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civilians, not to mention the deep frustrations at being unable to distinguish friend and foe. Faced with uncertain prospects, unacceptable costs and disillusionment at home, NATO faces inevitable troop reductions, racing against the clock to develop a stable government before its forces depart.

The objective cannot be phrased in terms of Taliban or NATO - they are both alien forces, both racing against different clocks. The preferred winner has to be the Afghan people energized by the prospects of a new life opening before them. This is exactly what President Karzai has expressed at the recent [international conference](#). "I invite us to elevate our vision above the din of the battle with our common enemies and to focus on our noble goal: a peaceful, prosperous and stable Afghanistan." This is where NATO's failure has been most critical - it has failed to support Afghans in developing a [vision of a new Afghanistan](#), an Afghanistan incorporating basic human aspirations for a better life with responsible government. The military effort is self-defeating. Its long logistics tail feeds the very corruption it is fighting against, both within Afghanistan and in neighboring countries. The high cost in lives -- both NATO and Afghan -- badly undermines support within Afghanistan and at home. Some of the most knowledgeable commentators are coming to this same conclusion. [Ahmed Rashid](#) argues that, "We now desperately need a political strategy to take precedence over the military." [Richard Haass](#) echoes this, "The war the United States is now fighting in Afghanistan is not succeeding and is not worth waging in this way."

The ambivalence of the American people is captured succinctly in two opposing comments on a recent posting by [Doug Bandow](#) which argues that, "The original justification for war long ago disappeared...It's hard to fathom another reason for staying." One commenter concludes that, "These people NEVER left the stone age....this government of ours is dropping tens of billions into a vast wasteland." In contrast to this, another commenter questions, "but just because the Taliban are killing thousands seems to him [Bandow] not a worthwhile reason for us to help." Many, perhaps most, Americans now see Afghanistan as a black pit, a hopeless country mired in ancient poverty. Nonetheless, there remains a strong tradition of helping downtrodden people. Yet, news at home provides a steady stream of reports of bullets, bombs, blasts and bodies. It provides no sense of Afghanistan Awakening - the strivings of an ancient people to move into the modern age. Thousands of positive steps forward get no mention in the daily press.

So what to do?

The first step clearly has to be to develop more [rational objectives](#), fitting Afghanistan into a broader strategy. The basic objective can only be [helping Afghans to build a better life](#). And this has to be part of a larger objective to promote global prosperity as the only route to avoid global turmoil. Afghanistan has become a major test of US and NATO interest and capability to promote development of a vibrant, prosperous, open Muslim society. The best NATO can do is promote a stable central government which facilitates economic development throughout the country. It cannot force this government to eliminate internal corruption, but it can insist that NATO efforts, and especially NATO payments, be as open and transparent as possible.

The strategy needs to shift, not overnight but steadily, from a military one to one focused on the [economic imperative](#) noted by Fick and Lockhart as being a core element of Afghan stability. This has to provide a steady increase in visible development efforts at the local level, visible not only to Afghans but to the Americans and their allies at home who have to support this effort to build freedom in a faraway place, who have to see results, who have to believe in their own ideals, who have to help protect a vulnerable population from a brutal menace which the United States helped to create. Local security must depend on commitment of local leaders to insure their own security. There is something out of place about the NATO difficulties in getting Afghans to fight for their own interests. Afghans have historically been fighters, and the Taliban manages to field dedicated units. The key difference is clearly motivation -

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- Jim Phillips
- Derek Reveron
- RSIS
- Paul Saunders
- David Schenker
- Ghassan Schbley
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- Daniel Serwer
- George Smith
- Scott Snyder
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local Afghans will fight to defend their local interests, if they are convinced that there is something worthwhile to defend. [Marjah](#) residents are slowly coming to believe that there might be a viable alternative to Taliban rule; some [other villages](#) have decided to actively oppose Taliban control. In the north, various [local militias](#) defend their own territories, sometimes with US support, often at odds with one another and/or the central government, but uniformly anti-Taliban. In a recent policy shift, General Petraeus is supporting the development of [local defense units](#), a move even approved by [President Karzai](#) despite its obvious decentralization effects. NATO forces can help facilitate Afghan government support, but prospects of a better life are even more important to provide incentives for people to take their security into their own hands. Local groups need to see that there is an alternative to the Taliban, and it is not NATO, it is their own local interests, their own development, a route to a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

