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## Exiting the Afghan Quagmire

Posted by Malou Innocent on October 7th, 2009

Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's former ambassador to Washington, and Anatol Lieven, a professor at King's College London, [argue](#) in this morning's *Financial Times* how we can exit the Afghan quagmire.

The west should therefore pursue a political solution, open negotiations with the Taliban and offer a timetable for a phased withdrawal in return for a ceasefire. This should begin with the military pulling out of specific areas in return for Taliban guarantees not to attack western bases and Afghan authorities in those areas. If the Taliban refuses such terms, then military pressure should continue. The point should not be to eliminate the Taliban – which is impossible – but to persuade it to agree to a deal.

Lodhi and Lieven's argument echoes one that [David Axe, Jason Reich, and I made yesterday on ForeignPolicy.com](#).

... regime change, and democracy, are not necessary for counterterrorism. Propping up President Hamid Karzai's Western-style government in Kabul does not make operations against al Qaeda any easier or more successful. If anything, it distracts from the conceptually simpler task of finding and killing terrorists. Without U.S. and NATO protection, Karzai's regime would, sooner or later, probably fall to the Taliban. But U.S. observers should not equate that eventuality with "losing" the war. The war is against terrorists, not Islamist governments. The United States should be prepared to make peace, and amends, with a resurgent Taliban – and to encourage the group to excise its more extreme elements.

I admit talking to the Taliban sounds weird and scary. But my contention is that there is no shortage of Pashtun militants willing to fight against what they perceive to be a foreign occupation of their region. Certainly the Taliban does not enjoy support among the majority of Pashtuns—as Lodhi and Lieven point out—but neither did the IRA in Northern Ireland or the FLN in Algeria. The point is not exclusively about popularity (although that's a critical component, along with local legitimacy), but the fact that these indigenous groups are willing to fight the United States and NATO indefinitely. Indeed, it is the western military presence that is driving support for the Taliban both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

Moreover, the notion that we must protect Pakistan from the Taliban is ludicrous. Pakistan's intelligence service helped create the Taliban and they

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continue to protect the Afghan Taliban to keep India at bay. From this point of view, deploying more troops would be irrelevant to the fight against al Qaeda and counterproductive in our attempts to pacify the region. For more on what we should do, check [this](#) out.

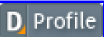



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