied by the inadvertent killing of innocent bystanders, including most recently nine children. So there is always the danger that even targeted strikes based on timely, credible intelligence, will over the long term replace one dead Talib with two or four or eight of his sons, brothers, cousins, and tribesman. How many people have said "We can't kill our way to victory"?

For Dorronsoro, the crucial metric is security, not number of bad guys and suspected bad guys killed. And, given that he can't drive to places that he freely visited two or three years ago, he judges that security in the country has gotten worse, not better. Many U.S. and Western troops cannot leave their bases without encountering IEDs or more coordinated attacks from insurgents. U.S. and NATO forces don't control territory, and there is little reason to think that they can. Effective counterinsurgencies (COIN) are waged by a credible local partner, a government that commands the respect and authority of its citizens. That obviously doesn't exist in Afghanistan. The Afghan militia, supposedly the key to long-term success, is completely ineffective.

Secretary Gates asserted on Monday that the draw down of U.S. troops would begin as scheduled this July, although, as the *Washington Post's* Greg Jaffe writes,^[3] "he cautioned that any reductions in U.S. forces would likely be small and that a significant U.S force will remain in combat for the rest of 2011." NATO remains committed to 2014 as the date to hand over security to the Afghan government. Whether the United States retains a long-term presence in the country is the subject of much speculation.

For the people from FDD, it shouldn't be. Roggio stressed that the problem with U.S. strategy is that Americans were looking for an exit, when we should be making a long-term commitment to Afghanistan. May concurred. When I asked them to clarify how long term, both demurred (Roggio said "a decade or more" but didn't elaborate). I also inquired about the resources that would be required to constitute "commitment". Given that we have over 100,000 troops on the ground, and that we will spend over \$100 billion in Afghanistan in this year alone, how much more of a commitment would they find acceptable? Again, no definitive answer.

Roggio did claim, however, that a long-term commitment would increase the prospect of turning the Pakistanis. This is the crucial other piece in the puzzle. Nearly everyone in the meeting agreed that the unwillingness of the Pakistanis to cooperate with the United States had allowed a safe haven to be created in North Waziristan and elsewhere along the AfPak border. Most in the meeting admitted that Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan did not always align with our own. None had an answer for decisively changing this calculus, but some agreed with Roggio that evidence of progress in Afghanistan -- combined with a credible commitment on the part of the U.S. to remain for the long-haul -- would convince the Pakistanis to side with the Americans.

If you're reading carefully, you can see a circular logic here, brilliantly encapsulated by Dorronsoro. I paraphrase: We cannot win Afghanistan without turning Pakistan, but we cannot turn the Pakistanis without winning in Afghanistan. It is no wonder that one attendee declared herself growing increasingly depressed as the meeting wore on.

* Such optimism is worthy of a post all its own. I'll write more later about why the need to show progress in order to maintain flagging public support for the mission contributes to a cycle of wishful thinking and, at times, outright distortion. During Vietnam, critics called the happy talk emanating from the Pentagon the 5 o'clock follies. It led to a credibility gap. I submit that a similar

phenomenon is playing out today.

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