The results can begin, indeed must begin, in quiet areas, focusing not on the least secure areas but the most secure, the priority districts that Shahm Mahmood Miakhel has called [centers of gravity](#). NATO must build on success and focus on areas where it can get the biggest return for the least cost, especially in lives. Such results can demonstrate what can be done to improve lives, to build an economy with the infrastructure of roads, businesses, municipal services that are needed. Most importantly to build people, to give them the education and skills needed for a better life. This means supporting local councils and regional leaders who work to take charge of their own lives and build their own communities. Competent local governments are more important than a strong central government. Good governance is more important than some veneer of democracy; responsiveness, fairness and transparency are critical. Widespread grass-roots development is the only alternative to interminable fighting and instability, what [Richard Haass](#) has termed "reorienting U.S. Afghan policy toward decentralization." NATO has to help build an attractive alternative to the medieval asceticism and intolerance of the Taliban, an alternative attractive to the Afghan people, to the Pakistani and Central Asian neighbors watching closely, to the whole Muslim world and beyond. This is the real challenge and it will not be achieved in a short year or two. [Secretary Clinton](#) clearly recognizes this, commenting that "the U.S. has stood beside countries [through] ups and downs a lot longer than eight years." The commitment indeed has to be a long-term one, but it cannot be a long-term major military commitment, but rather a robust commitment to support continuing political, social and economic development.

Rebuilding support at home is essential for this. [Another commenter](#) on a web posting lamented that "it was a mistake to invade almost 10 YEARS ago and we have not accomplished ANYTHING." This is a vivid demonstration of what a dismal, inept job the government and the media have done in raising awareness of accomplishments and of the thousands of Afghans who are working hard to bring their country into the modern world, risking and too often losing their own lives in this struggle. Afghanistan will not [collapse](#) as Vietnam did, but there are deep concerns that NATO support will collapse, that the most dedicated people will be left in the lurch. Rebuilding support requires:

- Articulation of a clear sense of purpose, along with a new [vision](#) of what Afghanistan can become: open discussions, bargaining and proposal development in both Afghanistan and among NATO allies. Any comprehensive approach has to address regional stabilization and be set into a broader strategic context.
- Widespread positive publicity on a "thousand points of light" -- the myriad projects which are today improving the lives of everyday Afghans -- educational, agricultural, construction and business activities now in progress and helping to build the new Afghanistan. It is critical that NATO publics see Afghanistan as being full of dynamic, forward-looking individuals who are actively working for better lives and appreciate the support they are getting. Publicity and media development within Afghanistan is equally important. [Afghanistan Alive](#) and [Good Afghan News](#) are already doing some of this, but there is no similar positive publicity in the United States.
- Encouraging a broader development of local press and media, both as a check on government corruption and as a counter to Taliban propaganda. In a largely illiterate society, radio is a critical communications vehicle and is

adroitly exploited by the Taliban. NATO needs to do more to support independent Afghan voices which can provide a more balanced and attractive view of Afghan developments. The Taliban's gamble on increasing pressure on civilians must be made to further undermine their appeal. NATO is now [actively denouncing](#) the insurgents for killing and wounding civilians -- over 200 in the last several weeks. But statements from NATO headquarters have little impact in the field; much broader dissemination from Afghan sources is necessary.

- Minimizing military operations. Help to put a lid on Taliban expansion, especially in the south, but focus efforts in quieter areas. Local security must depend on commitment of local leaders to insure their own security.
- Encouraging involvement of grass roots organizations in the United States and allied countries with grass roots Afghan organizations. Help these organizations adopt and sponsor specific projects -- educational, municipal, commercial -- to maximize not only NATO citizen involvement, but word of mouth publicity of positive developments.

Any comprehensive approach has to incorporate allied efforts and regional stabilization. President Obama's address to the United Nations on [global issues](#) stressed the need for international cooperation, though it did not specifically call attention to the potential for Islamic radicals to greatly complicate these efforts. Struggling in Afghanistan only makes sense as part of thus larger effort to integrate the Muslim world into a global development program that is essential for US prosperity. That's [why we need to be there](#) and our stated objective has to make this clear. The alternative to the Taliban is not NATO but a prosperous Afghanistan.

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